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Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear

By Julian Hanich

New York and London: Routledge, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-415-87139-6 (hbk). xi + 301 pp. £85.00 (hbk)

Tim Burton: The Monster and the Crowd: A Post-Jungian Perspective

By Helena Bassil-Morozow

London and New York: Routledge, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-415-48971-3(pbk). xiii + 200 pp. £19.99 (pbk)

A Review by Flavia Monceri, Università del Molise (Campobasso), Italy

In the last few decades, horror films have established themselves at a global level as one of the most successful cinematic genres, which can be analyzed from different viewpoints. In his *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers*, Julian Hanich addresses *fear*, that is to say the basic 'emotion' aroused by horror films, to show that it can be *pleasurable* and that "the oft-derided and condemned but hugely popular cinema of fear surely yields beneficial pleasures" (256). The book is divided into three parts. Along with the Introduction, Part One includes two chapters. In the first chapter, titled 'How to Describe Cinematic Fear, or Why Phenomenology?', Hanich outlines the phenomenological method he employs to investigate the emotion of fear, which "describes phenomena that are actually experienced – phenomena that we have at least a certain awareness of while living through them" (15). Since the 'lived experience' of each individual, as Hanich rightly points out, is something taking place in a specific spatial and temporal context, the second chapter – 'Multiplexperiences: Individualized Immersion and Collective Feelings' – considers "the contemporary American multiplex" (17), that is to say the social space in which the viewer is more likely to experience horror films and thrillers.

In Part Two, Hanich investigates five different versions of "cinematic fear": direct horror, suggested horror, cinematic shock, cinematic dread, and cinematic terror. Fear is the singular emotion addressed in the book. Hanich says "the word *fear* functions as an umbrella term in my account", because "it encompasses a number of emotional states that are sufficiently close to *each other* as well as to *prototypical fear in everyday life* in order to deserve this single name" (17). In Part Three, the last part of the book, the results of the previous investigation are discussed in the

light of theories of (advanced) modernity as elaborated, among others, by Norbert Elias and Zygmunt Bauman, in order to highlight the problematic aspects of contemporary culture addressed by horror films and thrillers.

The individuation and definition of the five types of cinematic fear occupy the largest part of the book. The first three types of fear have in common an immediate reference to the present moment. So, direct horror "presents the threatening violent event or monstrous object in full vision and thus as directly as possible" (82), while suggested horror "relies on *intimidating imaginations* of violence and/or a monster evoked through verbal descriptions, sound effects or partial, blocked and withheld vision" (109). Cinematic shock, on the other hand, "responds to a threatening object or event that ruptures the situation suddenly and unexpectedly" (127), and unlike other types of fear "it is an extremely brief, highly compressed response to a sudden, unexpected, rupturing threat" (128). As for the remaining two types, dread can be defined as "an intense, but quiet anticipatory type of cinematic fear in which we both feel *for the endangered character* and fearfully expect a threatening outcome that promises to be shocking and/or horrifying to *us*", which is most likely to occur in a kind of "alone-in-the-dark scenario" (156). In contrast to dread, cinematic terror presents "a vulnerable, extremely frightened character escaping from a threatening monster or killer gradually coming closer" – a "chase-and-escape scenario" (203).

However, the most interesting, if debatable, assumption of Hanich's book is that the pleasure(s) cinematic fear can offer the viewer cannot be investigated with reference to the notion of catharsis, against which the author argues at length. Hanich makes an interesting comparison with pornography to make his claim. The most important function of pornography is "to arouse", although "it is not the film itself that can cleanse us from our desire: it can only become a *means* to this end"; in the case of porn, "emotions, passions, affects are often not erased but enhanced", and "the same goes for frightening movies" (11), thus leading to the opposite effect of a catharsis.

Hanich seems to give a sort of 'collectivistic' reading of the experience of seeing a horror film with co-viewers within the context of the American multiplex, as if it were able to restore some sense of social and political community. Now, although this is certainly a consistent conclusion, it does not represent the whole truth, so to speak, because it does not adequately take into account the fact that circumstances and lived experiences of individual viewers may differ. In this sense, the reference to a phenomenological *notion* of 'lived experience', according to which it might be assumed to be tendentially one and the same for all individuals, raises problems. They become evident as soon as we begin to analyze horror films from a more individualistic-oriented perspective. Hanich, too, appears to suggest the need for this kind of a perspective when he links

the genre to the gothic novel, which he describes as "the first type of literature geared to the pleasure of fear", in which "a shift occurred from the social utility of earlier didactic forms of literature to the more 'gratuitous' indulgences in fantasies of fear" (231).

The notion of "the Gothic" as an individualistic source of "pleasurable fear" seems to be the central concern of most of Tim Burton's films analyzed in Helena Bassil-Morozow's *Tim Burton: The Monster and the Crowd*. According to the author, "Burton's perception of fictional freaks and mutants lies far from the official, mainstream reaction to 'horrible' things as it can be; in fact, it dangerously borders on the dramatic, maximalist introversion of a troubled teenage Goth", for whom "monsters are not the scary 'other' – on the contrary, they appear to him less alien than 'normal people'" (37). Considered from the post-Jungian perspective adopted in the book, Burton's films can be read with reference to different 'archetypes', among which one "is especially important for understanding the psychology of the Burtonian male hero – the archetype of the self" (27). According to Jung, such an archetype is linked with "the wonder-infant motif, which is present in so many fairy tales and myths", because "the child is a future hero, and many mythological saviours are, in fact, child gods" (33).

What is characteristic of Burton's 'children' is that they never become 'adult heroes', and this implies that they refuse to conform to the prevailing image of the world and to its assumed 'rules'. This seems to be true of most of Burton's films, as far as male protagonists are concerned – from *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), as well as the two Batman-films (*Batman*, 1989; *Batman Returns*, 1992) and *Ed Wood* (1994). An interesting implication of the choice not to become (fully) adults, and to remain strictly connected to a "Gothic imagery" more typical of childhood, is the ability to see the world differently. It also allows them the opportunity to question the cultural, social and political stereotypes of what is perceived as 'different', including the various categories of beings that most cultures label as 'monsters'. It is true, as Bassil-Morozow states, that while "from the point of view of the community, the 'different' perception of the environment is a sign of madness; from the point of view of the individual, it is a chance to exercise one's independent thinking", with the result that "individualism in Burton's films equals (often self-inflicted) loneliness" (29). But the positive side of such loneliness of the 'different individual' is the ability to see a different world besides and beyond the one that is culturally, socially and politically given. In this sense, Burton's 'children' are a kind of 'rebels', who can provide the viewer(s) with an alternative model of the relationship between the individual and the 'community', through gothic and otherwise 'fearful' images.

This is the reason why Hanich's statement seems only partially applicable here. According to him, "frightening films help to reconcile […] the *loosening of social bonds* as a result of individualization (requiring new forms of collectivity if a sense of isolation and loneliness to be prevented)" (25). On the contrary, the impossibility of reconciliation seems to be an outcome of the Jungian "individuation process", which "implies, to some extent, a conflict with society, because, in becoming an individual, one may start questioning collective norms and tradition" (Bassil-Morozow, 28). Therefore, it does not seem surprising that the conflict between "the monster" and "the crowd", that is to say between the individual and society, is also at the core of Burton's films. Even from a Jungian perspective, the relevance of 'archetypes' and the images through which symbols manifest themselves is related to their ambiguity, in the sense that "symbols unite people by the very fact of their indeterminability because they contain unlimited space for interpretation and amplification" (25), thus leaving room for individual 'subversive' interpretations.

Of course, it is possible for individuals to interpret shared symbols and archetypes differently. But there are some individuals, usually the ones labeled as 'deviant' and/or otherwise 'different' from 'normal', for whom such a possibility becomes a necessity in order to cope with their self-perceived 'difference'. This idea emerges in the four chapters in Bazil-Mozorow's book that are explicitly devoted to the various figures in which the Burtonian male protagonists present themselves: the monster, the superhero, the genius, and the maniac, which are all "different guises of the image of the 'dark child'" (2). For such individuals, the conflict with society is unavoidable, because they are not able to accept the prevailing 'normal' interpretation of the world, and at the same time represent a threat to 'normality' and its rules. This relegates them to the realm of the 'horrible' and the 'terrifying'. For them, society cannot be defined as a 'community'. Bassil-Morozow focuses on what she describes as "monstrous society" in the last chapter of her book, particularly considering the vision of society and the kind of "social criticism" Burton offers in *Mars Attacks!* (1996) and *Planet of the Apes* (2001).

Jointly considered, and for all their differences in approaches and results, Hanich and Bassil-Morozow's books both seem to arrive at some shared conclusions, at least those concerning the relevance of "frightening films" for contemporary societies. At the end of her book, Bassil-Morozow states that "Tim Burton's popularity as a director and visionary, which comes despite his films being marginal, overtly Gothic and otherwise nonconformist, is not surprising", because

> his depiction of the individual as a fragile creature whose integrity is being threatened by the unthinking collectivity, and the decisions of those few who have the power to influence the direction of mass

> thinking, is acutely relevant in the contemporary post-industrial, globalised capitalist world. (177)

In fact, Burton's films are able to highlight

> the psychological dangers of a whole cluster of issues that come with modernity and postmodernity: an excessively materialist and utilitarian view of the world and physical processes; efficiency and technology at the expense of humanity; the rationalisation and professionalisation of private life; and even – ironically, given the general individualistic stance of Burton's *oeuvre* – loss of communal and familial ties. (177-178)

The difficulties of (re)building a 'community' from individual differences in contemporary societies seem to be a common concern of the two authors. They also share the assumption that films in general, and 'frightening films' in particular, do address, and attempt to suggest a solution to, the eternal conflict between individual and society. However, there is a difference. Hanich seems to rely on a more 'ontological' position in suggesting that the basic universality of human emotions (in this case, 'fear'), especially when they are collectively experienced – as in the case of co-viewing scary films in a shared spatial and temporal context – could be a means through which the 'malaises' of modernity can be perceived. Bassil-Mozorow's account of Burton's films offers a more nuanced picture. The perspective here is of the individual who is not able, or refuses, to accept any limitations to her interpretative possibilities in re-imagining the world, as she urges us, as viewers, to remain aware there cannot be a community that can assemble the infinite individual interpretations of an assumed 'common world'.