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Horror Fiction and Commodification of Fear in Times of Industrial Revolution.
Economy of Angst in Post-industrial Landscape

MFA
Kunstakademiet 2016

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Horror Fiction and Commodification of Fear
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*Offspring of suburban fright, pearl white creatures of the night*¹

Bad Religion

What I am trying to do here is to examine the roots and a stunning career of the modern anxiety disorder. To which, from time to time, I'm fleetingly a subject. Angst. What is the reason for being afraid of anything, if in modern times life is so easy and safe? If we're living in such comfortable times? Why to be afraid of anything, unless some serious misfortune strikes, like a serious disease, or some comparably dramatic thing happens? Well, I have my theory. Story begins with a bit of historical background. Let's proceed.

The literature of horror fiction has been introduced approximately in the same times as the Industrial Revolution happened, when the ideas of classical modernity were first being put into practice. Conventional time frame of Industrial Revolution is usually set between 1760s and 1820s or 1830s.³ During these 70 years mankind transformed the surface of Earth on unprecedented scale. Human habits and routines evolved deeply and quickly like never before.⁴ One of the first novels of gothic horror, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole is published in 1764.⁵ I believe it is possible to see the genre of horror fiction as a side reaction to grave and rapid structural transformation of European societies, economies and cities in the second half of XVIII and early XIX century. The advent of horror literature is a turning point in the history of commodification of experience of fear. It is true that fear, among other negative emotions, was historically used as a tool for building the frame of political and religious structures, just like fear-inducing folk tales, myths and public punishment were a form of entertainment. But what made a novelty in the beginnings of classical modernity, was an opportunity to irritate one's sense of terror just for pleasure, where the threat is openly recognised as not real, and means to obtain it are accessible like a service – buy, read or drop, put on shelf, get a new one. I would like to analyse contemporary, far consequences of that invention.

I want to focus on a different way of interpreting the constellation of events presented in the

1 Bad Religion, *White Trash* from: *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, 1981

3 <http://global.britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution>

4 It is tempting to compare social and material consequences of Industrial Revolution with technological revolution of our times – so called Digital Revolution. Unfortunately, out of lack of necessary space, this cannot be properly done in this essay.

5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Castle_of_Otranto

beginning of this text, namely on the commodification of experience of fear. Such approach requires prior explanation of some presuppositions. First, I do not intend to present commodification of fear as an economic strategy, aiming to make capital, political or monetary, by inspiring fear. However, such practice has been in widespread use since the dawn of civilisations. In a similar fashion anxiety has been used as an agent running whole branches of economy, like arms trade, insurance, security etc. I would like to argue on the contrary and present commodification of fear as a practice providing opportunity to „disarm” fear, to deprive it of fangs and display as a cute puppy, that is in other words – as a method to overcome fear.

Before we reach that point, we will find ourselves in three different positions towards the invention of horror fiction. On the first position we will find horror fiction a subversive invention, that set new way of cultural critique. On the second position, we will realise one further consequence of birth of horror fiction – commodification of fear, and how it (commodification) compromises above mentioned subversive powers and causes imbalance in economy of fear and anxiety. Finally, on the third position we will sigh with relief, realising that in times of commodified fear there is no real fear anymore.

First lets look at subversive powers of horror literature. Parallely with implementation of a new stage of the modern project, a new way, new practice of its critique occurs. Critique through speculations on a world in which human world, prepared and worked out by human kind, would develop and continue existing without the need for humans. A world, which can function without people as well. According to one of the definitions of horror, that’s what it actually is about - even without human actions, influence and control, the world can keep existing on its own.⁶ So we ask - in what way would that be subversive? Yet by describing the world without human, it actually prepares grounds for a world that can function without humans. Grounds for the free market to run without human factor, for the future to develop on its own. And that’s not subversive in any way... So, here I try to explain how it can be subversive. I believe we can say that horror transgresses the modern project in two ways.

First off, by undermining coherence of scientific paradigm. One of the definitions of horror fiction is “the literature of the world which is similar to the real world, but also encapsulating some events that cannot be explained without referring to supernatural phenomena”⁷. Supernatural phenomena, please excuse the expression, by its nature are unexplainable scientifically. Which means we can never be sure if all the knowledge we, the mankind, have, is true or completely missed. Yet it is also possible that all the science is actually wrong. One good, though late, example

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmicism>

⁷ translated to English from: <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror>

“Horror – fantastyka grozy – odmiana fantastyki polegająca na budowaniu świata przedstawionego na wzór rzeczywistości i praw nią rządzących po to, aby wprowadzić w jego obręb zjawiska kwestionujące te prawa i nie dające się wytłumaczyć bez odwoływania się do zjawisk nadprzyrodzonych.”

of such narration is from *At the Mountains of Madness* by H. P. Lovecraft. In that novel, scientists discovered a fossil, that falsified all the history of biological sciences. Everything they thought they knew about botany and animals turned out to be simply wrong. What they actually discover is that it is not the fossil that is an abnormality, but the human science is off with the actual organisation of the universe. Moreover, there is another universe out there, and there is no further possibility to keep human on a privileged position on a ladder of entities. Awareness of that fact inspires them with awe, and scared they are all the time up until they get massacred by an otherworldly monster, that the fossil morphed into. Before that they attempt to save mankind from monstrosity of that awareness by appealing:

*It is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind, that some of earth's dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be left alone; lest sleeping abnormalities wake to resurgent life, and blasphemously surviving nightmares squirm and splash out of their black lairs to newer and wider conquests.*⁸

The second way in which horror literature transgresses the modern project is by providing the reader with an opportunity to experience fear and come into relation with the sublime. To describe the relation between fear and the sublime, and anxiety and the sublime, I should first define the very terms of horror and terror, of fear and anxiety.

Fear, a term which I use interchangeably with the word „Horror”, is an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger⁹, evil, pain, etc., whether the threat is real or imagined. It is a direct experience, actually a bodily reaction to threat, happening “right now” in a given moment, and oriented toward that very moment. As opposed to anxiety, fear is not anticipation of traumatic event, but it comes in the very moment of horror. It's a kind of event, even though it lasts in time, it should be rather imagined as a point in time.

Anxiety, or Terror, is the expectation of some threat, of something dangerous to come. Fear comes when one actually happens to come across a threat, and in anxiety the threat doesn't ever have to come. It's just an expectation of something that is out there, or one thinks it is out there, but it doesn't necessarily have to come, or even exist, at all.

So what's the relation between fear and the sublime? According to Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* the relation goes both directions. First off – fear is sublime:

8 H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness and Other Tales of Terror*, Mass Market Paperback, 1991

9 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fear>

*No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible (...) is sublime too.*¹¹

Fear, being an apprehension of death, is inherently connected to infinity, to sublime, it's eschatological.

In another fragment of the same tractatus, Burke arguments that sublime is scary. Thanks to that we can say, that relation between the two terms discussed here is a relation of indexing each other. They both encapsulate a little bit of the other one.

*The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature (...) is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.*¹²

Sublime is horrifying. Motionlessness of experiencing sublime somehow resembles freezing up in presence of horror. If fear is sublime, it means it reaches beyond the limit of the imaginable, it's inexpressible. It is possible to talk about it, maybe even to get far into details. But at some point one reaches the limit of expressible. All constellations beyond the perceptual capacity of the modern mind seem awful to it. Fear is always exceeding reason and that's how Horror is subversive in the second way.

Now, what happens to sublimity of fear in times when horror becomes available as a product? Commodification is a transformation of goods, ideas or experiences into commodity. In case of fear, which is an emotion, the way to commodification leads through creation of channels that make such experience possible on demand - in more or less literal frames, and to a different degree of intensity. A scary movie, book, safari, live action horror game, excursion into space or polar expedition – the list of services that make a simulation of real experience of awe possible is long, potentially infinite. The very fact of commodification of fear does not make it a less serious experience. But prevalence of facing it in simulated form, voluntarily and in safe surrounding, does. Commodified fear is different from the “real” one. It gives a similar experience of commune with the sublime, but it is not actually sublime. Yes, it is still “an apprehension of pain and death”. And yes, it does operate in a manner that resembles actual pain. But it's a pain separated from the real with a magical wall of consensus. Just like at bachelors party kidnapping, or in a LARP game, there is a code word that can put an end to all that play in a blink of an eye. Commodified fear has been pre-estimated, pre-packaged as a ready service, predictable in terms of calculated how far it can go.

11 Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757, part II, section II.

12 Ibid, part II, section I.

It's measurable, it has some dimensions, or one can exchange it for a given amount of a currency of choice. Commodified fear feels very similar to the "real" one, but the threat is just not there. In this way it delivers some kind of mediated sublime experience, a concept that is simply internally wrong.

Here, realising its further consequences, we find ourselves on the second position towards the invention of horror fiction. Trained by fictitious experience of fear, we accustom a new approach to the real fear. Trying to analyse the whole adventure of recognising, expecting, and facing a real threat, it is difficult to localise the actual moment of horror. Zooming in to a selected part of the whole experience yields little result. Widespread domestication of fear in its commodified form compromises its second subversive power described above – bringing into relation with the sublime – and causes imbalance in economy of fear and anxiety. The first subversive power – undermining belief in mankind's privileged position in organisation of entities – remains intact. And here we ask one question – what does awareness of not being the very special one actually mean? Isn't it a necessary stage of the process of growing, of coming of age? And isn't anxiety an emotion inherently interwoven into that process? We are talking about times shortly preceding triple bereavement of man, self-inflicted by the Masters of Suspensions – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Limitation of input of fear into experience of an average individual results with major imbalance in the economy of anxiety. Fear is a cathartic experience, releasing tensions and, to some degree, levelling up emotional landscape. As opposed to fear, anxiety does not bring into relation with the sublime. Anxiety does not reach beyond the limits as it's merely a position of expecting. It's not ecstatic (ex-static) but expecting. The moment of confrontation with threat is not there. Overall, with time the participation of fear in the individual experience is getting less and less substantial, as the world is getting more and more safe. There is simply less risk. As fear shrinks, anxiety gains prominence and power. I believe there is some kind of interdependence between fear and anxiety. In reality deprived of fear, opportunities for transgressive emotional experiences are missing. As a result, anxiety, expectation of threat to come is piling up, waiting to be released in a sudden event. This is where I would search for the source of anxiety disorders in modern society.

Lets project some of the above gathered facts on one core attribute of liberal capitalism. I introduce this term without defining it out of lack of necessary space. Liberal capitalism is by its nature infinitely inclusive and hospitable. It wants everything and everyone inside, all in. If fear is sublime, if it's reaching beyond the limits, this means it cannot be all inside. Sublime explodes the frame of liberal capitalism. By contrast, anxiety is not transgressive, so it works perfectly within the framework of current economic and political situation. Anxiety is stagnation in expectation of an event, pessimistic about its possible outcome. Eager to finally get it over with and at the same time reluctant to face the change. It is speculating on different scenarios of what can potentially go

wrong, unlike fear that brings a *catharsis* through pure horror, unloading the need to speculate on what can go wrong, as things are going wrong indeed. Anxiety is welcome within the framework of the current political and economic situation, as it postpones the coming of an actual transgressive event. It works as a dismantler, exciter and substitute to the event. And in this way it makes it easier to keep everything, whatever class of entities we consider, within the system.

So here we are standing, ambivalent towards benefits from, and usefulness of invention of fear as a product. In a way, as disappointment of second position cancels the enthusiasm of the first position, we find ourselves in a starting point. But I've also promised to describe the third position. It's a tongue-in-cheek optimistic, and slightly naïve stance, but it opens field for free movement in the field beforehand formatted by recognising subversive powers of literature of fear and its failure in compromised commodified form. The third position is a relief in realising that if fear has been conquered by writing, and in that conquered form compromised as detached from the real, in times of commodified fear there is no real fear anymore, there is no more fear.

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