Monsters, Perversion, and Enjoyment:
Toward a Psychoanalytic Theory
of Postmodern Horror

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Abstract

This essay looks at "horror" both as a narrative (literary and especially cinematic) genre and as a trans-genre, postmodern social and cultural milieu, one in which horror has become entangled with excessive, pathological fantasy and enjoyment. First, the traditional, 19th-century literary-Gothic motifs (excess, monstrosity, transgression, and uncanny doubling) will be explored in the light of such psychoanalytic concepts as the uncanny, extimacy, and the "subject-beyond-subjectivization." Then the reworking or transformation of these motifs, especially the monster motif, in contemporary "postmodern" horror films like Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) will be discussed. This "new Monster" will be described in terms of the superego, aggression, and perversion in our contemporary "culture of enjoyment"; a key notion here is the move from Freudian superego as the collective moral voice of society (moral conscience) to Lacanian superego as perverse command to "enjoy ourselves." The essay's final section offers some psychoanalytical-ethical reflections on reading contemporary, horror-immersed culture.

Keywords

In their often-cited studies of the horror genre in film, Jonathan Lake Crane and Andrew Tudor argue that conventional genre criticism tends to fossilize genres as immutable codes; it is thus susceptible to the "fallacy of generic concreteness" and fails to take into account the viewers' actual cinematic experiences (Crane 23; Tudor 49). Drawing on a sociological and cognitive approach, these authors denounce psychoanalytically-informed readings of the horror film for their ensnarement by "universal and ahistorical deep structures" (Crane 29) and their neglect of "the variability of audience responses in the name of spurious generality" (Tudor 49).

In fact, both Crane and Tudor themselves share in the blindness of those critics who claim to be sociological, positivist, and cognitive, and thus are bewilderingly hostile toward psychoanalysis in their stance. First of all, endeavoring to exorcise these "fallacies" they fall back on another "spurious generality," for they too see the cinema audience as a collective body of individual viewers. In a similar vein, feminist critics like Laura Mulvey, Gaylyn Studlar, Elizabeth Cowie, and Cynthia A. Freeland unknowingly over-generalize the horror film as a genre that reinforces the audience's identification with the male gaze, and its submission to that dominant patriarchal ideology which condones acts of patriarchal violence against women. Even though critics like Barbara Creed strive to explore the audience's ambivalent cinematic experiences and the transgressive potential of female monsters—in Creed's term, "the monstrous-feminine"—that gaze back at and provoke the castration anxiety of male viewers, they usually end up by somehow subsuming the various forms of ambivalence, ambiguity, and anxiety within "patriarchy." For Creed, the horror film is a kind of defilement rite that aims to purify the abject and "separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies" (14). The horror film in this sense turns out to be nothing but an instrument of patriarchal ideology and oppression.

Here Mark Jancovich's concise clarification may be useful:

> Genres cannot . . . simply be defined by the expectations of "the audience," because the audience is not a coherent body with a consistent set of expectations. Different sections of the audience can have violently opposed expectations. Not only can the generic status of an individual film change over time, it can also be the object of intense struggles at a particular moment. (153)

I would also like to conceptualize "genre" not as any fixed class of texts that appeal to (or interpellate) a definite body of individual viewers, but rather as an ongoing series of contestations regarding cultural values and legitimacy. To retain "genre" as a concept and classificatory category, in other words, we simply cannot dispense with a certain degree of abstraction and universalization. But I would also question the claim that psychoanalytic theory is too "universalizing." In Žižekian terms, "universality" does not designate a static, immutable, fully present entity; in cultural, political realms, it functions as an empty Master signifier that allows for the ceaseless contestation of particular contents (*TS* 176-77).[1] Thus, while each audience member may have his/her own idiosyncratic response to the phobic objects in a horror film, it does not follow that a universal psychical form or fantasmatic framework loses its functioning. What makes psychoanalysis subject to critique, denunciation, or even prejudice is exactly the very breadth and depth of its theoretical universality and, therefore, the space it opens up for critical confrontations and interventions. Moreover, in anti-psychoanalytical criticism the mode of identification tends to be limited to the (Lacanian) Imaginary, and the gaze reduced to the biological act of looking.[2] I would argue, on the other hand, that a theoretically sophisticated ideological critique of the horror film needs to focus on the categories of enjoyment, fantasy, and the Real, a focus clearly lacking in sociological and cognitive-psychological approaches.

Here, then, I do not wish to restrict postmodern horror within a pre-defined generic (and literary) boundary. The term "postmodern horror" does not apply merely to an increase (as compared with the conventional "Gothic" genre) in the number of cinematic images of fragmented body parts and other forms of graphic

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[1] Abbreviation of *The Ticklish Subject*. Other abbreviations of the titles of books by Žižek include *B* (*On Belief*), *DSST* (*Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*), *EYAWK* (*Everything You Always Want to Know about Lacan*), *EYS* (*Enjoy Your Symptom!*), *FA* (*The Fragile Absolute*), *LA* (*Looking Awry*), *PF* (*The Plague of Fantasies*), *SOI* (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*), *TKN* (*For They Know Not What They Do*), *TN* (*Tarrying with the Negative*), and *WDR* (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real*).

[2] It is no news that the gaze as a densely Lacanian category is often misused as a merely biological act of looking, or that it is completely disregarded in most feminist and anti-psychoanalytic film studies cited in this essay. In fact, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, there is an absolute split between the gaze and looking. The gaze belongs more to the side of the objective than to the subjective. It is the absent object cause of the subject's scopic drive—hence, the *object a*, the small piece of the Real; it is the impossible objective point from which the subject fantasizes looking at itself. It also implies the anamorphic, shocking discovery that the subject and its standpoint is already included in what it is looking at or, in Lacan's own words, "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (*Seminar XI* 72): therefore, the centrality of the gaze in the Gothic and horror genre is beyond doubt.

cinematic violence; it also pertains to the monstrous excess or excessive monstrosity in contemporary postmodern society itself. Rosi Braidotti claims that in our "postmodern Gothic" culture, monstrous or teratological others (freaks, the geeks, androgynes, hermaphrodites) appear as mere commodities, objects of mass consumption or fetish objects, and metamorphosis has been raised to the status of a cultural icon (177-79). Indeed, global capitalism cannot function without its circular, vampiric logic of commodification that sucks in almost all kinds of Otherness; it is no longer a hyperbolic figure of speech to call this "a spectral economy of the eternal return" (Braidotti 176), which, as in the recurring horror film theme of eternally-returning *revenants* ("monsters-always-coming-back"), never ceases to haunt consumers with the burden of their own or—given their over-proximity to it—their neighbors' enjoyment, and capture them in the "ghastly/ghostly economy of postmodern vampiric consumption" (Braidotti 211). Monstrosity, spectre, horror, Gothicism, and vampirism do not invade and contaminate postmodernity from outside but rather from inside. This contamination from within, from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, manifests the pleasurable fantasy which always circles the object just beyond the subject's grasp, thus becoming "something in it more than itself," the Thing that has been excluded, "something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me" (Lacan, *Seminar VII* 71).

The boundaries between self/Other, inside/outside, subjective/objective have thus become blurred, engendering what Lacan calls "extimacy" ("external intimacy"). This term reminds us in turn of Freud's concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), developed from his reading of Hoffmann's story "The Sand Man" and his clinical observations of neurotic patients. The *unheimlich* is both "at home" and "not at home," familiar and unfamiliar to us, since it has much to do with the unexpected return of our repressed childhood memories: it thus describes any terrifyingly familiar person, place or experience (369-70) and is associated with the obsessive-neurotic compulsion to repeat, or the death drive (389-92). Mladen Dolar makes explicit the "extimate" nature of the uncanny: for him this "points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior" (6). This uncanny extimacy provokes anxiety, a sense that one has already come too close to the monstrous, traumatic Thing that derails the subject's desire and sense of reality (*TN* 90).

Do horrendous, virtually "unthinkable" cases like the Heaven's Gate massacre (April 1997) and the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 not confront us with such a sense of derailment? Here technological rationality and efficiency have inverted themselves to become the most primitive, irrational sort of violence and

"evil"; yet clearly our late-capitalist, high-tech, fully-computerized obsessions already potentially possess this violence and this "evil force." (Thus so many recent sci-fi/horror films have asked: "What could be more terrible, monstrous and evil than man-becoming-machine—a more extreme playing out of the death drive—which is precisely what we now see happening?") Perhaps we could say that in contemporary society of mass consumption, our popular culture and cyberculture, our drive toward "virtuality"—virtualization of body, gender, class, ethnicity, and so on—is combined with a "a passion for the Real," in Žižek's term, a demand for immediate and excessive satisfaction, the sudden irruption of bodily horror and violence. But here a fundamental ethical problem arises: does this culture of enjoyment in fact bring us more satisfaction, even more freedom, than we had before? Perhaps it even brings us less? Or is it this very "lack" that now gives us a perverse enjoyment?

In what follows, I will briefly examine the ways in which the Gothic motifs of excess, monstrosity, transgression, and uncanny doubling are transformed in and by contemporary postmodern horror films. Of special interest here will be the new (as opposed to traditional "Gothic") figure of the Monster, its Otherness and ambivalence, including the ambivalent responses it provokes. By looking at films like Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), the new Monster will be examined in relation to the problem of superegoic aggressivity, and perversion. The ultimate concern of this essay is with a psychoanalytic ethics of "reading" the postmodern horror of our culture, as a both narrative genre and a socio-cultural milieu.

A Critical Genealogy of Gothic Horror

Since its alleged birth in the late eighteenth century, Gothic literature has never for a moment deviated from its uncanny, "extimate" nature. Paradigmatic texts like Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mystery of Udolpho* (1794), and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) can be located in the Romantic, anti-rationalist socio-cultural context at that time: they are intensely concerned with exposing the dark, irrational, impulsive, and even perverse side of human nature and the nightmarish terror lying beneath the semblance of well-controlled social, moral, and spiritual order. Three Gothic narratives of the nineteenth century, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Luis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), expanded the range of Gothic motifs to include bodily metamorphosis,

sexual perversion, the Other's invasion and contamination, and the *doppelganger*, all of which are revisited, reproduced or rewritten in later horror texts and their cinematic adaptations. The ghosts, vampires, and undead dead—in a word, monsters—which inhabit and haunt the Gothic, actually "flourish in an era when you might expect them to be dead and buried, without a place. They are something brought about by modernity itself" (Dolar 7). Gothic fiction, in other words, though often described as dark or late Romanticism, is also the uncanny, monstrous counterpart or Other to modernity and the Enlightenment; it is the excess of/within realism, scientific theories, and technological innovations (Botting 12; Carroll 55; Jones 39). Besides, the monsters of Gothic fiction never cease to send the inverted message to modernity that destruction does not come from outside. As José B. Monleon puts it: "The dream of reason definitely produced monsters. . . . The new industrial age created its own negation" (22). It is no exaggeration to see Gothicism as the indelible Real or foreign intruder that remains *fully within* modernity, the "defeat of modernity in its very triumph" (*B* 11-12), the monstrosity of modernity's own excess.

The extimate nature of Gothic fiction can be best seen in its ambivalent fascination with, and anxiety about, the transgression of boundaries and taboos. Through its monstrous figures, such fiction penetrates into the interstitial zones of the macro-social, moral, and spiritual order, into a mythic, ahistorical, irrational taboo-zone of corruption (Simpson 32, 49-50). The ambivalence and extimacy of our fantasies make them, in Žižek's view, "simultaneously pacifying, disarming (providing an imaginary scenario which enables us to endure the abyss of the Other's desire) and shattering, disturbing, inassimilable into our reality" (*WDR* 18). In a certain way we could then say: if monsters are of our own (trans-human) fantasies, then such fantasies are themselves monstrous (trans-human). Thus while the Monster in Gothic fiction is always represented within a definite fantasmatic framework, "domesticated" (*heimlich*, "at home") within an imaginary scenario, it nonetheless embodies a monstrous Thing, *something in it more than itself*, the real kernel in the excess of fantasy that cannot be fully captured in the Symbolic and Imaginary, the kernel that therefore creates the ambivalence of a fantasy which simultaneously provokes anxiety. Hence Jonathan's encounter with three female vampires in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*:

> All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the
> ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that
> made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly

fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. (42)

What is "the return of the repressed" or the monstrous, real Thing in Jonathan's Victorian (male, in this case) fantasy of vampires, if not the uncanny intimation that there is no vampirism without the desire to be vampirized? This uncanny, extimate, excessive monstrosity, as both the return of the repressed and the real Thing, is captured by the narrator's ambivalent depiction of the night as "tempestuous yet sternly beautiful, and . . . wildly singular in its terror and its beauty" (188) in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Obsessively rife with an ambivalent, perverted desire, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is symptomatic of Gothic fiction in general in its representation of "a strong sense of environmental claustrophobia, the destructive imposition of the past on the present and a metaphysical internalization of evil" (Simpson 29). According to the narrator's account, Roderick Usher's "peculiar sensibility of temperament" was pathologically developed from out of the House itself, a typical Gothic domain of decay and corruption saturated in an atmosphere peculiar to itself, "which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mythic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" (179). By way of Roderick's own confession that he suffers—or enjoys?—the neurotic "omnipotence of thought," together with the uncanny, haunted awareness that sentience is everywhere in the house, and the "silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family" (185), we feel that this Gothic claustrophobia extends beyond the excessive yet closed-in spatial and visual imagery to the consciousness of a time that is also closed-in, pre-determined, for here the past haunts the present and "destroys it from within," as we have entered an ahistorical zone where the present is always already entombed in the past. Perhaps we might see this sort of monstrousness in relation to the real Thing and the death drive that keeps repeating itself.

The extimate monstrosity of Gothic fiction can be further observed in the uncanny doubling of the self and the Other. At the simplest level, the double provokes fascination and anxiety by destroying the boundaries between self/Other, inside/outside, and subjective/objective. This we may see in Dr. Jekyll's "full statement of the strange case of Mr. Hyde":

> That part of me which I had the *power of projecting* had lately been much exercised and nourished; it had seemed to me of late as though the body of Edward Hyde had grown in nature, as though (when I wore that form) I were conscious of a more generous tide of blood; and I began to spy a danger that, if this were prolonged, the balance of my nature might be permanently overthrown, the power of voluntary change be forfeited, and *the character of Edward Hyde become irrevocably mine*. (78; emphasis added)

On the first level we may of course try to describe this as physiological or psychological illness, loss of balance or even "spit personality," or (in moral terms) as a—perhaps, devil-induced—struggle between good and evil, ideas which to a great extent apply to Gothic fiction in general. Yet we can go deeper with a more sophisticated understanding of the uncanny nature of the superego. Returning to Poe for a moment, let us consider the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "William Wilson": he could be diagnosed as a paranoid psychotic who is haunted by delusions of persecution in the form of a superegoic voice. Ironically, the "Tell-Tale Heart" narrator begins by trying to convince the reader that he "cannot be mad" since he is so "rational" and also his senses are so "acute"—as if "sanity" could be equated with both hyper-rationality and hyper-sensitivity, whereas in fact the opposite might be true; indeed, he can "even hear the voices from heaven and from hell." The "William Wilson" narrator is haunted by a double whose peculiar constitutional disease "precluded him from raising his voice at any time *above a very low whisper*" (161), suggesting that this could be the voice (vocalized or sub-vocalized) of the narrator's own *conscience*, consciousness, and/or conscience. If we read "William Wilson" together with Stoker's *Dracula* and Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, we will see that the Gothic uncanny double not only threatens to destroy the boundary between the self and the Other, provoking anxiety; it more fundamentally embodies both a moral superego (conscience) that says "No!" to the subject and a perverted superego that, knowing the subject's *jouissance*, commands the subject to "enjoy." The uncanny, superegoic double, in other words, perpetuates in the subject "the return of the repressed," overproximity to the monstrous, the extimate real Thing, irrepressible anxiety and a perpetual struggle between *too little* and *too much* enjoyment.

Thus the notion that the Gothic genre, as well as the psychoanalytic theory of fantasy in particular and psychoanalysis in general, involves only personal

psychical ambivalence or pathology is ungrounded. The Gothic extimate, monstrosity, excess, uncanny doubling and invasion-from-within can also be read as symptoms of "*a collective fear* in the seemingly incomprehensible or occultly ineffable" (Nixon 224; emphasis added). For example, we can interpret "Transylvania" and Dracula in Stoker's *Dracula* as the ethnic Other in opposition to those Western identities that the Victorian literary output taken as a whole tries to capture (Mckee 48; Rickels 31). However, what is at work here is more complicated than just an imaginary, ideological projection or introjection. For in imagining the Other as monstrous Thing, the subject not only acts out its fear and anxiety but also acquires a surplus enjoyment. In the figure of Dracula, who embodies sexual, biological, personal, cultural, and political invasions and contaminations, "Victorian readers could recognize their culture's imperial ideology mirrored back as a kind of monstrosity. . . . This mirroring extends not just to the imperial practices themselves, but to their epistemological underpinnings" (Arata 469-70). It is in this sense that Dracula stands for the monstrous Thing, the real antagonism *within* the Victorian society, which the vampire hunters and the symbolic order they represent strive to exorcise and yet, in so striving, paradoxically cling to all the more.

In other words, the Victorians are enjoying their own symptoms through Dracula and hence, in a vicarious sort of way, enjoying the fantasy of antagonisms. The irrepressible, uncanny, monstrous double or Other turns out to be the most intimate alien or, in Lacan's terms, the extimacy to/of the subject and the Symbolic. As part of the symbolic order, Gothic fiction, albeit with its figures of excessive, transgressive monstrosity and fear, anxiety, repulsion (and the psychical ambivalence they evoke), is susceptible to ideological interpellation and the mechanisms of power. Thus it is legitimate to see, as does Kim Ian Michasiw, Gothic fiction as a mode of fantasy that facilitates both the creation of anxiety and its management through defense mechanisms against a focusless dread and through the displacement of phobic objects (237). And the same goes for the horror film. However, ideology grips the subject not only through the symbolic identification of master signifiers and imaginary projection, introjection or abjection (Ziarek 118, 125) but also, more crucially, through the structuration of enjoyment, the dimension of "the subject beyond subjectivization," an absolute Otherness "beyond the wall of language" (*EYAWK* 245), a real dimension at once *in and not in* the subject or, in Lacanian terms, that most external intimate kernel of being, which the subject can never assume as its own, where no identification with it and also no intersubjectivity is possible. This is also the realm of the death drive and enjoyment, which lies beyond the pleasure principle and binds us to something always beyond

our grasp, even at the cost of pleasure or psychical harmony.[3] When these ideas are all taken into consideration, we may gain a new insight into the Monster and the horror it embodies: we hold onto the Monster through the very impossibility of grasping it. Due to the inevitable failure of our interpretive attempts we can only circle around it without touching it; in this sense the "monster" may be (like the real thing) our own lack of it, our own failure to grasp it.

The Postmodern Horror Film:
Fear, Violence, and Evil of Everyday Life

Though emerging and developing long before the invention of modern cinema, Gothic fiction bequeaths to the later horror genre such crucial themes as monstrosity, uncanny doubling, and destruction-from-within, all of which make makes room, as we have seen, for the critical intervention of psychoanalytic discourse, and all of which will be revisited by horror films. In contrast to its forerunners, the horror film from the 1940s onward increasingly foregrounds ordinary realities: we now begin to witness the fear, violence, and evil of everyday life. Horror need not be cosmic in scale, nor does it have to happen in exotic, insulated places like Transylvania or the fictional House of Usher: life in a typical American small town may be horrible enough. Like science-fiction films, horror films have become increasingly obsessed with collective, paranoid fears of invasion, pestilence, and corruption: irrational and perverse fears penetrate more and more deeply into the routines of everyday life, the semblance of a serene small-town life is about to be disrupted, teenagers' junior prom nights and Halloween parties turn into infernal massacres.

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[3] In addition to these formulations of "the subject beyond subjectivization," Žižek in "The Supposed Subject" also designates this dimension as "objectively subjective," a bizarre category to which fantasy and the unconscious belong (53-54). Undoubtedly, what we have at this point is Žižek's updated elaboration of Lacanian extimacy: "I am deprived even of my most intimate 'subjective' experience, the way things 'really seem to me,' that of the fundamental fantasy which constitutes and guarantees the kernel of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it" (55). Moreover, my view of the Monster as Other and real Thing and of its ideological functioning, which supplements the lack in most criticisms of the Gothic and horror genres (with their under-theorized conceptualizations of ideology that are limited to imaginary identification), closely relates to Lacan's sophisticated conception of the Other: in addition to the imaginary other "with whom I am engaged in the mirror-like relationships of competition [and] mutual recognition," there is the symbolic "big Other"—"the 'substance' of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that co-ordinate our coexistence"—and the Other qua Real, "the impossible Thing, the 'inhuman partner,' the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Other, is possible" (*DSST* 163).

Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) is a milestone of the postmodern horror film. First of all, this film gives us cinematographic-spatial paradigms as well as musical ones: the famous shower scene (with its musical accompaniment), the scene uncannily shot from above that shows Bates (in mother's dress and wig) running out of room and stabbing Arbogast at the top of the stairs (accompanied by the same musical theme). Many later horror and thriller films were influenced by these scenes and others like them (e.g. the mummified mother slowly turning around in her chair to face Lila, down in the fruit cellar) (Picart and Frank 207). Such scenes create excessive fear and horror purely through their subtle visual effects (and music), without relying on blood or gore. Hitchcock succeeds in maximizing the significance of the gaze in cinematic horror, above all the spectator's gaze, through his meticulous planning, shooting, and editing; he is skilled at "visualizing the unvisualizable" (Picart and Frank 207). Murders, crime scenes, dead bodies are planned, designed and disposed with great craftsmanship—hence, the aestheticization of violence—and thereby elicit reactions in the audience that are more subtle, complex and ambivalent than mere shock or terror (Schneider, "Murder" 179-80). Such aestheticized violence not only challenges and disrupts the viewer's visual order and fantasmatic framework, but also confronts him or her with the problem of "the alien within" and, by extension, of "enjoyment."

But what also enables *Psycho* to usher in the era of "postmodern" horror films is the fact that it gives us a new breed of Monster, a completely familiar "boy next door" who is "mutable, protean, unspeakable, unknowable, but ironically and frighteningly domesticated" (Wells 74), and replaces those monstrous embodiments of supernatural "evil forces." The case of Norman Bates, who "became his dead mother," is also pre-eminently suitable for psychoanalytic interpretations, Lacanian as well as (the more obvious) Freudian ones. According to one reading we could say that Norman's is not so much a case of split personality as one of complete possession by the maternal superego: "normal" appearance here becomes a blank mask that hides *nothing*, a complete destruction of subjectivity caused by the unbearable superegoic injunctions to kill and enjoy. On this reading we would say that Norman's monstrosity attests to the cruelest and most horrible manifestations of the superego. This may be a variation on the Gothic theme of "invasion/ destruction from within," albeit through the fantasy of the monstrous, castrating Mother, an absent Mother who is nonetheless more real than the real one, and (from beyond the grave) grips her son as a "subject beyond subjectivization," from that dimension of absolute Otherness inside the subject.

George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), although possessing a less sophisticated narrative framework and techniques than those of *Psycho*, is important for bringing the new category of "slasher" film (or random serial-killer film) into the horror repertoire, which includes such later films as Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1975), John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), all those "monster-keeps-coming-back" series-films like *Friday the 13ᵗʰ*, *A Nightmare on the Elm Street* and *Scream* (in the 1980s and 1990s), as well as Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and David Fincher's *Seven* (1995). In spite of their different narrative formats as well as aesthetic qualities and conceptual complexities, all these films expand on the motifs of fear in everyday life and the collapse of family and community; more conspicuously, they all present excessively graphic and repulsive images of dead, dying, returning-to-life or broken and fragmented bodies. These two characteristics are often read as correlates of the postmodern social experience of fragmentation and identity crisis (Tudor 51), and yet there are also more subtle ways of doing this. Relying less on graphic horror, Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River* (2003) presents to the audience the repression, trauma, perversity, and criminality that lie beneath the seemingly "normal" surface of neighborhood life, for this is a world saturated in and tormented by a superegoic sense of guilt and enjoyment no less horrible than that in the above-mentioned films.

Of course, in the above-mentioned list the real "slasher" films, where "many kill many" (*Night of the Living Dead*), "a few kill a few" (*The Texas Chain-Saw Massacre*) or "one kills many" (*Friday the 13ᵗʰ*, *Halloween*, and *Scream* movies), would need to be distinguished from the police-thriller serial-killer films, where the detective (or detectives) has to use his (their) brains to identify the single mad killer, the "one who kills many," films like *Seven* or Clint Eastwood's classic *Dirty Harry* series. In the latter case we are generally concerned with a more "serious" psychiatric profile of the killer than in the former case, though some minimal attempt is made in the Jason (*Friday the 13ᵗʰ*) films and also in the most recent *Chain-Saw Massacre* film to create such a profile for the (original) killer. Clearly, however, we get a much more complex profile with John Doe in *Seven* and Dr. Lecter in *Hannibal* than in those slasher films, filled as they are with graphic, completely senseless massacres, slashings and mutilations committed by completely insane killing-machines or monsters. Films falling more in the latter category commonly appeal to the audience's mass consumption of excessive bodily horror:

in this respect, postmodern culture may seem to be perverse and in this sense "Gothic," a "culture of enjoyment (painful pleasure)" or "wound culture."[4]

I would see this "postmodern wound culture" as being driven by that "passion for the Real," which Žižek articulates mainly in his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* and his works on cyberculture, where he is fascinated with body fragmentation, trauma, and shock, taking these to be symptomatic of late capitalist consumption—excessive consumption (driven by excessive desire) as a pleasure and/or (pleasurable) pain, as in body-piercing—and commodity fetishism (Simpson xi-xiv). The postmodern horror film, with the slasher and/or serial-killer film as its dominant sub-genre(s), is then visualizing a certain crisis of the body in relation to self-identity, both of which have perhaps metamorphosed into "amorphous" commodities, mere things for exchange and circulation, and therefore are susceptible to infinite invasion (as in eating, sexuality and body-piercing), deterritorialization and reterritorialization, hybridization, technologization, object-tification, and traumatization. Seen from this sort of anamorphic perspective, such a "passion for real body horror" brings both the body and self-identity to the brink of disappearance, and we are thus tempted to see it as the uncanny double of the "drive to virtuality," the virtualization of body, sexuality, reality, ethnicity, class, nation-state in our contemporary cyberculture.

Locating the postmodern horror film in such a social and cultural milieu, then, we cannot help but invoke the problem of ambivalent identification. Is it possible that the madness and evil embodied by serial killers like Norman Bates, Hannibal Lecter, and John Doe somehow (however perversely) works to render them heroic, or render heroic this "dark side" of the human male, and thus to legitimize or naturalize masculine violence against women, as Freeland claims (186-87)? I tend to think this particular feminist view goes a little bit too far, as do feminist film theorists like Elizabeth Young and Laura Mulvey, who point to the frequent filmic representation of the dominant male gaze and the passive, victimized image of the female in mainstream films (Schopp 128-32). One problem with both of these views is that there are also many (and their number is increasing, at least in films) female killers and monsters out there, in movies as in life, and ancient myths from all cultures are filled with powerful and fearful female monsters (witches, sirens,

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[4] According to Simpson, the original formulation of "wound culture" comes from Mark Seltzer's *Serial Killers*: *Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* and Annalee Newitz's "Serial Killers, True Crime, and Economic Performance Anxiety." Interestingly enough, the relatively recent fashion (especially but not only among the young) of body-piercing, and even to a degree perhaps (mainly male) head-shaving, could also suggest (and quite literally) a perverse (more specifically, masochistic) "wound culture."

harpies, Medusas).[5] While I nonetheless admit that there may still be some truth to the above-mentioned feminist concerns regarding the representation of "conventional" gender roles in cinema, I also find myself pondering the final gaze of Normal Bates (who thinks he is his own dead mother, murdered by "himself") at the camera. How can we describe this gaze except by relating it to the passive kernel of the subject's being, or the dimension of the "subject beyond (ideological and gender) subjectivization," where no "identification" (with it) and also no "intersubjectivity" are possible? Does this dimension not also call for our rethinking of the rigid differentiation between heteronomy and autonomy, subjectivity and objectivity, passivity and activity in the ideological critique of the horror film?

Serial killers like Norman Bates, Hannibal Lecter, and John Doe commit murders, arrange crime scenes, and dispose dead bodies in such a way that the distinction between art and savagery almost disappears (Fashy 29; Schneider, "Murder" 179-80; Wolfe and Elmer 141). This also tends to blur the boundaries between self/Other, normal/abnormal, and good/evil, rendering ambivalent the film audience's "identification." But what lies behind this boundary-blurring (or boundary-destroying) that characterizes not only the postmodern horror film but also postmodernity *per se*? Earlier I pointed out the insufficiency of the ideological critique of horror films, which is limited to an imaginary identification. For "real" horror does not lie in the graphic, nihilistic images themselves but in the dimensions of drive, enjoyment and (once again) the subject-beyond-subjectivization; more specifically it lies in the viewing subject's drive to transgress and violate boundaries (between self/Other, animate/inanimate, human/nonhuman, life/death, good/evil, etc.) over and over again, as if compelled to do so. Here we witness the drive at its purest: the drive that disregards any boundary, moving beyond the pleasure principle with no definite objects in view, becoming "a direct will to destruction" and creation *ex nihilo* (Lacan, *Seminar VII* 212-13). Through their disruption of the everyday world, the explosion of our previous assumptions about normality, reality and unreality, violence against the body and the social or moral order, etc., postmodern horror films offer the audience the impossible satisfaction of the death drive, the enjoyment of always seeing more than meets the eye, seeing beyond the cinematic images and yet repeating them from the beginning all over again.

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[5] These creatures are, on a well-known feminist reading, expressions of men's deep-lying fear of women's sexuality, more broadly of women's "sexual-reproductive" power, her power as "mother"—a reading which seems obviously right to me and which (not coincidentally) has many Lacanian echoes (e.g. in terms of the mother and the power of women to possess the phallus).

Ultimately this is the real horror that all the mere images of destruction try to keep at bay, the horror extimate to both the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

The controversies over the ambivalent identification and ideological effects of the postmodern horror film center, to a great extent, around its (new) figure of the Monster. Earlier I drew upon Lacanian psychoanalysis to bring together Gothic monstrosity, the uncanny double, and the superegoic injunction to enjoy. I now want to look at Hannibal Lecter as representative of the "new Monster," or of the obscene Father-*jouissance*, in the postmodern horror film. Many critics have discussed Lecter's role in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*; he has been seen as embodying the "postmodern" identity *par excellence* because he is (or plays) a psychoanalyst, gourmet, connoisseur of art and music, maniac, and killer all in one person. But most critics fail to observe that Lecter's "identity play," his transgression of normal identity boundaries, is something he enjoys immensely. For example, Maggie Kilgour interprets Lecter as Starling's double: "[T]he two opposites are working together, exchanging knowledge . . . analyzing each other, and exchanging secrets so that it's difficult to tell who's who" (250). But conceptualizing the double in this way virtually deprives intersubjective communication of its hard kernel of the Real, and does not disclose the true threat that Lecter poses to Starling. This "hard kernel of the Real," or radical Otherness, lurks underneath Starling-Lecter's imaginary mutual-identification and inter-subjective symbolic exchange; it resides in the zone of pure drive and pure enjoyment, of the subject beyond subjectivization, a zone where the boundaries between pleasure/pain, activity/passivity, good/evil can no longer be sustained. Lecter's unspeakable madness and evil defies all categorizations; he himself tells Starling not to reduce him to a set of influences and in every way defies quantified behavior science (although he is or was himself a psychiatrist). For similar reasons, we should not valorize Lecter as "master" who, with his own "omnivorous aesthetic" and gentleman's code of honor and justice, consciously forms himself and aims to transgress values in a Nietzschean sense (Freeland 206-07; Shaw 21). Lecter's evil and madness do not achieve any Dionysian expression or release of will-to-power beyond the Symbolic. Rather, they constitute the most real, most alien kernel of the Symbolic itself; they are extimate in nature. Without (or outside) the Symbolic, Lecter no longer exists, and *vice versa*.

Lecter's radical madness and evil are intricately tied up with his (postmodern) parody and perversion of the role of psychoanalyst/paternal figure in his interaction with Starling. For he does not pose, with her, as the Other who departs from the

imaginary projection of love, hate, jealousy, etc. and so fulfills the proper "depersonalization and impassibility," the proper demeanor of a psychoanalyst:

> What, then, lies behind the analyst's attitude, sitting there as he does across from [the analysand]? The concern to provide the dialogue with a participant who is as devoid as possible of individual characteristics. We efface ourselves, we leave the field in which lie the interest, sympathy, and reaction a speaker seeks to find on his interlocutor's face, we conceal whatever might betray them, we depersonalize ourselves and strive to represent to the other an ideal of impassibility. (*Écrits* 15)

Nor does Lecter play the role of a ventriloquist's dummy, persisting in the desire of non-understanding and "hearing but not enjoying" (his analysand's *jouissance*), as Lacan's later discourse on the analyst demands (Fink, *Lacan* 7-8; Lacan, *Écrits* 218, 220). For Lacan, a truly ethical psychoanalyst must dispense with the any semblance of "the subject who is supposed to know," namely the bearer of absolute knowledge, and "the subject who is supposed to enjoy" (the analysand's symptoms, trauma, and transference). Lecter, on the other hand, perverts the symbolic order from its very roots: he saturates his interviews with Starling with an excessive physicality, taking immense pleasure in staring at, smelling, touching, and exchanging secrets with her; he directs Starling's "advancement" (as he knows well how to play on the death of Starling's father, on her blue-collar, somewhat traumatic semi-orphaned childhood); he "artistically" designs and manipulates the progression of interviews, and so on. As a "cannibalistic" psychoanalyst (in both the figurative and literal sense), Lecter eats away at, and enjoys eating away at, Starling's very identity and being. It is through such *perverse enjoyment* that we can perceive the uncanny relationship between the Law and the obscene Father-*jouissance*.

In his "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding Night: Lacan and the Uncanny," Mladen Dolar interprets the figure of Father-*jouissance* as the "objectal remainder" of the symbolic Law that "blocks the fulfillment of our subjectivity . . . [and] at one and the same time opens the threat of castration and comes to fill the gap of castration" (10). Thus Father-*jouissance* mediates castration, in the excess of the symbolic Law, through the threat of over-enjoyment, over-proximity to the cause of desire, the most alien kernel of the subject's being. Castration conceived in this way is split within itself. We have, on the one hand, the symbolic Father, the

Name-of-the-Father that says "No!" and, on the other, the Father-*jouissance* as its "obscene, uncanny, shadowy double" (*EYS* 158). It is just such uncanny doubling that perpetuates in the subject the struggle between too little and too much enjoyment. And thus we also perceive here the split nature of the superego: the moral conscience that says "No!" to the subject on one side, and the obscene, perverted superego that knows the subject's *jouissance* and haunts the subject with the command to "enjoy!" on the other. As long as the subject submits to the Law in exchange for "surplus enjoyment" (allowed enjoyment, allowed transgression), it obtains a certain breathing space; it will not cross the *real* limits of the society, which are grounded in some fundamental, absolutely untouchable prohibitions.

Yet, what if the subject fully identifies with the "objectal remainder of the symbolic Law," the surplus enjoyment, the obscene Father's commands to enjoy? In this case, enjoyment no longer stays on the underside of the Law; instead, it is elevated to the status of the Law itself or, in Žižek's term, "the sublime object of ideology." And the question "What do you want from me?" that the subject poses to the Other as a question of desire now becomes irrelevant. What has been disavowed is the undecidability of desiring, the principle of lack as the driving force of desire. Enjoyment, in a word, supports the symbolic Law only on condition that it remains on the underside; when it is publicly recognized, allowed, and even demanded, or when the Father-*jouissance* haunts, captures the subject with his obscene, penetrating, omnipresent gaze and commands the subject to enjoy "by all means," without any pretense or holding back, then the subject's desire and the symbolic order will together reach their fundamental predicaments.

Psychoanalytic-Ethical Reflections
on the Culture of Enjoyment

The mass consumption of body-horror, serial killers and nihilistic worldviews in contemporary horror films attests to the postmodern consumer's death drive, which always seeks for more satisfaction and even, at the most horrible extreme, full identification with the obscene Father-*jouissance*. Does global capitalism not "take hold of" the subject by inducing the latter's drive to excessive, limitless consumption of an Otherness now defined as the most precious commodity? The reign of the capitalist Father-*jouissance* always penetrates into the subject's desire and commands it to embrace the images of satisfaction while paradoxically also confronting the Other's enjoyment and, therefore, always asking for still more, which turns out to be an unbearable burden for the subject (Jagodzinski 91;

McGowan 50-53). The subject is thus constantly faced with the problem of over-proximity to the Thing, the most alien kernel, the absolute Otherness of its desire: hence, the anxiety stemming from the impossibility of desiring, the lack of lack.

We can observe the symptomatic acting-out of the anxiety in question here in the contemporary culture of political correctness and of narrowly ideological criticism. After all, is not right-wing extremist or fundamentalist violence irrupting in our multiculturalist age that so openly (brazenly) embraces the principles of "love your neighbor" or "respect for the Other"? This may be because, when general permissiveness and transgression are publicly encouraged, the obscene Father-*jouissance* ascends to dominance and takes the place of the symbolic Father that says "No!" That is, it may be because, when the Symbolic loses its "efficiency" or comes to its demise, the subject is not really liberated from symbolic prohibitions; instead, it keeps running into the stumbling block of enjoyment even in the insignificant details or contingent situations of daily routine, since it has to constantly confront a plethora choices (regarding, for example, identity, body, sexuality, lifestyle, commodities, and so on). When the symbolic Other is replaced by innumerable "committees" (or small Others) which (re)invent rules for us, we have an impossibly excessive proliferation of "ethics" that teach us how to enjoy: bioethics, job ethics, ethics of eating, ethics of sex, along with New Age spiritualized lifestyles, like spa therapy, decaffeinated coffee, light beer, and all those other "better-for-you" commodities, all of which obsessively aim to blend enjoyment with fulfilling of one's duties. Ironically, the expanding range of choices does not really make us more "free to choose"; rather, it makes it increasingly impossible to choose and thus to enjoy anything.

We are thus brought back to the paradoxical nature of the superego, as stated in Lacan's thesis that "the more one sacrifices to [the superego], the more it demands" (*Seminar VII* 302). Haunted by insatiable superegoic commands, the subject is trapped in a vicious circle: the more it represses its transgressive desire in order to obey the Law, the more this desire returns to obsess the subject, which consequently feels guiltier due to not having enjoyed enough (*DSST* 100; *FA* 141). As Sarah Kay puts it, "[W]e feel guilty at having betrayed our desire, and this vengeful, perverse [and superegoic] dimension of the law punishes us by making us conform even more to the law, which makes us feel even guiltier" (111). Here we see the paradox of the superego in the pervert's position: the will to enjoy creates innumerable laws in order that it may finally reach its own limits (Fink, *Clinical Introduction* 192). The pervert, therefore, simultaneously plays the role of the sadist Other and masochistic victim; he identifies with the agent-executor of the Other's

will or the instrument of the Other's enjoyment; thus in him the subject's gaze and the gaze of the Other that objectifies overlap, paralyzing him (*EYAWK* 164, 220; *LA* 109-10; *TKN* 234, 271). This is the "short-circuiting" of activity-and-passivity.

Does not the prevalence of web cams, MSN, virtual sex betray the very perversion that is in question here—the anxiety about still *not being exposed enough* to the Other's gaze; the fantasy of sublimating the real body into a spectral, virtual body for inexhaustible enjoyment as in sado-masochistic scenarios; ultimately, the being-active in order to be passive—and thereby exemplify postmodern horror as such? In the final analysis, the superegoic imperatives to enjoy and transgress reenact the senseless, absurd, automatic dimension of the Law, which cannot be integrated into the subject's world—again, the ideological taking-hold of/on the subject-beyond-subjectivization—and thus hinder the subject's access to real enjoyment much more efficiently than any downright prohibition (*PF* 114; *SOI* 37; *TKN* 30). Excessive, transgressive enjoyment turns out to be a mere semblance of that higher degree of domination by the Law, power, and ideology. And we therefore witness a certain "rigidity underneath fluidity" in our contemporary society of enjoyment, where all kinds of choices are offered to (or forced upon?) the consumer with the choice "not to choose" always foreclosed, thus with the fundamental fantasy and politico-economic structure left intact.

Our society or culture of enjoyment might perhaps be renamed the "plague of fantasies," "culture of the drive," "wound culture," or "culture of the horror film" as I have interpreted these terms. We should bear in mind here that this passion for the Real develops along with the drive to virtuality (virtualization of body, sexuality, reality, ethnicity, class, nation-state, etc.) in cyberculture (*WDR* 9-10, 105). Thus we are very "susceptible" to the postmodern horror film, which offers us (as we have seen) the disruption of the everyday world, the explosion of our assumptions about normality, reality, and unreality, violence against the body and the social-moral order, that is, which offers us the impossible satisfaction of the death drive, the forbidden enjoyment of always seeing more and repeating everything from the beginning all over again. Yet precisely this endless and obsessive repetition of the death drive is the real horror, the one that all the horrible cinematic images function to virtualize, that is, whose disappearance they herald. Hence the short-circuit of over-proximity to the Other and the deprivation, disavowal of its Otherness. With regard to our "ideological defense mechanism," the passion for the Real should be viewed as an uncanny, anamorphic twist in the virtualizing process of reality, body, and subjectivity. Such an uncanny doubling also pertains to multiculturalism (with all those ethical injunctions to "love your neighbor" and "respect the Other") and

fundamentalist, xenophobic violence. This passion for the Real, according to Žižek, is "a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was _the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real_" (_WDR_ 24; emphasis original). And so we have the imaginary Real that enables us to avoid confronting our real inconsistencies and antagonisms and the dimension of "the subject beyond subjectivization."

After all the argumentative twists and turns, one final problem remains concerning both the ethics of "reading" the postmodern horror film and our culture of enjoyment. Whatever solutions we may arrive at, such pathologizing gestures as the following passage of "criticism" need to be avoided in the first place:

> [The] gratification of the contemporary Horror film is based upon tension, fear, anxiety, sadism and masochism—a disposition that is overall both tasteless and morbid. The pleasure of the text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you—and loving it: an exchange mediated by adrenalin. (Brophy 5; qtd. in Jancovich 47)

What we have here is the assumption of a pseudo-objectively detached, a pseudo-critical distance with respect to our excessive, monstrous enjoyments, the extimacy of our very existence. True, Lacan speaks of an ethics of psychoanalysis that aims at "the taming of perverse _jouissance_" (_Seminar VII_ 4), yet to "tame our perverse _jouissance_" and maintain a properly ethical distance from it has nothing to do with either the rational control of the death drive or any good, pleasurable sense of harmony as the ultimate ethical goal. Taming perverse _jouissance_ is more about "traversing the fantasy": in the context of this essay, it means identifying with the Monster as symptom, "to recognize in the 'excesses,' in the disruptions of the 'normal' way of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning" (_SOI_ 128). This means a traumatic encounter with the real, hard kernel of our being and/or with the impossible antagonisms of our society; it means, in Žižek's term, a "subjective destitution":

> The disavowed fundamental passivity of my being is structured in the fundamental fantasy which . . . regulates the way I relate to _jouissance_. For that precise reason, it is impossible for the subject to assume his fundamental fantasy without undergoing the radical experience of "subjective destitution": in assuming my fundamental fantasy, I take upon myself the passive kernel of my being—the

kernel the distance towards which sustains my subjective activity.
(*PF* 116)

This "passive kernel of my being" is the subject at its purest, the dimension of the "subject-beyond-subjectivization" where, paradoxically enough, ideological grip and truly ethical action take place. From the ethical perspective of psychoanalysis, the truly ethical subject and action only emerge in the form of Truth, a messianic Event "violently imposed on me from the Outside through a traumatic encounter that shatters the very foundation of my being" (*TS* 212); perhaps this is also somehow congruent with the Schellingian "abyss of freedom." The truly ethical subject performing a truly ethical act does not choose among the options offered by the power structure or status quo; it changes the rules of choosing and "the very parameters of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellation" (*TS* 199). In this, after all its most (and/or its only) ethical use, the postmodern horror film shocks us with the pretense that we do not need to make any fundamental change in the fantasmatic, politico-social structure, in our society of enjoyment: and this is the real horror of everyday life, something that is always buried in the Mystic River.

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