



*Kirk J. Schneider*

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# **HORROR AND THE HOLY**

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*Wisdom-  
Teachings  
of the  
Monster  
Tale*

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of the Monster Tale

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Front cover photo: Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's Monster, from *Frankenstein*, Universal, 1931. Copyright © by Universal City Studios, Inc. Courtesy of MCA Publishing Rights, a division of MCA Inc.



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## Preface

I am sitting in a dark theater watching David Cronenberg's *The Fly*. Suddenly, I am struck by my fascination. How could I, a relatively temperate individual, be so fixated on the grisly events before me? How could the hundred or so patrons in the theater with me be equally entranced? How can there be so much *prurient* interest in general?

Then it dawns on me. We are all so captivated because there are elements of the sacred in what we witness. There is an intersection here between horror and the holy! Creation, destruction, the monstrous—each of these touch on the extraordinary as well as on the pathological.

Why else would so many of us be attracted to dangerous or extreme situations—carnivals, bloodsports, mountain climbing, sex palaces, military battles? Why else would we be captivated by crime, mayhem, and cataclysm? Even in ancient times, biblical writers understood our enchantment with the macabre.

But there is another reason for our fixation on the horrific: horror provides us with a view of one of the fundamental human dilemmas—that which frees us versus that which limits us. We can *attempt* virtually anything, the genre stresses, but we must ever be apprised of the costs.

Certainly, I am not the only one to have made this observation. Some of us have made it intuitively, and others, like the author H. P. Lovecraft, have alluded to it explicitly.<sup>1</sup> A few psychologists—Freudians and Jungians mainly—have also made such observations but with moderately different emphases. None of these standpoints, however, has proved satisfactory to me. Either they treat the subject too briefly, as in Lovecraft's essay, or they don't quite grasp the profundity of the phenomenon, as in Freudian and Jungian considerations.

This book, then, is written for all those who see more in horror's unsettling domains. It is written for both academic and lay readers who perceive something momentous in classic horror, but who cannot find sourcebooks which fully legitimate this perception. Accordingly, *Horror and the Holy* opens with four psychological assumptions (which draw in part on earlier research I have published<sup>2</sup>): (1) classic horror (and by analogy the self/cosmic relation) is both ecstatic and terrifying; (2) the basis for this condition is infinity (or "the holy"); (3) the further we pursue the ecstatic, the more we unveil its terrifying context; and (4) the *encounter* with this context (as opposed to the denial or passive acceptance of this context) promotes vitality and social sensitivity.

After elaborating on the structure of these assumptions and their relevance to eleven classic tales, we explore their implications for living. Specifically, we consider their pertinence to psychological, social, scientific, and spiritual well-being. We close, finally, with a comment on the productive and unproductive dimensions of "evil."

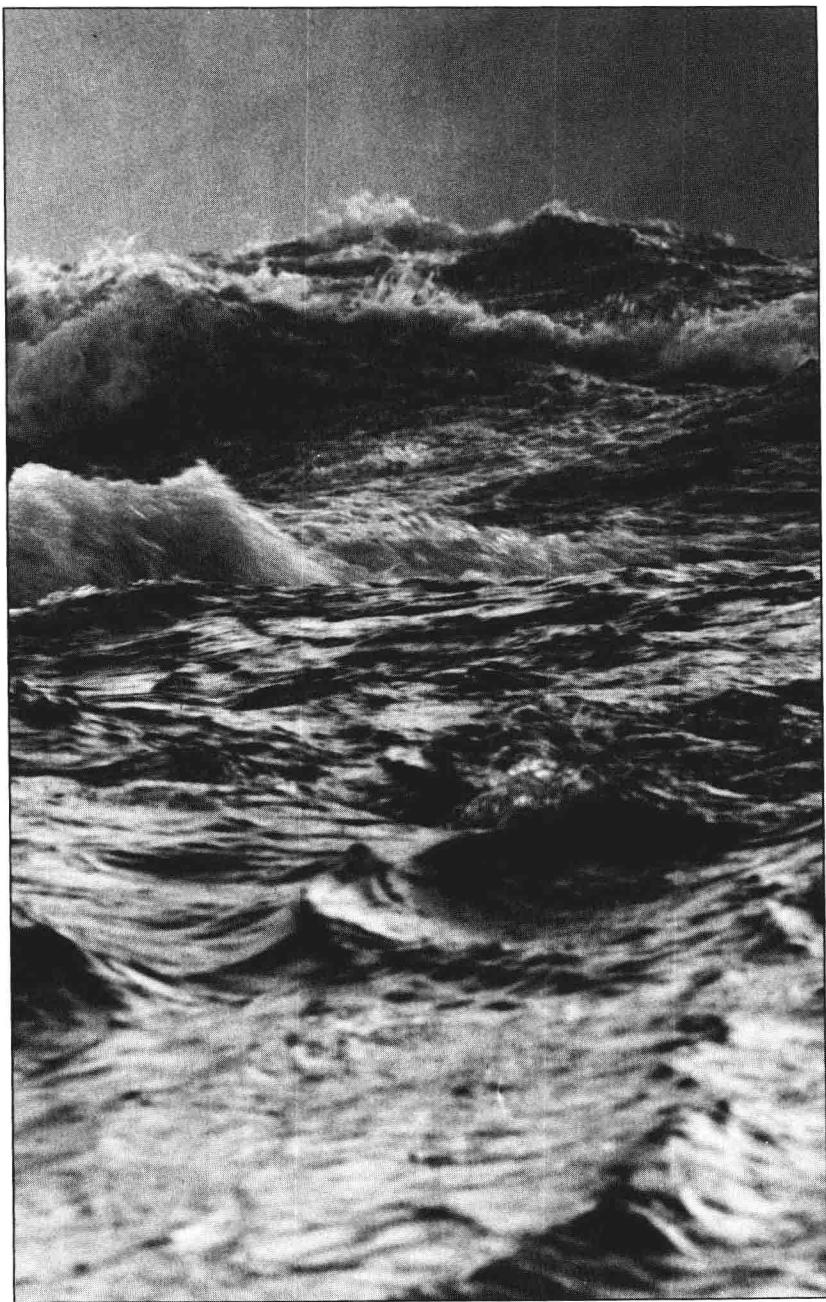
One last note: To a large extent, I arrived at a spiritual understanding of life through horror—*my own* as well as that which I witnessed in books and movies. Although this may not be the traditional path to such a sensibility, it is a much more common one, I believe, than is ordinarily acknowledged. (Witness, for example, the phenomena of shamanism and the "wounded healer.") I hope that others, who are similarly disposed, can derive benefit from this perspective and from the exalted sentiments of Hölderlin: "Where danger is, the delivering power grows too."<sup>3</sup>

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*Niagara Falls* (1969). Photo by Algimantas Kezys.

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# Introduction—Ecstasy, Terror, and Infinity

*For beauty is . . . but the beginning of  
terror, which we . . . are just able to  
endure.*

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

Infinity—and I mean here infinity of the small as well as the large—has ever held humanity in its sway. From the dawn of civilization, we have been fascinated by endlessness (or the *intimations* of endlessness). Cave drawings reveal immense beasts of prey. Ancient temples swell with excesses—giant pillars, dazzling spires, extravagant offerings to the gods. Obscure details have also been significant. Wind, rain, and snow are enduring objects of worship. The occult—darkness, phantoms, alchemy—has constantly intrigued us. The subtle world of microorganisms has never ceased to amaze.

Religiosity, love, poetry, art—these too celebrate the limitless (or what is believed to be limitless). We revel in them, become dizzy, giddy, intoxicated through them. Religions promise to immortalize us. Lovers create paradise. Poets and artists show us possibilities. We can cover the whole range with these vehicles, or so it seems. We can know total surrender and total dominance. We can give in, diminish, merge; and we can assert, expand, engulf.

But there is a hitch to our celebrations of the infinite (or the holy, in the classic sense of the term).<sup>1</sup> This is the other message that has been foretold. Celebration is joyful, this tradition suggests, but it is only partial; it is only the initial phase of what can be. On the other side terror reigns.<sup>2</sup> *Ecstasy is a glimpse of the infinite; terror is full disclosure.* Ecstasy is marked by a degree of

comfort, innocence, illusion; terror is ultimately bereft of these. Ecstasy implies some degree of containment or manageability; terror is unbridled. It is fine to say with Lao Tzu and the institutional Jesus that they are “the way,” but the call of the tragedian, I believe, is more germane: “All [is] in doubt.”<sup>3</sup>

The chief assumptions of this book, accordingly, are: (1) the basis for terror and ecstasy is infinity (or the holy); (2) terror sets the upper limit on ecstasy and not the other way around; and (3) the *encounter* with this limit promotes vitality and social sensitivity.

While the artistic, literary, and philosophical validations of our position are notable,<sup>4</sup> one relevant area—the horror tale—has been woefully underinvestigated. Daunting though it may be, horror slashes through life’s surfaces and exposes the heart of our condition. It cuts through all of our comforts, from the obvious to the sublime, and unveils our *rootlessness*. At the same time, it suggests a way to *handle* this rootlessness.

For the balance of this book, we will pursue the horror phenomenon. First, we will consider the psychological structure of horror—how it arises, what it implies about ecstasy, how it relates to infinity. Next, we will consider the wisdom in horror beginning with two archetypal thrillers, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Third, we will elaborate upon this wisdom with nine classic counterparts to the above—*The Phantom of the Opera*, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” *The Invisible Man*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Birds*, *Forbidden Planet*, *Vertigo*, and *Alien*. Finally, we will consider horror as a worldview—what the moral and psychological lessons of horror are and how they can promote well-being.





Untitled artwork  
by Angela  
Campbell of the  
National  
Institute of Art  
and Disabilities,  
Richmond,  
California.

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# Part I

## The Structure of Horror: Chaos and Obliteration

*Whoso takes this survey of himself will  
be terrified at the thought that he is  
upheld . . . between these two abysses of  
the infinite and nothing, he will tremble  
at the sight of these marvels.*

—BLAISE PASCAL

In order to understand horror, we must begin with “deviation.”<sup>1</sup> Although deviation can also imply ecstasy, such deviation is *transitory*. The prospect of *unabating* deviation, on the other hand, is horrifying. This point can be illustrated by a simple vignette. If I take a mild sedative, I am likely to feel relaxed; if I take a few sedatives I will probably feel serene; if I overdose on sedatives, I will quite rapidly feel *immobilized*. To illustrate further—the early stages of love can be a joyful, intoxicating experience. But what happens when one lover becomes obsessed? What happens if this lover follows his partner around, can’t stop thinking about her, and petitions her incessantly?

Now let us carry these cases further and contemplate *unceasing* sedation or *boundless* adoration. For example, what might it be like if we *could not stop* relaxing, if even death could not bar us from this process? What might such deterioration look like? Is it even conceivable? What about our *boundlessly* devoted lover? What if he followed his beloved *everywhere*? What if he clung to her *interminably*?

If these extremities strike a chord for you, then you have probably entered the world of horror. This is the world of the nightmare and the grotesque. What makes this world so disturb-

ing is not merely its lethality (which might actually be welcomed under the circumstances!) but its *unstoppability*, its *endlessness*.

Take almost any deviation from customary experience, stretch it far enough, and you produce horror. Think about vision, for example. Observing the details of nature with normal, healthy eyes is a wondrous event. However, what if our eyes were capable of microscopic discriminations? What if we could see the details of common houseflies? What if we could peer into the molecular structure of food or skin? What if our entire visual field constituted microbes and electro-magnetic charges? By the same token, what if we could see into distant homes, towns, or even countries with a single glance? What if unaided visibility extended to other planets or solar systems? How manageable would our lives be?

This conception can be applied to *any* of our senses. Consider *unimpeded* hearing or *unlimited* physical sensation. What if we were bombarded with distant sounds or uncontrollable pain? The problem holds for thoughts and emotions as well. Contemplate *unbounded* anger, sadness, or envy. Consider *endless* analyzing, categorizing, or speculating. To be sure, writers use such exaggerated phraseology but only for dramatic effect. Reflect upon what such experiences might *literally* be like.

Even so-called elated states of consciousness can become harrowing. Heaven, Paradise, Nirvana—all of these *sound* beautiful. But what might they *actually* be like? How do *eternal* submission or *unceasing* harmony strike us? What about *perpetual* enthusiasm? Mark Twain (1962) has mused widely on these problems:

In man's heaven *everybody sings!* The man who did not sing on earth sings there; the man who could not sing on earth is able to do it there. This universal singing is not casual, not occasional, not relieved by intervals of quiet; it goes on all day long . . . every day. . . .

Meantime, every person is playing a harp. . . . Consider the deafening hurricane of sound—millions and millions of voices screaming at once and millions and millions of harps gritting their teeth at the same time! I ask you: is it hideous, is it odious, is it horrible? (pp. 10–11)

Deviation from the familiar, then, prompts discomfort. Extreme deviation, on the other hand, or what I term “contradic-



tion,” prompts *horror*. That which begins as a cure for nervousness, for example, winds up as *paralyzing*. That which starts as a casual fling ends in *obsession*. That which is initially wondrous turns *monstrous*. These are the earmarks of horror.

But we cannot stop here. Contradiction taken to its logical conclusion brings us to *infinity*. Why infinity? Because, as we have seen, the more a thing differs, the less manageable it becomes; the less manageable it becomes, the greater its linkage to extremity, obscurity, and, ultimately, *endlessness*.

Elsewhere, I have shown that human consciousness is characterized by two potentially endless poles—the *constrictive* and the *expansive* (Schneider 1990). Constrictive experience is typified by “drawing back” and confining; expansive perception is marked by “bursting forth” and extending. Many if not most of our horrors can be understood in this vein. Our “sedation” episode, for example, illustrates uncontrollable contraction; the “love” vignette suggests unmanageable extension (e.g., envelopment), as well as some contractive elements (e.g., obsession). Constriction is associated with a variety of states: retreating, diminishing, isolating, falling, emptying, or slowing. Expansion is linked to gaining, enlarging, dispersing, ascending, filling, or accelerating.

Now if we apply this model to horror classics, central themes become more intelligible. Is it any wonder that the genre is preoccupied by immensity, materialization, and explosiveness on the one hand, and imperceptibility, dematerialization, and entrapment on the other? And we must go even further. Superlative horror carries these dimensions to their ultimate point; it displays expansion and constriction in their starkest light. What, then, are the final implications of maximization (immensity, materialization, explosiveness) and minimization (imperceptibility, dematerialization, entrapment)? While we certainly cannot provide definitive answers here, my research suggests two polar eventualities—those of chaos and obliteration (Schneider 1990).

In these extremities we find the utmost consternations of humanity. Chaos is representative of unrelenting proliferation; it is the nightmare of mania, the end-state of ruthlessness and disarray. Obliteration, conversely, signifies never-ending collapse; it is the final outcome of isolation, the culmination of secrecy and disappearance.

Let me be clear that these are *unending* associations about which we are speaking, and the most powerful horror tales revel