Fearing the Nonexistent*

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At the heart of artistic horror lies a double paradox: we are frightened by what we know does not exist and we take pleasure from what horrifies us. From Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke to Julia Kristeva to David Pole and to Stephen King, many have tried to account for this puzzle, but their attempts have been either too specific or too general, failing to advance the discussion of the nature and narrative structures of horror. Noël Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror* aims to correct this situation and to offer an aesthetics of horror as it occurs in literature and in other media.

Carroll's hypothesis relies mainly on the nature of horror and on one's relation to fictions. Of central interest to me is the latter question, which could be rephrased as 'Why do we fear the nonexistent?', for it leads to a semiotic problem: 'How does the sign refer to things that do not exist?' After trying to answer this, I shall proceed to examine the first part of Carroll's hypothesis, which depends on the second for a clearer understanding of the paradox of horror.

Thing, Object, and Sign

The sign relates to an object regardless whether it is a purely mental creation or something in the physical world. This alone makes culture and its manifestations possible. Imaginary creations become a possibility when the organism that uses the sign perceives relations as relations. Such a feat enables the organism to introduce language as another level of reality in its *Umwelt* (Uexküll 1957) which now becomes the *Lebenswelt* (Husserl 1970, Spiegelberg 1960, Deely 1982), specific of human beings. At this point humans differentiate themselves from other animals, and transform zoösemiosis into anthroposemiosis.

Deceptions, as well as varieties of illusions and delusions, exist at the level of zoösemiosis (Sebeok 1963:74); but only in anthroposemiosis does it become possible to play with relations to create possible worlds that do not correspond in some direct way to the physical environment (Deely 1990:19 n.5). The sign refers both to what exists as mind dependent and to what exists as mind independent. This feature of the sign originates notions such as truth and reality, lies and fiction, and, as a consequence, art and science and social institutions.

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* Review of Carroll, Noël. (1990). *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart.* New York: Routledge.

Recent philosophy has glossed over or explained away the problem of how we can talk about objects in a way that appears to be indifferent to their actual existence. Modern semiotics, on the other hand, has concerned itself with the reference to nonexistent beings (e.g., Deely 1975, 1990), albeit scarcely. I would suggest that Peircean semiotics, in particular, can explain satisfactorily the relation of the sign to existent and nonexistent beings alike.

A step seldom taken in any discussion of Peirce's theory of the sign is to consider what he means by object. Peirce (*MS* 693A:33) points out that

> one should remark that the common use of the word 'object' to mean a *thing*, is altogether incorrect. The noun *objectum* came into use in the XIIIth century, as a term of psychology. It means primarily that creation of the mind in its reaction with a more or less real something, which creation becomes that upon which cognition is directed ....

For Peirce and the scholastics before him (as well as for Maritain 1959, Deely 1982, 1990, and Cahalan 1985 more recently), thing is all that is there for the mind to meet. As a thing is known, it becomes an object. Thus objective, in Peirce's semiotics, does not refer to that which belongs to the sensible world and is observable or verifiable. Quite the opposite: objective means that which exists in relation to a knowing subject. 'Every cognition,' according to Peirce (*CP* 5.238), 'involves something represented, or that of which we are conscious, and some action or passion of the self whereby it becomes represented. The former shall be termed the objective, the latter the subjective, element of the cognition.'

This suggests that the subjective interpretive elements by which the cognizing organism projects and organizes its objective world–the *Umwelt*–are themselves already signs. Signs, as far as they have a subjective component, are fundaments–the representative element–upon which objective relations are grounded and from which they result.

Most of Peirce's definitions of a sign feature it being determined by the object. The following quotation (*MS* 318:44), for example, stresses the objective determination:

> a sign is anything, of whatsoever mode of being, which mediates between an object and an interpretant; since it is both determined by the object *relatively to the interpretant*, and determines the interpretant *in reference to the object*, in such wise as to cause the interpretant to be determined by the object through the mediation of this 'sign' [sic].

The object determines the sign itself to have a specific interpretant, and it determines the interpretant to have a specific object because of the sign. The logical causality in the object's determination of the sign relation, however, differs from the physical causality.

Poinsot (1985:195/3-9, 195/18-29) holds that this difference arises from two principles. The first is that an object exercises an objective, not a productive, causality to a mind, and it does so as an extrinsic form made present to that mind 'by means of a specifying form.' The second principle is that a sign is substituted in the place of an object objectively, not productively nor as leading the mind 'to a thing signified in the mode of an effective cause.' Peirce (*CP* 5.484) explains the difference thus:

> All dynamical action, or action of brute force, physical or psychical, either takes place between two subjects [whether they react equally upon each other, or one is agent and the other patient, entirely or partially] or at any rate is a resultant of such actions between pairs. But by 'semiosis' I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a coöperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs.

Material changes always result from the dynamical action of bodies, and objective changes may or may not occur. Exactly the opposite obtains from the action of signs. Any material change is only presupposed, for what constitutes the essence of the action of signs is an objective transformation, which is often (but not necessarily) a 'modification of consciousness,' to use Peirce's phrase (*CP* 5.485).

Two Kinds of Objects

To understand the logical causality that relates the object to its sign and to the interpretant of the sign of that object, one should turn to Peirce's definitions of kinds of objects. He distinguishes (*MS* 318:33) between the immediate and the real (or dynamical) object: 'This ... I term the *Object* of the sign;– the *immediate* object, if it be the idea which the sign is built upon, the *real* object, if it be that real thing or circumstance upon which that idea is founded, as on a bed-rock' (similar definitions appear throughout Peirce's works, for example, *CP* 4.536, 5.473, 8.183, and 8.314). In this two-step process, a thing becomes the dynamical (or real or existent) object that will serve as ground for an idea. This idea will become an immediate object, which in turn will determine a sign.

The idea in the mind–a subjective factor and representation–is not a sign formally, but only fundamentally. Poinsot expresses this by saying that the idea in the mind (as 'someone's idea') is a transcendental relation, while the idea considered as signifying in an ontological relation. Formally, the sign consists in the relation of this idea with its object. The object is at least modally distinct from its idea, and the sign relation distinct from both the signified object and the idea it signifies.

This, however, does not imply that the dynamical object is always a mind-independent being. The sign is built upon the immediate object–the idea of a dynamical object. The dynamical object, in turn, is the idea of 'a strictly individual thing or an individual collection or series, or an individual event, or an individual *ens rationis*' (*MS* 318:34). Thus, for Peirce, immediate and dynamical objects differ only on formal grounds. There are no essential differences between an idea as an immediate object and an idea as something real—that is, as a dynamical object existing by itself in our cognition.

Peirce (*MS* 318:41) makes this clear when he classes nonexistent objects, such as a phoenix or truth, as immediate objects without a sufficiently corresponding dynamical object:

> It may be that there is no such thing or fact in existence, or in any mode of reality, but we surely shall not deny to the common picture of a phoenix or to a figure in naked truth in her well the name of a 'sign', simply because the bird is a fiction and Truth an *ens rationis*. If there be anything *real* ... that sufficiently corresponds with the immediate object (which since it is an apprehension, is not real,) then whether this be identifiable with the Object strictly so-called or not, it ought to be called and usually is called, the 'real object' of the sign.

A third kind of object seems to show up unannounced: 'the Object strictly so-called,' which would exist in the physical world, and upon which the dynamical object is founded. In fact, this would-be third object is 'that creation of the mind in its reaction with a more or less real something' (*MS* 693A:33)—a thing become known. Notice that it is 'more or less real,' as a being 'out there in the world,' or an idea existing by itself in cognition. Consider a phoenix. It was first a conception in someone's mind, a thousand or more years ago. Once it became a public sign, it also became a thing. When my mind encountered the sign of a phoenix (an idea-as-thing to me) the mythological bird became a dynamical object. This dynamical object originated an immediate object in my mind, starting another semiotic process.

Here lies the crux of our discussion of how signs refer to nonexistent beings. A sign always refers to, or is determined by, its immediate object, which, as an apprehension, is not real (in the sense of existing physically). The immediate object does not need to correspond sufficiently with a dynamical object. The dynamical object need provide no more than a sensory core around which the mind elaborates an immediate object transcending and exceeding what the percepts alone provide. This object is the object for fantasy–or, for that matter, of mistaken belief in other contexts. The sign therefore

refers to its immediate object regardless whether that object is identifiable with a thing or with a creation of the mind.

Peirce speaks out of both sides of his mouth on this point: as an idealist at *CP* 8.153 and as a realist at 1904 (many other conflicting textual samples could be given along the same line). The point is that 'The data from which inference sets out and upon which all reasoning depends are the *perceptual facts*, the intellect's fallible record of the *percepts*, or "evidence of the senses"' (*CP* 2.143). This evidence never reduces to what the mind constructs within the order of objectivity, as Poinsot has explained (1985: Book II, Question 2, esp. n. 9, p. 311). When a thing becomes an object, it does not thereby reduce to experience and become 'purely mental'. Rather, the cognizing organism can apprehend only some aspects of its physical being. As these aspects are objectified and contextualized in the larger web of objective relationships, they serve as sign-vehicles, whether for a scientific enterprise or, more commonly, the cultural awareness of immediate objects out of which fantasies are derived. A thing exists in its own right, independently of being known, but as it is experienced, the thing acquires an objectified existence dependent on the perceptual, biological structure of the organism. This objectified existence is what provides the dynamical aspect within the immediate object.

The Representation of Fictive Objects

A further consideration is of what sort a sign must be to represent fictive objects, that is, objects 'whose characters depend upon what characters somebody attributes to' them (*CP* 5.153). As to their mode of possible presentation, mind-dependent beings are 'Potisigns, or Objects which are signs so far as they are merely possible, but felt to be positively possible' (*CP* 8.347). Thus, they are presented 'As mere Ideas, or what might be if things were not as they are' (*CP* 8.349). Plans, utopias, wishes, and similar creations of the mind belong to this division.

Following this path, Peirce (*CP* 8.350) obtains signs he calls 'Descriptives, which determine their Objects by stating the characters of the latter.' This becomes obvious when one considers creatures such as the phoenix, laws, beauty, etc. The mind creates them as signs, and they in turn determine their objects. Or as Peirce (*CP* 8.361) has it, 'it is of the essence of the Sign to determine [i.e., to render 'definitely to be such as will be'] certain Ideas; i.e., certain Possibles.' Buildings, books, and institutions come into existence because the sign previously determined them.

Signs whose dynamical objects are purely objective beings are, in Peirce's theory (*CP* 8.366), 'Signs of Possibles. That is, *Abstractives* such as Color, Mass, Whiteness, etc.' By abstractives he means 'signs of

immediate abstractions.' Also, 'if the Dynamical Object be a mere Possible the Immediate Object could only be of the same nature' (*CP* 8.367). Such a dynamical object is an abstraction. Thus, the immediate object–an idea of the dynamical one–is the abstraction of an abstraction.

Broadly speaking, signs in relation to objects that refer to nonexistent beings are iconic or symbolic. If the relation is one of likeness, for example between the picture of a phoenix and the phoenix itself, the sign is predominantly an icon. If the relation is one of generality or law, such as between a flag and the country it stands for, it is mainly a symbol.

The iconic sign (say, the picture of the phoenix) is the character that the sign (the picture) has that refers to its object (the mythological bird). It can be a quality (a qualisign) or a law (a legisign), insofar as it is supposedly like the bird and is used as a sign of it (*CP* 2.247). The symbolic sign (say, a flag taken to represent a country) is that generality or law in our minds that mediates between that flag and the country. Note that country is an existent instance of what the symbolic sign denotes, but, as Peirce (*CP* 2.249) aptly puts it, 'existent in the possibly imaginary universe to which the Symbol refers.'

More specifically, signs that refer to nonexistent beings fall into five classes. First, when they make quality a sign, they are qualisigns (*CP* 2.254). Since we have to know, or have a conception of, what a phoenix is to compare what is common between picture and bird, the picture as qualisign is also iconic. Since the 'phoenix quality' is but a logical possibility, the picture as qualisign contains a sign of the essence of a phoenix–that is, a rheme.

Second, they can be iconic sinsigns. They are some quality 'that determines the idea of an object' (*CP* 2.255). For example: the individual picture of the phoenix, a relief of the war between the Olympians and the Titans, or a diagram of the angelical order are iconic in that they involve a supposed likeness of the bird, of the mythological war, or of the heavenly hierarchy.

Third, as instances of generality embodying qualities, signs that refer to mind-dependent creatures can be iconic legisigns (*CP* 2.258): that in the picture which allows it to embody a definite quality of phoenixes; that which renders it fit to call to mind any supposed phoenix. Each embodiment, such as the picture, is a replica, which in turn is an iconic sinsign.

Fourth, these signs can be instances of generality as generating concepts, or rhematic symbols (*CP* 2.261)–that in the picture which draws attention to phoenixes. The mediation between the rhematic symbols and the fabulous birds is an iconic legisign.

Finally, when the mediation between the signs and the nonexistent beings is an ulterior sign through a law, the signs are said to be arguments (*CP* 2.263). This means that generality in the picture which makes it a symbol of all phoenixes.

Fictions as Internal and External Realities

Phoenixes, unfortunately, exist as external objects only 'as a product of somebody's imagination' and whose 'characters are independent of how you or I think' (*CP* 5.405). By themselves, they are not realities but fictions, and as such can only exist in what Peirce (*CP* 5.476, 5.480, 5.487, 5.493) calls our 'inner world.' As intellectual concepts, fictions are conjectures, that is, first logical interpretants (*CP* 5.476) that function as 'the essential effect upon the interpreter' (*CP* 5.482). These first logical interpretants stimulate us to act in our inner world, and the resulting thoughts are in 'the conditional mood, the "*would-be*"' (*CP* 5.482). Phoenixes and all nonexistent beings originate in our individual objective world, the *Innenwelt* (Uexküll 1957), as conjectures. Later, through the embodied sign, they come into existence in the *Lebenswelt*, the public objective world.

It is thus, referring indifferently to objects that correspond to things (realities) and to objects that correspond to conjectures (fictions), that the sign can refer to nonexistent beings. This property of the sign allows for phenomena like delusion, illusion, and deception in zoösemiosis and anthroposemiosis. For the animal it is vital to eliminate all purely objective creations; otherwise it will eventually end as an item in its predators' diet. On the other hand, it is exactly such indifference of the sign about the nature of its object that enables human beings to redistribute relations in ways not found in the physical world, and thus to create language and that postlinguistic, purely objective world we call culture.

The Nature of Horror

The *Lebenswelt* functions as a modeling system that informs human beings about reality; it is a collective interpretant necessary for communication (and all it implies) to exist. According to this interpretant, objects acquire different ontological status in a given society at a certain period. The planet Vulcan was thought to be real until its existence was proved a misinterpretation of astronomical data. For Trekkies, however, it became the home of Mr. Spock. Considering the objective world an interpretant upon which the categories of real and unreal rely, we can define fantasy as an intentional divergence from the *Lebenswelt*.

Together with Manlove (1983) and Hume (1984), I consider fantasy one of the impulses in art, the other being mimesis. While realist art seems to be oriented by an interpretant that pulls the sign closer to the object–the *Lebenswelt*–in non realist art there appears to exist an interpretant that pushes the sign away from its object. In the first case, what prevents sign and object from coinciding is the creative element the Greeks called poiesis; similarly, mimesis, in the second case, precludes sign and object from being totally unrelated. Even when the sign appears to be a most fantastic creature, it is never completely alien, for we cannot perceive the absolutely unknown.

Fantasy manifests itself in art through the creation of phenomena that are not supposed to exist in the world as we know it. The manifestations can be grouped in categories according to their nature and common structural characteristics (I avoid using the term genre because of its ambiguity). Noël Carroll (1990:3) recognizes that fantasy subsumes horror ('the fantasy genres, of which horror is a leading example'), but a few lines later, he commits the categorical mistake of placing both at the same level ('the horror/fantasy film'). This confusion plagues the work of scholars such as Searles, Meacham & Franklin (1982), Hume (1984), Pringle (1985, 1989), invalidating their theoretical presuppositions, but here it is a minor fault that does not undermine Carroll's poetics.

Carroll correlates horror with the presence of monsters and the attitude of characters in the story to give him a means of demarcating it from other manifestations of fantasy. 'In works of horror', he points out (Carroll 1990:16), 'the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order. In fairy tales, on the other hand, monsters are part of the everyday furniture of the universe.' We could extend this analysis and say that if the monsters can be explained by scientific laws, the story is science fiction; the tale is one of terror if the monsters are threatening but not repulsive; when the characters recognize the monsters as such, but do not feel disgusted by them nor think that they threaten the *Lebenswelt*, the story is what the French call *fantastique*.

Here we should remark that Carroll, like Frank (1990), distinguishes between horror and terror, but the usefulness of such move seems unclear. Frank (1990:6) defines terror as 'anticipation of the dreadful' and horror as 'realization of the hideous', while in Carroll's definition, the characters of a terror story feel the monsters to be threatening but not repugnant, and those of horror fiction react to the monsters with both fear and repulsion. Depending on which dictionary or thesaurus one consults, the distinction Frank makes agrees or disagrees with Carroll's, and both seem to cancel each other out. This, however, shows the superiority of Carroll's approach: instead of relying on lexical definitions, which, owing to the nature of the sign, can become an infinite hunt for the right word, he turns to the reactions of the characters facing the monster. Such approach, which he confides comes from Aristotle's description of tragedy and from Todorov's definition of the fantastic, provides him with a reliable means of identifying the object of his research.

Carroll is a gentleman when he states that he admires Todorov's work and is 'obviously influenced by it'. Carroll's poetics of horror compares favorably with any other study of the same kind and has achieved what Todorov's unaccountably famous book could not even aim to. In fact, the fortune of *The Fantastic* (Todorov 1973) may be attributed more to the lobbying made by the French than to any intrinsic scientific value it might have (for critical evaluations of Todorov's work see Bessière 1974, Lem 1974, Brooke-Rose 1976, McHale 1987). As they had done with Ferdinand de Saussure, whom they proclaimed 'the father of semiology', the French canonized Tzvetan Todorov as the authority on the fantastic. Todorov's definition, however, could work but a few miracles: the only texts that satisfied its conditions were Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* and Mérimée's tale 'La Vénus d'Ille'. Even Carroll's sympathetic efforts could produce just a couple of other examples in contemporary literature that would fit that definition. In so doing, Carroll (unwittingly, I believe) defeated Todorov, for the latter had announced the demise of the fantastic in the twentieth century and its replacement by science fiction.

The fantastic and every other manifestation of fantasy are still alive in this postmodern age, as some authors have noticed (McHale 1987, Olsen 1987, Johnson 1988). Although Carroll (1990:210-211) 'is not convinced by the philosophical arguments advanced by the postmodernists', he grants that insofar as they suspect 'the inadequacy of our conceptual schemes', the postmodernists reflect a feeling 'that is enacted by the contemporary horror fictions consumed by mass audiences'. A concise discussion follows that throws some light on why the *American Dream* has become the *American Nightmare*. The Gulf Crisis and its denouement may have outdated it, but it remains a good explanation as any for why, in these last decades of awesome events and changes, the Americans have elected horror their genre.

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