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Still Two Problematic Theses in Carroll's Account of Horror: A Response to "Monsters and the Moving Image"

I. INTRODUCTION

Although two decades have passed since the publication of *The Philosophy of Horror*,¹ Noël Carroll's account remains the leading, most sophisticated view of horror fiction. Recently, however, I presented some novel criticisms of Carroll's view.² Specifically, I contended that two of Carroll's original suggestions face various counterexamples. The first is his suggestion that audiences are meant to parallel the emotional responses of characters confronting horror monsters. The second is his contention that audiences are meant to be disgusted by horror monsters, because the monsters are impure. I drew widely upon recognized works of horror to criticize each thesis. Carroll has swiftly responded to these charges,³ dismissing them on the grounds that they either distort or underestimate the resourcefulness of his view. In this paper, I argue that Carroll's response to my criticisms is inadequate, and that he underestimates the problems I have identified for his view.

II. THE MIRRORING-EFFECT REVISITED

The first thesis at issue is the claim that in horror works, "audiences are meant to parallel, in some respects, the emotional responses of some characters toward the monster."⁴ If a monster frightens characters, on this suggestion, it's meant to frighten audiences as well. I dubbed this thesis the "mirroring-effect." Carroll himself never calls it that, but the claim is present throughout his work, though in different versions, as I noted. Sometimes he says we're supposed to parallel the responses of any character toward the monster; other times only the responses of human characters; still other times only those of positive human characters; and finally only those of protagonists. In my original discussion, I argued that none of these proposals can be sustained and enumerated counterexamples to each, drawing upon familiar horror fictions to make my case. Let's consider a few examples.

Take the version of the mirroring-effect which states that, in horror fictions, audiences ought to mimic the responses of human characters toward the monster. Initially, this might seem plausible, but, in fact, there are plenty of human characters in horror fictions whose reactions we are probably not intended to share. For example, satanic horror, such as *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen*, typically features villainous humans that aid and worship the Devil. Instead of fearing him, these characters love and adore him. But presumably, that's not at all how viewers are intended to feel. Similarly mundane counterexamples confront other versions of the mirroring-

effect. Consider the version that says we ought to parallel the emotional responses of positive human characters. This avoids the last set of counterexamples, but here too there are exceptions. Some positive human characters are brave; they're not frightened by the monster, though audiences are surely meant to be. In this vein, consider the penultimate scene of *The Exorcist*, in which the two priests, Father Karras and Father Merrin, drive the demon from Regan's body. Undoubtedly, this scene is designed to frighten viewers. However, recall that the priests aren't frightened. Rather, they act brave—even calm—in the face of the demon's contortions. Indeed, it is precisely these qualities that make them such formidable opponents for the monster, and which make the scene suspenseful. Anyone who revisits this film will likely agree it's implausible to interpret it as prescribing that audiences parallel the response of the exorcists. Such counterexamples—and there are plenty of them, as my article outlines—have a plain ring of plausibility, but Carroll contends they pose no challenge to his account. However, his defense of this claim is wanting in multiple respects.

Carroll begins his response by subtly conflating the mirroring-effect with another claim, which I am not addressing. Carroll says, "The mirroring-effect refers to a frequently observed phenomenon in horror fictions, viz., that the emotional responses of the human characters, most notably the protagonists, to the monsters in such stories, and the emotional responses of the readers, viewers, and/or listeners often run parallel."⁵ But note that this is just an empirical generalization about audience behavior, not the normative thesis at issue. It's unclear why Carroll mistakes the two. For there's little room to debate the meaning of the term "mirroring-effect." Carroll never used it before responding to my article. Instead, I coined it to refer to a family of claims Carroll makes throughout his writings, such as:

Horror audiences are supposed to react emotionally to the monsters featured in horror fictions in the same manner that the characters in horror fictions react emotionally to the monsters they meet there.⁶

With horror fictions, ideally, the emotional responses of the audience to the monster are meant to mimic the emotional responses of the human characters in the fiction to the monsters therein.⁷

The characters of works of horror exemplify for us the way in which to react to the monsters in the fiction. Our emotions are supposed to mirror those of the positive human characters.⁸

Although Carroll mistakenly treats the mirroring-effect as a descriptive claim in some passages of his reply, in others he seems to recognize I am, in fact, addressing the sort of normative claims found in the above quotations. Nevertheless, when he does address the mirroring-effect, as I defined it, Carroll contends my objections pose no problem for him.

Interestingly, though, he doesn't do so by challenging any of my counterexamples. Indeed, he entirely passes over them, insisting instead that I misrepresented his position. He bluntly states, "Laetz is attacking a position that is not held by me, or anyone else of whose writings I am aware. Laetz is attacking a straw man of his own creation."⁹ In light of passages like those quoted above, this charge seems plainly mistaken. However, Carroll's complaint here isn't that he rejects the mirroring-effect, but rather that it is not part of his *definition* of art-horror. Instead, he says, it's a methodological premise he uses to construct his definition. Briefly, the idea is this. Part of what defines horror, Carroll assumes, are the emotions we are meant to feel toward the monsters in horror fictions. But how do we know which emotions those are? Carroll suggests we look at how the characters in horror fictions behave. He assumes we're supposed to parallel, in some respects, their responses. In other words, he embraces what I call the mirroring-effect. Carroll thinks the latter reveals the emotions horror fictions are essentially designed to elicit. These emotions help

define the genre, not the mirroring-effect, which he only thinks can be used to discover them. Carroll accuses me of not realizing this.

Now, to be fair, my original discussion is probably unclear in some respects. However, Carroll fails to acknowledge that, in some passages, I do indicate that the mirroring-effect is methodological, rather than definitional. For instance, after introducing the mirroring-effect in the second sentence of my paper, I immediately say: "This is offered as an indicator for determining the nature of art-horror, the emotion that audiences are meant to feel toward the monster and which helps to define the genre."¹⁰ Saying the mirroring-effect is supposed to be an 'indicator' of the nature of art-horror, adequately conveys that I understand Carroll's position (otherwise, one would have to interpret my statement as saying that a part of art-horror is an indicator of the nature of art-horror). Moreover, in some passages, Carroll himself seems to realize as much. At the very beginning of his paper, he describes my critique as follows: "The first mistake that I supposedly make is that I take what Laetz calls the 'mirroring effect' as a standard for determining the nature of art-horror."¹¹ Note that this is more or less just a paraphrase of what I said above, except that where I speak of an "indicator" of the nature of art-horror, Carroll speaks of a "standard for determining" its nature. This makes Carroll's allegation that I misinterpreted him—really, the main thrust of his reply—rather puzzling.

This misunderstanding aside, even if Carroll were correct in supposing I misconstrued the role of the mirroring-effect, his response would still be rather superficial. For even if he doesn't think it's a constitutive feature of horror, Carroll repeatedly states that audiences are meant to parallel the reactions of characters confronting horror monsters. So, unless he can discredit my counterexamples, it remains a problematic thesis in his work; whether it was meant to be definitional thus seems a rather minor point on which to fixate. Carroll doesn't anticipate this objection, instead concluding, "The so-called mirroring-effect was a device to get to my analysis; it was not the analysis itself. Thus, Laetz's objections with respect to the mirroring-effect are beside the point."¹² But here Carroll crucially fails to explain why it's all right for the mirroring-effect to face numerous counterexamples on account of being a "device" rather than part of his analysis. Moreover, it seems unlikely that he could, for the mirroring-effect remains a hypothesis of some sort, and a hypothesis is problematic if it faces counterexamples, regardless of the role it's intended to play in a theory.

Carroll seems to offer another response to my criticism, though it is only mentioned in passing. After complaining that I mistook the mirroring-effect as definitional, he parenthetically adds that he never actually believed characters "always cue the audience's response," instead "only that they often seem to."¹³ At this point in his discussion, it's not entirely clear whether Carroll is addressing the normative thesis, or again confusing it with a descriptive claim, but if we suppose the former, this seems to be a way of saying that he never actually endorsed the mirroring-effect to begin with. In support of this, Carroll refers to one page of his monograph, but the only relevant passage is a single line: "In works of horror the responses of characters *often* seem to cue the emotional responses of the audiences"¹⁴ (emphasis added). But this is immediately preceded by: "Horror appears to be one of those genres in which the emotive responses of the audience, ideally, run parallel to the emotions of characters."¹⁵ When you look at these passages side-by-side, as they appear in the text, it's not clear that he's really saying there are exceptions to the mirroring-effect, after all:

Horror appears to be one of those genres in which the emotive responses of the audience, ideally, run parallel to the emotions of characters. Indeed, in works of horror the responses of characters often seem to cue the emotional responses of the audiences.¹⁶

The first sentence is just a statement of the mirroring-effect. The wording of the second sentence ("indeed") makes it sound as if it's meant to contrast and reinforce it, instead of being a

qualified restatement of it. This is typical of Carroll's various presentations of the mirroring-effect: in previous writings, he repeatedly claimed to endorse it, without unequivocal accompanying qualifications to indicate otherwise. But let's grant that Carroll really does hold that we are sometimes, and sometimes not, meant to parallel the responses of characters. Nevertheless, accepting this doesn't wholly gut my criticism. For my counterexamples still help demonstrate that the mirroring-effect—even a modest, less-than-universal version of it—cannot play the role Carroll wants it to.

As Carroll says in his response, he adopted the mirroring-effect to avoid relying on intuitions to construct a definition of art-horror. He worries that we need better evidence for determining the emotions horror fictions aim to elicit. The behavior of characters toward the monsters in horror fictions constitutes such evidence, he says, so long as we suppose viewers are meant to mimic their responses. The assumption that we are supposed to mimic their responses is, of course, what I call the mirroring-effect, which Carroll appeared to embrace in previous writings. But now enter Carroll's recent discussion. There he evidently grants some exceptions to the mirroring-effect. But I don't think he can say this without relying on the sort of intuitions that he adopted the mirroring-effect to avoid. To see why, return to an example discussed earlier: the climactic scene of *The Exorcist*. I had said this scene constituted a compelling counterexample to one version of the mirroring-effect, because it makes sense to interpret it as designed to frighten us even though a frightened reaction wouldn't be achieved by mimicking the priests. Presumably, Carroll would agree. But this immediately invites the following question: under what precise conditions are we then meant to parallel the responses of characters toward monsters, on Carroll's view? If he accepts the example, evidently he must say that we shouldn't mimic brave characters, like the priests in *The Exorcist*. But, crucially, wouldn't this just be a way of saying that we shouldn't parallel the responses of *fearless* characters? And, finally, wouldn't this be because he is already assuming horror fictions are meant to frighten us—independently of how characters in the fiction react to the monster? It appears, then, that Carroll can only limit the mirroring-effect's scope by relying on antecedent intuitions regarding the affective aims of horror fictions. In this case, the mirroring-effect becomes worthless, since he introduced it only to replace such intuitions.

We may sum up the results of this discussion as a dilemma for Carroll. Either he thinks the mirroring-effect is a universal (even if not essential or constitutive) feature of horror fictions, or he doesn't. If the former, the mirroring-effect is false, as the various counterexamples canvassed in my article demonstrate. If the latter, the mirroring-effect is methodologically useless, because limiting the scope of it involves relying on intuitions about the nature of art-horror that the mirroring-effect was introduced to replace. Even after all the relevant qualifications are made, it still seems safe to conclude that the mirroring-effect is a problematic thesis in Carroll's account.

III. THE IMPURITY-DISGUST COMPLEX REVISITED

The second thesis at issue is the claim that horror monsters are meant to disgust audiences, because the monsters are impure. I dubbed this thesis "the impurity-disgust complex." Carroll himself never calls it that, but it is present throughout his work. Indeed, it is a defining feature of the genre on Carroll's view, one that he confirms in his response. To better grasp this idea, it helps to see it within the context of Carroll's overall definition of horror. Very briefly, Carroll begins with the assumption that including a monster—understood as a being whose existence contemporary science denies—is a necessary feature of horror fictions. But this is far from sufficient, as various works outside the genre feature such beings (think Chewbacca in *Star Wars*). According to Carroll, what distinguishes horror fictions from these other works is that in the former monsters are designed to elicit a specific emotional response from viewers. Not surprisingly, Carroll suggests here that horror monsters are supposed to frighten audiences by their threatening aspect. But that's only half the story. He also suggests horror monsters are

supposed to disgust viewers by their impurity: "Where my theory may be innovative...is in the hypothesis that horror also essentially involves the emotional response of abhorrence, disgust, or revulsion in consequence of the monster's impurity."¹⁷ Although he hesitates to define it, Carroll realizes some might complain that the notion of impurity is vague,¹⁸ so he attempts a rough characterization. He tells us he will employ an anthropological concept, suggesting, "Things are adjudged impure when they present problems for standing categories or conceptual schemes."¹⁹ He also offers a range of examples from horror fictions. Werewolves are impure because they straddle two different categories, being both wolf and man; zombies because they are contradictory, being both living and dead. A lot of interesting ideas are at play here. And they illuminate many horror fictions; often horror monsters are designed to disgust audiences by virtue of their impurity. However, I suggested we can imagine counterexamples to this idea, and that some familiar horror fictions may already constitute exceptions to it. Before getting to those, let me pause to note that, originally, Carroll claimed to derive this proposal from dutifully applying the mirroring-effect, finding that the characters in horror respond to monsters with disgust, because the monsters are impure. Nevertheless, given the preceding discussion of the mirroring-effect, we may dismiss this argument.

The problem with the impurity-disgust complex is that, in some horror stories, a character may possess the same impurity as the horrifying monster—that is, the monster that makes the fiction horror—without thereby being meant to cause disgust. This casts doubt on the idea that, in all such stories, the monster's impurity is meant to cause disgust, because every such fiction would then be flagrantly irrational—just as irrational as any fiction that presented two physically identical characters and prescribed that viewers feel attracted to one solely on the basis of looks, and feel repulsed by the other also solely on the basis of looks. I suggested a few actual horror examples in this vein, but only explained one in detail: the film *Scanners*. The story centers on people with telekinetic powers, appropriately dubbed "scanners," who can affect physical systems by exercising a strange mental power—that is, by "scanning." In the film, scanners use their power in all sorts of ways. They can control another person's breathing, give them a headache, or (as in one notorious scene) even blow their head apart. The key is this: *Scanners* is universally classified as a horror film (albeit sci-fi horror). But recall on Carroll's theory what this means: it must feature a monster—a being science denies—that is designed to frighten viewers because it is threatening, and disgust them, because it is impure. Does *Scanners* have that?

Contemporary science rejects the existence of scanners. So the film has plenty of monsters. But are they intended to frighten viewers, because they are threatening? Some of them are. Daryl Revoc, the antagonist of the movie, certainly fits the bill (he's the one that blows a friendly scanner's head apart). But note that some scanners don't seem intended to frighten viewers. Some are nice, like Cameron Vale, a scanner who is, in fact, the protagonist of the story. On Carroll's view, although Vale is a monster—because scientists wouldn't believe in someone like him, either—he's not a horror monster, because he's not intended to frighten viewers. If all the scanners in the story were like Vale in this respect, *Scanners* wouldn't be horror at all. Rather, it would be plain old science fiction. So, if the film is horror, it must be due to Revoc, because he is certainly intended to be frightening. But, according to Carroll's theory, in order for *Scanners* to qualify as horror, Revoc must also be intended to disgust viewers, because he is impure. Well then, is he impure? Let's grant that telekinesis qualifies as an impurity. This leaves a final question: is his impurity intended to cause disgust? I contended that it is implausible to think so, for the "nice" scanners, like Vale, don't seem intended to cause disgust at all, much less in virtue of the impurity they share with Revoc. Carroll finds this and the other examples I mention unconvincing. And he offers a critical response to them, but not before committing a few minor errors that should be corrected.

Carroll begins by saying, "Laetz challenges my claim that impurity or the capacity to elicit disgust is an essential feature of horrific monsters."²⁰ That's close, but not quite right. I am specifically challenging the idea that horrific monsters are meant to disgust *because* of their

impurity. Why? Because that's part of Carroll's definition: "Central to the classification of a fiction as art-horror or genre-horror is that it contains a monster designed to arouse the emotions of fear in the audience in virtue of its harmfulness, and that of revulsion in virtue of its impurity."²¹ I am not challenging the idea that horror monsters must be impure, nor even that they are meant to cause disgust. What I am claiming is that, in some cases, the alleged impurity of the horror monster isn't meant to disgust. That's what the *Scanners* example is selected to illustrate. This might seem like a small point. It is not. The concern here is Carroll's definition of horror, and this is one of the necessary conditions he proposes. One small point before moving on: Carroll's discussion suggests that he might now understand impurity simply as the capacity to elicit disgust. If so, it bears emphasizing that prior to this exchange, Carroll always treated impurity as something more than the capacity to cause disgust (otherwise, one would have to read his original definition as stating that horror monsters are meant to cause disgust because they have the capacity to cause disgust). With that said, we may now consider Carroll's response.

At first, Carroll casts my criticism as rather crude and uninformed: "Unfortunately, Laetz fails to pay attention to certain important qualifications in the text. I explicitly note that not all monsters are necessarily *perceptually* loathsome."²² This comment falsely portrays my rejection of the impurity-disgust complex as issuing from the idea that some monsters do not look gross. Fortunately, though, Carroll eventually manages to address my argument in its real complexity. His strategy is to say that Vale, for example, is truly designed to repulse viewers in virtue of his impurity. Even before hearing why, however, this should give readers pause. Remember, Vale is a good scanner and the clear protagonist of the story—not an especially strong candidate for being designed to repulse viewers. Nevertheless, Carroll identifies multiple details in *Scanners* that allegedly indicate this. I'll briefly run through them all before addressing each individually.

Carroll starts by contending that, in some scenes, Vale's telekinesis is *indirectly* portrayed as revolting, similarly to the way Dracula's repulsiveness is obliquely established through his association with manifestly gross creatures, like spiders. In this vein, Carroll points out that in the first scene of the movie, Vale, at the time homeless, rummages through other people's leftovers in a mall food court, leading some onlookers to audibly express disgust. He thinks the attitudes of other characters establish this repulsiveness, as well. For example, the scientist, Dr. Paul Ruth, says that all scanners are derelicts and human trash. Carroll also thinks the film *directly* portrays the repulsiveness of Vale's telekinesis. In the film's climax, Vale and Revoc engage in a deadly scanning confrontation. Here, Vale appears rather gruesome, indeed; he bleeds, his skin peels, and, eventually, his body burns beyond recognition. Carroll further adds that Vale's identity as a scanner is intended in itself to cause disgust, since scanners can do awful things, like blow someone's head apart. Initially, some of these details might seem compelling, but each can be plausibly interpreted as serving some role other than indicating that Vale is disgusting.

One alternative is that some of these details are meant to establish or reinforce that scanners are marginalized by society. Vale's initial homelessness, for instance, can be interpreted this way without supposing it means his telekinesis is repulsive. The same can plausibly be said about the attitudes of certain human characters Carroll exploits. The person in the mall, disgusted by Vale's foraging—in addition to having no idea he is a scanner—isn't portrayed as anything more than a callous middle-class woman, unsympathetic to a homeless man's plight. One can plausibly interpret Dr. Ruth's disparaging comments about scanners as simply establishing his prejudice. This is reinforced when he turns out to be a morally flawed character. He's spent his life working for ConSec, a villainous corporate/military entity that wants to exploit scanners for purposes like espionage. It's also revealed that, for the sake of research, he sacrificed the well-being of his sons, who turn out to be scanners (don't worry—it's a long story). Ultimately, the film portrays him as approaching scanners from a dehumanizing, clinical perspective. His remarks are thus readily interpreted as merely conveying his bigotry. Even Carroll's most compelling evidence—the climactic battle between Vale and Revoc—is more debatable than he suggests. Admittedly, Vale does look disgusting in this scene, but this does not seem to be related to his telekinesis, for his

gruesome appearance and injuries are the result of Revoc's scanning assault. The fact that Vale, too, is a scanner, seems incidental to his injuries, for Revoc's assault would have the same effect on ordinary humans. So, although Vale's appearance is surely meant to disgust us here, this is not because he is telekinetic. Finally, Carroll's contention that Vale's impurity is meant to disgust simply because he is a scanner and is capable of, say, blowing someone's head apart, is problematic for two reasons. The first problem can be seen through a simple analogy. The human characters in the film are capable of doing all sorts of disgusting things—urinating or defecating on each other, for example—but it would be ludicrous to suggest that means they're thereby intended to cause disgust in viewers. So too, the mere fact that Vale's telekinesis involves the ability to do some disgusting things doesn't mean it's automatically intended to cause disgust. The second problem is that this suggestion plainly begs the question, for, in the film, telekinesis consists of the ability to perform such feats. Carroll's claiming that Vale's repulsiveness is established merely by way of his being a scanner is thus nothing more than an assertion of what his theory implies, rather than a novel argument on its behalf. So, on closer inspection, Carroll's case for thinking that Vale doesn't falsify the impurity-disgust complex appears flawed.

Despite all this, Carroll is right that a few scenes in the film are debatable with respect to these issues, and that it is plausible to interpret them as portraying Vale in a creepy light. Even so, there are two reasons why *Scanners* still poses a real challenge to the impurity-disgust complex. First, there happen to be other scanners in the story who are "good" and who, unlike Vale, are never portrayed as even close to repugnant. One such character is Kim, an attractive middle-aged woman who becomes Vale's companion in his fight against Revoc. Unlike Vale, Kim is never a derelict, eating other people's leftovers. Nor is there any indication that Dr. Ruth's sweeping indictment of scanners aptly characterizes her. From her introduction, she seems decent, gentle, well-adjusted, and integrated into society. And no scene portrays her otherwise. Even the two instances in the film in which she scans people are instances of justified self-defense against villains. Moreover, those scenes are very mild and not at all gory; she simply disarms and immobilizes her assailants, avoiding the sort of bloody violence in which Vale is often embroiled. So, if one is unconvinced by Vale, Kim provides a much safer example of a character that possesses the same impurity as Revoc, but who is plausibly not designed to thereby disgust viewers.

Second, even were there no decisive counterexamples in *Scanners*, such as Kim, Vale still comes close enough to falsifying Carroll's proposal that it seems rather easy to imagine a story in which he would. This can be discerned from considering the exegetical disagreements between Carroll and myself. For example, suppose Carroll were right in thinking Vale's homelessness was chosen to convey the repulsiveness of his impurity. Even so, one can still imagine a horror fiction virtually identical to Cronenberg's *Scanners*, in which my interpretation, rather than Carroll's, is correct. This alone supports the objection. Look at it this way: if you're inclined to think of *Scanners* as horror, to begin with, would your mind really change upon discovering Vale's homelessness wasn't meant to convey the repugnance of his telekinesis? That seems unlikely. Surely, its status as a horror film doesn't hinge on such fine exegetical issues about very small details of the film. Thus, even if one still thinks *Scanners* is not a perfect counterexample, it still constitutes a good model for constructing an imaginary counterexample to the impurity-disgust complex. Along the same lines, it seems plausible to suppose, as I stated in my earlier essay, that one could make "horror stories with twin ghosts, twin witches, or twin vampires," for example, "in which some of them are evil and meant to cause horror, while the others are not."²³ This point remains unchallenged, even if one can raise worries about the real examples I suggested.

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