An Apologetic of Horror
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by Brian Godawa

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When one thinks of horror movies, the usual images conjured up in the mind are of nubile coeds being lured to isolated locations for the purpose of having sex and then being murdered and carved up in ever innovative and disgusting new ways by a grotesque chimera or phantasm. Likewise, for thriller movies, images that stalk the mind are of innocent men or women being hunted by maniacal serial murderers as a relentless feast of fear and gore for the audience.

Though these repulsive clichés have become the norm for many Hollywood horror and thriller films, they are not the only approach to the genres. In fact, in today’s postmodern society so saturated with relative morality, horror and thriller stories have the ability to be an effective apologetic for the Christian worldview.

Some well-meaning cultural crusaders make claims that horror is an intrinsically evil genre that is not appropriate for Christians to create or enjoy. They believe horror is an unbiblical genre of storytelling. One writer argues, “Horror is an example of a genre which was conceived in rebellion. It is based on a fascination with goddly fear. It should not be imitated, propagated, or encouraged. It cannot be redeemed because it is presuppositionally at war with God.”1 Evidently, God disagrees with such religious critics because God himself told horror stories thousands of years before Stephen King or Wes Craven were even born.

The prophet Daniel wrote horror literature, based on images and drama pitched by God to him in Babylon. Not only did God turn the blaspheming king Nebuchadnezzar into an insane wolfman to humble his idolatrous pride (Dan. 4), but He storyboarded horror epics for kings Belshazzar and Darius as allegories of the historical battle between good and evil to come. Huge hybrid carnivorous monsters come out of the sea like Godzilla, one of them with large fangs and ravishing claws to devour, crush, and trample over the earth (7:1–8) until it is slain and its flesh roasted in fire (7:11); there are blasphemous sacrileges causing horror (8:13), including an abomination of desolation (9:26–27); angels and demons engaging in spiritual warfare (10:13); rivers of fire (7:10); deep impact comets and meteors colliding with the earth, Armageddon style (8:10); wars, desolation, and complete destruction (9:26–27). The book of Daniel reads like God’s own horror film festival.

It is not merely the human being Daniel who crafted this work of epic horror allegory, it is God Himself who rolled the camera and directed the action. God himself enjoys the horror genre. That’s God-breathed inerrancy. The author of this faith didn’t grow out of it after the Old Testament. In fact, he may have received an even harsher movie rating in his later production, the New Testament.

The book of Revelation is an epic horror fantasy sequel to Daniel, complete with science fiction special effects, and spectacles of horror darker than anything in a David Cronenber Grand Guignol theater of blood. In this apocalyptic prophecy we read of a huge demonic spectacle of genetically mutated monsters chasing and tormenting screaming people (9:1–11); armies of bizarre beasts wreaking death and destruction on the masses (9:13–18); a demonic dragon chasing a woman with the intent to eat her child (12:3–4); a seven-headed amphibious Hydra with horns that blasphemes God and draws pagan idol worship from everyone on earth (13:1–10); massive famines (6:8); gross outbreaks of rotting sores covering people’s bodies (16:2); plagues of demonic insects torturing populations (9:1–11); fire-breathing Griffin-like creatures (9:17); supernatural warfare of angels and demons (12:7); the dragging of rotting corpses through the streets while people party over them (11:7–13); rivers and seas of blood (14:20; 16:3); a blaspheming harlot doing the deed with kings and merchants (17:1-5) who then turn on her, strip her naked, burn her with fire, and cannibalize her (17:16); more famines, pestilence, and plagues (18:8); and when the good guys win, there is a mighty feast of vultures scavenging the flesh of kings and commanders in victory (19:17–18). And I might add, this all gives glory to God in the highest.

The apocalyptic genre that was used by the prophets and apostles of God relied heavily on images of horror to solicit holy fear of sin and its consequences in their audience and point them to God. Horror and thriller movies (and by extension, other forms of horror storytelling or image-making) can accomplish this same “prophetic” redemptive task several ways.

**ORIG INAL S IN CROUCHING AT THE DOOR**

First, horror can be redemptive by reinforcing the doctrine of man’s sinful nature. Gothic storytelling prides itself on exploiting man’s fear of his dark side through vampires, werewolves, and other half-man/half-monsters. These freaks of nature or supernature personify the cultured, educated man by day and the unbridled beast by night. They represent the gospel truth that our evil nature avoids the light, lest its deeds be exposed (John 3:20), and that true evil is done by otherwise “normal” people who suppress the truth about themselves in unrighteousness (Rom. 3:18–21). We are Jekylls and Hydes, all.

The Victorian era provided western culture with a rich and lasting heritage of Christian metaphors for the depraved side of human nature that requires restraint. Those metaphors have been resurrected in some modern films with equal moral vision. Dracula symbolized the struggle of the repressed dark side and its eternal hunger and need for redemption, which is explored with modern fervor in Interview with the Vampire and Dracula 2000.2 Dr. Jekyll fought to suppress the increasing inhumanity of his depraved alter ego, Mr. Hyde, just like Jack has to defeat his destructive inner self, Tyler, in Fight Club. Victor Frankenstein’s scientific hubris leads to a vengeful monster in the same way that the conceit of scientists...
Horror is not an inherently evil genre of storytelling. It can be used for gratuitous evil purposes, or for godly moral purposes. The Bible tells many stories using the horror genre in order to inspire holy fear of evil and admonish or chastise those in sin. Horror movies can be biblically redeeming in three ways. First, horror can reinforce the doctrine of humanity’s sinful nature and its consequences. Monsters become metaphors for wickedness suppressed in unrighteousness and its outcome (Rom. 1:18).

Second, horror can illustrate the consequences of modernism’s humanistic and scientific hubris. When humans play “god” in science or knowledge, they are blind to the true nature of evil and therefore reap their own destruction (Gal. 6:7–8). Third, horror can be a prophetic social commentary on the sins of society. We are revealed to be no different than zombies, bloodsuckers, and other monsters in our social injustice and cultural degeneracy.
without moral restraint leads to the takeover of Jurassic Park by unpredictable dinosaurs. The corrupted conscience of H.G. Wells’s invisible man getting away with crime is revisited in the more recent Hollow Man.

One movie, The Addiction, uses the vampire genre as a metaphor for the addictive sinful nature of humanity. The vampires spout human philosophy as they kill their victims, attempting to prove there is no moral authority to condemn what they do. One of them even concedes R.C. Sproul’s theological point, that, “we’re not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners.” One victim is shocked at being bitten by her friend. She anxiously blurts out, “How could you do this? Doesn’t it affect you? How can you do this to me?” To which her vampires friend sardonically replies, “It was your decision. Your friend Feuerbach said that all men counting stars are equivalent in every way to God. My indifference is not the concern here. It’s your astonishment that needs study.” This reversal is an apologetic argument against unbelief, par excellence. If God is dead, as the modern secular mindset proposes, and man is his own deity, creating his own morality, then no one should be surprised when people create their own morality by feasting on the blood of others. Without God, there is no such thing as “evil.” In the end, the vampire, believe it or not, has a Catholic conversion! This film embodies the argument for God’s existence through the existence of evil.3

YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT

Another way in which horror and thriller movies can communicate truth about human nature is in showing the logical consequences of sin. In the same way, the Bible plays out some sexually disgusting scenarios and gruesome violence in order to communicate the seriousness of sin and its negative impact upon our relationship with God. In Ezekiel 16 and 23, God describes Israel’s spiritual condition figuratively as a harlot “spreading her legs” to every Egyptian, Assyrian, and Chaldean who passes by, as well as to donkeys (bestiality) and idols as sexual devices. The book of Judges depicts the horrors of a society where “every man does what is right in his own eyes,” such as gangrapes and dismemberment (19:22–29), burning victims alive (9:49), cutting off thumbs (1:6–7), and disemboweling (3:21–22), among other monstrous atrocities that illustrate their need for repentance.

Hide and Seek is a story in the vein of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde about a man named David whose daughter is in danger from some kind of scary imaginary man who is stalking her. Like Nathan’s parable to King David, this David learns that “he is that man,” his dissociated split identity a symptom of his suppressed past sins.

The Machinist and The Number 23 are both macabre Poe-like tales that illustrate the effect of suppressing sin and guilt, as well as the redemptive power of confession. The Machinist is about an industrial worker whose body and mind wastes away from insomnia because of his running away from a past crime. The movie is a literalization of Psalms 32:3–5: “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long...I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’; and You forgave the guilt of my sin” (NASB).4

The Number 23 is a thriller about a guy whose discovery of a novel that mysteriously reflects his own life leads him to an obsession with the number twenty-three, which ultimately leads him into mental disorder that endangers others. It’s not until he faces the fact that all the mysterious coincidences in his life are the bubbling up of suppressed sin and guilt that he can repent and find redemption. Not coincidentally, the filmmaker put a Bible verse at the end of the film to express this very theme: “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23).

Ghost stories have been a staple of humanity’s storytelling diet since the beginning. From the Bible’s witch of Endor, to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, to modern campfire yarns, people love to tell ghost stories to scare the Beetlejuice out of each other. Christians sometimes condemn ghost stories because they seem to imply a purgatory that is not in the Bible, or because they appear to violate the Scriptural prohibition against calling up the dead. But the purpose of some ghost stories has nothing to do with “reality.” They are often metaphors depicting morally “unfinished business” or the demand for justice against unsolved crime, very much in the biblical spirit of the voice of Abel’s murdered blood crying to God for justice from the ground (Gen. 4:10).

A Stir of Echoes, The Haunting, Gothika, and The Haunting in Connecticut are all movies where ghosts are not haunting people because they are evil, but because they are victims of unsolved murders who can’t rest until the murderer pays for his crimes. These are parables communicating that there is no spiritual statute of limitations on the guilt of sin. They are fables about the telltale heart of moral conscience.

Some sincere Christians will often find passages that in their eyes appear to discredit the narrative depiction of sin and its guilty consequences. One such common passage is Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

Contrary to some interpretations, this passage does not depict Christianit as an episode of Veggie Tales or Little House on the Prairie. It is not only true, honorable, and right to show the glorious blessings of the gospel. It is also true, honorable, and right to show the suicidal rotting flesh of Judas, the betrayer of that gospel (Acts 1:18–19). It is not only pure, lovely, and of good repute that Noah was depicted in the Bible as a righteous man, but it is also pure, lovely, and of good repute that all the other inhabitants of the earth around him were depicted as entirely wicked and worthy of destruction (Gen. 6:5). It is not only excellent and worthy of praise that Lot was revealed as a righteous man, but it is also
excellent and worthy of praise that the destroyed inhabitants of Sodom were revealed as unrighteous men “who indulge[d] the flesh in its corrupt desires” (2 Pet. 2:10).

The portrayal of good and evil, as well as their consequences, are two sides of God’s one honorable, pure, lovely, excellent, and praiseworthy truth. According to the Bible, pointing out wrong is part of dwelling on what is right, exposing lies is part of dwelling on the truth, revealing cowardice is part of dwelling on the honorable, and uncovering corruption is part of dwelling on the pure.

MONSTERS OF MODERNITY: HUBRIS

Horror and thriller stories can also be redemptive when they illustrate the consequences of modern man’s hubris. In his book, Monsters from the Id, Michael E. Jones writes about the origins of modern horror as a reaction to the Enlightenment worldview. Jones points out that the Enlightenment rejection of the supernatural, the exaltation of man’s primary urges, and scientific hubris created Frankenstein, Dracula, Jekyll and Hyde, and others. He argues that the evils of horror are the result of suppressing morality, which backfires on us in the form of the monsters it breeds.

Jones explains the origins of Frankenstein as author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s personal attempt to make sense out of the conflict between the Enlightenment’s naturalism and sexual libertinism and the classical Christian moral order. Mary Wollstonecraft had been initiated into the inner circle of libertine poets Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. By the time Mary wrote her novel, she had married Shelley and experienced an avalanche of the consequences of living out Enlightenment sexual and political “liberation” with her husband: familial alienation, jealousy and betrayal, promiscuity, adultery, incest, psychosis, suicides, and drug abuse. These men espoused “nature” in place of morality and therefore behaved as animals. In the novel, Dr. Frankenstein is the symbol of enlightened man. He is the “hero” or high priest of the religion of science, the belief that man is ultimately a machine, reducible to chemistry and physics. His creation of the monster is his ultimate act of hubris in playing God. The monster’s pursuit of vengeance against the doctor is a playing out of the miserable consequences Shelley herself had experienced in her own life.

A common staple in many horror films is the calmly deliberate, logical-minded scientist who tortures or kills in the name of scientific therapy or advancement. The scientist’s often flat affect or calm in the face of others’ suffering represents the repression of emotions or humanity that modern science and reason demand. This scientist “monster” is a powerful moral critique of the dangers of science without moral restraint and can be seen in such movies as The Boys from Brazil, Blade Runner, The Island of Dr. Moreau, Hollow Man, The Island, Turistas, and The Jacket.

Another example of the Frankenstein monster motif is the serial killer, who becomes the evil yet rational extension of evolutionary survival ethics, as in Collateral; or the amoral monster created by a society that rejects the notion of sin, as in Se7en; or the beast that is justified by humanistic theories of behaviorism, as in Primal Fear and Silence of the Lambs. In From Hell, an investigating criminologist explains to an inspector that Jack the Ripper was probably an educated man with medical knowledge. The inspector replies with shocked incredulity that no rational or educated man could possibly engage in such barbaric behavior. All these serial killer films make the point that humanistic and Enlightenment beliefs about man’s basic goodness blind us to the reality of evil.

Enlightened modern man has another weakness: the inability to deal with real supernatural evil. Because he believes that there is a natural scientific explanation for all spiritual phenomena, he is blinded to the truth of a spiritual dimension to reality. The classic example of this is The Exorcist, where a little girl possessed by a demon is analyzed by medical and psychological doctors. All of them seek natural explanations...
that remain inadequate because their worldview blinds them to the truth. This blindness to the supernatural is updated in the horror films *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* and *The Exorcist: The Beginning*.

*The Reaping* carries that naturalistic ignorance to new heights when a small southern town is being besieged by supernatural phenomena replicating the ten plagues of Egypt. A Christian apostate professor, who specializes in debunking paranormal phenomena, seeks to give natural scientific explanations for each plague, only to be confronted with true demonic spiritual reality. Her faith is restored in God when she experiences a supernatural arrival of God in judgment on the evil.

**SOCIAL COMMENTARY**

Lastly, the horror and thriller genres can be effective social commentaries on the sins of society. Many Christians claim that we should not tell stories that focus on the evils of sin. They appeal to verses such as Ephesians 5:12: “It is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by [the sons of disobedience] in secret.” I write about this “hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil” interpretation in my newly updated and expanded edition of *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*. These critics read this Bible verse, and others, to teach that we should not speak of, let alone watch, acts of depravity in movies. But look at the verses before and after this “disgraceful to speak” verse. Ephesians 5:11: “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them” (emphasis added). Ephesians 5:13: “But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light” (emphasis added).

Paul is not telling us to evade talking about deeds of darkness because of their disgracefulness; rather, he is telling us to expose them by talking about them. By bringing that which is disgracefully hidden out into the light, we show it for what it really is. This proper biblical use of shame aids us in the pursuit of godliness.

This is exactly the tactic God uses with his prophets under both Old and New Covenants. God uses horrific explicit images in order to put up a mirror to cultures of social injustice and spiritual defilement. God used gang rape of a harlot and dismemberment of her body as a metaphor of Israel’s spiritual apostasy (Ezek. 16, 23), and the resurrection of skeletal remains as a symbol for the restoration of his people within the covenant (Ezek. 37). Our holy, loving, kind, and good God also used the following horror images to visually depict cultural decay and social injustice: skinning bodies and cannibalism (Mic. 3:1–3); Frankenstein replacement of necrotic body parts (Ezek. 11:19); cannibalism (Ezek. 36:13–14; Ps. 27:2; Prov. 30:14; Jer. 19:9; Zech 11:9); vampirism (2 Sam. 23:17; Rev. 16:6); cannibals and vampires together (Ezek. 39:18–19); rotting flesh (Lam 3:4; 4:8; Ps. 31:9–10; 38:2–8; Ezek. 24:3, 33:10; Zech 14:12); buckets of blood across the land (Ezek. 9:9, 22:2–4); man-eating beasts devouring people and flesh (Ezek. 19:1–8; 22:25, 27; 29:3; Dan. 7:5; Jer. 50:17); crushing and trampling bodies and grinding faces (Amos 4:1; 8:4; Isa. 3:15); and bloody murdering hands ( Isa. 1:15, 59:3; Mic. 7:2–3). Horror is a strongly biblical medium for God’s social commentary.

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is a story that has had many movie remakes, with all of them reflecting the current cultural fears of each era. The basic template is a story about an epidemic of alien life forms coming to Earth and replacing human bodies with people who look the same but are part of a conspiracy to take over the planet. The original (1956) was a political analogy of the Red Scare of communist infiltration of the United States in the 1950s. The 1978 remake, starring Donald Sutherland, was a parallel to the 1970s conformity to the herd mentality of the New Age “me decade.” *Body Snatchers* was the 1993 version that analogized the doppelganger takeover to a monolithic conformism to U.S. “military imperialism,” with a touch of AIDS paranoia thrown...
in. In 2007, *The Invasion*, with Nicole Kidman, became a parable of cultural imperialism and the postmodern “other.”

Strong social criticism has been leveled by horror movies at various relevant issues in our culture. In *Underworld*, racism is paralleled and condemned through an “inter-species” romance between a werewolf and a vampire; *The Wicker Man* damns neo-pagan Gaia religion in its murderous matriarchal colony of goddess-worshipping, man-abusing feminists. In one segment entitled “Dumplings” in the movie *Three Extremes*, abortion is likened to the sci-fi quest for eternal youth through cannibalizing our offspring.

One common theme in some horror movies is the degeneration of society into a selfish survival of the fittest ethic that animalizes us, versus an ethic of self-sacrifice that humanizes us. In a sense it becomes a cinematic dialectic of the evolutionary worldview versus the Christian worldview.

*28 Days Later* is about Jack, who awakens in a hospital bed to discover all of London is empty of people—except for roaming zombies seeking human flesh. The zombies are the result of a viral contagion that sends people into a murderous rage. When Jack stumbles upon a fortress of military survivors besieged by the zombies, this isolated human society degenerates into its own animalistic survival. It is a parable of how uncivilized male aggression can become an evil culture of “zombies within.”

In the sequel, *28 Weeks Later*, a father struggles with the moral guilt of saving himself at the expense of his wife’s life when escaping from the zombies. He finds it hard to face his own surviving children later. The entire movie is an incarnation of the ethic of survival versus the ethic of sacrifice, the first making us no different than a zombie, the other making us human. Those in the movie who try to save themselves tend to end up stricken; those who try to rescue others at risk to themselves demonstrate the potential nobility of the human race.

*I Am Legend* is a parable of a lone survivor, Neville, maintaining his humanity in the face of wild flesh-eating zombies. It becomes a Christ parable as Neville’s blood contains the antibody to the viral contagion that caused the zombies in the first place. As a Christ figure, Neville must sacrifice himself to save others, but only after struggling with his doubts about God’s goodness in light of all the evil. A fellow survivor’s unwavering faith that “God has a plan” wraps up this movie that wrestles with God’s sovereignty and evil, the primal instinct for survival, and the values of religion, sacrifice, and atonement.

*30 Days of Night* portrays vampires as metaphors for an atheistic evolutionary survival of the fittest ethic. When one victim whispers a prayer to God for help, the head vampire stops, repeats the word, “God,” looks all around the heavens to see if He will answer, and then replies very simply, “No God” before devouring her.

It is important to remember that in a story, the worldview that the villain holds is the worldview that the storyteller is criticizing. So the fact that the vampires in this movie are atheistic, inhuman predators without mercy is a metaphor for the consequences of evolutionary ethics. In contrast with this ethic, the people who do battle with them can only win by being more human, which is through altruistic sacrifice of themselves for others.

**DISCERNING GOOD FROM EVIL IN GOOD AND EVIL**

Horror and thriller movies are two powerful apologetic means of arguing against the moral relativism of our postmodern society. Not only can they reinforce the biblical doctrine of the basic evil nature in humanity, but they can personify profound arguments of the kind of destructive evil that results when society affirms the Enlightenment worldview of scientism and sexual and political liberation. Of course, this is not to suggest that all horror movies are morally acceptable. In fact, I would argue that many of them have degenerated into immoral exaltation of sex, violence, and death. But abuse of a genre does not negate the proper use of that genre.

It would be vain to try to justify the unhealthy obsession that some people have with the dark side, especially in their movie viewing habits. Too much focus on the bad news will dilute the power that the Good News has on an individual. Too much fascination with the nature and effects of sin can impede one’s growth in salvation. So, the defense of horror and thriller movies in principle should not be misconstrued to argue that many of them have degenerated into immoral horror and thriller movies in practice. It is the mature Christian who, because of practice, has his senses trained to discern good and evil in a fallen world (Heb. 5:14). It is the mature Christian who, like the apostle Paul, can explore and study his pagan culture and draw out the good from the bad in order to interact redemptively with that culture (Acts 17).

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2 The unique twist in *Dracula 2000* is in its depiction of Dracula’s origins. Dracula is revealed to be the undead soul of Judas Iscariot prowling the earth in vengeance against his own perfidy. This story contains strong Christian metaphors: Dracula/Judas’s insatiable lust for blood is a symbol of the eternal need for Christ’s blood of forgiveness; the silver abhorrence, a reflection of the thirty pieces of silver Judas betrayed Christ for; and of course, crosses and wooden stakes through the heart, elements of the power of the cross of Christ to destroy evil. *Dracula 2000* resurrects Christian elements that have been buried by many contemporary vampire movies.
3 Another vampire film that warns of the subtle and seductive nature of sin is *Let the Right One In*, a story of a young boy befriending a young girl who happens to be a vampire.
4 All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
6 Jones, 66–100.