

Freudian Interpretation of Monster Movies

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Sigmund Freud's evolving theory of unconscious process has been the source of most psychoanalytic ideas, a huge amount of controversy, a series of favorable and unfavorable movements, and a place of distinction among the most pivotal human achievements of all time. His view of topography and development of the unconscious has led to a linguistic popularization unknown in other areas of psychiatry, with words such as "ego," "repression," "libido," or "fixation" used in every day parlance of a completely non-technical nature, often with no understanding of the actual meaning of the terms. Jules Bemporad in his "Fond Farewell" (*Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 29, #4, 2001) alluded to the need for Freudian concepts to understand literary and dramatic works and lamented the popular move away from these concepts in understanding the psychiatric work with actual patients.

One of the areas of creative endeavor in which Freudian concepts play a fundamental role is in understanding the mass appeal of monster and horror movies. This is a genre that is perhaps underrepresented in the intellectual press for several reasons. These movies, with rare exceptions, are seen as superficial, poorly acted, "stupid," and of no real artistry. Yet they have a strong attraction for adolescents and adults due to the libidinal

themes they act out and the conflicts they portray, as well as the transference heroes, villains, and situations presented. Nonetheless people are loathe to admit to actually "liking" such movies and will often "brown bag" them home from the store, uncomfortable to admit ever actually to watch them. ("For my kids, you know.") It is notable that the great Oscar-winning films are made once, but many teen horror or monster movies have sequels, in the "Return of ..." "Part 2," "It Lives ...," etc. Some, like "Friday The 13th," "Halloween," "Scream," or "Elm Street" are up to five or six sequels. Despite the clear disdain that intellectuals generally feel for such films, their success is a signal of the repression necessary for people to maintain a façade of sophistication and maturity.

In general terms, these productions can be classified into several broad categories over the past fifty years of their existence. The first, often made in Japan in the 1950's, has some variation of the following: A group of miners or fishermen discover in a secluded cave a very large egg, unlike anything ever seen before. The authorities are notified, and the egg is brought to the central lab for study where, due to an error in incubation, it hatches and produces some sort of creature that promptly eats the lab and several cleaning people. Out on the street it begins a rampage eating everything in sight - people, cars and buildings - and nothing can stop it. The army is

called, and despite modern weaponry the creature eats tanks, trucks, soldiers, helicopters and jet fighters. For special effect it goes into the countryside and eats high-tension power lines. Rows of scientists pore over microscopes while generals study maps, all without success, to plot the course of and thwart the creature. There is often a pretty girl reporter, who is trapped somewhere and is menaced by the monster. All seems dismal, but suddenly a young boy gets into the strategy room, past the guards, and suggests a bottle of thorium (or a similar substance) might work. A bottle, the last one, is located, and a semi-suicidal volunteer drives up with a bazooka, firing the bottle into the gaping jaws of the monster who, upon swallowing it, falls over dead. In great triumph, the boy is paraded through the streets and marries the girl reporter.

This vignette, representative of so many low-budget black-and-white movies, demonstrates a highly aggressive oral creature that uses its mouth to conquer the world, to place a sexual object in a helpless position, and ultimately to be killed. The powerful oedipal figures of the scientists and generals are completely ineffectual in controlling the sexual and aggressive force of the libido-based monster, but pure innocent virginity is the triumphant hero, and through the victory over the libidinal forces is able to achieve adult genitality and marital union. The oral quality of this scenario is augmented by the monsters

themselves, which often take on a cartoon-like appearance, and the protagonists who are often children.

The second broad category, the natural disaster movie, became popular in the 1960's with "Earthquake" "Crack in the Earth" "Krakatoa," "Tsunami," and "Avalanche" as examples, and persists up to the present with works like "Asteroid," "The Perfect Storm," "Deep Impact" and to a lesser degree "Titanic." In these movies people fall into huge cracks that form, sometimes spewing out hot liquid, diarrhea-like lava that burns everything in its path. Buildings fall, crushing life with huge brown fecal-appearing fragments, or great brown boulders roll down destructive paths. Dams break, the avalanche overwhelms, and people are smothered or drowned in liquid and semi-liquid floods.

The clear anal and urinary metaphor lacks a human or animal protagonist, but there is usually a thinly crafted story closely related to the earlier oral ones. The hero is somehow misunderstood by the oedipal, aggressive power structure. Despite his adamant timely warnings of the impending disaster, the authorities pay no heed, and only the beautiful and equally misunderstood heroine sees the truth. All the incompetent authorities are killed by the force of the disaster, but by using their strength and cunning, the hero and heroine narrowly escape nature's fury and strengthen their love. These films, more than oral movies, introduce a rudimentary moral code as well: All

virgins survive, and all addicts or alcoholics are killed. All clergy sacrifice themselves for others, but anyone selfish dies a horrible death. Also, more than oral firms, the concept of the "Sleeping Giant" is seen, the idea that the destructive power can be overcome but never conquered and certainly never destroyed. This idea can be compared to the libidinal impulses, which can be tamed but not ever removed.

With the advent of "slasher" movies, the emphasis switches to penetration as a tool of aggression and sexuality; almost any sharp object is wielded for this purpose. One can see chainsaws, scalpels, electric drills, long nails, coat hangers, and all manner of knives used to inflict damage. So many popular titles fall in this category that they have become parodies of themselves. As in the other types, there is always an oedipal figure who meets a particularly gruesome fate. There is a strong sexual-aggressive movement, in that most victims are scantily clad, rather disdainful young men or women sometimes murdered in *pleno delicto*. Unattainable objects of desire are killed while kindly old lonely-hearted grandparents survive. The rudimentary morality of the disaster film is augmented to include likeable and unlikable people. This addition unwittingly confers on the hero and heroine a grandiose power over the lives of everyone around them: all good friends survive, and anyone who is mean or even disinterested is a victim.

Immediately noticeable is the fact that, like in disaster movies, the libidinal creature is quelled by the strength of the hero but never obliterated, and the wounded slasher, due to his diabolically inexplicable power, will return some day. Thus the triumphant relief is only temporary, just as our control over unconscious urges also is only temporary. It should also be remarked that the villain is quite indistinct in these movies versus in crime or cowboy movies, very much in accord with Freudian constructs. Is the monster truly the villain, or is the non-understanding, uncaring oedipal figure truly the villain? By murdering all the negative, morally unfit abusers, the monster in fact saves the hero's virtue and safely accomplishes what the hero cannot do while remaining pure.

Ironically, carefully etched character studies make the purpose of aggression more clearly defined. In films such as "High Noon" or "The Untouchables," the hero has to confront the forces of evil and take the risk of contaminating his non-violent image, as well as his own purity, by personally killing the villains. The bad guy's motives are also easy to see - greed, power, or vengeance. Nobody cheers for him. In monster movies the slasher/monster becomes a way to get the hero into a position of control and confident sexual functioning, previously impaired by those who become the victims of the violence. In later Japanese monster movies, Godzilla, originally a destructive tyrannosaurus-

like creature, is resurrected into a mighty protector of humanity against other monsters; like a huge watch dog he can be summoned by a boy who has the capacity to forge a special friendship with him. Thus the libidinal force is not defeated but redirected to fight other destructive impulses.

The fact that so many movies contain elements identical to, or at least related to, specific psychoanalytic notions derived directly from Freud would be hard to consider a pure coincidence.

Nor would it be reasonable to assume that every screenwriter, producer, director, and viewer of horror movies has studied psychoanalytic theory. Yet the popularity of such films is clearly based on their very direct appeal to the viewer.

It is unfortunate that Freud's theories have become politicized and rejected. In my own analytic framework, that of Karen Horney, Freud's perspective is replaced by a theory that I find works for the treatment of emotional illness in my patients. That is, however, a matter of personal style. I find that the Freudian understanding of unconscious psychosexual growth through the redirecting of libidinal energy is a powerful and apparently valid way of reaching an audience and interpreting the ubiquitous cultural phenomenon of horror movies.

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