

Wednesday, 26 February 2025

filmosofia 8 at Rozz-Tox

Mulholland Drive (2001 Lynch, dir.) &

“The Nature of Horror” (Carroll 1990)¹

Agenda:

- pre-screening discussion (about 6:30pm)
- film starts 7:00pm
- 10 minute break
- post-screening discussion of Carroll reading selection and film from 9:45pm to 10:45pm

Pre-screening discussion (6:30pm)

- general remarks about filmesofia series:
 - roughly every other month we screen a film and we pair it with a famous philosophical text that examines themes related to that film
 - the 2025 filmesofia schedule is now posted on instagram (@rozztox_qc & @casuallyineffacious) and on the Rozz-Tox website; stay tuned for updates about the 2025 philosophy events
 - the second filmesofia screening will be Aronofsky’s (1998) *Pi*, and the reading will be Popper’s (1978) “The Three Worlds”: Wednesday 30 April
 - free print articles for filmesofia will be in the usual place, in the front of the cafe
- More details on the four main branches of philosophy:
 - metaphysics: the theory of reality
 - notable sub-fields: ontology (the study of what exists), philosophy of mind (theory of the nature of consciousness)
 - epistemology: the theory of knowledge
 - notable sub-fields: analysis of ‘knowledge’ (challenges to the “Justified True Belief” model), debates over the a priori vs. a posteriori justification (whether there is justification independent of experience)
 - axiology: the theory of value
 - notable sub-fields: normative ethics (theory of right/wrong), aesthetics (theory of good/bad art)
 - logic: the theory of right reasoning
 - notable sub-fields: classical logic (modern formal theory of entailment), non-classical logics (formal theories that reject assumptions in classical logic, such as the principle of explosion (*ex falso quodlibet*) in paraconsistent logics)

¹ Carroll, Noel. “The Nature of Horror.” *The Philosophy of Horror*. Routledge. 1990. p12-58.

- tonight's topic: aesthetics and metaphysics
 - aesthetics is a branch of axiology, or the theory of value: it is concerned with the nature of art, and what features distinguish good art from bad art
 - generally, aesthetics may range over topics related to the traditional fine arts, to music, and even to food (or culinary arts)
 - our primary question tonight: what is horror?
 - I hope to argue that the film we will watch tonight (*Mulholland Drive*) should count as a work of horror
 - a question about the nature of a genre of art
 - not a question about a mere cultural trend, or what people happen to think horror is
 - *nota bene*: we will assume that there is an objective standard for answering this question, that it's not merely a "subjective" matter
 - thus, the topic relates to metaphysics, insofar as we're investigating the properties and essential nature of the horror genre

Post-Screening Discussion (9:45pm)

- tonight's topic: aesthetics (branch of axiology) and metaphysics
 - we will begin with some qualifications,
 - then, a brief overview of the account of "art-horror" from Carroll 1990,
 - followed by an objection and my alternative account, and an argument
- some qualifications: what I'm not aiming to cover tonight:
 - tonight's discussion will not be concerned with the ethics of horror, or related questions, including:
 - is horror morally wrong to produce? is horror morally wrong to consume?
 - what types of horror works (e.g., slasher films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) are morally worse than others? etc.²
 - also, I won't aim to give an account of the best works of horror here
 - it's possible that the account I will defend offers some suggestions for that project, but that's a topic for another time

² For more on these sorts of questions, see Di Muzio, Gianluca. (2006) "The Immorality of Horror Films" *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 20.2: p277-294.; Kreider, S. Evan. (2008) "The Virtue of Horror Films: A Response to Di Muzio." *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 22.1: p149-157. In this exchange, Di Muzio and Kreider debate whether there is a useful analogy between this topic and the controversy surrounding the production and consumption of some forms of pornography.

- a worthwhile terminological distinction: “natural horror” vs. “art-horror” (Carroll 1990, p12):
 - natural horror is name used to refer to real-world events that provoke a feeling of horror (atrocities, natural disasters, etc.); art-horror is the name Carroll uses to refer to the genre of art concerned with provoking feelings of horror in the audience (in this context, I’ll mostly use “horror” and “art-horror” interchangeably)
- Carroll’s account: “I am occurrently art-horrified by some monster X, say Dracula, if and only if 1) I am in some state of abnormal, physically felt agitation (shuddering, tingling, screaming, etc.) which 2) has been *caused* by a) the thought: that Dracula is a possible being; and by the evaluative thoughts: that b) said Dracula has the property of being physically (and perhaps morally and socially) threatening in the ways portrayed in the fiction and that c) said Dracula has the property of being impure, where 3) such thoughts are usually accompanied by the desire to avoid the touch of things like Dracula.” (p27)
 - I mostly agree with the points that he makes about emotional responses to horror.³
 - I agree that the audience of a work of horror should, typically, be in sync with the main characters, protagonists, etc. (p18).
 - I also think his concluding remarks about the Enlightenment and how a scientific worldview helped to make horror possible as a genre are right (p55-58). But...
- Objection to Carroll’s account: this account mistakes the *tropes* or tools of horror with the *aims* of horror as a genre: the tropes are used in the service of the aims
 - Carroll’s account (and most others like it) are too fixated on monsters, but there are more levels to possible horror as a genre, and as a result, the account is far too narrow
 - A work of art in the horror genre might get us to consider a repulsive possible being, but it might also get us to consider a repulsive possible place or situation or context or even existence in general—there are many possible levels beyond a single entity that can serve this aim, not just monsters.

³ For more, see Contesi, Filippo. (2022) “The Affective Nature of Horror.” *Culture Approaches to Disgust and the Visceral*. Ryynanen, Kosonen, & Ylonen, eds. Routledge. p31-43.; Contesi, Filippo. (2022) “Carroll on the Emotion of Horror.” *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*. 14: p47-54.; Hick, Darren Hudson. “Horror and Its Affects.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 80: p140-150.

- My alternative account of horror: Someone is horrified by a monster or concept or situation or location if and only if that person is in some state of abnormal, physically felt agitation which has been caused by the thought that the monster/concept/situation/location (MCSL) is possible and by the evaluative thoughts that the MCSL threatens one's sense of safety/security and that the MCSL violates the fundamental trust in the ontological framework that makes possible one's sense of safety/security in the most fundamental senses.
 - The final point is to show that mere impurity is not broad enough: there are deeper layers to the experience of horror, and they all share a fundamentally related source—that the horrifying thing challenges their understanding of the nature of reality
 - impure things do this, too: when living things also have maggots on them, that challenges our understanding of health and proper biological function
 - but the challenge might possibly be more fundamental: a work of horror might provide an experience that causes us to question not only proper biological function, but the nature of identity or the nature of existence⁴
 - as with many other forms of genre, it's all about how it's presented and whether the work has the aim of producing the associated emotional responses
- An argument that *Mulholland Drive* should count as horror:
 1. *Mulholland Drive* is a work that aims to produce a feeling of dread, terror, confusion, disgust, sadness, etc. about the nature of identity and existence.
 2. Any work that aims to produce such a response is a work of horror (see the alternative to Carroll's account above; note that Carroll's account would exclude *MD*).
 3. Thus, *Mulholland Drive* is a work of horror.
 - It's worth noting that there is a case to be made that *Mulholland Drive* does contain monsters, in the sense that the Diane character becomes consumed by jealousy to the point of hiring a hitman to kill her former lover Camilla.⁵

⁴ David Livingstone Smith made a similar point in his piece for the "Halloween BONUS EPISODE: The Philosophy of Monsters, Magic, and Mausoleums." *Philosophy For Our Times*. 01 November 2024. URL: <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/halloween-bonus-episode-the-philosophy-of-monsters/id1151965239?i=1000675337000>

⁵ See Miller, Patrick Lee. (2013) "Monstrous Maturity on *Mulholland Drive*." *Mulholland Drive*. Giannopoulou, ed. Routledge. p97-120.

- Stray thoughts regarding horror and the aims of the genre:
 - we've all considered the idea that horror works best when it makes you feel afraid even after the experience of watching the film, reading the book, etc.
 - Carroll's account can go some way toward explaining this for works involving monsters—those would be works that made you believe that the entity is not only *possible*, but that it is more probably *actual*.
 - on my account, though, a work of horror might have a lasting effect because it causes you to reflect on the nature of your own existence, or that the universe is more hostile or mysterious or irrational than you previously supposed
 - this suggests a tier-system for ranking horror, if the evaluation is related to the effectiveness in making the audience feel a lingering sense of horror long after the experience of the work
 - my aim isn't to dig too deeply into the claim here that X work of horror is better than others, or that *Mulholland Drive* is among the best works,⁶ but there's a possible way to see that argument:
 - 1. Horror is more or less successful depending on how lasting the emotional response is after the experience of the work.
 - 2. Horror that causes one to experience the relevant emotional response in regard to their own fundamental understanding of reality and existence is more likely to have a lingering effect after the experience of the work.
 - 3. *Mulholland Drive* is among the works that does what is described in premise 2.
 - 4. So, *Mulholland Drive* is among the most successful works of horror.
 - one last stray thought: even on Carroll's account, *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993) ought to count as horror; I would preserve that, too
 - the “dinosaurs” are literally monsters—they are composed of DNA from frogs as well as the fragment remains of dinosaur DNA recovered from amber; a good example of scientific pursuit resulting in monstrosity
 - moreover, the drama unfolds in such a way that the monsters are terrifying and should cause repulsion, trembling, etc.

⁶ See Ebiri, Bilge. “The Devil Behind the Dumpster: Mulholland Drive, like the best horror films, gets at the most unsettling of existential fears.” *Slate*. 24 October 2014. URL: <https://slate.com/culture/2014/10/mulholland-drive-why-david-lynchs-2001-film-is-a-great-horror-movie.html> and Knight, Rich. “5 Reasons Why I Consider Mulholland Drive To Be A Horror Movie (And A Great One).” *CinemaBlend*. 13 August 2021. URL: <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/2571603/reasons-why-i-consider-mulholland-drive-to-be-a-horror-movie-and-a-great-one>