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No one here gets out alive: Educational implications of duomining as aesthetic ground in psychological horror

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Abstract: Considering works of Horror artistic manifestations of cultural nightmares, the author takes up the charge that dreams deserve a place in the study of curriculum. Utilizing an object-oriented approach to aesthetic and educational inquiry, the author first develops a theory of Horror that divides the genre into the distinct categories of Supernatural, Unnatural, Psychotic, and Psychological. Once this theory is established, the author unpacks the notion of duomining—a process in which objects are simultaneously reduced to mere collections of their components as well as reduced to their relations to other objects and as appearances-to-consciousness—and argues that this process provides the groundwork for horror in works of Psychological Horror, then further translating this sense of horror to the standardized classroom as well as the notion of a “student-centered” classroom.

Subjects: Arts; Education; Humanities

Keywords: object-oriented ontology; philosophy of horror; duomining; horror and education; psychological horror; curriculum of horror

All the darkness looks alive. (R. Ascher's *The Nightmare*)

Teddy, this is our home. The grass is black. The sky is choked with smoke. All of the people have disappeared. This is our home. (The dead Mrs. Barnes, *YellowBrickRoad*)

1. Introduction

I am watching television at 10:15 in the evening and, having looked away for a moment, I notice that the screen is blurry; it is only a little blurry, but enough so that it needs correcting. I lift the middle finger of my left hand to push my glasses up onto the radix of my nose (a move that has become

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Grant is a doctoral student in the Curriculum Studies at Georgia Southern University, where his primary interests are cultural and media studies within the context of curriculum. The work presented here is an extension of this interest, particularly in regard to aesthetics in horror films and texts and how these aesthetics translate to the twenty-first century classroom. He has been an educator since 2009, and has worked at the middle and high school levels in private and public institutions. He currently teaches 9th grade composition, debate, and AP language at Grovetown High School in Grovetown, Georgia.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

When we develop rigid ideas about the world we live in, we set the groundwork for being horrified when the unexpected occurs. The genre of Psychological Horror provides fertile ground for exploring how this occurs. This text guides the reader through analysis of this process within Psychological Horror texts, providing insight for the modern educator as to (a) how the same process occurs in the classroom, as well as how it may be combated.

a mindless habit) but my glasses are not there—it's a flesh-on-flesh connection that was not anticipated, my mind having preconceived one of flesh-on-plastic. There is no possibility of correction because the reality that I had taken for granted, the readiness-to-hand of the sight- (and thus world)-correcting agent, is absent. The world remains a blur, and the absence of an ameliorative generates the question (momentarily, but generates it nonetheless): were there ever glasses there to begin with? Is the fuzzy world that I'm taking in the world that I've always known, or have I really had a way of correcting my access to the world-at-hand visually? This, for my often-overly-analytic mind, soon enough shifts to: what *are* glasses, anyway, and why do I only notice them when they're gone? And then, weirdly: are my glasses not what I knew them to be? Can they have conspired against me, having a being all their own that is divorced from my understanding and contemplation of them?

True story (Ish).

While the metaphysical analysis of the particular moment I noticed my glasses missing may have occurred in retrospect, this simple dilemma does illustrate a reality that Psychological Horror and speculative realism (particularly, though not exclusively) within the realm of object-oriented ontology convey: the absence of the ready-to-hand, the broken and missing tool through which an actor who is divorced *from* the world by vicarious extension *into* the world is recalled into that world, reveals that the reality of the world, its being-in-itself, cannot be contained in or grounded by human consciousness; because the being of the world consistently retreats from human consciousness, it is necessarily independent of it (Harman, 2011; Heidegger, 1926/1962; Morton, 2013b), and such independence can be the groundwork for horror when it is overlooked. All that we can truly know about a thing are its sensual, aesthetic properties, never its being *in* or *for* itself (Harman, 2011, 2013; Morton, 2012, 2013a, 2013b), and because we can only ever know the momentary and fleeting sensual qualities of the world that present themselves to us—never the reality behind those appearances—whatever stories we tell ourselves about the world in our attempts to master it are little more than self-deluded follies that privilege human knowing over other modes of being, paraphrases of an ungraspable reality.

Psychological Horror, however, as well as object-oriented ontology, challenges the notion of an anthropocentric mastery of the world; whereas Psychological Horror problematizes this reading of the world by positing a seemingly broken world that does not act the way it should as part of the groundwork of its horrific aesthetic, OOO challenges it simply by placing all objects on an equal plane *as objects*, denying any anthropocentric privilege with the understanding that a human mind perceiving and calculating is no different, functionally, from a fork efficiently stabbing a chunk of romaine: in both cases, the objects in question are performing the acts they are expected to perform, as well as being ontologically limited by those expectations. Works of Psychological Horror present to us a world that exists in spite of, indeed often in direct contention with, the anthropocentric reading—a reading that seeks dominance and mastery through the concurrent reduction of the world to its most basic components as well as a drive toward mathematization—of it. This nonhuman, misanthropic element of Psychological Horror invites a post/nonhuman, object-oriented analysis which will provide a solid means for penetrating the broken-world aesthetic ground for the genre and create a space for understanding its relevance with regard to twenty-first century education, particularly in light of Doll's (1995) position that our dreams have a place in the study of curriculum; for what are works of Horror other than the artistic manifestation of cultural nightmares?

2. On differentiating horror

Before moving forward, I must be clear: my intentions here are to (a) briefly iterate a rationale for differentiating Horror¹ altogether, and (b) develop a case for understanding Psychological Horror in its own right as a viable vehicle for creating horror. Given these intentions, I must note that I will not devote very much time to explaining the logic behind the first three styles/variations of Horror that I have distinguished (Supernatural, Unnatural, and Psychotic), as they are not the key focus of this piece and will, if my overall research goals pan out, be further developed in the future, but I will

instead focus on the relevance of the elements of Psychological Horror in determining it as a category unto itself and its relevance to the field as a whole.

I must also note that, from here—where necessary—I will be using Thacker’s (2011) terminology to clarify certain concepts which are called by different names across philosophies, presenting the idea that the “world-for-us is simply the *World*, the world-in-itself is simply the *Earth*, and the world-without-us is simply the *Planet*” (p. 6). It is important to point out here that Thacker goes on to argue that “even ‘the Earth’ is simply a designation that we’ve given to something that has revealed itself or made itself available to the gathering of samples, the generating of data, the production of models, and the disputes over policy” (p. 6). What is important to note here in light of data generation is that, while the term “data” was originally used in English as a term of art, utilized to speak of what was essentially beyond argument and outside of process, we now tend to think of data as “the result of an investigation rather than its premise,” which has made possible the notion of data as *what we seek to attain* (Rosenberg, 2013, p. 33), which is little more than a rhetorical notion; we have, through continued anthropocentric scientific experimentation and linguistic hijinks, repurposed the *Earth* (and thus all relations to it) as a means to argumentative ends. All of this is to say that there is a hiddenness behind even this understanding of an *Earth* (as data factory) that has made itself available, and that anything “that reveals itself does not reveal itself in total,” and that the difference between what is presented and what is sought after is “the Planet [... which not only] moves beyond the subjective World, but it also recedes behind the objective Earth” (Thacker, 2011, p. 6). The *Planet*, that is, is the sheer unsayable quiddity that lies somewhere in the difference beneath the *World* and the *Earth*, the reality that informs each.

Let us begin, then, with the general theory of Horror presented by Noël Carroll (Carroll, 1987, 1990), a well-renowned and oft-cited philosopher of Horror, who claims that there are ultimately two categories of horror: natural horror and art-horror, the latter of which is both a purposefully created emotion induced by productions of Horror, as well as the works of art that create it. This distinction is not quite enough, however. The reader should understand that, for Carroll, the key distinction between art-horror and natural horror is that, whereas art-horror depends on the likes of zombies and the supernatural, natural horror is more like “the sort of horror one expresses in saying ‘I am horrified by the prospect of ecological disaster’ or ‘Terrorist acts are horrifying’” (1987, p. 51). While this understanding of the Horror genre is important and foundational for understanding a basic horrific aesthetic, it is also somewhat problematic. Even though it is quite true that the two latter horrific possibilities would generally be better fits for action thrillers, Carroll still leaves out much of the potentially-horrific in this limited discussion of art-horror. For example, in his going on to say that “Poe’s ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’ and ‘The Telltale Heart,’ [as well as] Hitchcock’s *Psycho*” should not be called Horror properly because the means by which they evoke the sense of horror are “all too human” (p. 52), the implication is that, in the end, psychopaths and ensuing psychopathy (as well as suffering the torments that those with whom we commune have developed), while perhaps dread-inducing, should not be considered Horror because they are things that can happen to people, and so aren’t out of our everyday sphere of reference. This idea largely derives from Carroll’s limited view of art-horror as necessarily resulting in some degree of disgust (as opposed to fear or dread alone) on the part of a protagonist toward the being of the horrifying object, a disgust the audience is intended to share.

While Carroll’s notion of empathy in experiencing works of Horror is incredibly important in approaching the genre, a major problem with his simple categorization is that, while relevant, again, it excludes much of what could rightfully be called Horror by other means. On this note, perhaps Nickel’s (2010) significant understanding that Horror “helps us to experience the fact that the intellectual backing for our practical trust, consisting in the various background beliefs we have that our environment (natural and social) will behave in regular ways, cannot be made perfectly certain” (p. 29) will prove useful in moving the conversation forward. Nickel makes the case that even though a psychotic neighbor is an everyday possibility, it is *not* an everyday reality that most people deal with. The norm is quite the opposite: we expect our neighbors to be neighborly, and so when that

expectation is disrupted on screen or on the page by a bloody axe in regular human being's hand, the result is a sense of horror. Through this line of argumentation, Nickel makes a case for expanding Carroll's very narrow view of Horror, which would likely eliminate such films as *Saw* and *Session 9*, which clearly have merit as works of Horror, from the conversation concerning the genre. The incredible relevance of this conception of Horror is the notion that the ground for a work of Horror is, ultimately, a series of predictable worldly categories. No predictability, no Horror. Nickel's work, however, while directly expanding the genre to include the psychotic, does not openly create a space for the psychological, an oversight that needs to be accounted for.

Again, Carroll's (1990) idea that

[where] art-horror involves disgust as a central feature, what might be called art-dread does not. Art-dread probably deserves a theory of its own, though I do not have one ready-to-hand. Presumably, art-dread will bear some affinities with art-horror since both traffic in the preternatural—with both supernatural and sci-fi variations (p. 42)

comes up a bit short. What Carroll calls “art-dread” here is closely akin to what Lovecraft (2012) calls Cosmic Horror. Underlying Cosmic Horror is the notion that the unfathomable depths of the Cosmos contain secrets that may drive humankind mad in- and of-themselves (i.e. simply because they exist, if they were to be uncovered) but also may purposefully do so out of a certain misanthropy, or, at the very least, a cosmic ambivalence toward the being of humanity (imagine yourself as a cosmic cockroach for a moment; should the Old Ones let you scurry by, or should they crush you like vermin?). With this understanding, we can see Carroll's notion of art-dread, which involves events that are “constructed to move the audience rhetorically to the point that one entertains the idea that unavowed, unknown, and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe” (p. 42), as a relative echo of Lovecraft's thought. Carroll's distinction, however, unnecessarily writes off the *horror* of what would otherwise be considered Cosmic Horror, simply because these works do not contain the “disgust” element of his horror aesthetic, not through lack of any other merit.

What Carroll's theory misses is the idea that a neighbor not fulfilling his everyday role as a neighbor, or a *World* not completing its *Worldly* duties of providing ground for human endeavors (i.e. the *World* revealing itself as a *Planet*) can constitute a ground for disgust toward an experienced reality. Just as the reality of encountering a rampaging psychopathic killer is not part of the everyday experience of most individuals, neither is a *Planetary* contrivance against the human aesthetic, and so we may confidently call—given the proper mood and style (the very bottom of the ground for Horror, we must understand, is not so different from the ground of humor (Bergson, 1911/2005; Harman, 2005))—works that present these scenarios Horror, even if there is no tangible, locatable monster creature that evokes disgust. Indeed, it is the very *lack* of a being to point at beyond *being itself* that helps develop the feeling of horror in such works, which is not to say simply that a monster cannot be seen in the movie—indeed, much of the horror that is evoked in *The House of the Devil* (Braun, Fessenden, Kass, Phok, & West, 2009) comes well before any devils or Satanists appear as such, though it is clear that there is a supernatural *element* at play—but that the horror arises from somewhere between what we believe about how the World ought to be and how the World is *behaving* as it presents itself to the characters and, vicariously, to us, the audience.

All of this is to say that, ultimately, tales of Cosmic Horror, whether they contain monsters or not, are works of Horror: they do manufacture a sense of the horrible within an audience; it is simply the case that sometimes the “monster” therein is *being itself*. On this note, though, I suggest a schism, breaking Lovecraft's Cosmic Horror into Horror categories that would envelope the overall concept for the sake of attaining not only a proper understanding of Psychological Horror, but also Horror as a genre unto itself. While Lovecraft's works of Cosmic Horror *do* center around a dissolving experience of everyday reality for the stories' protagonists, as do author Thomas Ligotti's, more often than not (though several of the tales in Ligotti's (2007) *The nightmare factory*, “Teatro Grottesco” most particularly, are exempt) these tales do include some sort of actual monster (like Lovecraft's Old

Ones, for instance, which tend to lie hidden from the everyday reality of humans, allowing for their emergence to be the *World*-shattering, horror-inducing event), whereas works of Psychological Horror, properly speaking, are devoid of any such direct and persistent manifestations; the *World* itself, due in large to the human need to solidify it and use it as ground, is the aesthetic ground for Psychological Horror. In so doing, these works present to us in a frighteningly claustrophobic manner a possible answer to Snaza & Weaver's (Snaza & Weaver, 2015) question: "What would a world be that did not insist on human superiority or dominance and that did not disavow the human's ecological entanglements" (p. 24). The answer for-us, as presented by Psychological Horror and in the wake of an object-ignorant ontology, is: an unfathomable monstrosity. When the *World* as we have known it as a thing-to-be-known-and-mastered breaks, and our centrality as masters and knowers of that world breaks with it, horror ensues with the knowledge that it was never what we thought it was and the subsequent knowledge that we are not what we thought we were. The *World's* relation to us is no different from a tree's relation to a nesting owl or a pond's relation to moonbeams; the destabilization of human ontological primacy is nothing short of terrifying simply because it is a reality that we have not allowed ourselves to be faced with, in large, for thousands of years.

Here we again take up the work of Nickel (2010), who has written that the "idea of a secure, regular everyday world is [...] a construction. One valuable thing about horror literature and film is that they keep this fact in view" (p. 30). What is important from here is to understand just how it is that different works of Horror disrupt the everyday construction of the world. That is, while Horror as a genre unto itself goes about creating a certain feeling in those who engage with it, there are distinguishable ways that this occurs, and these need to be noted, as their implications are myriad. Quite simply, works of Supernatural Horror disrupt the everyday construction of the world by inserting supernatural forces like ghosts and demons into it; Unnatural Horror upsets the everyday world by inserting creatures that upset our sense of what is natural, like zombies or weird hybrid animals; Psychotic Horror destroys the sense of everydayness by inserting a murderous human or animal; and works of Psychological Horror destroy the everyday sense of the world by disintegrating the very foundation of our understanding of it, often causing characters to lose their sanity.

In Psychological Horror, the world as it appears is not the world as it *has* appeared; it seems, at first take, metaphysically broken. With this in mind, perhaps Tallon's (2010) comment that as "an artistic category, horror trades in the random and meaningless" (p. 35) is better suited to Psychological Horror than any of the other categories that I have posited. Whereas "the anti-correlationist dark ecology of the zombie functions to break from the epistemological question of *what knowledge is of most worth* insofar as it suggests both forms of life and realities to which humans have *no access*" (Wallin, 2015, p. 178), what is missed here is that, in so many zombie films, the zombie is not only merely a byproduct of human decisions (zombies arise as results of cancer treatments gone awry, nuclear byproducts, chemical hazes, etc.), but also a catalyst for further human action, however futile such action may be. Often, the human is overrun by the zombie population, but there is still a human struggle *against* the zombies, and—often, though not always—a human coming-together against the zombies that keeps human knowledge of the world and of humanity at the forefront, however run-over by the zombie horde it may be. Zombies and other physical monsters, that is, however much they may serve to break the *World* initially, often become one more reason for putting it back together on human terms.

None of this is to say that every work of Horror fits hard-and-fast into a single category, or that there are not films which blend several of the above-mentioned categories together; there are, and numerous ones at that. Kubrick's (1980) *The Shining* is a brilliant example, presenting the slowly encroaching psychopathy of Jack Torrance possibly as a result of, but at the very least in tandem with, supernatural events occurring within the Overlook Hotel and Torrance's own predilection toward violence. It is merely my intention to promote the idea that we do need to understand the *source* of horror in different works if we are to understand (and thus learn from) the genre as a whole, as well as to create a foothold for understanding and differentiating those sources.

3. The divorced planet; or, an object-oriented approach to the world

Morton (2013b) has made the rather startling claim that the end of the world is not an event to come in some distant future if we don't take action now, but rather an event that has already occurred. To better understand this sentiment, we must come to an understanding of what Morton intends by "world" through the terminology that I have posited thus far. "World," he writes, "is an aesthetic effect based on a blurriness and aesthetic distance [... which] derives from ignorance concerning objects" (p. 104). So, Morton's understanding of *World* is much the same as ours, with the added understanding that the idea of the world-for-us emerges from a necessary ignorance of the world-for-itself through anthropocentric vanity, and this conception of the end of the world essentially refers to a destruction of this aesthetic effect of *World* brought about by "the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale" (p. 7) by Watt's patent of the carbon-depositing steam engine. While there is much of merit in Morton's work, I must counter his claim that the notion of *World* ended with humanity's large-scale position of dominion over it with the understanding that the notion of *World* was further solidified with our attempts at mastery, attempts that have reduced further and further what may have been mysterious to the ready-to-hand. Our ignorance of the *World* as the *Planet* through using it as the *Earth*, (i.e. in denying its individual reality through viewing it as a simple data factory to be mined and mastered) has done nothing but compound over time since the onset of the Industrial Revolution. The end of the *World* does not arise with human ideas of mastery over it; the end of the *World* comes from the realization that we can never master it.

To better understand just how the solidification and disintegration of *World* emerge, an understanding of the concept duoming is necessary. In an object-oriented reading of the world, there are essentially two ways of devaluing the importance of any object, the *World* being no exception: undermining and overmining, and duoming combines the worst elements of each of these. When objects are undermined, they are reduced to simple conglomerations of all of their component parts, or rather, undermining positions claim that objects "are too specific to deserve the name of ultimate reality, and dream up some deeper indeterminate basis from which specific things arise" (Harman, 2011, p. 10; see also Harman, 2012b, 2013). A cake, for example, is not a cake, but rather an accumulation of flour, egg, sugar, butter, salt, chocolate, heat, and time. Since it can be reduced to these individual components, the singular importance of the cake as an object unto itself is dismissed. Overmining, on the other end of the spectrum of devaluation, is the reduction of an object to its relations, systems in which it participates (a la Deleuze & Guattari's (1972/2003) notion that everything is systems), and its mathematization, ultimately proclaiming that "objects are important only insofar as they are manifested to the mind, or are part of some concrete event that affects other objects as well" (Harman, 2011, p. 11). That same cake is no longer the assemblage of a series of parts, but rather now a birthday treat, a wedding centerpiece, a guilty midnight snack, and the perfect thing to smash into your jerk of a boss's face; it is a cake toward some end that will never exhaust the reality of the cake.

Duoming, then, does the materialist trick of undermining and overmining objects at one and the same time, "treating them as ultimate elements that are actually nothing but sets of qualities" (Harman, 2011, p. 14, 2013), and it is generally a materialist position that we adopt when thinking of the *World*, as well as when developing a humanist curriculum. The everyday notion of world—whether through a scientific analysis that makes *World* out of *Earth* through explaining away any inherent mystery in the being of an object both by explaining that object in terms of its components and in terms of its uses, or through the commonsense notion that the being of any thing is the accumulated whole of its aesthetic effects, its appearances—is a constant vacillation between undermining and overmining, often performing both at once.

What is important to understand here is that the *World*—as solidifying as it may be as a concept for our sake, bringing together all aesthetic data that objects emit in a pleasant, accessible package—always runs the risk of appearing broken due to the natural disjuncture between what is intended by the concept *World* (the world-for-us, that is; an intention of an anthropocentric ontology; a predictable, manipulable experience of "reality") and that from whence the concept is derived (the

untouchable, inexhaustible, unnamable reality of *Planetary* being). What we can understand here is that the *World* is essentially a tool for grounding our reality, but we must also understand that, insofar “as a tool is a tool, it is quite invisible. And what makes it invisible is the way that it disappears in favor of some purpose that it serves” (Harman, 2011, p. 38). Further, tools, as such, tend not to show back up in our consciousness until they break or go missing (Heidegger, 1926/1962), and it is the very manner of this reappearance through brokenness that can create either laughter, the case for which Bergson (1911/2005) illuminates brilliantly, or horror, as we will see below. In either case, the *appearance* of the broken *World* should illuminate the fact that the *World* is always broken; we’ve simply fooled ourselves of its completeness through our sense of the everyday.

Before proceeding further, I would like to add a brief note against any developing notions of futility in this argument. It would be rather easy for a reader at this point to say: “since the notion of *World* does not truly grasp reality, and reality itself exhausts anything that can be said about it, the author is merely wasting space on paper and my own precious time. Even this conception of *World* doesn’t truly grasp *World* because there is a reality underlying *that* that is still unknowable.” I would like to put aside such an argument by pointing out to the reader that I began this project with Barber’s (2013) understanding that “[temporally] speaking [...] to begin is to enter a war with what is left behind; spatially speaking, to begin is to enter a war with what is on the other side” (p. 19). The point here is to acknowledge the *reality* of objects beyond human intention; the fact that there will always be something *beyond* what consciousness can intend or what language can express is no cause for silence, this is not a war unworthy of waging. Rather, the love of wisdom drives us toward a further emptying, one that creates a space for what correlationist philosophies of access would have us deny: the reality of that which is not founded by human cognition.

4. Psychological horror: a categorical analysis

There are several ways of developing horror through a psychological framework. One rather common one is to blend the psychological with the supernatural, creating a clear split in the reading and leaving a case to be made for either side, with no clear winner at the work’s conclusion. *The Babadook* (Ceyton & Kent, 2014)—which will be left alone beyond this paragraph—is a prime example of this because on the one hand the film can be read as a single mother’s slowly ensuing psychological breakdown in the midst of dealing with an unruly child after her (clearly beloved) husband’s death, and on the other hand we have a film about a supernatural being capable of making its way into a family’s daily lives, tormenting them, asserting and reinventing itself as it needs to meet its own sinister ends. The mother’s world is either falling apart because of the way she has approached and grounded it, allowing her personal expectations and rules to be its foundational principle, or because of that supernatural creature that is always lurking in the corners and hiding in the basement.

There is also the case wherein the psychological is a red herring, where the psychological must ultimately be written off altogether for the sake of the supernatural. *The Chair* (Patterson & Sullivan, 2007), which will also be left alone from here, is a relevant modern example of this form of Horror because of its early focus on the main character’s psychosis. The problem of her medication maintenance is one that is prevalent early in the film, and one that continues to suck in other characters along the way, causing the audience (mildly, but much less so than actual characters) to question whether the character is truly (merely) in the midst of a psychotic break. The viewer wonders, but only briefly, whether the shifts in what is supposed to be reality have something to do with the combination of the character’s inherent psychosis and her non-compliance with the medication regimen that would alleviate the situation. In such cases, particularly when this problem is presented early (and *The Chair* is an excellent example of this), it is almost always revealed that there is actually a supernatural element at play. This supernatural element (a possession, for example) always supersedes the psychological, as it is revealed that it is not the characters’ understanding of the world that provides the ground of horror, but rather the fact that some entity beyond what is normally considered an element of the world has chosen to impose its will upon a human reality.

Finally, there is the truly psychological. In a true work of Psychological Horror, the world itself is the monster in question. A simple (yet nonetheless stunning) example of this can be found in the two sentence Horror story that reads: “I never go to sleep. But I keep waking up,” attributed to contributor watermelonmoose on the website justsomething.com (2014). Here, the protagonist’s reality (that of consistently waking into new realities) is clearly made up of a world that is at odds with the simple human desires of consistency, predictability, and to get some bloody sleep. The horror arises from our ability to put ourselves in the speaker’s shoes, asking the question: what if I were to snap out of the “reality” I’m experiencing now into some other one, and then into another one after that? So much of what we take for granted—what constitutes the ground of reality, for example, whether it be the stripping down of any object or situation to its component parts or the series of relations that extend outward from whole objects and systems—would disappear; nothing would ever be solid; the very ground that we stand upon could be little more than so many mouths waiting to gobble us up along with the thinner and thinner “realities” that we perceive moment to moment.

This story, while illustrative and captivating, is hardly enough, however, to get a solid handle on the distinctiveness of the genre. We can derive a much more thorough understanding from an analysis of the film *YellowBrickRoad* (Hungerford, Holland, & Mitton, 2010), a prime example of Psychological Horror in this author’s humble opinion, due to the development of the psychological level of horror that the film presents. To be clear, it is not my purpose here to cast judgment upon the overall theatrical merits, positive or negative, of *YellowBrickRoad*—and while a quick lookup of the film on the accessible and thorough review site rottentomatoes.com reveals an overall rating of 44% (*YellowBrickRoad*, n.d.), the reader should consider that this rating is out of only 16 reviewers, and only a portion of those reviewers are non-amateurs—but simply to say that the film is an excellent example of Psychological Horror, if for no other reason than its unrelenting efforts at making the horror that the characters experience due to a world that is at odds with them and their desires to understand/master it without resorting to the visible, biological extroversion of some creature, driving most characters over the edge of sanity.

The film is the story of a research expedition. A couple wants to investigate a trail in New Hampshire that, nearly a century earlier, the entire population of a town followed and either went insane, died, or disappeared. Great pains, we learn, have been taken by modern inhabitants of the town to keep curious outsiders away, but our protagonists manage to secure documentation that provides relevant starting points and, most importantly, permission to investigate. The couple gathers a team that includes, but is not limited to: a doctor of psychology (who happens to be an old friend), a member of a forestry department, a camera crew, an intern (who we are led to believe early on in the film has accidentally broken the GPS equipment), and, eventually, a local, who joins the team as they make their way, seemingly mistakenly, to what is supposed to be the trailhead: a cinema.

Feeling dejected and misled, the leader of the expedition learns from the local, a popcorn vendor at the cinema, that there actually is a trail—a pathway called “YellowBrickRoad” by locals (the foundation of a *Wizard of Oz* theme that works its way through the film)—nearby that no one actually travels but where local kids go to drink and “get scared,” and toward which the local agrees to point the team in the right direction if they allow her to travel with them.

Once the expedition is back underway, things begin to go awry relatively quickly, beginning with the GPS breakdown, a glitch that places the group at one moment in Italy, only to have them across the ocean in Australia the next. This displacement in space is soon met with inexplicable music—though not without a number of theories from the expedition members—from the first half on the 20th century piping its way into the mountainside landscape and onto the psyches of the travelers. Following other unexplainable events, we are given the creeping feeling that the travelers’ sanity is collectively disintegrating, a feeling that is met with one expedition member, following a fight over a hat, slitting the face of another and ripping off her leg, leaving her to die on the mountainside.

Soon enough, more wrong numbers. Math doesn't work. We learn that the crew cannot turn around because, even though the coordinates they marked made sense going forward, the mathematical logic fails when going backward. The music grows louder, earth-shakingly so, more than once, an effect laid not only upon the trekkers, but upon the audience as well: we stumble with the crew as they travel up pathways against swells of sound; we feel, through strange, claustrophobic silences, the need for covering ears; the alphabet becomes disjointed, unruly (see Appendix A for a note on this phenomenon).

Soon we encounter a scarecrow (a reference to the aforementioned *Wizard of Oz* theme) guarding a blocked-off section of the path. This scarecrow is the raised body of our murderer, his face sliding half-off upon camera recognition. Relationships crumble; distrust festers; identities fade; fights flare; the sense of displacement is enhanced by contentions over which way to travel; more death; we see from afar either the trail we have traveled or the trail to be traveled, it is unclear which; the willy-nilly ingestion of nightshade becomes a *good* choice; ironies are uncovered; intentions of the original party (read: the choice of the insanity of the trail over the mundanity of "town life") are understood; soundless suicide; isolation; the expedition leader finds himself ending his journey in a cinema, with a very familiar voice hoping that he enjoys his "picture show," an unending reminder (as it is a repetition of a line given at the film's inception to the expedition upon receiving his paperwork) not only of the horrors that he has experienced, but also those that he has dragged others through.

This film is a perfect example of Psychological Horror because it not only presents the *idea* of a broken world, but allows us to experience the ensuing psychosis arising from drastic changes in world-appearance (i.e. hidden reality creeping its way into perceived and anticipated reality) over time.

5. The *World* as object for psychological horror

In Psychological Horror, the foundational horror is largely existential: a character has used the world's aesthetic presentation of itself as the ground upon which they are situated, and that world is *not as it should be*, which is to say not as it should be *for them*. Such a quake in grounding causes the character's reality to crumble, and what constitutes the real becomes unstable. Reality is not real (or, rather, is more real than a character is willing or able to conceive), and so the character no longer understands who they are in the wake of that reality. The world itself becomes a monster beyond human control, indeed seemingly antagonistic toward human conceptions of reality. Somewhere in here, the *World* has begun to act like the *Planet*.

While Carroll's (1987, 1990) notion of horrific empathy is important in understanding horror on an aesthetic level for the audience of *YellowBrickRoad* here, to do so we must have a framework for what creates horror for the *characters*, and it lies in the act of duoming. Perhaps the most striking occasions for this in the film are the trail mystery itself and the group's response to the ghost music. In the first case, there is a thing to be uncovered, to be documented, to be stripped down to its essential components and understood, and the group who heads up this research project is very much of the mind that if they can just get enough evidence, just get the experience of "being there," then they may be able to fit together the pieces of this mystery, make some sense of it, make some money, and possibly make a name for themselves. The phenomenon of mass disappearance/insanity/murder is mistaken first for its component parts, and then again as a for-us relation under a materialist/scientific worldview.

In the case of the ghost music, we can understand that the *World* has clearly broken. Any sense of everydayness ought to have disappeared with the insertion of this strange music blasting its way across the mountainside. Here we are presented with a cause to question the foundation of reality beyond the causal and aesthetic, yet it is not until the music begins to weave itself into the fabric of the *World* and team members begin to lose their sanity that the characters really feel any sense of dread. Initially it is addressed causally: there must be a locatable, nameable *reason* that this music exists, and maybe it's because the people who lost their minds here before loved it. What is missing

is the sense that “reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it” (Harman, 2012a, p. 51). We set out with all sorts of technical equipment to map reality, yet when it presents itself, our minds—because they have held on so tightly to aesthetic representations of reality and have not created a space for the real beyond the tangible—dissolve.

While it may seem at first take that the *Planet* would be the foundational element of horror in Psychological Horror pieces, inserting itself into humans’ constructed realities and terrorizing them, we must understand that without a world-for-us ontology, such horror could not arise. Scientific uniformitarianism would have us believe that the world as it has been is the world as it will continue to be, that all matter, all states of matter, and all laws regulating matter, have been uniform in their existence since the beginning of time and will continue to be so until the end of time, and that we can know this world by its features. Yet a thing that has changed some of its features would still remain the same thing (Harman, 2012a). On this note, I turn to Morton’s (2013b) imagining of a series of the surprisingly warm arctic summers suggested by Aristotle. In a discussion of events which would be considered “accidents” of nature rather than the substance of nature, Morton concludes that if a series of terribly warm arctic summers were to continue “then there *never was* a genuine, meaningful (for us humans) sweltering summer, just a long period of sweltering that seemed real because it kept on repeating for, say, two or three millennia” (p. 102). While I disagree with Morton’s notion that the meaningful never existed for us—indeed, I argue quite the opposite: that what is meaningful-for-us in such cases is ultimately foundationless, false, and thereby meaningless *in itself*, regardless of whether it had meaning for us at any one time—this understanding of how a thing’s aesthetic expression of its reality can change over time, exposing the flaws in an unspeculative scientific worldview and creating a horrorshow of what we thought was reality (a horrifying understanding, that is, of what was once the *World*) is critical in understanding how the *Planet* allows for the *World* to be the cornerstone of Psychological Horror.

One could argue that a thing is a thing moment to moment, and that because of this, if a thing were to change its attributes over time then it *would* be a different thing. That is, how we experience an object *in a particular moment* is an experience of the object in that particular moment, and a new experience of the object at a different instance would be an experience of a different object. This argument will not hold, however, because we never actually experience a thing, only the thing-for-us, its aesthetic qualities, and since time is a quality emitted by things, not a realm in which things exist in themselves (Harman, 2011) it cannot be the case that we have a new object over time, merely new expressions *of* the object *through* time. A world in the wake of global warming, a world in which GPS units locate us on one continent in and then another only seconds later, a world where popular 1940s music suddenly exists of its own free will in the air around us, is just a world that has changed some of its features; it is not a new world, only a world revealing a potential that was not an element of *our lived experience* of it. What ends in such occasions is our ability to fool ourselves into believing that we are approaching it authentically, and this thought is horrifying.

6. Implications for educators

Harman (2013) has written that the “the whole of modern science is a duoming project, since it aims both to reduce objects downward to the most basic constituents *and* to claim that these things are, in principal, knowable through mathematization” (p. 46). An analysis of the current educational system in America proves to be no less a duoming project than that of science in this way. At the very same time that we, as educators, are expected to understand our students as manifestations of their component skills, racial/ethnic makeup, social class, behaviors, family history, extra-curricular interests, and dis/abilities, we are further expected to fit these neatly onto data spreadsheets, into grading rubrics, and into strategically partnered desks with the added understanding that, because these can be mathematized, this mathematization presents the *reality* of those students. We have a commonplace notion, that is, that reality is constructed and knowable causally and relationally, an idea which extends to the belief that “there is no independent reality outside of the system of language, discourse, or power” (Harman, 2013, p. 45), and the latter here is supported by the previously mentioned notion that if these realities are stripped to their individual components and

interlocking parts then they can be understood and *changed*. The anthropocentric reading of the world that we see in Psychological Horror is no different from the system-centric reading of the student (and, under the current TEM system of evaluation, of the teacher).

This is not to say that these approaches are not useful; they are. However, as Harman (2013) points out, “usefulness and truth are not the same thing” (p. 47). When we undermine the reality of our students by examining them as conglomerations of components, we lose a sense of emergence, of possibility; the case is closed, that is, the minute the student becomes a data farm. At the same time, if we overmine our students with the understanding that all is relation, again there is no reason for change; this systematization creates a necessarily closed loop, and in so doing, the need for an education disappears.

Psychological Horror is perhaps most useful here in its presentation of this very sort of horrific affect. Just as characters sink slowly into madness across the text of a work of Psychological Horror, the modern educator is faced daily with the possibility of ensuing insanity. Standardization is little more than systematization both ways (downward and outward), and in the very same way that this false, anthropocentric reading of the world is the groundwork for the aesthetically horrifying in works of Psychological Horror, it can lend itself to making a nightmare of the modern classroom. Harman (2012a), again, has written that “normally we feel no gap at all between the world and our descriptions of it” (p. 27). We have a tendency to take the way the world presents itself to us moment-to-moment as the reality of the world, the way we can pin it down and solidify it *for ourselves*. The idea that the world exists *beyond* our ability to describe it is rarely taken into account, and this fact, as we have seen through our exploration of Psychological Horror, can be the frame of a terrifying reality.

On this note, I would like to point the reader toward fourteenth-century monk Gregory Palamas’s notion of *hesychia*, a monastic goal in approaching solitude, as “that stillness or quiet that is arrived at through an ongoing, negative prayer, stripping away all proximal or distal relations, a prayer of remoteness” (Thacker, 2013, p. 15). There is something of the apophatic here, a *via negativa*, but this notion of *hesychia* goes beyond the apophatic, valuing not only the unsayability of a thing, but also the *act* of stripping things beyond what is sayable about them, the involvement of the emptying of the individual with the emptying of the world. Such an engagement not only necessarily removes human imposition onto the reality of objects, but also develops the understanding that whatever thing we can point at about an object will never be the whole of that object’s reality; relations become relative and arbitrary at best. In this way, (that is, living with a sense of *hesychia*) the mystery of the universe (including the solitary things within it) is always at hand; there can be no horror deriving from a plasticized world here, because the monk has made no mold. The monastic goal of solitude—a goal that, according to Thacker (2013) is ultimately unreachable because, when all seek solitude, such seeking creates communities of seekers, bound by their individual desires to rid themselves of the confines and traps of community—is bound up in the *via negativa*; God must be free of all relations, and, since the community is a series of relations, it must ultimately be shunned if there is to be communion with God, regardless of the Biblical notion that “where two or three are gathered” God is amongst them (Matt. 18:20). The point here is that the group itself runs the risk of replacing God, and must therefore be shunned, however much the group may make God present. Once the presence of God has been made present *through* the group, that is, the group must be dismissed, as it can stand in the way of understanding God *as* God.

In much the same way, we must understand our students *as* students who have lives that can never be emptied by our attempts to pin them down. Such an understanding is also fundamental for a truly student-centered classroom. The corporate model of the classroom founded upon data collection and scientific readings of those data can never be a truly student-centered locale for several reasons, particularly when we consider Bergson’s notion of science. For Bergson (1911/1998), science “cannot do otherwise than express [a relation] in terms of intelligence; but in so doing it constructs an imitation [...] rather than penetrates within it” (p. 168). The scientific (i.e. data-driven

through *post hoc* sensibilities, as opposed to a durational approach with an understanding of the freedom of individuals and of matter) reading of our students, understood this way, allows us to abstract them and see not the students themselves, but imitations of them, caricatures. Perhaps this is the allure of this model. Imitations are neat, tidy, manipulable (cf. Rosenberg's (2013) notion of data being primarily *rhetorical*), and comforting in their mannequinuity (if the reader would forgive me for attempting to coin a term that approaches mannequin-being). Realities, however, for Bergson and for OOO are messier, freer, and ultimately more frightening in their unpredictability. In fact, City's (2014) third reason why student-centered learning and discussion has been long in the making is that people are afraid. "Student-driven discussions," she writes, "can feel risky to all involved. We're afraid of losing control (teachers). Of not knowing how to play the game of school correctly (students). Of sounding stupid (students and teachers). Of silence (teachers and students)" (p. 12). The student-centered classroom is a shaky, grey area, that can be a terror to all who venture it, yet if we are going to allow our students to "own the classroom" and make themselves a part of the curriculum—a value and goal that we must uphold if education is to be meaningful and just—such horrors must be ventured; we must allow the unknowable reality of our students to break the pre-constructed *World* of the classroom.

And yet, even this may not be enough, particularly considering the limits that humanism has presented to the classroom setting. The "student-centered" classroom is designed to keep focus on student needs, strengths, and abilities within the context of a proscribed curriculum; it is a means of avoiding the traps of the science/market-based classroom and allow for human flourishing in an atmosphere that ultimately has the capability to deny humanity. Considering what has been discussed thus far, however, such an endeavor, when carried out in ignorance of the process of dominating, runs the risk of extending to the world-at-large and promoting the anthropocentrism that Dewey's (1966) notion that a "child's life is an integral, a total one" which "passes quickly and readily from one topic to another, as from one spot to another, but is not conscious of transition or break" (para. 6) misses. This child's world, that is, is the *World-for-the-child*, and a naïve approach to "student-centered" learning can promote the exploitation of that world (and the terror that ensues when the *World* ends, ignoring Bergson's (1911/1998) claim that "the line of evolution that ends in man is not the only one" (p. xii)) that humanist approaches have allowed to date; until an object-oriented approach to that world (a student-centered approach that simultaneously decenters the student) is effectively enacted, such is the chance we take daily of creating a framework for future horrors, both *for* our students and *because* of them. Further, along with promoting the humanist project of education beyond the human, such an approach to the classroom, through its unattainable challenge to exhaust the possibilities of what the classroom *is*, can open the space to transforming the commonsense capitalist approach to the classroom often taken by students ("I've got to get an education so I can get a better job and make some money").

7. Conclusion

When Jim Morrison growls the prophetically ominous "no one here gets out alive" on "5 to 1" (1968, track 11), he is wailing about the weird disconnect between the *World* and the *Planet*, that strangely discomfoting understanding that, however much we continue to utilize the *World* as a ground for our particularly *human* being, this grounding is only a singular manifestation of a greater reality does not need us one bit, and that will eventually swallow us all. Morton (2012) suggests that black holes may be the ultimate object of ontology, due to the degree of concealment that black holes paradoxically express. Through Morrison's lyrics, however, and the world that works of Psychological Horror present to us, we can see that the *World* is just such a black hole.

Because Horror challenges "philosophy's most basic presuppositions—the principle of non-contradiction, the principle of sufficient reason, the principle of sufficient philosophy itself" (Thacker, 2015, p. 131) and "puts forward scenarios that through their vivid depiction threaten our background cognitive reliance on others and the world around us" (Nickel, 2010, p. 28), it is an incredibly rich genre for analyzing how we approach education, a field that so often works to set the world in stone through content knowledge in general, through the standardization of such content knowledge, and

through the standardization of behaviors. Standardization tends to recreate and hold as supreme the notion of the world-for-us, an act that “points to the circle of correlationism in which thought itself becomes habituated. It is not just that we are taught that things have proper categorical meanings or epistemic states, but, more fundamentally, that human consciousness constitutes privileged access to the world (Wallin, 2015, p. 173), and Psychological Horror suggests that unfathomable harm can arise from such privileging.

If the hyperbolic decay and general weirdness that create the aesthetic grotesquerie of Horror which “fascinates because it offers contact with another plane of existence,” allowing us to reach “beyond ordinary, anodyne life” (Cokal, 2010, p. 183), then the post-human, object-oriented worlds presented by works of Psychological Horror are evidence of just the type of worlds we are capable of contacting. We cannot write ourselves out of our entanglements with our world, and ignoring them through the privileging of a human knowing that masks the occluded reality underlying all things has proven to be a project that attempts to do just this. The fact that we desire to reach beyond ordinary life through our fascination with the grotesque—particularly the grotesquerie of a *World* that is not a world-for-us—displays a certain unease with the primacy of human knowing, yet it is this very sense of unease that is missing from the American classroom as a standardized humanist project. Until we can appreciate our world as an object unto itself, an object that we will never master and that we can never escape, our education will provide little more than a dreadful foundation.

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Note

1. Style note: I must comment here, for the sake of clarity, on my capitalization of the term “Horror.” In order to effectively differentiate between the genre and the emotion, I have chosen to capitalize the term when referencing the genre, unless the term appears in a quote, in which case I have kept each author’s original scheme of capitalization.

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Appendix A

On the broken alphabet

The reader may find it amusing to know that, one morning, after having completed the first complete draft of this paper and having awoken from falling asleep while editing the draft the night before, at the end of the paragraph that would end up being at the top of page 6 of the draft, the author found, upon opening the document, seven pages of nothing but the lowercase letter d, concluding with the word “reality.” The horror I experienced in that moment was very much a reality.



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