# Hannibal Lecter V. Immanuel Kant
# An Application of Kantianism to Graphic Horror Film

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## A Brief History of Horror Film

The horror film genre has been around almost as long as film itself. In 1919 the first *Frankenstein* film was made; the cut lasted only 16 minutes, but it started the timeless tradition of horror film[1]. Shortly after came *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene 1919) and *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau 1922). The 1950s-1960s brought the creature feature to the screen with such films as *Godzilla* (Ishirô Honda 1954).

The seventies brought the monster in a new package. While rudimentary special effects had been around as long as film, the late 70's were a benchmark due to the development of the Dykstraflex, a computer-controlled camera that was developed in the making of *Star Wars* (George Lucas 1977). *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg 1977) influenced the industry with its

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[1] Corrigan, Timothy, White, Patricia, <u>The Film Experience</u>, Bedford St. Martin's, 2004.

unique "lens flare" technique. This technique was used to create eerie image of the flying saucers in the film by reflecting light on the cameras lens[2]. The most influential of special effect advances was computer generated imagery (CGI) in 1973. It was not until the 80's that it won the industry over its most notable use in *The Abyss* (James Cameron 1989)[3].

CCI has been able to do much more with special effects in horror film than make-up and costume. Horror films that employ CGI have much more realistic scenes of supernatural activity. Contrast, for example the original *House on Haunted Hill* (William Castle, 1959) to the remake *The Haunting* (Jan de Bont, 1999). In the original, no special effects were used beyond what could be done with simple camera tricks. The filmmakers relied heavily upon psychological scare tactics. The film used sound effects like doors creaking and glass shaking in the pane to convey that the house was haunted. While you never saw the monster in this film, you heard it, and you certainly experienced the fright of the characters by watching their emotional reactions. In the remake, however,

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[2] www.horrorfilmhistory.com, Katrina Wilson, 2000-2005.
[3] Morton Lisa, "Have Special Effects Killed Horror?" Horror Magazine issue 7, 1996

CGI was used to make the house itself come alive. There were scenes in which the cherubs in the woodwork came alive and screamed. There was also the infamous scene of the bed coming alive and the four posts weaving their malicious wooden arms around the heroine's body.

This decade that has taken CGI effects to a whole new level. As well as being able to aid in the supernatural effects, CGI has the ability to produce violent scenes with much more realistic blood and gore. We have films like *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven 2006) in which a family is brutalized by a gang of desert mutants. In the second half of the film, we are taken into the world of the mutants, and we get a good look at their freakish bodies and cannibalistic behavior. CGI makes it all look real. In the battle scenes between the father and the mutant patriarch, blood sprays everywhere, limbs fly and people are bludgeoned. These graphic images are produced by CGI. Without it, horror films would not be at the current level of graphic violence. Before CGI, horror films often relied on implying unimaginable horrors of the body. Now, horror films can show you images beyond what is in your worst

nightmare. The *Hills Have Eyes* was criticized for two particularly disturbing scenes. The first entails the brutal rape of sixteen year old Brenda by two mutants. The second is a scene in which a gun is pointed at an infant while the young mother is forced to allow an adult male mutant to suckle her breast. The horrific nature of these two scenes exemplifies the current level of acceptable violence in graphic horror film.

Horror films that use CGI have raised the bar for realistic images of blood and violence. Though not all current horror films use CGI, most of them uphold this new tradition of visual excess until we are "up to [our] eyes in gore, and loving it."[4] Current films in the category we will refer to as graphic horror includes *Saw* (James Wan, 2004), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Marcus Nispel, 2003), *The House of 1000 Corpses* (Rob Zombie, 2003), its sequel *The Devil's Rejects* (Rob Zombie, 2005), *House of Wax* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2005), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 2006), *Silent Hill* (Christopher Gans, 2006) and *See No Evil* (Gregory Dark, 2006)[5]. All these films have three things in common: unparalleled gore, emphasis on

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[4] Alex Williams, "Up to Her Eyes in Gore and Loving it" New York Times April 30, 2006
[5] filmsandtv.com, 2006.

spectacle over plot, and multimillion dollar popularity. It is this current category of horror film that this paper will focus on. In order to distinguish these films from other types of horror, they will be referred to as graphic horror from now on.

## Important Questions

Whether studio blockbusters like these or independent films like *The Blair Witch Project*, the horror genre is alive and well, marketing more blood and gore then ever. Partly due to technological advances in special effects, and partly due to the increase in violence in the media, horror films have adapted a "keepin' up with the Joneses" attitude toward gore. In a decade where these films have become the norm, where will horror go next? How does this reflect the tastes of American culture? While these films may be rated R, the fact of the matter is that young kids are watching these films in the theaters. I viewed *The Hills Have Eyes* in theaters and was shocked to see there a group of 13 year old boys from a camp where I worked days. The next day at camp, I

discussed the film with them, asking them why they went to see such a graphic film. Twelve year old Adam explained "It's like, you go to see if you can handle it, if you can take it"[6].

While these are interesting and valuable questions, this essay will focus on the present issues of horror film. As said before, this essay will focus primarily on a sub genre of horror called graphic horror. Two questions we will focus on are, "How do we become engaged in graphic horror film?" and "Is graphic horror film morally wrong?"

In this thesis I will argue that graphic horror film is morally wrong because of the ways in which we engage in it. In the upcoming chapters I will apply a modified theory of identificationism to graphic horror film and describe how Kantianism conflicts with this adaptation of identificationism. First, in order to focus on graphic horror film, we must settle on a definition of horror film in general.

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[6] Informal conversation, stated by Adam Ells

**Defining Horror**

In his book, <u>The Philosophy of Horror</u>, Noel Carroll asserts

that horror is identified by the emotion it elicits: a sense of

suspense, mystery, and fear[7]. In contrast, a western would be

identified by its setting, a musical by its score, or a comedy by its

humor or ironic quality. Carroll claims that, "like works of

suspense, works of horror are designed to elicit a certain kind of

affect."[8] This affect is the emotion of horror that the genre is named

after. The point of horror, therefore, is to horrify the audience, to

elicit fear, anxiety, dread, and disgust in a particular strategy. This

strategy includes shock tactics (the monster jumping out of a dark

corner), a plot built on suspense and a repulsive monster.

According to Carroll, one necessary condition that separates

horror from other similar genres such as terror or myth is the

character's treatment of the monster. In a myth or fable the

characters treat the monster as a familiar part of the universe they

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[7] Carroll Noel, Philosophy of Horror, p 14.
[8] Carroll Noel, Philosophy of Horror, p 15.

are present in. For example, a character may stop along her journey

to ask directions from a dragon. In a horror film, the dragon would

be treated by the character as an abnormality of the universe. In

horror films, the universe is a mirror of our own, so a monster of

sci-fi or supernatural quality would be an anomaly or universal

mistake[9]. A character in a horror film responds to the monster with

fear and disgust, and according to Carroll, the audience mimics the

character's emotions of fear and disgust[10]. The emotional response

of the character in the film is an indication of how we should feel

about the monster. Take, for example, Julia Cotton's initial response

to the monster "Frank" in *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker 1987). Julia is

shocked, disgusted and terrified by the creature crawling towards

her. Yet when she realizes it is her lover Frank, she begins to calm

down. The audience mimics her reaction, both repulsed and

sympathetic. Julia's emotions continue to tear at her throughout the

film; she loves Frank but is terrified by his consumption of people

and is repulsed by his skinless body. The audience, as a

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[9] Noel Carroll later defines this as a categorical mistake or mishap
[10] Carroll Noel, Philosophy of Horror, p 17.

consequence, partly wants Frank to become whole and escape the Cenobites, but is also relieved in the end when he is taken by them.

The most noteworthy aspect of Carroll's definition of horror is his assertion that the monster must be supernatural or science fictional. He denies that films with a human monster (e.g. serial killers) are a part of the horror tradition. Some examples of these films are Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*. Carroll considers these films to be "tales of terror"[11] that explore the possible abnormal psychologies of disturbed people and labels them in a separate category called terror films. He states that these types of films "though eerie and unnerving, achieve their frightening effects by exploring psychological phenomena that are all too human"[12].

## Categorical Contradiction

Carroll asserts two criteria that the monster of a horror film must fulfill: threat and categorical contradiction. The most basic way of

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[11] Carroll Noel, Philosophy of Horror, p 15.
[12] Carroll Noel, Philosophy of Horror, p 15.

fulfilling the first requirement is to make the monster dangerous, usually by being a lethal entity. Carroll claims that the monster may also be psychologically, morally, or socially threatening. For example, *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) exemplifies Satan as the monster, not because he kills Sharon, but because he possesses her body. *The Exorcist* therefore is an example of a film with a monster who is psychologically and morally threatening.

His second criterion is that the monster must be a categorical mistake. Carroll believes that we must feel disgust when watching a horror film. This disgust is not based on blood or gore, but with the monster in itself. We can only be truly disgusted by the monster if it is a categorical mistake. Instead, the disgust arises out of a deep seated fear and repulsion towards something that does not fit into the categories of the world around us. A werewolf, for example, would be a category mistake; it is neither human nor wolf. This creature does not fit into any category that lies in our human understanding. We are disgusted by this creature, and consequently we are in awe of it.

The idea of categorical paradox is one Carroll adapted from Mary Douglas. He refers to it as "interstitially" and "categorical contradictoriness." The contradictoriness is a natural impurity on the part of the monster that incites disgust in the audience. For Carroll, this can be achieved in two ways: fusion and fission.

Fusion is when the monster is made of two contradictory categories in the same spatio-temporal embodiment. Many of these creatures blur the categories of living/dead, animal/human, or machine/human. For example, zombies, vampires, ghosts, or mummies are all categorical contradictions between living and dead. Frankenstein is an example of a categorical paradox because he blurs the living/dead categorical lines; he is physically made of different human parts and is part machine.

Fission monsters are those that combine categories and are distributed over different entities. These entities are however, metaphysically related. Some example of these would be alter-egos, werewolves, or doppelgangers. The clearest example is the werewolf because it is a categorical contradiction of a human and a wolf, yet it is a fission character because the wolf and the human

appear at different times. In contrast a werewolf would be a fusion character if it were part wolf and part human at the same time, say, a creature with a human head and wolf legs.

These categorical paradoxes are, for Carroll, what creates disgust in the monster. The repulsion we feel towards the monster is a metaphysical one. We are not simply disturbed and nauseated by its appearance, but instead by its categorical violation. Due to this, Carroll does not believe that human monsters such as serial killers or psychopaths qualify as true monsters and therefore these types of films are not classified as horror. He puts these films into a separate category of thriller films.

## My Analysis

I agree with Carroll's assertion that horror films are designed to elicit particular emotional responses in people. But I feel he falls short in his analysis of the monster archetype. These emotional responses, according to Carroll, are fear and disgust. The monster provides the means to elicit these emotions in people.

If a film is designed to elicit fear, disgust, dread, anxiety, etc, in a person, and does so by employing a being that has this effect, what does it matter if it is human or not? The point of horror, simply put, is to scare people. Every horror film has a monster that does this. Sometimes it is a supernatural force you never see, as in *The House on Haunted Hill* (William Castle, 1959), and sometimes it is a human monster such as the character of Jacob Goodnight (Cane) in *See No Evil* (Gregory Dark, 2006). Both terrify audiences in different ways. It is not necessary for the monster to be a categorical mistake.

For Carroll, our interest in the monster is based in fear, repulsion, and awe. This can only happen with an unrealistic monster, one that could never exist. By having a completely unknowable monster, our natural categorical understanding is challenged. As a consequence, we are intrigued, left to be in awe and repulsion of this creature that we do not understand.

A human monster is someone with an abnormal psychosis, someone who understands how people are most terrified and tortured, it is just as, if not more, terrifying than a supernatural

monster. It seems that a human monster does challenge our categorical system in some way. We are given a human being who is supposed to fit into our understanding of what a human being is, yet there is something excessively wrong in their makeup. Cannibalism, bestiality and necrophilia oppose human nature and therefore challenge the categorical essence of a human being. The category of human does not include eating other people or sexual intercourse with the dead. Disgust arises because examples of people who participate in these activities violate what we understand to be "human." The disgust one feels for a human monster is similar to the disgust one feels for a supernatural monster. Both challenge our understanding of the universal categories. Yes a supernatural monster doesn't fit any category of this world, but a human monster, also does not fit entirely into the category of "human." So both are fully or partially without category, and in light of this, we are left with awe and disgust towards it.

Carroll asserts that while human monsters do not elicit categorical disgust, monster satisfy the element of disgust if they

fall into what he calls "horrific metonymy."[13] He recognizes that the horror of the monster may not be apparent to the naked eye. Because of this he claims that a monster may be horrific if it is surrounded by horrific things. If this is accurate, then it poses a problem for Carroll. Let us take, for example, the character of Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*. Carroll would probably say that Bill is not a monster because he does not violate any categorical element. However, Bill is surrounded by horrific things such as tools for skinning women, bones, corpses, etc. He has a "woman suit" that is made up of the skin from many different women. That itself would be a fusion artifact if applied to Carroll's theory. So then, would Carroll still be able to say that Buffalo Bill is not a monster of horror film?

Another example is Norman Bates in *Psycho*, a character that Carroll directly disputes as qualifying as a horror monster. However, Norman surrounds himself with horrifying relics as well, including the rotten corpse of his mother which he animates. Not only is the corpse evidence of Norman's monstrosity, but Norman

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[13] Carroll Noel, Philosophy of Horror, p 50

himself is a fission character because he contains an alter-ego of his dead mother.

Due to this closer evaluation of disgust, I assert that Carroll's criterion is incorrect. A human monster is one that elicits fear, disgust, and dread; it is lethal and terrifying. A human monster therefore, is qualified to be the subject of a horror film. Beyond this, if we ruled films with human monsters out of the "horror" category we would be classifying many graphic horror films such as *Saw, The Hills Have Eyes, See No Evil, Texas Chainsaw Massacre and The Devils Rejects* as "thrillers." These graphic horror films may have human monsters but are becoming a popular way of terrifying and disgusting today' audiences.

Yet, is the criterion of the monster enough for a full definition of horror film? It seems there are many films with monsters that would not be considered horror. For example, the film *Little Children* had a plot in which a pedophile moves into an upper class suburban town. He is portrayed as a very dangerous, even lethal. His outward appearance as well as his actions frighten the audience. He, for all intensive purposes, is the monster of the

film. *Little Children* however, is the story of two people experiencing mid life crises and coming together. This is considered a drama, but by no means a horror film. What then must a horror film maintain in order to be considered horror?

Cynthia Freeland disagrees with Carroll's account of the monster in her book <u>The Naked and the Undead</u>. She considers horror to be a genre with too long a history to settle on one definition based on one type of monster (supernatural). She asserts that the horror genre is a means to symbolize evil[14], a topic that humans have sought to cope with over centuries. The monsters need only have one thing in common: evil.

In her theory, horror films simulate evil and allow us to react emotionally and intellectually. She, like Carroll, agrees with the cognitivist theory that horror films are designed to elicit "emotions of fear, sympathy, revulsion, dread, anxiety or disgust."[15] By inducing such visceral responses, our intellects are stimulated, and we begin to form judgments about, and discuss, evil.

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[14] Freeland Cynthia, The Naked and the Undead, p 2.
[15] Freeland Cynthia, The Naked and the Undead, p 3.

While Freeland has an interesting point that a monster really only needs to meet the one criterion of being evil. She claims that "horror has too long and complex a history for me to feel confidant in any one definition."[16] But horror film is a genre and can be given a definition. In the following paragraphs I will give specific criteria for horror film.

## A New Definition

Horror film must incorporate these three necessary and sufficient elements. A film in which (1) the narrative is built on shock, suspense, and surprise, using visual composition and mise-en-scène to create fear (2) there is some type of monster, whether known or unknown, real or supernatural, a force or an incarnation, and (3) characters that react to the monster(s) emotionally in order to emotionally engage the audience.

Films like *Saw, Hostel, Silent Hill* and *The Ring,* all use a very stylized mise-en-scène that works to be as terrifying as the monster

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[16] Freeland Cynthia, The Naked and the Undead, p 10.

itself. *Silent Hill,* for example, is set in an abandoned town. The

buildings are frightening because of the eerie lighting and the

rough, rotten metallic structure that convey a sense of sinister

doom. In this film, when "the darkness" (the monster) appears, the

walls fall away in sickening fleshy chunks to reveal a fiery, metallic

hell. The lighting changes from green-gray to red and shadowed,

signifying this other dimension. The walls crawl with creatures,

and everything is illuminated by the heroine's flashlight. The mise-

en-scène and the composition of the scenes are an important part of

the narrative structure. And in horror film it is often not just the

storyline, but the look and feel of the film that is horrifying.

As discussed earlier, a horror film has some sort of monster.

I disagree with Freeman that all monsters must be evil,

Frankenstein for example, was not an evil monster, but a creature

who was misunderstood and rejected by society as malevolent.

Cujo was not an evil dog, but one that had been infected with

rabies. My point is that regardless of the inherent evil of these

creatures, they are still monsters. So then, I assert that the monster

must possess a level of repulsiveness. They could be repulsive due

to their physicality, their mental corruption, or their actions could be repulsive in themselves. The monster must elicit fear, that is, they need to cause the characters and the audience to feel fear. And the monster needs to be a negative force within the narrative. That is, the monster need not be evil, but must be working against the protagonist in some way. As discussed earlier, it does not matter what form the monster takes; it could be (but not limited to) animal, supernatural entity, alien, insect, or human.

One contradictory example of a monster is in the children's movie *The Goonies* (Richard Donner 1985). In this film, one child, "Chunk," is kept prisoner by the "bad guys" and encounters "Sloth" a frighteningly deformed creature of a man. He is physically repulsive and frightening as he thrashes against his chains while wailing at Chunk. However, this creature does not prove to be a negative force against the band of children. In fact he takes their side and helps them. If he had sabotaged their plans, or scared them away, or displayed some sort of threat, he would then have qualified as a monster.

The last criterion of horror film is an essential one. Characters designed to react to the monster are necessary means of conveying how the audience should be reacting. When we watch a horror film, we often experience the monster as the character does, though sometimes we experience the monster's perspective as in *Silence of the Lambs*. As we watch the character respond to the monster in fear, dread, and disgust, we too respond with fear, dread and disgust.

Let us look at a counter example to illuminate these three criteria more clearly. In the opening scenes of the film *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton 1998), we follow Peggy the Avon lady around the cul-de-sac. She is dressed in a lavender Jackie-O suit and pillbox hat, navigating her way around the equally pastel neighborhood. Suddenly, we get a glimpse of a dark, crooked mansion on the top of the hill, Peggy decides to try and sell her product there. She enters the grotesque palace, full of frightening looking machinery and an askew spiral staircase. This environment is starkly gray and dark compared the pastel neighborhood it sits above. As Peggy begins to climb up the stairs, her lavender body

enveloped by the darkness, we begin to fear for her. When she reaches the attic our suspense is overwhelming. We see odd relics of newspaper clipping and decide there is something sinister lurking. Peggy spots a creature in the corner with pale skin, garbed in strange sadonistic/masochistic clothing with long, sharp, knife-like hands. All of the suspense built up to this moment cries out for Peggy to run, but she does not. She instead, reacts with curiosity and, upon seeing his scars, compassion. We are not frightened because she is not. Had Peggy reacted with fear and run away, we would be terrified of this monster, but when she asks his name, we are comforted by his quiet voice and common name, Edward.

## Graphic Horror

This essay concerns itself not with horror as a genre, but with a subgenre of horror that I have referred to as graphic horror. It is important to analyze graphic horror as a subgenre because this thesis claims that *only* graphic horror is universally morally wrong.

In order to separate traditional horror from graphic horror there must be specific criteria.

These graphic horror films, while employing the overall definition of horror I have given, are specific in their emphasis on spectacle over plot. They employ images of violence and gore rather than depending on narrative and visual composition to elicit fear, dread and disgust in the viewer. Some examples discussed earlier were *Saw*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2000), *The House of 1000 Corpses*, *The Devil's Rejects*, *House of Wax*, *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), and *See No Evil*.

Graphic horror evolved in direct relation to advances in technology regarding special effects. Earlier films had to rely on simple camera tricks to create special effects, and as a result, for a film to be successful in frightening its audiences it had to rely on narrative structure.[17] Two good examples of these are Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and William Castle's *House on Haunted Hill* (1959). Both films are still considered to be some of the best examples of horror film today. The plot of *Psycho* was full of twists

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[17] Freeland, Cynthia

and turns that illuminated the terrifying depths of Norman Bates'

psychosis.

In contrast, *House on Haunted Hill* was terrifying because of

the acting. One scene in particular highlights this strength. Two

women are sharing a room when suddenly they are being

tormented by a ghost. The scene is completely black, you cannot

see the characters or what is happening. You can only hear the

violent shaking of the room and the panicked voices of the women.

One woman screams at the other "you're squeezing my hand!" she

continues to yell at to woman to let go of her hand because she is

hurting her. The shaking stops and the lights turn on, we see the

characters in separate beds. The second says to the first, "I wasn't

holding your hand." I personally consider that scene to be one of

the most horrifying. Without the ability to see what is happening,

we are left to hear the character's emotional reactions of panic and

fear.

In this film, neither the audience, nor the characters are faced

directly with the monster. There is only the suggestion of some

unnatural and evil force at work, yet it is terrifying. Now, with the

advances of CGI effects graphic horror films have unlimited ability to depict violence and gore. The graphic horror films we have now are extremely violent and repulsive. As a result the popularity of graphic scenes have resulted in the emphasis of spectacle over plot.

Often called "splatter films,"[18] graphic horror emerged as a leading trend in the 1980s and 1990s with *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (Hooper 1986), and the *Halloween, Friday the 13th,* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series. Each film became more graphic then the last, trying to outdo itself, even leading to the duel of two different monsters in *Freddy meets Jason: A Nightmare on Friday the 13th*. Since then graphic horror has become one of the more popular types of horror film and has certainly produced more films than supernatural horror. *The Ring* (Verbinski 2002), in fact had very little gore, but was considered one of the most frightening films of the decade. Thanks to CGI effects, the making of excessively graphic films has become easier, faster and cheaper, which in turn, has made graphic horror itself easier, faster, and cheaper.

In light of the accessibility and apparent takeover of this subgenre of horror, should we be worried? While tempting to

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[18] Freeland Cynthia, The Naked and the Undead, p 241

scream and shout "yes yes yes!!!!", we must consider that art itself has always pushed the boundaries of what we consider acceptable and unacceptable images. If we try to limit horror film to the appropriateness of the audience, that is, the application of the rating system, we fail to allow art to grow.

In this essay, I will discuss this question under the greater context of our attraction to graphic horror in general. Why are we attracted to films that depict some of the most disgusting and horrific images we will ever witness? Images that frighten and repulse us beyond mental capability have become increasingly popular. This is the paradox of horror, coined by Noel Carroll, which continues to baffle. Now that the definition has been constructed, we will build our understanding of how we are attracted to graphic horror in the first place. Understanding how we identify with characters is important to my claim that graphic horror film is morally wrong because it violates Kantianism.

# Chapter Two:
# Explaining Audience Engagement

When discussing film theory, we often pass over the basic

question how does the audience become engaged in film? Being

mentally absorbed in film seems to be a given fact that does not

require much attention or debate. However, the aim of this thesis is

to ethically evaluate the nature of graphic horror film. In doing so

we must look at the basic question of how we become engaged in

film of any kind. By looking in depth at some explanations of this

phenomenon, we can return to graphic horror film with a better

basis for our later argument. Once we understand how we are

engaged in graphic horror film we can evaluate it ethically. In the

next chapter, audience engagement through identificationism will

serve as the basis of the moral argument against graphic horror films. I will argue that graphic horror is morally wrong because it violates Kantianism. While this argument may seem convoluted now, the next chapter will illuminate the argument in full.

There have been many theories to explain how spectators become engaged in film. Some of these have been based on purely cinematographic tools such as point of view shots or familiar mise-en-scene; some have been based on ancient ideas on emotional catharsis; but the most prevalent and widely debated has been the theory of identificationism.

## The Origin of Identificationism

Plato believed that reason should rule strictly over the passions. This is difficult to maintain because according to him, humans are naturally irrational and need to constantly strive to maintain a psyche ruled by reason. Poetry, according to him, was the most dangerous of mass arts because it appealed directly to the passions of the spectator, causing an upset in the rule of reason

over passion in the human psyche. This was dangerous because the spectator was prone to overindulge in the passion, causing his reason to be undermined.

Poetry has the ability to undermine the rule of reason over the passions because it appeals directly to the passions, causing them to be excited. That is, poets rely on appealing to the passions of the spectator to attract the audience at all. Noel Carroll claims that poets rely on this method because the audience may have little knowledge of the background of the play and can only understand it through the emotional aspects of the events[19]. I think this theory would better suit a present-day Platonist because Plato was talking about poetry, not drama. I think a present-day Platonist would give the example of the show ER. Those who watch the show *ER* have little or no knowledge of medicine. For us to be attracted to the show, the characters must play upon our emotional understanding of an emergency situation, this explains why they enjoy the show even when we do not understand the medical terminology they use in the dialogue. We don't feel suspense, a rush of adrenaline, and sadness when a person dies because we understand what is going

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[19] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 251

on medically, but because we understand death and the emotions that go with it.

The danger of poetry was two-fold for Plato; first is the artist's participation in the role of the character, and secondly, the audience's absorption of the emotions as portrayed by the artist. For the artist to be effective, they have to lose themselves in the character's emotions[20].

According to Plato, the ramifications of the passions ruling the human psyche were especially bad for soldiers. He claimed a soldier who was ruled by the passions could have an active sense of fear of death or pity. They would become afraid of death on the battlefield and might pity his enemy. Certainly these emotions are not suitable for warriors.

Plato believed that maintaining the rule of reason over passion was a delicate and thoughtful process that would determine the happiness of a man. He worried that those who did not strive for reason over passion would never attain true

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[20] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 311

happiness. As he stated "The life ruled by the passions rather than by reason is not balanced and cannot be a happy one"[21].

Plato described identification as the means to which we become emotionally engaged in drama. He did not write extensively about the meaning or application of identification but assumed it as a given means by which passions were provoked. He did, however, originally apply this theory of identification to the artists who act the part of the character. He had in mind the process by which the actor took on the emotional identity of the character in order to convey the emotion to the audience, consequently piquing their interest.

The level to which the audience becomes emotionally engaged in film is also attributed to identificationism. This part of the theory will be the focus of this chapter. As an audience member viewing a film, we witness the events through our eyes and ears, we understand them in relation to one another through our mental processes, and we become engaged with them through our emotions. We can break this process down into clear, albeit simplistic, steps. The first step simply requires the stimulus of the

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[21] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 251

film itself visually and audibly. The second step follows because our minds have a natural continuity that connects events from one moment to the next in order to make sense of the world. The last step of emotional engagement however, is the one up for debate. Most people consider this to be the level that requires identification with the characters. Some philosophers, like Noël Carroll, disagree that we need identification to make this happen at all. I will argue that identification is a necessary element of the audience's engagement with film.

Let us for a moment look at these three levels of involvement as a necessary whole. Many types of films would not be successful if they failed to rouse all three levels of engagement of the audience. For example, if a horror film was able to convey the events visually and audibly and the audience understood them in relation to one another, yet felt no emotional response, the film would fail to frighten the audience. This paradigm may seem to suggest that the only successful type of film is the Hollywood narrative, I do not, however, mean to promote this narrow view. Take for example the Soviet montage; it is a type of film designed

to simulate visually and audibly and evoke an emotional response, but attempts to give no outright relation of events. This does not mean the film fails; it is simply a different way in which the audience must process the events without the given continuity of a Hollywood film. This type of film is often very successful in engaging the audience by a different means; asking the audience to participate on a more active level by removing the straightforward continuity. But horror films, especially graphic horror films, do often stick to a simple Hollywood narrative structure. This structure, though not necessary for the three steps of audience engagement, is most effective. For effectiveness of graphic horror film, Hollywood narrative is the best route.

Contemporary Platonists and other censors have adapted this theory of identification to silent consumption of mass art. This new faction considers identification in contemporary mass art, especially visual art such as film, television, videogames, and pornography, to be morally risky. This theory, called consequentialism, predicts specific outcomes for different types of

mass art. When applied to identificationism this theory would state that identification has moral influence.

One common example of this is pornography. Some feminist theorists believe that pornography influences men to rape women. That is, a man who watches pornography may identify with the sexual aggression of the male character, thus becoming aggressive towards women, possibly even committing rape. Conversely, a child identifying with Superman could result in the child's sense of honor and moral goodness becoming stronger[22]. The theory of consequentialism will be addressed in depth in the next chapter. While keeping its existence in mind, let us move on.

This brief background of identification shows that spectatorial identification with the characters in drama has been embraced by most art critics, psychologists, and philosophers, that is, until recently. Noël Carroll has come to regard identificationism as a fallacy based on an incorrect understanding of the term "identify". Carroll defines identification as a literal adaptation of a character's beliefs, desires, and moral values. I believe he takes on this definition in order to argue that is mentally, physically, and

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[22] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 250

emotionally impossible to "identify" with a character. He claims

when a person says they "identify" with a character they really

mean they "like" a character. Carroll is going to say that

identificationism is a deeply flawed theory that attempts to explain

why we become engaged in film. Carroll seeks to prove that

identification is a misunderstood term used incorrectly when

speaking about emotional engagement in fiction. The conclusion of

this theory is that while we do become emotionally engaged with

art, it is not necessarily through identification that we do so.

This section is an attempt to lay out two theories of

identificationism, concentrating especially on the negative

cognitivist view as described by Noël Carroll, and Berys Gaut's

attempt to reconcile identificationism to cognitivism. Before we

delve into what exactly this theory of identification entails, let us

first discuss why the existence of identificationism is an important

question to film in general and more specifically, horror film.

Identificationism occupies our common language when

speaking about film. Often we find ourselves saying things such as

"I liked this film a great deal because I could really identify with

the Queen". These types of evaluative statements are the basis of our, (the spectator's), reception of the film. The merit of the film may be contingent on our ability to identify with the characters[23].

To illuminate this point more clearly, let us think of the last conversation we had with a person after viewing a film. It may have gone like this, "I enjoyed *The Fountain* (Aronofsky 2006) because I could really identify with Tommy. I could feel the devotion of his love for Izzy and his absolute anguish when she dies". Or, conversely: "I hated *Bridget Jones' Diary* because I just couldn't identify with the main character Bridget. When she caught her boyfriend with another woman I just didn't feel anything".

The prevalent use of the word "identify" in common language is a trend that Carroll must confront in order to disprove the theory of identification. While it is tempting for Carroll to assume that the common use of the term is incorrect, to assert that we are not "identifying" but instead generically "liking" the character, this is simply not the case. Most people who use the term "identify" do so to describe the way in which they engage with

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[23] This is a more complicated issue because film critics would not delve into identification as a rating for the merit of a film. They would avoid using the term and the theory behind it. The assertion that I make is based on popular criticism; how everyday people rate films.

fictional characters. They not only believe they are using the word correctly, but are endorsing the theory behind it. They are not only saying "I identify with Tommy" but also "I believe myself to be identifying with Tommy". We cannot simply substitute "like" for "identify" because it is possible to not "like" the character you feel you "identify" with. For example, horror films often have a female character we do not particularly like but do identify with in her struggle. In *See No Evil* we may not like Michael, the bad boy character, but we certainly identify with his scrape for survival. Or, in the film *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, we may like the character of Lefty, the somewhat vapid heroine. But because of her shallow nature, we do not identify with her.

Carroll is going to have to account for the deeply rooted use of the word "identify" in common language of film. The consistent use of the term results in the way in which we talk about, and judge, film. I do not believe it can simply be dismissed on the basis that people have confused the word meaning. Let us begin with Carroll's extensive theory against identificationism.

## Noël Carroll's Theory of Identificationism

In his book <u>Philosophy of Mass Art</u> Noël Carroll defines the identificationtist view as "readers, viewers, and listeners [taking] on the emotions of fictional characters"[24]. Based on this definition, he comes up with two concrete objections to identification: symmetry and conflicting moral judgments. The first objection is based directly on his definition of identification. This objection assumes that identifying with a character's emotions necessarily means you must also identify with their beliefs, desires, and moral values. The second objection works off this basic premise, giving examples of conflicting moral judgments that the audience may hold but not the character. We will start with his first objection regarding emotional symmetry between the audience and the character. But first let us understand his definition of identification in depth.

When Carroll uses the term "take on" he means the literal *taking on* of the character's emotions. He means that we feel *exactly*

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[24] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 299

what the character feels with whom we are identifying with.

Carroll implicitly implies that we must always and consistently

mirror their emotions. According to Carroll, to truly be identifying

with a character when we watch a film we must feel identical to

them throughout the entire film. So when I watch *Donnie Darko*

(Richard Kelly, 2001) I must feel exactly how Donnie feels

throughout the entire film. In the scene where Grandma Death is

nearly hit by Donnie's car, I must feel the lasting effects of

adrenaline even after she is okay. Because Donnie remains shaken

up, so must I. Similarly, when Donnie is hypnotized and begins to

blubber and cry for no real reason, so should we. It is safe to

assume in this definition of identification that "identical" can be

interchanged with "identify". That is to say, "I identify with

Donnie" really means "I feel identical to Donnie".

One point of clarification I would like to make here is that

Carroll is not asserting that we do not become emotionally engaged

in film, only that identification is not the process. He states in his

book "in the standard case, when we are emotionally engaged by

fictions, we do not identify emotionally with the characters by, so

to say, taking on their emotions"[25]. Here he is not denying that we do engage in fiction emotionally, his only objection is that it is not by means of identification. He gives an alternate theory called Criterial Prefocusing to explain how he believes spectators engage emotionally in fiction without the use of identification. We will look at this theory in depth after focusing on his main objections.

## Symmetry

Carroll's definition of identification requires symmetry between the emotions, beliefs, desires, and moral values of the audience and those of the characters we claim to identify with. This claim suggests that if we identify with how the characters feel, then we must also take on their beliefs, desires, and moral values regardless of our own. It goes beyond the simple theory of identification that involves taking on some of the emotions of the characters to a more complicated taking on of their psyche[26]. Carroll uses the example of a love story told from a third party

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[25] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 260
[26] This claim is closer to one that a consequentialist would argue for. It in fact suggests that if we take on these moral values we may be at risk for never taking them off.

view; the characters feel "in love" with each other. We feel

happiness for them, but we do not feel "in love" as they do. We do

understand emotionally what they feel, but this translates as

happiness from an observational standpoint. Another example

could again be *Halloween*, Michael's sister is combing her hair

absentmindedly. She feels safe and content; we however, feel

suspense, fear, and concern for her safety as Michael sneaks up

behind her with a butcher's knife. These examples highlight our

lack of symmetry between the emotions of the characters and our

own. Carroll insists that the only way we could truly identify is by

feeling identical to the characters at all times.

By this reasoning, Carroll moves on to explain that if we

truly identified with a character, and by his definition, took on all

of their beliefs, desires, and moral values, we would act as they do.

For example, if we were viewing the film *Signs*, we would run out

of the theater, board up our houses, and head for water. We would

truly believe that aliens were attacking and we would react as the

characters do. One thing this suggests (that Carroll does not

address) is motivation. He seems to assume that identification

would result in actions of the spectators.

## Conflicting Moral Judgments

Carroll's second objection to identificationism is the fact that

we do not identify will all the emotions, beliefs, and moral values

that the character possesses. Often we only identify with certain

aspects of the character's beliefs or values, and not all of them. For

example, In *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven 2006) I may identify

with the terror of the teenage girl when she is sexually assaulted by

two mutants, but I may not identify with her bratty behavior in the

scene where they have broken down on the side of the road and she

refuses to help, preferring to sunbathe. According to Carroll, this is

proof that I am not truly identifying with the character to the extent

that I believe I am. If I really identified with her then I would also

take on her selfish values as well as her beliefs behind these values.

For example, maybe she believes because she is a young woman

she needs to be taken care of, rather then to take care of others.

This argument is along the lines of the paradox of fiction. The paradox of fiction, holds the claim that it is irrational for a person to become emotionally engaged by what they know is not real. Carroll argues that you cannot possibly be identifying with a character because you may at one time or another take on merely some of their characteristics, rather then all. I believe this argument is based on the premise that it is irrational to become emotionally engaged in film. From here he is able to argue that the only way to not be irrationally emotionally engaged in film is to take on a complete symmetry between character beliefs, desires, and moral values. Like some sort of three dimensional submersion the person is not irrational in their emotional engagement because there is very little separation between the reality of the spectator and the false reality of the character. If, the only way to really identify with a character is to have complete symmetry, and because most healthy people do not maintain strict symmetry then, there must be no true identificationism.

Carroll considers the possibility of partial identification. This would allow for a person to taken on only certain aspects of the

character. But within Carroll's paradigm of identification this does not work because it contradicts the definition of identification, and "partial identification doesn't sound to me like identification at all!"[27] It contradicts the definition of identification because the definition requires a total symmetry with the character. To only take on specific aspects of the characters psyche would produce an asymmetry between character and spectator.

Carroll makes sense of this paradox by suggesting that we are really superimposing our preexisting moral values and beliefs on the characters. In this vein, we have identification completely backwards. We are not taking on the emotions, beliefs, and moral values of the characters; instead we are imposing our own on the characters. Instead of gaining new emotions, beliefs, and moral values, we are withdrawing from the bank of our own psyche. When the character with whom we identify is confronted with an event, we understand the emotion she is feeling. We then use our preexisting value bank to make moral judgments.

Yet we are still not always in agreement with the character's moral values, Carroll accounts for this by saying that we can only

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[27] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 314

share particular values that the character already agrees with us on[28]. This explains why the spectator often feels and acts differently, and holds different moral judgments from the characters on the screen. When the character responds differently then we do whether emotionally, morally, or in actions, Carroll attributes it to the lack of symmetry between our preexisting psyche and the character's. What we think they should do and what they actually do may be different.

Carroll concludes that we have emotional engagement in fiction but the mechanism by which we do this need not be identification. His responds to the prevalence of identification in common language and common film theory by asserting that when we think we are identifying with a character, all we really mean is that we like them. Let us look back on the first example of statements like this "I liked this film a great deal because I could really identify with the Queen". What Carroll is concluding here is that we really mean is "I liked this film a great deal because I really liked the Queen". While it seems redundant to speak this way

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[28] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 313

about film, Carroll insists that "identify" is synonymous with "like".

We do in fact often like the characters we believe we are identifying with, and this could also explain why it is we come to care for them. One question I have for Carroll is: must we necessarily "like" the character we "identify" with? This question will be addressed in the following section. First we must examine Carroll's alternate theory of emotional engagement.

## Criterial Prefocusing

Noël Carroll's theory of criterial prefocusing is an attempt to give an alternate explanation of the mechanism by which we become emotionally engaged in fiction. This theory shifts the means of the emotional engagement from identification to cues within the text of the artwork itself. In a basic sense, the text is intentionally designed to focus the emotions of the spectator as an attention mechanism rather then an action mechanism.

Carroll asserts that the emotions are related to attention rather than action because artworks command attention not action. Our emotions serve as an attention mechanism that results in our engagement rather than an action mechanism that would result in us acting as the character does. The emotions direct our attention to particular details in an array of details within the text. The emotions then allow us to organize this array of details into a whole, which allows us to evaluate the situations and events within the narrative. We can then assess what is good, dangerous, happy, funny, or frightening.[29]

The assessment occurs at the level of organizing the details and at a more active level as well. When our emotions organize these details, we hold fast to them and often search for more. We actively participate in a search for more details in the fiction that will support our feeling. For example, we are able to assess situations that may cause harm because our emotions provoke an organization of the details of the situation that allows us to recognize it as harmful. In *Silent Hill* our emotions of fear pick out specific details in the array of details in the event that leads us to

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[29] Carroll, Noel Philosophy of Mass Art p 261

conclude that it is dangerous or frightening. We see the whole town in a gray cloud, but when Rose goes inside everything becomes pitch black. This gives us a sense of danger because she cannot see her surroundings. We search the darkness for more signs of danger such as movement or sound. When evil creatures do come out of the dark we feel vindicated in having our original fear. We seek out more details that suggest danger or harm in order to verify our emotional assessment[30].

We may think that this is how our minds work in real life and cannot be an account of emotional engagement in fiction. Why then should we consider this theory to be an alternative to identification? As Carroll makes clear, in real life, we are working with events that have no focus. We must work only from the knowledge and the perspective we have. We may understand a situation through many different perspectives depending on how we happened on the event. I could hear about a car crash from a friend, or I could witness it myself. In fiction however, our perspective and how we come to know the details of an event is based on how the writer or filmmaker structures it.

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[30] Carroll, Noel <u>Philosophy of Mass Art</u> p. 263

This explains the prefocusing aspect of the theory. The creator (whether artist, writer, or filmmaker) decides exactly how to reveal the events to the spectator, and in doing this, predesigns our emotional assessment. In the case of horror film, the filmmaker prestructures the events so that they can make specific details more salient than others, consequently predetermining our emotional assessment. So they may chose to show the rusty tools of torture in an abandoned house where the protagonist is trapped. These details evoke suspense in the audience member, who then searches for more gruesome details to support her emotional assessment that the situation is fearful.

Carroll explains that the confusion of identification with criterial prefocusing is a result of the audience member assuming they are identifying with a character's emotions when really the text is created to activate specific preexisting emotional responses.

## A Response to Carroll

Berys Gaut sets out in his paper to reconcile the account of identification to cognitive theory. He claims that cognitivists[31] have understood identification through its etymological root. The Latin word *idem* meaning "the same"[32] is the root of identification. Carroll takes this meaning of the word to create his account of identification as the literal "making the same" of character and spectator. As Gaut points out, the merging of two persons is numerically impossible without one ceasing to exist[33]. Therefore, a spectator cannot literally "become identical with" the character as Carroll suggests because either the character or the spectator would cease to exist. He suggests that we look at the way in which we use the term "identify" in common language to define it.

Gaut's definition cites "care" for the character to be a necessary element of identification with that character. But the act of caring alone cannot account for identification because it does not

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[31] those philosophers who draw upon a wide range of philosophy, psychology, neuroscience etc to build a philosophy of mind (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
[32] Concise Oxford Dictionary of Etymology
[33] Gaut, Berys *Identification and Emotion* p. 202

explain *how* we come to care for them. In other words, care for the character is a necessary but not sufficient component of identification. So the simplistic idea of "caring" for a character (similar to the "liking" theory that Carroll cited) does not define identification adequately. While it may seem contradictory of me to accept the thesis that we must necessarily care for a character but do not necessarily have to like them, it does in fact separate the levels to which we relate to other humans. While I may not like George Bush, in some senses I care for him and if he were in the plot of a graphic horror films I would care for his safety. You may dislike a character and still identify with them. Through identifying with this character, on some instinctual level, you must also care for them. You may not care for them as person, but you may care for their survival as a human.

To clarify his theory, Gaut explains three different emotional reactions that are the basis of three theories of identification. Affective identification, empathy, and sympathy are all emotional explanations we faced in the last section.

Empathy is commonly referred to as "stepping into another's shoes". This would be the literal "taking on" of emotions that Carroll is speaking about. Let us look at the example of a little girl looking for her lost puppy for many weeks, only to find it dead under her house. Empathy requires us to take on the feelings of the little girl, not as to understand them, but as to actually feel as though we had found our dead puppy. This is the perfect symmetry Carroll advocates that is required to truly identify with a character. Gaut rejects empathy to be the definition of identification because it requires perfect symmetry between the character and the spectator. If there were perfect symmetry then the two would somehow queerly be made one[34]. That is, in the spectator's mind, the character and the spectator would somehow blend together as one embodiment. The spectator would be completely removed from their body, believing themselves to actually be the character within the film. Therefore, empathy cannot be the definition of identification.

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[34] Gaut, Berys *Identification and Emotion* p. 202

Sympathy is the ability to care for and be concerned for a character[35]. This is familiar because this is the emotional experience Carroll claims we are really having in his book <u>Philosophy of Mass Art</u>. In the case of the dead puppy, I would feel pity, sadness, or compassion towards the little girl. In Carroll's terms, this is an asymmetrical relationship of the spectator to the character and proves there is no such identification occurring.

Gaut suggests that we are really engaging in affective identification. This is when we actually *imagining* ourselves to be the character that we are identifying with. We by no means believe we really are the character, just as I do not believe myself to really be Wolverine, yet we do imagine ourselves to be the character. In the example, of the little girl and the dead puppy, I could *imagine* myself to be the little girl who has found her dead puppy. This would allow me to feel the emotions she feels without being queerly required to participate in the literal "taking on" of her beliefs, desires, and moral values. I would not literally be feeling the exact way as she does, as in the case of empathy, but instead would be *imagining* myself to be her and to feel her loss. This not

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[35]Gaut, Berys *Identification and Emotion* p. 207

only accounts for our *care* for the character, but also *how* we come to

care for them.

According to the theory of affective identification, we are

allowed to not only imagine how the character feels, but to imagine

their general perspective on the fictional world. This could contain

their perspectives on events, such as the perspective of the little girl

on the event of her dog's death. Imagining her motivational

perspective would allow us to understand her actions resulting

from the events. Say she thought the puppy was sleeping and was

motivated to pull its dead body out from under the porch.

Epistemic perspective accounts for how she feels about the death of

the dog. Say for example that by her childlike perspective, the dog

is in doggy heaven chasing cats, and she feels comfort based on her

perspective.

We may ask what the difference is between Carroll's

assertion that identification requires a person to take on the

emotions, moral values, beliefs, and motivations of the character

and Gaut's assertion that through affective identification we may

be privy to the perspective on events, and the epistemic and

motivational perspectives. The difference comes from the basic premise that Carroll believes identification comes from *empathetic* emotional responses and Gaut believes identification is derived from *imagining* oneself to have the emotional responses of the characters. Carroll believes we are really adapting the psyche of the characters while Gaut believes that we are only imagining ourselves to adapt the psyche of the character.

Carroll's account of identification entails motivation. He believes that if we truly identify with a character we would literally act as they do. In the instance of watching a film like *Independence Day* we would run screaming from the theater. Carroll's identification leads necessarily to the motivation to act.

In Gaut's account, we are only imagining ourselves to be the character. We are only able to imagine taking on their desires, perspectives, moral values, and motivations. We could imagine ourselves to run from the theater screaming, but we do not actually do so. There are two reasons for this; one, there is no real motivational set that produces actions in the spectator, and two, there is a distinct and maintained line drawn between the fictional

world we are imaging ourselves to be in, and the actual world we

are simultaneously rooted in.

Has Berys Gaut saved identification? Has he closed the gap

in meaning between the literal and the figurative? This next section

will examine his theory, raising questions and objections to his

theory. But first we will return to Noël Carroll's theory of

identificationism and comb through it, finding the soft spots. The

end of this next section will serve to evaluate identificationism as

an appropriate and thorough answer to our question of spectatorial

emotional engagement.

## From Identification to Identical

While Noël Carroll's account of identificationism may seem

convincing, his theory falls short, especially in regards to his

definition of identification. I must return to his initial definition of

the term identification. He, as Gaut asserts, has taken the

etymological root of the word to be the definition. By this measure

yes, identification could mean the literal "taking on" of the

emotions of the character. Carroll is suggesting here that 'identify' really means 'identical'. It is not convincing that because the words hold the same root, they must also hold the same meaning. The English language is full of words and phrases that do not hold the exact meaning with their roots. Carroll is incorrect to assume the etymological root as the meaning of an entire mental process.

He himself cites a variation to his definition of the term in his footnotes. His alternate explanation is "the reader, listener, or viewer identifies with the emotional perspective of the implied narrator"[36]. This is a very different account of identification. Here he is focusing more on the term's use in common language. This definition requires no exact replication of the character's psyche by the spectator. In fact, by allowing the spectator to be identifying with the emotional perspective, there is no necessary component of symmetry. As one might imagine, it is very different to be identical to a character than it is to identify with their emotional perspective. This alternate definition is more along the lines of what Gaut was proposing.

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[36] Carroll, Noel *Philosophy of Mass Art* p. 299

It is probably safe to assume Carroll is using "identify" in the second definition in the same sense as literally "take on" as he did in the first. This definition would imply that "the spectator takes on the emotional perspective of the character". This is still different from his first definition because the first requires the literal taking on of the emotions, the second requires the literal taking on of the emotional perspective. Carroll is correct that it is not possible to literally take on the emotions of the character, but it is possible to literally take on their emotional perspective. For example, when watching the film *Fight Club* I do not take on the main character's emotions literally. They are complicated and unique. However, I can take on his emotional perspective. The filmmaker(s) is able to align my perspective physically, mentally, and emotionally with a character. They do this through camera technique as well as other theatrical tools including the actor conveying the perspective, soundtrack, lighting, and continuity.

Carroll creates a slippery slope argument for the pro-identificationtist to fall down. He does this in his section on consequentialism, propositionalism, and identificationism. He

describes these three views to be overlapping and nearly impossible to hold separate from one another. A quick summary of his argument is as follows: if you believe that the spectator "takes on the emotions of the characters" (identifies) and can agree that mass art has certain propositions (implicitly or explicitly) then it is not too far fetched to agree that mass art contains causal consequences of becoming emotionally involved. For example, I saw Casino Royale last night and identified with James Bond's ambition, commitment, and affection for the love interest. So, then, I accepted implicit propositions about how driving fast and recklessly is appropriate from this perspective. When I left the theater, I sped, and illegally passed an old man on the road.

He has set the slope so that someone who agrees that we identify with the characters has a hard time separating themselves from propositionalists, those who believe mass art holds specific propositions, and consequentialists, those who believe that these propositions have causal consequences All he has to say is that it if a person can take on the emotions of a character they must also be able to take on their ideas and beliefs as well.

Carroll concludes his criticism by asserting that we should simply leave identification out of the equation. He suggests that we replace the term "identify" with "like", since this is really what we mean. One question that must be raised here is "must we 'like' the character we 'identify' with?" Carroll assumes that every time we think we are identifying with a character we really just like them. It could be the case though, that a person may like a character they do not identify with. Let us look at the film *Silence of the Lambs*. The purpose of the film is to put the audience in the perspective of Hannibal Lector. We like Hannibal because he is polite and courteous to Clarice. He takes care of her, even killing the man who offended her in the prison. He a knight in shining armor, protecting her while furthering her career. In the end we want him to escape, we want him to kill the doctor, and we want him to live a long, free life.

We do not however, identify with Hannibal Lector. One reason is because the filmmaker did not intend for us to identify with Hannibal and provided no particular camera angles or shots that would put us in his perspective. Hannibal is a relatively

unemotional character, he is cool and calm, even when killing the

two guards. It would be hard for the audience to engage

emotionally in the character of Hannibal Lector. This example

proves that "identify" is not synonymous with "like" because I like

Hannibal, but I do not identify with him. Conversely, in the film

*Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006), I do not like the

character of Ofelia because she is a child and makes silly childish

mistakes in very important scenarios. Yet, we identify with Ofelia

because she is struggling to save her mother and unborn brother

from her cruel and violent stepfather.

The last criticism I would like to make of Carroll at this point

is his assertion that identification leads directly to action. There is a

leap between the literal taking on of the emotions, desires, beliefs,

and moral values, and literally acting as the character does. The

missing link is motivation. He is assuming that identification

includes acting as the character does. Even if this could somehow

be the case, Carroll fails to account for the lack of stimulus upon

leaving the theater. This description of identification suggests our

engagement is without time frame. The identification lasts after

leaving the theatre and returning home to our everyday stimulus. If I watched *Silent Hill* would I go home believing my child is possessed and that I am condemned to live in eternal purgatory with her?

## My Positive Account of Identificationism

I do believe the spectator becomes emotionally engaged in horror film through identification. I believe the success of a horror film is dependent on the emotional engagement of the spectator. If the spectator did not identify with the characters in a horror film and were consequently emotionally unengaged with the film, they would experience fear, disgust, and suspense. The horror film would not be successful if the audience failed to feel fear, disgust, and suspense.

Let us look more closely at a specific example in order to clarify this discussion. I consider *Silence of the Lambs* to be one of the best horror films due in part to the ability of the film to engage the viewer extensively. Clarice is a character that we identify deeply

with; she is young, smart, working against the system that is dominated by men. She is the unlikely hero. Clarice is at the top of her class; she is both intellectually and physically capable. These details are given to us in the opening scene, where she is on a cross country run. She is running fast, climbing hard, and sweating. We immediately respect her because as we watch her work so hard with the odds against her, we feel we can identify. Clarice is the American dream; the underdog fighting the system and is finally given a chance.

Clarice is given a golden opportunity to interview Hannibal Lector, she is chosen because she is smart, but she is also chosen because she is beautiful. We watch her put on a tough face as she gets on the elevator to meet the Captain, surrounded by men who are a head taller, and we identify with her determination not to be intimidated.

Through the film Clarice struggles between her confidence in her intellectual ability and her insecurity with her inexperience and her status as a woman. One scene that illuminates this is when she is invited to perform the autopsy of the first victim. When she

enters into the funeral home we are staged in a point of view shot

from her perspective. We are greeted by a sea of men in uniforms

whispering to each other in hushed tones, we feel their gaze stop

on us as they evaluate the young female cadet. Their stares are

menacing and humorous, they scoff at the ability of Clarice while

evaluating her sexually. In this point of view shot we feel her

discomfort, we are in tuned to the meaning of these stares, and we

identify with her because everything in this scene that is directed

Clarice is also directed at us. By visually aligning us with Clarice,

we identify with her physically and mentally. But the identification

continues after we move to a more subjective shot of her.

As the film continues, we identify with Clarice's

determination and her insecurity. We also identify with her actions,

for example when she gets close enough to Hannibal's cell that he

touches her hand. We understand the danger of this man, but we

trust him because we identify with her trust for him.

We come to the climax of the film. In the beginning of the

scene Clarice knocks on Buffalo Bill's door to ask him some

questions. We feel immediate fear because we know him to be the

killer and she does not. When she realizes he is the one, we feel her

immediate panic and her sense of helplessness. Her immediate

reaction is to ask him to use the phone, we presume to call for help.

He runs into his basement dungeon and there is a moment where

she decides to follow him. She draws her gun and prepares herself.

We feel every bit of suspense that she does, we also feel her

altruistic need to save the damsel in distress. As she searches for

Bill, turning every corner expecting his to be on the other side, she

is shaking and terrified, because we identify with her, we also feel

her terror.

The scene progresses until the lights cut. Clarice, and our

view of her, is left dangerously in the dark while Bill, and our view

of him is in eerie green night vision. Gregory Currie would argue

that in this scene we are strictly identifying with Buffalo Bill

because we are engaged in a point of view shot from his

perspective. I disagree: I believe that we are experiencing Buffalo

Bill's perspective, but we are identifying with Clarice. We are

emotionally engaged in her character, not Bill's. This scene is

emotionally exhausting because we are ultra-sensitive to Clarice's

fear. We are terrified and in an extreme state of suspense because we know how close he is, that he is toying with her. We are also terrified because we are mirroring her fear; she is shaking and barely able to breath. If Clarice was cool and calm, we would not be as frightened as we are. Seeing another human being terrified to the level of panic provokes fear and suspense in us because we identify with them, thus identification with characters in horror film is essential to the result of fear and suspense in the audience.

## Identificationism and Belief

To some extent when we watch film we allow ourselves to believe the characters, their stories and emotions to be true. The extent may be as simple as the two hours it takes to watch a film and experience a level of escapism into our creative minds. I believe the extent is simply a matter of partially believing the story to be true and maintaining an understanding that it is not. We simultaneously hold the contradictory opinions that the film is true and the film is false. By maintaining a cognitive dissonance

between believing the story to be true and not true we avoid

Carroll's assertion that identification requires perfect symmetry

between spectator and character. We may still identify with a

character and preserve our own opinions, thoughts, beliefs, and

moral values.

The extent to which we allow ourselves to temporarily

imagine the films we are watching to be true is irrelevant. What is

relevant and important to the argument of this thesis is that we do

in fact imagine them to be true, and partly believe them.

I agree with Berys Gaut's definition of identification. I

believe he hit the nail on the head when he turns to say that

identification is the act of imagining, I want to go one step farther

and say that identification is the means by which we are

transported into the narrative, which we temporarily and partially

believe to be true. By allowing ourselves to imagine the story to be

true we release our inhibitions and allow ourselves to delve into

the narrative and enjoy it. When we imagine the story to be true we

also imagine the characters to be true. However, our identification

is temporary, and partial. We uphold a level of cognitive

dissonance in which we partially believe the story to be true, and partially understand it to be false.

When watching the aforementioned scene in *Silence of the Lambs* we are imagining ourselves to be within the scene. We allow ourselves to forget about the world around us and think within the world of the film. We do not necessarily believe ourselves to be Clarisse; we may only believe ourselves to be a fly on the wall. In any case, we are imagining the narrative and the story to be true. Because we identify with Clarisse, we are riveted to her mental and emotional state, and in this case, we do care for her. Because of our identification with Clarisse, our imagining ourselves to be within the narrative, and our voluntary belief the story is true we come to fear for Clarisse's life because we believe the danger she is in to be real. This explains how it is that our hearts are racing, our palms are sweaty, and we are covering our eyes.

Identification begins with the characters who then serve as a sort of elaborate portal into a fictional world. Identification is the mode and the depiction of the characters is the vessel.

As stated before, this submersion into a fictional world via character identification is temporary. Unlike Carroll's theory where we run screaming from the theater, I assert that the voluntary gullibility that we partake in ends once we return to our minds and our reality. While we may remain frightened of the monster we do not really believe it to be true.

The extent to which we imagine ourselves to be in this fictional world can be shown through our imaginary interactions with other characters. When we are immersed in the film, via the characters we identify with, we interpret the interactions between characters to involve us. When the teenage girl screams "run!" we believe she is speaking to us in our fictional state. Therefore, identification is not some misunderstood synonym for "like" or "care" but an actual cognitive faculty that can be exercised by fiction.

# Chapter Three:
# Why Graphic Horror Film is Morally Wrong

"Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in

your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a

means, but always at the same time as an end."

-Immanuel Kant

In the last chapter we discussed how we are attracted to

horror films. By some form of identification we become invested in

the characters, concerning ourselves with their safety and survival.

In this chapter I will face the question is graphic horror film

morally wrong? This question will be posed for both the filmmaker

and the spectator. This chapter will serve to give a moral argument

against graphic horror films and the wrongness of continuing to

watch them. I believe there is something morally reprehensible in

the nature of graphic horror films because they treat people as a means to an end. In the first sections of the chapter I will discuss consequentialism and Kantianism as applicable theories. Later I will describe the formula of the end in itself and its application to graphic horror. I will discuss the issues that go into its application and finally I will discuss the possibility of graphic horror conveying moral lessons. This chapter will not deal with issues of censorship, ownership, freedom of speech, or freedom of creativity. This chapter will simply argue that viewing and enjoying graphic horror films is morally wrong.

There are several existing theories concerning morality and mass art. Two theories that I will highlight are consequentialism and Kant's "Formula of the end in itself".

## Consequentialism

Consequentialism is the belief that mass art has causal consequences on the moral behavior of the spectator. Not only does consequentialism claim that a person would be morally influenced,

but that the behavioral influence is predictable based on what the art depicts. For example, it might be argued that sexually explicit art would produce sexual promiscuity in audiences, glorification of illicit drug use might entice people to try illegal drugs, and violent depictions would create violent behavior in spectators.

It could be argued that graphic horror influences the moral behavior of the audience by causing the audience to become violent and promiscuous. For example, if I watched a graphic horror film that portrayed a large amount of reckless sex and violence, I might be influenced to participate in reckless sex and become more violent.

An example is the film *Turistas: go home* (2006). The film, set in Brazil, portrays a serial killer who tortures helpless American tourists by performing surgeries and amputations on conscious victims. If I watch this film I might be influenced to carry a gun while traveling in Brazil.

Consequentialism is not limited to morally bad consequences. Consequentialism in fact can work in positive ways. For example, *Sesame Street* could influence children to share toys,

enjoy learning or even be nice to brothers and sisters. In this regard,

consequentialist actions could be morally beneficial. If all art and

media portrayed morally good acts, viewers could become better

people.

This theory, applied to graphic horror makes a direct

connection between what the viewer is faced with on screen, and

how she will be influenced in her moral actions. While this is an

interesting line of reasoning, it is complicated and controversial.

The best way to determine the existence of causal consequences is

to look to sociology and psychology. However, this paper is not

aimed to bridge philosophy and the social sciences; therefore, I will

not consider consequentialism in much detail and will only briefly

cover a few objections.

While it seems plausible that *Sesame Street* could influence

children to share their toys, it does not seen plausible that people

who watch graphic horror films would be influenced to be

excessively violent. If consequentialism was truly applicable to

graphic horror film, wouldn't the thousands of people who watch

these films be more violent? Moreover, it seems that there would be

increased violence in countries were graphic horror films are common. By contrast, in countries where graphic horror films are less common, violence would also be less common. Yet I have found no change in violent actions in my own life considering I have seen dozens of graphic horror films.

Another claim consequentialism could make is that graphic horror films desensitize the viewer to violence. This maybe, is valid. When the spectator is pummeled by depictions of violence and gore he may lose some sensitivity. The desensitization of American youth due to violence in the media and video games such as "Grand Theft Auto" and other controversial public stimuli has been argued widely by psychologists and members of the rating system. I would argue in this case that graphic horror film alone could not desensitize a person to violence. But in our society as a whole, increasing violence in video games and song lyrics as well as graphic horror films could plausibly be desensitizing.

I do not deny the possibility that a person somewhere may be influenced by graphic horror films. Yet, the consequentialist view needs to be able to account for why some people are

influenced in their moral behavior and not others. Unfortunately this issue cannot be solved without careful analysis and without calling on sociology and psychology.

Consequentialism will now be placed aside. Graphic horror film is morally wrong because it violates the Kantianism "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."[37]

## The Formula of the End in Itself

While it is debatable whether or not art can directly influence behavior, art may hold specific propositions or maxims; they can be explicit or implicit and also can be moral in nature. A maxim of an act describes the principle upon which we are acting. A maxim describes a policy or more abstractly, a principle that we are acting off of when we do something.[38] For example, a person who decides to adopt a shelter dog normally has as a maxim the

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[37] Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals p 33
[38] A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics O'Neill p 587

principle of giving a needy dog a home. That is why people normally behave this way; it is a rule they followed in performing the action.

I propose the true reason that graphic horror film is immoral is because it depicts people as means to and end rather than an end in themselves and also requires people to treat their capacities to identify with other people as a means to an end. This argument began with Immanuel Kant in his book *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten)*: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."[39][40]

When we act intentionally we should be able to state the maxim we are acting from. Kant would say when we evaluate our maxims morally we should not be evaluating the maxims in terms of the amount of happiness they produce. This approach to our actions would follow a consequentialist line of reasoning; evaluating the amount of happiness produced is the same as

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[39] Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals p 33

evaluating the amount of violence produced. Instead, we should be

evaluating these maxims to determine if they use anyone as a mere

means to an end. If our maxim(s) treat any person or ourselves only

as a means to an end, then we are violating that person or

ourselves.

One longstanding example of treating a person as a mere

means to an end is pornography. The argument is that

pornography acts upon the maxim that women should be treated

as objects of sexual pleasure. This type of maxim treats women as a

mere means to male pleasure. Depicting a woman as a sexual object

devalues her from being an end in herself. Pornography depicts

women as simple means whose value is only relative to their

purpose which is male sexual pleasure. It is morally wrong to treat

people solely as means to an end rather then an end in themselves,

because to treat someone in the former is to base their value relative

to their means. In contrast to the consequentialist argument, the

"wrongness" of pornography has nothing to do with whether or

not it causes men to rape women, rather, the "wrongness" is way in

which it treats women. In the latter treatment, people are recognized as unconditional and absolute value in themselves.

To highlight this point lets compare how the porn star and entrepreneur Jenna Jameson is treated by the male audience as a porn star to how she is treated as a CEO by her male employees (Jameson founded Club Jenna Inc. which grossed 30 million its first year). In the first instance, the male audience is using Jenna as a means to an end. That is, her value is relative to sexually arousing men. In the latter situation, Jenna is treated with respect to her value as a decision making individual who is the president of a million dollar company. She is treated by her male peers as having value in herself as a conscious human being.

## Goodwill and Absolute Value

In this book *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten)*, Kant claimed that a rational agent has an unconditioned and absolute value in herself therefore, she must be treated as an end in herself, rather than a means to an

end[41]. To treat a rational agent as a means to an end is to make her value subsidiary to her personhood. In the case of pornography, it is to suppose that a woman is valuable only for the sexual pleasure she will provide.

According to Kant, every rational person has absolute and unconditional value in themselves. They hold this value because every rational person has the potential for goodwill. According to Kant, "it is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a goodwill."[42] Goodwill is the only thing that is good in itself and therefore has value in itself without qualification. Every other mental ability we can summon, intellect or wit for example, have value relative to how they are used. "Intelligence, wit, judgment, and any other *talents* of the mind we may care to name…as qualities of *temperament*, are without doubt good and desirable in many respects; but they can also be extremely bad and hurtful when the will is not good."[43]  A person can have a supreme wit, but the value of it is based on the use. If I use my wit to

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[41] Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals p 33
[42] Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals p 61
[43] Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals p 61

torment others, it is no longer good. This also applies to intellect. If

intellect is used to devise weapons of mass destruction, its value is

not longer good. Therefore, these mental "talents" as Kant calls

them, have value only relative to their use. In a very simplified

sense, every mental ability can be reduced to good and bad

applications. He concludes that goodwill is the only thing good in

itself because it is always good.

One might argue that goodwill can be bad when the

outcome is poor. Say for example, my parents mean to help me

with my student loans by giving me money. Because they have

given me money, the college revokes my financial aid. In the end I

have to pay more money for college than before. Here goodwill had

a bad outcome. However, the intentions of my parents were still

out of goodwill; they wished to help their daughter. Kant would

say that it does not matter the outcome of the act, but the intention

behind it. The evaluation of goodwill exists in the intention, not the

outcome. Because goodwill has necessarily good intentions,

goodwill is the only thing necessarily good in itself.

This brings us back to why people have absolute value. All rational people have the potential for goodwill. Goodwill is good in itself and therefore has absolute value. All rational people have the potential for goodwill; therefore, in having this potential they also have absolute value. Because all rational people have absolute value, it is morally wrong to treat any rational person as a mere means to an end because her value is no longer absolute, but relative to the means. It is possible to treat a person as a means to an end by understanding her value to be relative to some external value. I understand my automobile to be valuable only because of its ability to get me places. When we treat people in this same manner, we are treating them as a means to an end only.

Only rational people can be an ends in themselves, because only rational people alone hold unconditional and absolute value. This unconditional value is derived from the good will that exits within humanity. A person holds a will and is therefore a rational agent; this rational person who holds a will has unconditional value. One objection to this is that not all people have goodwill.

This is true, not all people have good will, but Kant would say that all rational agents have the potential for goodwill.

To evaluate the treatments of characters we must fully understand what it means to treat people as a means to an end rather than ends in themselves. One point of clarification I would like to make here is that Kant is not saying that every time we use a person as a means to an end we are morally wrong. He is saying we are acting in a morally reprehensible manner when we treat that person as *only* a means to an end. To best understand these concepts, let us look at examples.

## Onora O'Neill's Account of Kantianism

Onora O'Neill describes using a person as a means to an end as involving that person in a scheme of action to which she could not in principle consent[44]. In a basic sense, this means purposefully deceiving a person or ourselves. There are two specific ways in which we can do this; the first is to give a misleading account of

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[44] A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics O'Neill p 587

activity, and the second is to make a false promise or to create a fraudulent contract. An example of the first type of deception is as follows:

Recently in China a man was arrested for murder. He went to a family and asked to purchase their youngest daughter, who was mentally ill. He told the family that he intended to sell the girl into marriage. He then murdered the girl and sold her corpse to a family whose unmarried son has just died. It is an ancient Chinese belief that young men who die unmarried should be given a wife in death to keep them happy in the afterlife. This is a clear example of a misleading account of activity. The man who bought the girl told the family he was going to sell her into marriage, which he did. He did not mention that she would have to die first. This is different than the case of the false promise because not only did he keep his promise, but he also obeyed the contract. He did however give a misleading account of how he was going to sell her, to whom, and for what purpose.

A false promise, or a fraudulent contract, is when a person straightforwardly and deliberately lies to another person. This

could be when I tell my parents that I will stop going out to bars and start working on my thesis. If I then proceed to go out to a bar rather than work on my thesis, I am making a false promise. In the case of the man in China, if he had told the family that he was purchasing her to be a maid in his house he would have been making a false promise; if he had made a contract with the family to sell the girl into the best possible marriage it would have been a fraudulent contract.

## Objections to O'Neill

While O'Neill is correct in pointing out that Kant would say that involving someone in a scheme of action that they could not, in principle, consent to is treating a person as a mere means to an end, she would not agree that this is the only way in which we can treat people as a mere means to an end. O'Neill's description implies that all actions of treating a person as a means to an end are based on deceit. Involving someone in a scheme of action that they could not, in principle, consent to is to deceive someone about intentions,

contracts or outcomes. Here O'Neill has fatally forgotten Kant's examples of necessary and contingent duty to oneself.

Kant believes that we have a necessary duty to ourselves to treat our own persons as and end in ourselves. To commit suicide is to treat yourself as a means to an end only. Kant says if one "destroys himself in order to escape from a difficult situation, then he is making use of his person merely as a means so as to maintain a tolerable condition till the end of his life."[45] According to Kant, committing suicide is morally wrong because you are treating yourself as a means to an end only. This example topples O'Neill's definition of what it is to treat a person as a means to an end, because for a person to commit suicide he must, in principle, consent.

O'Neill defines Kantianism as treating a person as a means to an end by involving a person or yourself in a scheme of action to which neither would, in principle, consent. But in order to commit suicide, the person must be able to consent to the scheme of action. One cannot kill herself knowingly and conscientiously without, in principle, consenting.

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[45] Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals translated by James W. Ellington p 36

In contingent duty to oneself, Kant says that "it is not enough that the action does not conflict with humanity in our own person as an end in itself; the action must also harmonize with this end."[46] This is to say that simply going around not violating any maxims about treating people as a means to an end is not enough to be morally good. One must also maximize one's talents for the harmonization of humanity. For example, Kant would say that if there were a man who had a great talent for playing the piano, but was somehow independently wealthy, and never needed to cultivate his talent and therefore chose not to, he would be "consistent with the maintenance of humanity as an end it itself but would not be consistent with the advancement of the end."[47] Again, this example creates a fissure in O'Neill's narrow definition of Kantianism. The lazy pianist is not deceiving himself or anyone else; he fully consents to his own action. O'Neill could argue that somehow the potential audience did not consent to being deprived of music from this pianist. However, it is not the lack of consent from a potential audience that makes this persons act morally

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[46] Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals translated by James W. Ellington p 37

[47] Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals translated by James W. Ellington p 37

wrong; the lazy pianist is wasting his talent and this alone is what

is what makes his act wrong. Whether or not a potential audience

cares is not what determines if his action is wrong. It is wrong in

itself to not cultivate a talent.

Many contemporary philosophers (such as O'Neill) concern

themselves primarily with Kant's notion of treating *others* as a

means to an end. This thesis is more concerned with Kant's notion

of treating *oneself* as a means to an end as morally wrong. As our

examination moves to graphic horror films, we will first consider

the violation of graphic horror as treating characters as mere

means. Later I will show how graphic horror causes the audience to

treat itself as a mere means to an end. As this chapter progresses,

keep this section in mind.

## Why Graphic Horror Films Violate Kantianism

In graphic horror films many characters are treated as means

to an end rather then an end in themselves. These characters are

usually given very little consideration by the filmmakers in that

their background stories are not usually developed; they do not really have a purpose in the film except to die a violent death for the sake of frightening the audience, and often, we don't even know their names. These types of characters serve as a means to an end. Their death is a means to frighten the audience, further the plot or demonstrate the power of the monster. Therefore, there is at least a preliminary case that graphic horror films are morally wrong. It is wrong for the filmmaker to condemn a person in horror film to a violent, bloody death for the sake of frightening the audience. The person is then only valued relative to his usage. The person no longer has unconditional value because he has been used as a means to an end of frightening the audience.

This objection to graphic horror faces two immediate and serious obstacles. First, characters in horror films are not real people. One cannot liken graphic horror to pornography because the actions and treatment of people in pornography is real (for the most part) and the actions and treatment of people in graphic horror is not. I agree, characters are not real people and the actions against them are also not real. This question will be faced shortly.

The second objection is audience accountability. How can the audience be held accountable for the treatment of the characters in graphic horror when it is only passively witnessing fictitious events? This is a valid point, and I am prepared to deal with both objections, let us start with the latter first.

## Objection: audience accountability

While we believe that characters in film have choices just as we do in real life, the reality is that graphic horror (like any other work of fiction) is scripted, plotted, edited and directed. We, as spectators, do not make the decision to treat the characters as a means to an end. Are we to be held accountable? The filmmakers decide how to treat the characters, and it is the filmmakers who treat characters as means to an end, not the audience. The audience's only active contribution to graphic horror is to view it.

Why should the audience be held accountable at all for the treatment of characters in horror film? Because the audience is deriving entertainment from the character being treated as a means

to an end. For example, in the film *Halloween*, Michael stabs his sister to death in the first scene of the film. Her death is treated as a mere means to the end of spectacle by the filmmaker. The sister is portrayed as a teenage slut and has very few lines before being killed. She is shallow, and her entire purpose in the film seems to be her death. The filmmaker creates her specifically to be a bloody, nude spectacle that serves to frighten the audience and also shock them at Michael's ability to kill his sister in cold blood at the age of ten. Here, the sister is used by the filmmaker as a mere means to an end, but we derive enjoyment out of it. We are also to blame for seeking this film out and enjoying it.

But still, graphic horror film does not allow for the spectator to decide how to treat the characters. Even if I went to a graphic horror film understanding that treating characters as a means to an end is morally wrong, and tried as hard as I could to treat the characters as ends in themselves, the bottom line is an audience member does not have a choice about how to treat the characters.

Do we blame the filmmakers? Send them to sensitivity camp? No. While the source may be the filmmakers, as active

spectators (people who seek out these films) we are committing a morally reprehensible act. By watching graphic horror films we are participating in treating characters as means to an end instead of ends in themselves. By viewing graphic horror films, the spectator not only endorses the treatment of the characters, but furthermore enjoys it.

But pure enjoyment aside, for the two hours we watch these films we allow ourselves to the human ability to identify with characters on screen. We allow ourselves, even convince ourselves, that the characters and their stories are real. We align ourselves with particular characters and hope for their survival or death. We sometimes go as far as to hope disliked characters will die a terrible death. For example, in the film *See No Evil,* the character of the cruel, slutty girl spends the film answering her annoying cell phone and terrorizing the other people. Eventually, the serial killer finds her hiding spot because her beloved cell phone rings. He makes the cell phone the instrument of her death, literally shoving it down her throat. I am sure the majority of the audience (myself included) chuckles a little and feels as though she deserves it.

Because the audience has the capability to identify with the characters and believe the story to be true, we are participating in treating them as a means to an end. We enjoy the moment where the cruel girl has her cell phone shoved down her throat because we identify with the characters enough so that we believe the story to be true.

One objection to this line of reasoning is that we only temporarily identify with the characters, so we only temporarily endorse treating the characters as means to an end. Kant, however, did not put a time limit on treating a person as a mere means to an end. There is no clause in Kantianism that states "treating a person as a means to an end is only morally wrong if it exceeds two hours". In any respect, we identify with the characters and in doing so endorse their treatment. In fact, every time we remember the film, or recount it to another person, we are endorsing the treatment of the characters. Unless of course, we are discussing it in a philosophical paper such as this.

Audience endorsement is a complicated issue. Can we be held accountable for something we do not have a choice in? Since

we cannot treat the characters as ends in themselves even if we wanted to, are we culpable? This is debatable; the logical sense of the issue is that for us to be obligated to treat the characters as ends in themselves we must be able to. As we have already discussed, we are not able to decide how to treat the characters because the filmmaker alone has that control. If we ought to treat characters as ends in themselves then it follows that we necessarily must be able to. In the case of prescribed horror film, we are not able to choose how to treat the characters.

Yet there is a simple answer: the audience does have control over whether or not it watches the film. Quite frankly, if the public did not pay to see these films they would not exist. The audience actively participates the moment they get into their cars to drive to the theaters to see a graphic horror film.

## Objection: The Formula Applied to Fictional Characters

Does the formula of the end in itself even apply to fictional characters? These are not real people; these are not real deaths,

tortures or emotions. The entire experience is fabricated. How can we judge our moral treatment as well as the filmmaker's treatment of these fictional characters?

As we discussed in the last chapter, we have an ability to identify with fictional characters. When we watch graphic horror films, we throw ourselves into the lives, perceptions, emotions and deaths. We allow ourselves to believe wholeheartedly what we see for the duration of the film. Because we identify with the characters, we lend ourselves and our sense of rationality to the screen. The characters become rational agents as we immerse ourselves in their plight. We treat characters as rational agents who have moral choices to make. We find ourselves disliking and criticizing the classic horror character who goes towards danger instead of running away from it, regardless of the fact that his actions are not his own and that every movement he makes is predetermined.

Because we treat characters as rational, decision-making agents, we necessarily consider them to have a will. It is irrelevant if we form these impressions on our own or if they are a result of

the filmmaker's ability. What is relevant is that characters do have

value in themselves because we treat then as rational agents with a

potential for goodwill. So long as a thing has the potential for good

will, it is wrong to use them as a means to an end because we are

undermining their potential to have a good will.

Still, objectors to this theory can insist that it is acceptable,

though not morally good to treat fictional characters as a mere

means to an end because they are not real. This argument could

continue for many more papers however, I move to my next and

more important reason for why graphic horror is morally wrong.

## Response: Mental Capacities as Mere Means to an End

I propose that the bigger issue is the audience treating itself

as a means to an end. In the earlier section of objections to O'Neill's

account of Kantianism, I discussed the example of the piano player

who does not use his talent. The issue for Kant is that it is not

simply enough to go through life not violating any maxims. A

person must also make the effort to use any personal talents for the

greater harmonization of humanity. I move to state that Kant

would also find issue with a person who used their talent in a

shallow manner that in no way contributes to the harmonization of

humanity.

We humans have a cognitive capacity to identify with

fictional characters and to allow ourselves to temporarily believe

their stories to be true. When we watch graphic horror films we

violate two maxims. Not only do we treat this capacity as a means

to an end, but we also use our talent for shallow purposes that do

not contribute to humanity in any beneficial or moral way.

On the first account, we treat the capacity as a mere means

to a crude entertainment. We are not treating our ability to view

others as rational people as an end in itself with unconditional

value, but rather with value only relative to our entertainment. If

we are not entertained by a graphic horror film, we treat the film as

unsuccessful. We also treat our capacity to identify and believe the

film as having failed. We treat our ability to understand others as

having absolute value, even if they are fictions, a means to pure

entertainment. It follows that by treating our capacity cheaply we

are not treating ourselves as having absolute value. That is, because

we are rational agents with absolute value, when we treat our

capacities in this way, we are not treating ourselves with the

respect we deserve. Conversely, it would be wrong if we

manipulated the ability to identify of others. Say for example, I told

my friends I was pregnant as an April fool's joke.

One might ask if discontinuing graphic horror film because

of the immoral treatment of fictional characters might be missing

the point about what is really wrong with graphic horror. I realize

that the violence and depictions of gore are disturbing and

probably unnecessary. But the depictions of violence and gore are

not immoral in themselves because they do not violate any maxims.

Violent images are prevalent in documentaries and training films.

Images of violence are not morally wrong within the context of

these films. What then is the difference between the image of a man

having his leg blown off in a documentary verses the same image

in a graphic horror film? The difference lies in the context of the

type of film and good of showing violent images. In the

documentary, the image and our ability to identify with this person

is to teach us about the real horrors that afflict other people. In a graphic horror film the violent image is used to frighten the audience for the sake of entertainment.

This example highlights that while violent images are not immoral in themselves, what is immoral is how characters in graphic horror are treated in relation to this extreme violence and gruesome images and how we treat ourselves as not only a mere means to an end but also misuse our mental ability to identify with other people.

Let us take a scene from *Saw*. Amanda is a drug addict who wakes up, her jaw wired to a modified bear trap. The killer, Jigsaw, informs her that this contraption is rigged to a timer and will rip open her mouth, turning her head into a wide mouthed puppet. She is also told that there is a key and it is in the stomach of the drugged man on the floor. Amanda rips open the man's stomach while he lays there, paralyzed, whimpering like a puppy. As she fingers through his intestines pulling out organs and ripping open his stomach the clock is ticking, the trap is ready to spring, making her head into an exploding piece of meat.

All the while we are riveted to the screen, our hearts

pounding, urging Amanda to hurry up. We believe Amanda is real.

We believe her life and her terror are real. We panic while she

panics. And because of our identification with her, we are elated as

she digs through his intestines. We endorse her actions and enjoy

them because when she finds the key, we know she will live. To us,

the man is a mere means to an end. His value is relative to

Amanda's survival.

What is more important here, beyond treating the man on

the floor as a means to an end, is that we are treating our *capacity* to

identify with fictional characters as a mere means to a crude

entertainment. We are using our ability to identify with Amanda to

scare and disgust ourselves with images terrifying gore and

violence. This ability is being used for crude entertainment.

The capacity we are using is not only being treated as means

to an end, but is also devalued by they fact that we are using it for

no greater good. While we were out watching *Saw* and convincing

ourselves that Amanda was real and worth our ability to identify,

we could have been using this ability to identify with people who have real struggles and terror in their lives.

Kant would say that our ability to identify with other people should be "consistent with the maintenance of humanity as an end in itself"[48]. Watching graphic horror films and identifying with the characters for sheer entertainment is not consistent with the maintenance of humanity. Our ability to identify with other people could be used in the treatment of AIDS in Africa, teen pregnancy, spousal abuse, rape, war crimes, and any other real human issue. Surely, this is how our capacity to identify with other people should be used to contribute to the harmonization of humanity. Kant would say that we were given this faculty for a purpose. I am positive that entertainment through identifying with characters in graphic horror film was not the purpose of this faculty.

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[48] The Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals trans James W. Ellington

# Chapter Four: Conclusion

Horror films have become increasingly violent due to technological advancements. The increasing violence has lead to the bar has been raised for how much graphic content a film can possess. After about a decade of films becoming more violent and gory, the focus of horror films has shifted from scaring people to grossing them out with visions of extreme bodily mutilation.

These particularly gory films are known as graphic horror. They maintain all the aspects of traditional horror including a mise-en-scene designed to elicit fear, emotionally charged characters and a narrative built on suspense but add a strong emphasis of spectacle over plot.[49] In other words, what sets graphic horror apart from traditional horror is the heavy use of violent images to frighten the audience rather than a strong plot.

The shift from traditional horror to graphic horror in a widespread form has completely changed the kinds of images people are exposed to in mass. This change is important to

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[49] Mise-en-scene- all the external aspects of a film such as lighting, costume, makeup, set, even the actors themselves.

scrutinize because it not only reflects the tastes of American society today but also the use of our mental faculties, namely, our ability to identify.

This thesis aims to prove that we become engaged in graphic horror film through identification and that because of our use of identification, graphic horror film is morally wrong because it violates Kantianism.

We become engaged in graphic horror though identification. Noel Carroll disputes identificationism as a concept. He claims that identification requires the literal taking on of beliefs, desires, and moral values of fictional characters. He asserts that if we really identified with as character as he defines it, then we would act as though the character does. In other words, if we really identified with a character in a graphic horror film, we would run from the theater screaming.

I disagree with Noel Carroll on the basis of his definition and characterization of identification as the literal taking on of beliefs, desires, and moral values, and apparently, actions. I think there is a logical gap between taking on the beliefs, desires, and

moral values and acting upon them. This gap is the motivation to do these physical actions.

I believe that Berys Gaut was correct in his assertion that identifying with a character is the act of imagining yourself to be in a similar situation within that narrative. I want to go farther and say that identification is the means by which we are transported into the narrative, which we partially and temporarily believe to be true. The character we identify with acts as a portal into this fictional world. It is important to remember that I am claiming that this submersion into a fictional world via character identification is temporary and partial. Unlike Carroll's theory where we run screaming from the theater, I assert that the voluntary belief in the disbelievable that we partake in ends once we return to our minds and our reality. While we may remain frightened of the monster we do not really believe it to be true.

The extent to which we imagine ourselves to be in this fictional world can be shown through our imaginary interactions with other characters. When we are immersed in the film, via the characters we identify with, we interpret the interactions between

characters to involve us. When the teenage girl screams "run!" we believe she is speaking to us in our fictional state.

While this sort of cognitive dissonance is not fully explained in the sense of how much or how little we believe is true of the story, I argue that it does not matter for the moral argument. It does not matter how far into a narrative we allow ourselves to plunge, but however much of ourselves is engaged makes it morally wrong. The aim of this thesis was not to discover how deep we delve into graphic horror film, but instead to confirm that on some level we do, and because of this, it is morally wrong.

Kant argues that it is morally wrong to treat others and ourselves as a means only. He determines that goodwill is the only thing good in itself without qualification. Other faculties such as intelligence or wit are only good insofar as they are used for good. Goodwill on the other hand is always good in itself, regardless of the outcome. Kant claims that all rational agents have at least the potential for goodwill, regardless of whether it is exercised. Because all rational agents have the potential for goodwill, they consequently have an absolute value in themselves. By treating

others or yourself as a means to an end only, you are making the

value of the person relative to their means or purpose, rather than

treating them as having absolute value.

Graphic horror is morally wrong because it violates this

maxim in two distinct ways. First, we are treating the characters in

graphic horror as a means only. We use their torture, pain, and

deaths as crude entertainment. Secondly, we are treating ourselves

as a means only.

One objection to the first argument is that characters in

graphic horror are just that: characters. They are not real people

they are simply two dimensional representations of fictitious

people. Why then is it morally wrong to treat fictional characters as

a means only? While they are really fictional characters we believe

them to be true at one point or another, and though it is temporary

or partial, it is still morally wrong.

We also use these characters as simple portals or vessels for

our access into these fictional worlds. We are literally using them as

a mere means to enter into the narrative as well as a mere means

for pure entertainment. While this argument is still debatable, what

remains, which is more important, is that we are treating ourselves as a means only.

In essence, we use our ability to identify with others for pure entertainment when watching graphic horror. We are treating our capacity as a means to an end only. Even more wrong than treating characters as a means to an end is treating yourself as a means only. By allowing ourselves to use our capacity to identify with people for entertainment we are using that capacity as a means only. By treating our capacity to identify as a means only we are devaluing ourselves in a grave way. We are making our own value relative to our entertainment in graphic horror film.

Beyond using ourselves as a means only, Kant argues that it is not enough to go through life not violating any maxims. You must also contribute to the greater humanity in us and in the world. Therefore, the capacity to identify with other people should not be used to cheaply entertain, but to contribute something to the greater humanity.

The aim of the thesis was to explain how we become engaged in horror film and why it is morally wrong. In providing

an account for emotional engagement in film and a moral theory of graphic horror film the door has been opened for discussion. There are many questions that are important and should be answered. This thesis however only serves to start the debate about graphic horror film, not to finish it.

While currently unable to answer these further questions, this thesis can, in a very practical sense, help us to decide which film to take off the shelf next time we are searching for our Friday night entertainment at Blockbuster.

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