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Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?[1]

Siegfried Kracauer

Films saturated with terror and sadism have issued from Hollywood in such numbers recently as to become commonplace. The trend undoubtedly had its source in the requirements of wartime propaganda. The original task was to depict the threat of Nazism to the American public — Gestapo tortures, shining parades that alternated with silent agonies, life under the oppressive atmosphere of Nazi-conquered Europe, etc. But even in wartime, the trend went beyond exposing brutality. Along with anti-Nazi films, a number of movies appeared that cultivated the same kind of horror sheerly for the sake of entertainment. And now, with the war over, the species continues to flourish and to increase.

Thrillers are a venerable type in the films. But the current vogue is unique in its predilection for familiar, everyday surroundings as the setting in which crime and violence occur. The criminals in *Shadow of a Doubt* and Orson Welles's *The Stranger* settle down in plain small towns, places where no one would ever dream of meeting a killer in the flesh. Nightmares are seen in bright daylight, murderous traps are sprung just around the corner. Everyday life itself breeds anguish and destruction. And at the same time the villains become more prepossessing; they charm innocent girls and win the confidence of guileless bank-tellers. The Frankenstein monsters of the past made us shudder at first sight, but the contemporary monster can live among us without being recognized. Evil no longer marks and defines a person's face or manner. Thus, the

1. First published in *Commentary* 2 (1946): 132-36.

weird, veiled insecurity of life under the Nazis is transferred to the American scene. Sinister conspiracies incubate next door, within the world considered normal — any trusted neighbor may turn into a demon.

Despite Hollywood's old fondness for ruthless violence and for the raw and grotesque, the cruelty it now so obsessively depicts is of a kind rarely seen before on the screen. Now it originates from compulsive, sadistic urges, it is less animal — one might say that it is less spontaneous. In *Dark Corner*, a private detective is pursued by a gunman; he captures his pursuer and smashes his hand to make him confess the reason for his pursuit. Later the gunman sneaks into the detective's apartment and knocks him down; as he is about to leave, he turns suddenly and steps with the full weight of his body on the hand of the unconscious victim. The same lust to inflict wanton pain manifests itself in the scene in *Lost Weekend* in which the drunkard, after a night spent in delirium brought on by alcohol, has a hallucination in which he sees a mouse gnawing a hole in a wall and trying in vain to squeeze through it; then a bat that has been hovering about the room pounces on the animal and kills it while it is caught in the hole. As the tiny shrieks of the mouse die away, a rivulet of blood slowly trickles down the wall. It is a vision that reveals for a moment the tabooed depths of our bodily existence.

Titles such as *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Suspicion* (both Hitchcock movies) are typical of the emphasis many recent productions place, not so much on outright sadism, as on the permanent menace of it. Apprehension is accumulated; threatening allusions and dreadful possibilities evoke a world in which everybody is afraid of everybody else, and no one knows when or where the ultimate and inevitable horror will arrive. When it does arrive it arrives unexpectedly: erupting out of the dark from time to time in a piece of unspeakable brutality. That panic which in the anti-Nazi films was characterized as peculiar to the atmosphere of life under Hitler now saturates the whole world.

The recent and already mentioned *Dark Corner* goes the limit in terrorizing the audience. The private detective cannot imagine why he should be trailed by a gunman and gropes desperately for the identity of his enemy, only to find out in the end that what is at issue has nothing to do with him: the power behind the scenes — an unscrupulous "master mind" intent on killing his wife's lover — has staged the hunt in order to shift suspicion from himself to the detective, whom he considers a suitable scapegoat. The effect of terror, however, is only heightened by

this combination of meaningless suffering and arbitrary persecution.

Hand in hand with sadism in recent movies goes the morbid. Physical handicaps are elaborated upon and mental horror is added to crude violence. The main character of *The Spiral Staircase* is a mute servant girl employed in the household of a maniac who murders physically imperfect women in order to improve the human race. *Spellbound* and *Somewhere in the Night* exploit amnesia to build up suspense.

Also much favored is the theme of psychological destruction: the pianist in *Gaslight* and the psychiatrist in *Shock* no longer shoot, strangle, or poison the females they want to do away with, but systematically try to drive them insane. The tide in Hollywood has turned toward sick souls and fancy psychiatrists. And many a current melodrama suggests that normal and abnormal states of mind merge into each other imperceptibly and are hard to keep separate. The young lieutenant in *Shock* returns from the war to learn that his wife has been taken to a mental clinic. Was she not always healthy and full of good sense? A naive young man, he is frightened by the thought of what nature can do, unaccountably, to an ordinary person — and his fright makes the sympathetic audience realize that none of us is immune to mental disorders.

Thus, unlike the gangster movies of the depression era, the new films deal less with social abuses than with psychological aberrations. And this time the failure of the movies to offer or suggest solutions has become particularly striking; the all-pervasive fear that threatens the psychic integrity of the average person seems accepted as inevitable and almost inscrutable. Here a comparison between the recent Italian movie *Open City* and the bulk of our American anti-Nazi films is highly illuminating.

Open City exhibits the horrors, mental and otherwise, met by the Italian resistance in its struggle against fascism, with an uninhibited realism generally foreign to similar Hollywood productions. A Communist is tortured to death before our eyes; sophisticated cruelty, depravity, sordidness are shown with unimaginable intensity. But at the same time the Communist martyr's determination, the priest's faith, and Pina's natural magnanimity are shown to us in such a way that they appear as real as the terror that engulfs them. In this "morality play" — which is what Dorothy Thompson calls *Open City* — human dignity is practiced, not merely proclaimed; and even though the resistance leaders are hopelessly doomed, the vital power of their convictions wears down Nazi morale.

The American anti-Nazi films do not battle evil at such close quarters

— as a rule they merely circumvent it. The heroes and heroines of such movies as *Edge of Darkness*, *This Land Is Mine*, *Joan of Paris*, and others, endure Gestapo tortures no less bravely than the Italian partisans of *Open City*, but more often than not their victories are pure cloak-and-dagger acts that leave the enemy's ideological defenses intact. Hitlerism, undermined in an essential sense in *Open City*, remains virtually undefeated in Hollywood films — which seem to walk on eggs the moment they approach the positive aspects of that which they defend. Impressive surveys of Nazi might in *Prelude to War* and others of the army morale films are contrasted with strangely evasive scenes from life under democracy that betray indecision rather than confidence, lip-service instead of action. In almost every one of the anti-Nazi movies made in Hollywood a character comes to the fore at some moment, appropriate or otherwise, to recite as if by rote a eulogy of the democratic life and of the brave new world to come. But a creed that had a real hold on its adherents would not need to be so explicitly and superficially proclaimed; it would be an intrinsic part and culmination of the drama of the whole film.

Among the movie thrillers without a political message, *Lost Weekend* stands out for its attempt to invest horror with meaning. The drunkard here, after a bout with *delirium tremens*, swears off drink. But this conversion comes only at the very end of the film and is much too sketchily rendered to efface the impression of his confirmed alcoholism. Thus it seems a sham conversion.

Nor is the drunkard's hallucination exhibited in order to account for his change of heart; on the contrary, the illusion of a change serves but as a pretext for wallowing in the details of the hallucination, which are savored, illicitly, for their own sake.

But most of the current thrillers do not even pretend to motivate or excuse or rationalize the introduction of sadistic horrors. The urgency of the emotional need that is at the present moment satisfied by vicarious participation in these specific varieties of cruelty, violence, and fear becomes sufficient excuse in itself. Such being the case, the happy endings by which the movies finally escape from their psychological horrors become even more meaningless than usual. The feeling of uneasiness stirred up in the audience at the spectacle of an everyday world full of totalitarian horrors is left unrelieved. The sickness of the psyche is, essentially, taken for granted, and the impression remains that nothing can be done to cure it.

All these movies manifest an unusual interest in the physical environment against which their action unrolls. Chance arrangements of inanimate objects are made conspicuous, somber backgrounds assert themselves. In *The Spiral Staircase*, the scene of the maniac's first murder is a hotel room somewhere above an old-fashioned movie house; the opening sequence dwells on the ambiguous borderline between crime and pleasure by emphasizing the startling proximity of the two décors. One of the *leitmotifs* of *Dark Corner* is the staircase of a dilapidated rooming house at the foot of which a ragged little girl is forever blowing her penny whistle. The little girl, an apparition rather than a real person, seems to incarnate the rooming house's despondency. A similar staircase also marks a decisive turn in *Lost Weekend*: the drunkard falls down its whole length and then enters upon the final stage of his Calvary.

The last two movies feature Third Avenue and its iron-work, its bars and its pawnshops, as the region of anarchy and distress. (Significantly enough, shots of street life were also prominent in German films of the pre-Hitler Weimar Republic period that described the tragedies of instinct-possessed beings). There is nothing accidental about this. People emotionally out of joint inhabit a realm ruled by bodily sensations and material stimulants, a realm in which dumb objects loom monstrously high and become signal posts or stumbling blocks, enemies or allies. This obtrusiveness of inanimate objects is infallible evidence of an inherent concern with mental disintegration.

But movies not only cater to popular demands; they also reflect popular tendencies and inclinations. The conclusion therefore would be that inner disintegration, whatever its stages, has actually become a widespread phenomenon. And the images persistently repeated on the screens of our movie theaters suggest that uncontrolled sadism and apprehensiveness are involved in this disintegration. The hope of winning "freedom from fear" seems to stem from a great increase in feelings of fear. But here, with an impotence similar to that already remarked upon in their anti-Nazi versions, the present Hollywood thrillers are unable to demonstrate any counter-measures that would work to restore mental stability. The horrors are never incorporated in a meaningful pattern that would neutralize them. This would indicate that real life itself fails to suggest such a pattern. Whether society be a spiritual vacuum or a battlefield of irreconcilable beliefs, it seems no longer to provide a shelter for the individual, or principles that would compel his integrity.

In *The Three Caballeros*, Walt Disney — whose films reveal him as particularly sensitive to contemporary undercurrents of feeling — shows us a universe torn to pieces as though it had been hit by a cluster of atomic bombs. That shattered universe is symptomatic of the way we feel about the world now around us, as Barbara Deming has suggested in "The Artlessness of Walt Disney," a recent article in the *Partisan Review*. Amid the debris of such a universe dark impulses are sure to find freer play.

If such is indeed our predicament, a general desire for some sort of inner restabilization or reconstruction would seem very natural. That this desire does exist is indicated by the popularity of two other types of films at present, along with the horror thrillers. One type dramatizes psychoanalytical healing to show how mental balance can be restored from within: half-magician, half-mechanic, the psychoanalyst or psychiatrist lifts the seventh veil from before his patient's soul, ponders the scattered fragments of that soul, and in no time at all fits the jigsaw puzzle together again, with the result that the patient once more functions normally like a repaired watch.

The other type of "therapeutic" movie shows us Catholic life, and intimates that reintegration may be obtained from without, under the ministrations of the Church. Chaotic civilization is confronted with the articulate community of the faithful, and understanding priests take over the care of those who lack for mental shelter. Canon Roche in *The Green Years* likens his vocation to that of a doctor. "The mind is father of many ills," he says to a young man whom he wants to become a clergyman. "As a champion of truth, you cure the body as well as the soul." Exponents of wishful thinking, the screen priests as well as the screen psychoanalyst rise out of a reality in which things have fallen apart and the center no longer holds.

The problems to which these current trends in Hollywood film-making lead can barely be touched upon in the space of this brief article. That the kind of horror formerly attributed only to life under Hitler, in the anti-Nazi thrillers, has now been acclimated to the American scene, is more than accidental. Aside from the genuine and constant affinity between sadism and fascism, it seems probable that the sadistic energies at large in our society at the present moment are specifically suited to provide fuel for fascism. And it is in these energies, in this emotional preparedness for fascism, that the real danger lies, more than in

the agitators and rabble-rousers who, when the circumstances are right, will be able to manipulate them for tangible ends. Hatred of minorities feeds on the fears of the majority, and unless these fears subside the hatred will continue to multiply.

The particular fear we have to deal with here springs, in the final analysis, from a crucial dilemma. Caught in the snarls of the free-enterprise system, we nevertheless view with apprehension the totalitarian potentialities inherent in any sort of planned economy. Democracy, with its individual freedom, seems economically out of joint, so that it must resort to makeshifts and breed nightmarish dreams of fascist pseudo-solutions, worse than the ills they are intended to cure. Shall we be able to preserve individual freedom under collectivism?

In France, the traditional sanctuary of individual liberties, this sense of having reached an impasse is especially strong. Tormented by it, the Existentialists in the beginning wooed nothingness or indifference or fatality in a last-ditch stand against the powers closing in on the individual from all sides.

The political and social struggles of our time are not concerned merely with external changes and new borders — they involve the very core of our existence. A civil war is being fought inside every soul; and the movies reflect the uncertainties of that war in the form of general inner disintegration and mental disturbance.

Fear can be exorcised only by an incessant effort to penetrate it and spell out its causes. This is the prerequisite of redemption, even though the outcome may be unpredictable. It would be a hopeful sign if films were to appear in this country that, like *Open City*, really showed the principles of human integrity at grips with a deranged world — and showed them as positive forces, with a reality at least equal, if not superior to, the forces of cruelty and violence and to the fear upon which these feed. Yet it remains for life to offer these principles and confirm their efficacy.