



Mette Weisberg

*Stephen King's
American Nightmare
An Introduction*

forlaget lee

2 år gammel, 12 år fra eller set. 12 år fra eller set. King's egne ord) igt betalte jobs lien som fattig, lighed i skolen. g, og for at de rvativ" opdra- istne tradition st; ang. funda- t it was a good . If I had been r". (*The Art of*

fiktion i 7-års science fiction ne i sin første eskeheden fra smand afprøve så dyrene blev

til de største mæssigt sendt historier, og han ator i kælderens egentlig årsag isn't right".

afslag) er lang, overeller i (især) or at skrive, og an alligevel en fortælle "en god

hvorfra han tog ingscertifikat til r, King blev e i at kende den, Maine, og ns "fyrrum" og rne blev lagt i erioder afbrudt, der som King's olemes med sit

lev *Carrie* an-

taget, og alt blev forandret. Og det måtte ske, naturligvis. For som King selv skriver i *Danse Macabre* (p. 92) "I think that writers are made, not born or created out of dreams or childhood trauma - that becoming a writer ... is a direct result of conscious will. Of course there has to be 5 some talent involved, but talent is a dreadfully cheap commodity, cheaper than table salt. What separates the talented individual from the successful one is a lot of hard work and study; a constant process of honing (= hvæsning)."

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Hvad er horror?

Et enkelt spørgsmål fortjener et enkelt svar: horror er al litteratur og film, hvis hovedformål er at skræmme læseren, ifgl. King (men han er 15 nu i det hele taget ikke meget for at teoretisere).

Han skelner selv mellem tre former for gys: "terror", "horror" og "the gross out" (= brækfremkaldende). "Terror" er den "fineste" af de tre 20 former; den viser ikke, hvad der sker (bag den lukkede dør), men lader det være op til læserens fantasi at forestille sig, hvad der sker - og her er der som bekendt ingen grænser! "Horror" viser os monstret, men uden at gå til de yderste (ulækre) eksesser. "The gross out" er laveste kate- 25 gori: om ikke andet kan forfatteren få os til at brække os over fx maddi- ker eller udspekulerede lemlæstelser. King foretrækker naturligt nok "terror" som virkemiddel, men erklærer sig parat til at bruge "the gross out", hvis det er nødvendigt for at skræmme læseren ("I am not proud").

Men ellers kommer King nu vidt omkring genremæssige karakteristi- ka og problemstillinger i *Danse Macabre*, bl.a. i kapitler om, hvordan 30 moderne horror står i gæld til den ældre tradition. Han berører emner som publikum (overvejende yngre, overvejende mandligt), genrens kon- ventioner, d.v.s. "spilleregler" (vampyrer "dræbes" med en pæl gennem hjertet osv), tolkninger af horror som allegorier ("billeder" på noget andet), monstre som (seksuelle) fortrængninger og horror som "subtext" (skjult indhold) under den manifesterede tekst. Her skal alle disse emner ikke uddybes, men en kort redegørelse for genrens udvikling er uom- 35 gælig, fordi horror som nævnt er en genre, der meget bevidst spiller på sine forgængere og ofte "henviser" til andre værker.

Men først to prominente kritikeres, en film- og en litteraturkritikers, bud på, hvad horror og fantastisk litteratur er.

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Robin Wood om amerikansk horror film

I sin artikel *An Introduction to the American Horror Film* (1979), giver Robin Wood bl.a. følgende svar på spørgsmålet om, hvad der karakteri- serer amerikansk horrorfilm, idet han starter med at konstatere, at 45 horrorfilmen er en af de mest populære Hollywood-genrer, samtidig med

King on King

- 5 [The following section, *King on King*, consists of excerpts taken primarily from Stephen King's *Danse Macabre* (1981) and from Eric Norden's interview with King in *Playboy*, June 1983. The rest is from various interviews in Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller's collection of interviews *Bare Bones* (1988)].

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Why Do You Write That Stuff?

- 15 KING: People also ask, "Why do you write that stuff?" That's one that always comes up. The first reason is because I'm warped, of course. A lot of people are afraid to say that, but I'm not. I have a friend named Robert Bloch, who wrote the novel *Psycho*, on which Hitchcock's film was based, and he would always say in answer to that question, "Actually, I have the heart of a small boy. I keep it in a jar on my desk."
- 20 Another reason that I've always written horror is because it's a kind of psychological protection. It's like drawing a magic circle around myself and my family. My mother always used to say, "If you think the worst, it can't come true." I know that's only a superstition, but I've always believed that if you think the very worst, then, no matter how bad things
- 25 get (and in my heart I've always been convinced that they can get pretty bad), they'll never get as bad as *that*. If you write a novel where the bogeyman gets somebody else's children, maybe they'll never get your own children (...)
- 30 The other thing is, I really like to scare people. I really enjoy that ... The trick is to be able to get the reader's confidence. I'm not really interested in killing somebody in the first paragraph of a novel. I want to be your friend. I want to come up to you and put my arm around you and say, "Hey, you want to see something? It's *great*! Wait till you see it! You'll *really* like this thing." Then I get them really interested and lead
- 35 them up the street and take 'em around the corner and into the alley where there's this awful thing, and keep them there until they're *screaming*! It's just fun. I know how sadistic that must sound, but you have to tell the truth.

40 (...)

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What Scares People?

Q: What scares people?

- 30 KING: There are big things that scare people, like dying, which is the really big casino. Most people get scared anytime you venture into taboo territory. While we've become more explicit about things like sex, we've really tightened up on death and disfigurement. Those things scare people a lot because we put such a premium on being pretty and handsome and young.
- 35 Q: With all the horror of today's society, is it harder to scare people now? KING: No. In *Creepshow* there's a segment in which this guy is overwhelmed by cockroaches. The guys who handled the bugs, the "roach wranglers," work for the Museum of Natural History in New York, and they're used to handling bugs. We had about 3,000 cockroaches, and at
- 40 first the roach wranglers were pretty cool. But each day they got a little more freaked out. During filming, these bugs were living in big garbage cans and eating dog chow and bananas—a mixture that just reeked. By the end of the film, the wranglers were so scared that if you'd slapped one on the back, he'd have gone straight to heaven.
- 45 The more frightened people become about the real world, the easier they are to scare. Sociologists report that people in cities are hardened

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warp: forkvagle
jar: (sylte)krukke
superstition: overtro
bogeyman: bussemand
confidence: tillid
alley: smøge, gyde
block: blokering, »løben tør for ideer«

to violence. It's possible to get casual about it—to say, "Oh dear, a woman is getting beaten up. What's for dinner?" But the quantum of fear grows, and that's why horror films are so popular. People have more fears to get rid of.

5 Q: What's the greatest horror that you think high school kids face today?

KING: Not being able to interact, to get along and establish lines of communication. It's the fear I had, the fear of not being able to make friends, the fear of being afraid and not being able to tell anyone you're afraid. The feelings of inadequacy and of not having anybody to turn
10 to—a teacher, a counselor, a girlfriend, a boyfriend, the guy at the next locker—and say, "I'm afraid I can't make it on this level," whether you mean getting a date for the prom or passing Algebra II. There's a constant fear that *I am alone*. Mentally, you feel you're running a fever. That's when people need a close relationship, especially outside the
15 family. Inside the family things are often very tense: people say little more than "Please pass the butter" or "Give me the rolls." And all the time kids are deathly afraid that they won't be able to get along.

(...)

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Q: What about machines? Do they hold some fascination for you?

KING: I'm scared by machines. Machines frighten me because I don't know how they work in a lot of cases. And I'm fascinated by them because they do so much of my work. I was the kind of kid who had a
25 bad year when I was four because I couldn't figure out if that light in the refrigerator was still on when the door was shut. I had to get that into my head.

Machines frighten me, and of course on a turnpike you get one of those ten-wheelers in front of you, and one behind you, and one that's going
30 by in the passing lane, and you say your rosary. They look big and you can't see who's in them. I'm always convinced that the flatbed trucks, the big ones that have these tarpaulins over whatever's on the back of them ... could be alien communicators or disruptors. For a long time I've been curious whether or not there are outbreaks of violence wherever a lot of
35 these things are seen, because maybe aliens turn these things on and make people crazy.

Machines make me nervous. They just make me nervous. Because I live in a world that's surrounded by them. It's impossible to get away from them.

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(...)

Q: What do you think is the cause for the present fascination with both the science fiction and horror mediums?

45 KING: We live in a science fiction world and we live in a world that's full of horrible implications. We now have a disease called AIDS that causes

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An optimistic vampire? – Mr Barlow (Reggie Nalder) threatens young Mark Petrie (Lance Kerwin) in Tobe Hooper's *'Salem's Lot'* (1979).

a total immunological breakdown. It's a blood disease that sounds like something out of *The Stand*. A lot of people retreat into fantasy worlds because the real world is kind of a gruesome place.

5 People pick up *'Salem's Lot'* and read about vampires. Vampires seem optimistic compared to Ronald Reagan, who is our American version of a vampire, of the living dead. I mean Reagan's real, he's a real person, but vampires look good next to him because you know that you can at least dismiss the vampires when the movie's over or when you close the book.

10 (...)

Q: Is "the end"—oblivion—something you've personally come to terms with?

15 KING: I think that this idea about the end of the world is very libera-

ting. It was for me, and I think most people feel the same way. It's the end of all the shit, and you don't have to be afraid anymore, because the worst has already happened.

Q: That makes horror an escape mechanism to ^{erstate} subliminate our primal fear.

KING: I think that's very true.

Q: Then why does this generation seem obsessed with terrifying itself?

KING: We're the first generation to have grown up completely in the shadow of the atomic bomb. It seems to me that we are the first generation forced to live almost entirely without romance and forced to find some kind of supernatural outlet for the romantic impulses that are in all of us. This is really sad in a way. Everybody goes out to horror movies, reads horror novels—and it's almost as though we're trying to preview the end.

Q: You're saying our ultimate attraction to horror stems from a creeping paranoia?

KING: I think we are more paranoid, but I don't think that's necessarily an outgrowth of the bomb. I think we have a pretty good reason to be paranoid because of the information flow. More information washes over us than washed over any other generation in history—except for the generation we're raising. In college I became aware that a lot of people are paranoid, and I used to think: "Jesus Christ—they're all crazy!" And then the thing about Nixon came out; the man was making tapes in his goddamned office. We find out that Agnew was apparently taking bribes right in the vice-presidential mansion—money being passed across the desk. Jimmy Hoffa is inhabiting a bridge pylon somewhere in New Jersey. And then you say, "Well, we really do need to be paranoid." This flow of information—it makes you very nervous about everything.

Q: Is there a fine line where horror and reality become indistinguishable?

KING: Yes. It's when I'm sitting there with the TV on, reading a book or putting something together, and this voice will say, "We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin from CBS News." My pulse rate immediately doubles or triples. Whatever I'm doing is completely forgotten, and I wait to see if Walter Cronkite is going to come on and say, "Well, DEW line reports nuclear ICBMs over the North Pole. Put your head between your legs and kiss your ass goodbye."

Q: Isn't that carrying it to extremes?

KING: Yes, it is. But even so, you think of the times that didn't happen, when you got some other piece of news: when that bulletin came on that Robert Kennedy had been killed in Los Angeles, Martin Luther King had been assassinated, the president shot in Dallas. It changed everything.

(...)

Q: You once mentioned that you write about people caught in a crunch.

KING: I'm interested in what people do when they can't get out of a

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1 situation, particularly when the whole thing seems to slip out of control.
I maintain that my novels, taken together, form an allegory for a nation
that feels it's in a crunch and things are out of control. We're in that
situation now, in terms of our world posture and the economy and oil.
5 How do we cope? What do we do?

Why Do We Need Horror?

10 (Stephen King in *Danse Macabre*): Horror in real life is an emotion that
one grapples with—as I grappled with the realization that the Russians
had beaten us into space—all alone. It is a combat waged in the secret
recesses of the heart.

I believe that we are all ultimately alone and that any deep and
15 lasting human contact is nothing more nor less than a necessary
illusion—but at least the feelings which we think of as “positive” and
“constructive” are a reaching-out, an effort to make contact and establish
some sort of communication. Feelings of love and kindness, the ability to
care and empathize, are all we know of the light. They are efforts to link
20 and integrate; they are the emotions which brings us together, if not in
fact then at least in a comforting illusion that makes the burden of
mortality a little easier to bear.

Horror, terror, fear, panic: these are the emotions which drive wedges
between us, split us off from the crowd, and make us alone. It is
25 paradoxical that feelings and emotions we associate with the “mob
instinct” should do this, but crowds are lonely places to be, we're told, a
fellowship with no love in it. The melodies of the horror tale are simple
and repetitive, and they are melodies of disestablishment and dis-
integration ... but another paradox is that the ritual outletting of these
30 emotions seems to bring things back to a more stable and constructive
state again. Ask any psychiatrist what his patient is doing when he lies
there on the couch and talks about what keeps him awake and what he
sees in his dreams. What do you see when you turn out the light? the
Beatles asked; their answer: I can't tell you, but I know that it's mine.

35 The genre we're talking about, whether it be in terms of books, film,
or TV, is really all one: make-believe horrors. And one of the questions
that frequently comes up, asked by people who have grasped the paradox
(but perhaps not fully articulated it in their own minds) is: Why do you
want to make up horrible things when there is so much real horror in
40 the world?

The answer seems to be that we make up horrors to help us cope with
the real ones. With the endless inventiveness of humankind, we grasp
the very elements which are so divisive and destructive and try to turn
them into tools—to dismantle themselves. The term *catharsis* is as old
45 as Greek drama, and it has been used rather too glibly by some
practitioners in my field to justify what they do, but it still has its

limited uses here. The dream of horror is in itself an out-letting and a lancing ... and it may well be that the mass-media dream of horror can sometimes become a nationwide analyst's couch.

5 (...)

KING: Horror fiction is really as Republican as a banker in a three-piece suit. The story is always the same in terms of its development. There's an incursion into taboo lands, there's a place where you shouldn't go, but you do, the same way that your mother would tell you that the freak tent is a place you shouldn't go, but you do. And the same thing happens inside: you look at the guy with three eyes, or you look at the fat lady, or you look at the skeleton man or Mr. Electrical or whoever it happens to be. And when you come out, well, you say, "Hey, I'm not so bad. I'm all right. A lot better than I thought." It has that effect of reconfirming values, of reconfirming self-image and our good feelings about ourselves.

Of course, much of the movie audience, much of the impact audience, are teenagers who don't feel good about themselves a lot of the time, who feel confused, who look in the mirror and instead of seeing somebody who's perhaps better than they really are (which we tend to do as we get older, I think), they see somebody who's much, much worse. They think, "How can I go to school? I look awful. I've got zits on my face. I'm ugly. I don't have any friends. Nobody likes me." So for them, the horror movie or the horror story has a reconfirming value, where they can see themselves again in a valuable way, as part of the mainstream, part of what we call the norm. They feel better about themselves, and for that reason the experience is probably valuable. It's also reactionary, it resists any kind of change. In these movies things should never change. Boris Karloff and Elsa Lanchester are never allowed to get married because, well, think of the kids. You wouldn't want them on your street. So they always end up getting burned to death or they end up going around and around on a windmill, or something terrible happens to them. An electrocution, anything, just get rid of them.

Last reason for reading horror: it's a rehearsal for death. It's a way to get ready. People say there's nothing sure but death and taxes. But that's not really true. There's really only death, you know. Death is the biggie.

(...) The horror story or the horror movie is a little bit like the amusement park ride. When there's a double bill at the drive-in, it turns into an amusement park for teenagers—and sometimes the amusement is not always on the screen. (...) Teenagers feel healthy and they can cope with, let's say, the rides in the amusement park that mimic violent death, things like the parachute drop where you get to experience your own plane crash, the bumper cars where you get to have a harmless head-on collision, and so on.

The same thing is true of the horror movie. You very rarely see old

people on their golden-agers passes lurching out of theaters playing *Zombie* and *I Eat Your Skin*, because they don't need that experience. They know. They don't need to rehearse death. They've seen their friends go (...) and they don't need to rehearse it because it's there. The rest of us sometimes do.

(...)

(Stephen King in *Danse Macabre*): The horror movie, like the sick joke, has a dirty job to do. It deliberately appeals to all that is worst in us. It is morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free, our nastiest fantasies realized... and it all happens, fittingly enough, in the dark. For these reasons, good liberals often shy away from horror films. For myself, I like to see the most aggressive of them—*Dawn of the Dead*, for instance—as lifting a trapdoor in the civilized forebrain and throwing a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath.

Why bother? Because it keeps them from getting out, man. It keeps them down there and me up here. It was Lennon and McCartney who said that all you need is love, and I would agree with that. As long as you keep the gators fed (...).

Here is the final truth of horror movies: They do not love death, as some have suggested; they love life. They do not celebrate deformity but by dwelling on deformity, they sing of health and energy. By showing us the miseries of the damned, they help us to rediscover the smaller (but never petty) joys of our own lives. They are the barber's leeches of the psyche, drawing not bad blood but anxiety ... for a little while, anyway.

The horror movie asks you if you want to take a good close look at the dead cat (or the shape under the sheet, to use a metaphor from the introduction to my short story collection) ... but not as an adult would look at it. Never mind the philosophical implications of death or the religious possibilities inherent in the idea of survival; the horror film suggests we just have a good close look at the physical artifact of death. Let us be children masquerading as pathologists. We will, perhaps, link hands like children in a circle, and sing the song we all know in our hearts: time is short, no one is really okay, life is quick and dead is dead.

Omega, the horror film sings in those children's voices. Here is the end. Yet the ultimate subtext that underlies all good horror films is, *But not yet. Not this time*. Because in the final sense, the horror movie is the celebration of those who feel they can examine death because it does not yet live in their own hearts.