Darwin and Dracula

SUPER-NATURAL FANTASY AND HORROR FICTION appear to be a pleasure-and-revulsion aid of cognitive science, is better suited for the purpose. Horror fiction appears to be a pleasure-and-revulsion technology, one that activates or exploits adaptive threat-avoidance mechanisms (notably fear and disgust). And since fear is unusual, we might expect tales of fear to be the fear. (Of course, reducing the horror story to fear like reducing chilli can explain to capricious — yet a defining element of the genre.)

Horror stories simulate dangerous situations and give us vicarious taste of being hunted prey without the danger that is normally the cause of fear. Horror stories set our threat detection systems on high alert, keeping us on the edge of the screen while we scan the fictional environment for predatory monsters. The monsters of horror fiction often resemble ancestral predators, presumably because we are wired to react quickly, uncommonly and effectively to such threats. In Timothy Kettle’s words, “[horrors]’ supernatural monsters are depicted as little more than solitary ambush predators drooping in culturally controlled monster attire” (2004, p. 740).

GHOSTS ARE EVERYWHERE. They are natural by-products of human cognitive architecture (J. L. Barrett, 2004), and they are found in all cultures (Atten & Norenzayan, 2004). Our built-in HAIA, or hyperactive agency detection system (Barrett, 2004), constantly, unconsciously, and hyperactively scan the environment for agents (e.g. animals). Yet this tool is a virtual spook generator. As J. L. Barrett observes, “When hearing a bump in the night, our first impulse is to wonder who caused the noise or what caused the noise (pt. 31).”

The universal success of ghosts is explained by the “built-in HADD, or hyperactive agency detection system” (p. 176, c. 22). The MC1 receptor violates one or a few of our unconscious ideas about the world, and is thus very memorable and easy to transmit. Like most other monsters, which are merely “tweaked” animals, ghosts are “economic creatures” (Atten & Norenzayan, 2004, p. 715) which violate our intuitive ontology.

The impetus to actively seek out horror stories may be a variant of exploration or “training for the unexpected” (2001, p. 141). They suggest that play has adaptive value and that it serves to give its participants locomotor versatility and emotional flexibility. Play is a way to rehearse real-life dangers without any serious risk.

While motor systems are (usually) disengaged when we read, watch or listen to horror stories, we are emotionally involved and may thus fine-tune our emotional responses (and peutrical perceptions).

STEVEN PINKER has suggested that art is a kind of “pleasure technology,” one that prepares our “pleasure buttons” just like chesskeke or pornography (1999, 525). Contemporary horror fiction might be a sort of pleasure technology in reverse, a kind of fear-mean for the meat. It seems that from horror fiction, we get pleasure from fear, anxiety and revulsion. So many monsters of horror fiction are disgusting as well as threatening; indeed, their very uncleaness is threatening. Paul Rozin and colleagues have identified the major disgust elicitors (Rozin, Haidt & Lilly, 1999, all of which occur frequently in horror stories, including animals, bodily secretions, violations of the body, and death. Valerie Curtis and Adam Biran (2001) surmise that an adaptive mechanism, as a kind of “intuitive micro-mechanism,” to protect us against disease. In this view, many horror monsters are disgusting because they look like disease carriers (e.g., mutated, more or less animal, more or less dead). We tend to react strongly and disengages “horror fear” from “real fear.”

IT IS WELL-DOCUMENTED that fear is more easily linked to certain cues than to others (Marks & Nesse, 1994, p. 246); see also Olafson & Mitchell, 2001, that these cues are usually ones that constituted threats in the environment of evolutionary adaptations. A child might furiously attempt to squeeze a fork into an electrical outlet, while at the very least keeping its distance when seeing a dangerous animal in a zoo.

The “perpetrated learning” (Olafson & Mitchell, 2001) seen in the case in which children acquire fear of a g. s. snakes and spiders gives a “nonrandom distribution of fear” (Marks & Nesse, 1994, p. 255). It would seem that tellers of horror stories instinctively know this, since so many monsters resemble ancient threats. And as horror movie director John Carpenter has noted, “What scares me is what scares you. We all fear the same. That’s why horror is such a powerful genre” (quoted in McCatty & McLaughlin, 2013).


eweeklydeadpeople

We see dead people

The cognitive study of religion explains the widespread spread of beliefs in ghosts, and why ghost-stories apparently never die. By extension, explain why even hardened skeptics can get a thrill out of supernatural horror, since the well-told tale keeps our ADD on red alert.

We live in a world of ghosts and demons. According to the Information Commission of the UK, 14.8 million people believe in ghosts. For about 30% of this population, ghosts are a normal part of everyday life. Yet, the fear of ghosts and the belief in their existence is hardly a modern phenomenon. In my opinion, the dramas that are played out in horror stories may partly lie in the intuitive micro-mechanisms of our minds, a monster stemming from a human evolutionary past.


eweeklydeadpeople

We see dead people

The cognitive study of religion explains the widespread spread of beliefs in ghosts, and why ghost-stories apparently never die. By extension, explain why even hardened skeptics can get a thrill out of supernatural horror, since the well-told tale keeps our ADD on red alert.

We live in a world of ghosts and demons. According to the Information Commission of the UK, 14.8 million people believe in ghosts. For about 30% of this population, ghosts are a normal part of everyday life. Yet, the fear of ghosts and the belief in their existence is hardly a modern phenomenon. In my opinion, the dramas that are played out in horror stories may partly lie in the intuitive micro-mechanisms of our minds, a monster stemming from a human evolutionary past.


eweeklydeadpeople

We see dead people

The cognitive study of religion explains the widespread spread of beliefs in ghosts, and why ghost-stories apparently never die. By extension, explain why even hardened skeptics can get a thrill out of supernatural horror, since the well-told tale keeps our ADD on red alert.

We live in a world of ghosts and demons. According to the Information Commission of the UK, 14.8 million people believe in ghosts. For about 30% of this population, ghosts are a normal part of everyday life. Yet, the fear of ghosts and the belief in their existence is hardly a modern phenomenon. In my opinion, the dramas that are played out in horror stories may partly lie in the intuitive micro-mechanisms of our minds, a monster stemming from a human evolutionary past.


eweeklydeadpeople

We see dead people

The cognitive study of religion explains the widespread spread of beliefs in ghosts, and why ghost-stories apparently never die. By extension, explain why even hardened skeptics can get a thrill out of supernatural horror, since the well-told tale keeps our ADD on red alert.

We live in a world of ghosts and demons. According to the Information Commission of the UK, 14.8 million people believe in ghosts. For about 30% of this population, ghosts are a normal part of everyday life. Yet, the fear of ghosts and the belief in their existence is hardly a modern phenomenon. In my opinion, the dramas that are played out in horror stories may partly lie in the intuitive micro-mechanisms of our minds, a monster stemming from a human evolutionary past.


eweeklydeadpeople

We see dead people

The cognitive study of religion explains the widespread spread of beliefs in ghosts, and why ghost-stories apparently never die. By extension, explain why even hardened skeptics can get a thrill out of supernatural horror, since the well-told tale keeps our ADD on red alert.

We live in a world of ghosts and demons. According to the Information Commission of the UK, 14.8 million people believe in ghosts. For about 30% of this population, ghosts are a normal part of everyday life. Yet, the fear of ghosts and the belief in their existence is hardly a modern phenomenon. In my opinion, the dramas that are played out in horror stories may partly lie in the intuitive micro-mechanisms of our minds, a monster stemming from a human evolutionary past.


eweeklydeadpeople

We see dead people

The cognitive study of religion explains the widespread spread of beliefs in ghosts, and why ghost-stories apparently never die. By extension, explain why even hardened skeptics can get a thrill out of supernatural horror, since the well-told tale keeps our ADD on red alert.

We live in a world of ghosts and demons. According to the Information Commission of the UK, 14.8 million people believe in ghosts. For about 30% of this population, ghosts are a normal part of everyday life. Yet, the fear of ghosts and the belief in their existence is hardly a modern phenomenon. In my opinion, the dramas that are played out in horror stories may partly lie in the intuitive micro-mechanisms of our minds, a monster stemming from a human evolutionary past.


eweeklydeadpeople

We see dead people

The cognitive study of religion explains the widespread spread of beliefs in ghosts, and why ghost-stories apparently never die. By extension, explain why even hardened skeptics can get a thrill out of supernatural horror, since the well-told tale keeps our ADD on red alert.

We live in a world of ghosts and demons. According to the Information Commission of the UK, 14.8 million people believe in ghosts. For about 30% of this population, ghosts are a normal part of everyday life. Yet, the fear of ghosts and the belief in their existence is hardly a modern phenomenon. In my opinion, the dramas that are played out in horror stories may partly lie in the intuitive micro-mechanisms of our minds, a monster stemming from a human evolutionary past.