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The Lure of Excess

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Abstract

This article anatomizes the experience of violence. Drawing on the phenomenological observations of classic literature, and in particular, the horror genre, this article proposes that the tendency toward violence is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. While brain pathology, genetic disposition, and quantifiable stressors all appear to play a role in the outbreak of violence, the literary genre points to other, less well appreciated dimensions. Among these are: a sense of emptiness, the need to compensate for that emptiness through extreme and dramatic acts, and a lack of the sense of awe, meaning, and the carnivalesque in people's lives. This article argues for the restoration of awe, meaning, and the carnivalesque—and not only as a hedge against the kind of violence observed on September 11th, 2001--but as a virtue in its own right, and as an antidote, comparatively, to our desolate times.

While it is fairly obvious why people are repelled by violence--physical pain, emotional suffering, degradation, lack of control-- in this article I am going to explore a much greater challenge: that which attracts us to violence. If we can clarify this problem, we are well on our way to ameliorating it, to taking steps—both psychological and social--to minimizing the conditions for violence.

What makes people risk lives, families, reputations, friendships, and personal freedom just to knock somebody down, maim, rape, or even kill? What prompted Mohamed Attah, the ringleader of the 9/11 ambush, to coolly and cruelly leave “instructions” about how to massacre 3,000 people?

The theories run from the physiological to the mental and emotional. Think for example, about the influence of genetic dispositions (the "bad seed" theory), brain damage, and hormonal imbalances; or consider the impact of childhood trauma, abuse, neglect, impoverishment, cultural alienation, and hostile/critical parenting or some combination of physiological and psychological factors. Most of these theories, however, derive from rather detached and analytical investigations--lab studies or naturalistic observation by trained social scientists. Not that this situation is bad. Such data do have their uses and help society make a variety of public policy decisions. But the problem is that such data are constricted in certain ways. They derive their conclusions from within the confines of traditional science (or empiricism) and this traditional framework

only legitimates that which is overt and measurable; that which is affective, intuitive, and qualitative is essentially dismissed.

The existential-phenomenological investigator, by contrast, is not hemmed in by such criteria. His subject is the lifeworld, the pretheoretical, everyday understanding of the person or phenomenon before him, and his means of explicating the lifeworld is the rich and symbolic realm of language. The question for the existential-phenomenologist—as it was for Becker (1973)—is, what (in its fullest possible sense) is the *experience* of violence? For example, in addition to asking what it means for others to experience violence, the existential-phenomenological investigator asks what it means for *me* to have such an experience?

In this article, I will take this existential-phenomenological approach to violence. I will explore how violence is lived and embodied, not just reported on or measured. In particular, I am going to consider the lived attraction to violence as it is illustrated in classic horror tales (which I researched for my recent book *Horror and the Holy* [Schneider, 1993]). While these tales parallel many of Becker's concerns about violence, I believe they go beyond them in certain ways, and help to complement them.

What then do we learn from the horror genre about violence, and in particular, the lure of violence? First, we learn that violence is an extreme or polarization of human experience. And like all extremes, violence is radical change, alteration. Think here of the radical change exhibited by Frankenstein's

monster when he is rejected by the villagers: "I gave vent to my anguish in fearful howlings," the monster declares. "I bore a hell within me." "I was like a wild beast," "wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction." I "declared everlasting war against the [human] species" (Shelley, 1818/1981, p. 121). This passage reminds me of the Blake quote from *Proverbs of Hell*: "The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God. The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man." I think here also of that magnificent scene where King Kong, on display in a huge cage in front of a vast big city crowd, breaks the chains and bars that bind him. Or what about the early scenes in the Fredric March version of *Jekyll & Hyde* (1932) where Hyde bursts out of his laboratory, pushes his face into the driving rain, and runs about London throwing everyone out of his way. Then there is that remarkable scene in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) where Scotty, played by Jimmy Stewart, is hanging by the gutter of a skyscraper peering into the depths below. Violence can take more subtle forms as well: the image of the invisible man terrorizing a village, or the phantom of the opera trapping his victims in the dreaded Palace of Mirrors, or Dracula penetrating a young nubile with his menacing fangs or paralyzing someone with his piercing eyes. Take a moment to consider your favorite scenes from classic horror. What intrigues you about these scenes? What transfixes you?

Now I think you would concur that these images carry with them a degree of titillation and excitement as well as horror and disgust. Why is this? My own

provisional conclusion is that violence--extremism, monstrosity--are ultimate manifestations of the alterations that bring us joy and even ecstasy; that in many cases what we call violence is simply the unrestrained and unmanageable outcropping of what we call joy, release, liberation. I am not alone in this observation. Witness the words of the great craftsman of horror H.P. Lovecraft (1973): "Yet who shall declare the dark theme a positive handicap? Radiant with beauty, the cup of the Ptolemies was carven of onyx" (p. 106). Or hearken to this anonymous summation: "The poetry of transgression is also knowledge. He who transgresses not only breaks a rule. He goes somewhere that others are not; and he knows something that the others don't know."

Stated more formally, I believe that violence is attractive because it associates with the enlargement of consciousness (mental and physical agitation, upheaval, boundary-breaking). In some cases, such as the creation of a Frankenstein figure, violence is associated with the farthest, least bearable consciousness that we can attain--to wit, the resurrection of the flesh as in the biblical story of Lazarus. (Recall the scene where Jesus raises Lazarus in Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*). Now this thesis may sound strange coming from an ostensibly kind and thoughtful student of human behavior, but I genuinely believe it reflects the facts. The further we extend and enlarge ourselves, the more our experience appears bizarre, unassimilable, and in many cases perverse and violent; just as nature and the cosmos appear perverse and violent at their extremes.

Given this understanding, however, I am not saying that violence is good or that we should in some sense strive for it. This would be a total misreading of my thesis. What I am saying is that there is something animating, growthful, and inspiriting within violence that violent people, in their own misguided way, strive to engage (consider Rollo May's (1969) notion of the "daimonic" or Burke's (1757/1998) view of the "sublime."). I view violence as an overcompensation, in other words, that blindly and compulsively overshoots its aim. Victor Frankenstein, for example, intended to enhance human life, to strengthen and extend such life, but he was so driven, so blindly obsessed with that aim (due to his past state of unstrength and existential helplessness) that he went overboard and created a mockery of his desire. Other madmen and monsters in horror classics experience similar overcompensatory transformations. They "meddle in things men should leave alone," as one character put in *The Invisible Man* (1933), or they "trespass on God's domain" as it was put in the film *Jekyll and Hyde*. We are not too far afield, moreover, when we compare these figures in horror stories to the legions of real monstrosities and abusers in the world; for they too generally suffer from impotencies and impoverishments of all sort, and they too blindly and reflexively hyperreact to these conditions--and become extremists, berzerkers, and fanatics as a result. Recall the interview with mass murderer Jeffrey Dahmer where he talked about the unbarred power he experienced while planning and carrying out his cannibalistic acts. Or consider Attah again. It may not be too much of a stretch to consider that whatever else was driving this incendiary zealot

—religious principles, cultural estrangement--his own inner fragility, and the quest to stanch it, was a major factor. According to a New York Times article, Attah was shamed incessantly as a child, and his vulnerability and “girliness” mocked (Robin, 2001, December 16).

Even we the audience or witnesses, then, can get caught up in the morbid fascinations of real-life monstrosities. And even we, the “innocents,” can resonate to or even entertain similar fascinations within ourselves (recall Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia). And yet such fascinations are crucial because they are the key, I believe, to getting at the roots of the problem of violence. Specifically, too many of us as are fascinated by violence today because our society is bereft of the components that many of us, as well as violent people, misguidedly seek--a sense of awe, a sense of wonder, and a sense of spiritual sustenance. Each of these dimensions has been systematically eroded in our society over the past several centuries. Each has been eclipsed by growing needs for industrialization, be that capitalistic or communistic, or, on the other hand, in the context of the rising interests of fundamentalist religions, theocracies. You can't cultivate awe and wonder where there is little freedom, where time is held hostage, or where personal expression is stifled. (See the book *Jihad vs. McWorld* by Benjamin Barber, 1995).

What then, can we do about this dire state of affairs? How can we create conditions whereby people feel more fulfilled, less panicked, and less driven to evolve monstrous forms of overcompensation? While there are obviously no

simple answers to this question, the metaphor of Carnival has been of increasing help to me in my exploration of the issue. By Carnival I mean a certain kind of spirit, a spirit--as Richard Rorty (1991) discussed in his essay on Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens--that embodies play, adventure, complexity, and compassion (See also Mikhail Bakhtin's [1984] incredible *Rabelais and His World*). Rorty traces this spirit to the legacy left to us by Western literary traditions--the works of such greats as Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Dickens, and I might add, that of such authors of classic horror as Shelley, Stoker, and Stevenson.

An infusion of Carnival (which literally means raising or celebrating the flesh, coming alive) would be salutary to our world. The great question of course, is how do we go about incorporating Carnival in today's regimented climate? While I greatly struggle with this question, I do have some thoughts on the matter (see also Schneider, 1999, in preparation). First, our entire socio-economic system has to be reformed. We need to aim much less at material acquisition, wealth, status, and industrialization, and much more at cultivating meaning, purpose, richness, play, and adventure. I know all this sounds pie in the sky, but it is deadly serious with me and others (such as Michael Lerner [1996] with his *Politics of Meaning*) who propose it.

September 11th was a rip, a gash in the national fabric of routine, civility, and stability; it was also a wake-up call. How long can we pursue our so-called

national interests in the face of growing division in the world, in the face of the growing split between soulless capitalism (e.g., Enron) and the rabid fundamentalism (e.g., Taliban) that is its logical consequence? How long can human engagement—on both social and individual levels—be squelched?

And yet as September 11th amply demonstrated, if we do not cultivate this engagement—this temper of carnival--then in the long run we may not be able to sustain a civilization, let alone concern ourselves with relative peace. Perhaps, just perhaps, this is a time wherein people will reassess.

Precisely how we can bring more of the spirit of Carnival into our lives, I cannot fully say. But what I can say—and do believe—is that it will have something to do with pressing for more freedom for that spirit. It will have something to do with having more time--for reflection, for engagement with family, and for recreation. It will have something to do with the creation of new ritual and communal festivals that celebrate life's wonder and mystery. It will have something to do with increased opportunities to play and experiment on the jobsite (as that is appropriate), and it will have something to do with increased participation in the meaning and implications of one's job--in particular, for the society and environment around one. It will also have something to do with increased intercultural exchange and the opportunity to explore diverse lifestyles. Finally, it will have something to do with the poetry of transgression, as suggested earlier, with providing socially sensitive outlets for people to live a little dangerously, a little perversely, and a little unpredictably. This is the secret of

tragic art, and of the monster tale that so many of us in professional circles and academia so readily overlook.

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