

TESI DOCTORAL

Sara Martín Alegre

'More Human than Human':  
Aspects of Monstrosity  
in the Films and Novels in English  
of the 1980s and 1990s

Dirigida per: Dr. Andrew Monnickendam



Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística,  
Facultat de Lletres,  
UNIVERSITAT AUTONOMA DE BARCELONA,  
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## CHAPTER 4

### *Evil and Monstrosity: The Moral Monster*

#### *Introduction*

Monstrosity and evil are two concepts which are frequently intertwined; however, it is wrong to assume they are equivalent terms. All evil is perceived as a manifestation of monstrosity, but not all forms of monstrosity are necessarily evil. Furthermore, even though evil is usually identified with aggression, in fact, as Mary Midgley (1984: 3) argues, evil is much wider than aggression and is caused not only by violent impulses but also "by quiet, respectable, unaggressive motives like sloth, fear, avarice and greed." As I have argued in Chapter 3, many contemporary films and novels make the point of distinguishing between negative aggression and heroism, that is to say, positive aggression. Nevertheless, even within the large range of negative aggression it is necessary to distinguish between the predator and the evil monster.

The evil or moral monster is characterized by his or her causing undeserved harm with violence and cruelty to innocent victims. Thus, it is technically wrong to class predatory monsters with the monsters of evil, for predators hunt by instinct and do not use aggression to inflict unnecessary, sadistic, cruel suffering on their victims. Their behaviour may be considered cruel (evil) if we sympathise with the suffering of the innocent victims, but for the predatory monster, predation is a necessary part of the natural order. The monster of the *Alien* trilogy is not, therefore, an evil monster. Still, because of the strong connection between predating and evil at a subconscious level, a connection rooted in the defeat of the primal predator that I analyzed in the previous chapter, the almost impossible dissociating of the predator from the evil monster in the human imagination, especially when its victims are human, serves as the psychological basis for

the success of monster films like *Alien* (1979). In contrast, the extraterrestrial monster of *Predator* (1987) should be classed with the moral monsters, since, paradoxically, he is not a natural predator but an evil monster who causes unjustified violence for the sheer pleasure of gathering hunting trophies, and not because his existence and survival depend on his human prey.

Midgley argues in *Beast and Man* that the beast or natural predator has been unfairly exploited as a scapegoat to explain human evil. She attributes this to humankind's reluctance to acknowledge the human nature of evil out of vanity and also out of fear of the uncontrollable force of human evil. "Man," Midgley (1979: 31) writes, "has always been unwilling to admit his own ferocity, and has tried to deflect attention from it by making animals out to be more ferocious than they are." The controversial evidence gathered by scientists like Konrad Lorenz by comparing human and animal aggression has not definitively proved whether evil is a thoroughly human, innate characteristic. In any case, even supposing that the alleged existence of evil among animals could be proved, the sheer scale of destruction caused by humans against members of their own as well as other animal species would still differentiate man from any animal. Midgley (ibid.: 40) remarks that man's attempt at evading moral responsibility by blaming his animal nature for the existence of human evil "does the species credit, because it reflects our horror at the things we do."

The blending of the natural predator with the evil monster, which may have been originated in the prehistoric hominids' fear of the specialised predator as explained in the previous chapter, has had two disastrous effects: first, it has hindered the understanding of the darkest areas of human behaviour, especially of human evil; second, it has affected in a negative sense the way in which nature is understood and has created enmities against undeserving animals, such as the wolf, which have become symbols of evil behaviour. A recent BBC documentary series, *Nightmares of Nature* (1995), discredits false beliefs about which animal is man's most dangerous predator. The fierce nature of lions, sharks, crocodiles, man-eating tigers, and other traditionally feared predators actually produces a yearly death tally much inferior to that of

apparently peaceful animals such as elephants and rhinoceroses or, indeed, small insects such as the anopheles mosquito, which transmits malaria. In spite of the fact that the statistics prove that most attacks against human beings by animals occur mainly because of unfortunate intrusions of the humans into the breeding or hunting territory of dangerous animals, and despite the growing number of animal species in danger of extinction, myths about the evil nature of predators still persist. Nonetheless, the increasing difficulties in using animals as scapegoats to justify the 'natural' essence of human evil will inevitably lead to the exploitation of the imaginary non-human predatory monster to explain evil, as happens in *Alien*, and to produce more and more extreme portraits of human monsters so as to build a new frontier between human 'normality' and monstrous non-human 'abnormality'.

According to Midgley (1984: 14), evil is not an autonomous force but "essentially the absence of good". David Parkin (1985: 3) identifies evil, likewise, as a "negative aspect of morality." Evil, hence, cannot be understood on its own but within a dialectical relationship with good, that is to say, with moral life. This relationship is defined by John Kekes (1990: 121) as a "continuum between moral monstrosity and sainthood" rather than as a conflict between two opposite forces. For Kekes, evil people are those in whom vices have achieved dominance, understanding by vices not a corruption of the potentialities for good but their "equal partners" (ibid.: 9). From this point of view, we are all a mixture of potentially good and potentially bad qualities or virtues and vices. In Kekes' view, people who commit evil acts are not evil monsters but people dominated by their vices who do evil either in a spontaneous way or by choice. Much evil is caused by spontaneous, impulsive acting, and is, therefore, amoral, if we understand morality as a choice between good and evil behaviour. As Midgley (op. cit.: 63) writes, the formula for committing evil acts is "neither madness nor a bizarre morality, but a steady refusal to attend both to the consequences of one's actions and to the principles involved." In any case, the existence of the moral monster is acknowledged by both Midgley and Kekes: in fact those who choose to do evil in a rational way - often people of sharp intellect, strong will and capacity for choice - deny the

theory that evil is caused by "some cognitive or volitional weakness that corrupts our essential goodness" (Kekes, op. cit.: 131).

Spontaneous or chosen, all evil is morally disreputable for the philosophers, mainly because it is antisocial not so much because it is immoral, and must be accordingly punished. Legal sanctions and social pressure make the choice of evil - of moral monstrosity - particularly hard, so that, according to Kekes (ibid.: 84), most potential moral monsters are forced to hide behind masks of hypocrisy or self-deception. The idea of evil analyzed by philosophers like Midgley and Kekes is not quite the same as that of psychologists and law makers. In general terms, philosophers separate evil from responsibility, rejecting the idea that spontaneous or impulsive evil is not punishable; for them, all evil acts are punishable by law, regardless of the responsibility of the evildoer. Kekes (ibid.: 123) insists that "if we care about minimizing evil, then we must be prepared to judge habitual evildoers adversely, quite independently of whether they choose the evil they do." This is not the trend followed by psychiatry and the law for which unchosen evil often means that the evildoer cannot be judged because s/he is not rationally, hence morally, responsible for his or her acts.

In this sense, the law and psychiatry are supporters of what Kekes calls the soft reaction to evil, that is to say, "the reluctance to allow evil actions to account as evidence for their agents' being evil" (ibid.: 6). Kekes himself supports the hard reaction and so do most of the films and novels analyzed in this chapter. Socrates' dictum that nobody does wrong willingly but only because of the negative influence of the Beast within - which has been the symbol of a wide range of attempts to justify evil, from passion to mental illness passing through the old theory of humours - or the Beast without - variously identified with the Devil and social discrimination - is being questioned today, when the instances of evil in real life seem harder and harder to explain in moral or, alternatively, psychological, terms. In the face of evil, most people seek comfort in the moral values established by religion or secular social consent or prefer a scientific, psychological explanation of why evil exists, yet what is dramatized in the films and novels examined in this

chapter is the fact that, paradoxically, a deeper knowledge of evil does not really help to understand why evil acts happen, nor to prevent them from happening.

Believing that only evil monsters commit evil acts is, in this context, a consolatory fantasy. The horror felt for moral monsters may have two effects: s/he may appear either as an exception or as an example of a generalised rule. As an exception, the moral monster or evil monster (I will use both terms throughout the chapter) has an obvious use as a scapegoat; as an instance of the ordinary run of mankind, s/he is a menace to the moral integrity of society. The punishment and destruction of the moral monster of fiction allow people to reinforce their own sense of moral balance, of normality, in the same way that the exposure of the moral monsters of real life - the serial killers and mass murderers - in the media reinforces the idea that evil acts are committed exclusively by a certain type of person. Many novels and films play with the tension between the wish of audiences and readers to understand the roots of evil (and no doubt the pleasure afforded by experiencing the mystery of evil from a safe distance) and their wish to see justice triumph. All in all, the view of justice represented in many contemporary films and novels is very critical of the current legal and penal system in the Western world, defending instead a personal, eye-for-an-eye, violent type of punishment: since evil cannot be understood, these texts suggest, the least that can be expected from justice (usually embodied in a hero/ine who may not hesitate to break the law even if s/he represents it) is the physical destruction of the evildoer. This view of justice and the function of the moral monster as a scapegoat may result paradoxically in the reinforcement of the idea that the human potential for evil is outweighing the potential for good. The endless string of evildoers that inhabit contemporary films and novels, the preaching of Manichaeian values in the confrontation between the moral monster and the agent of good and the generalised mistrust in the expertise of those who define responsibility (psychologists, psychiatrists) and uphold the law also comprise the pessimistic panorama of contemporary fiction.

This reluctance to acknowledge evil as part of human nature is coupled with a reluctance to use words and images to discuss it from a serious (moral) standpoint, which has ironically

permitted the insidious encroachment of evil itself in the everyday life of Western societies. There are countless representations of violence in fiction and the media, and endless debates about the failure of the law to contain criminality and about the falling standards of morality attributed to the failure of the school and the family to educate the younger generations. Yet instead of facing evil, the citizens of the Western world prefer a prophylactic moral discourse that is sweeping the dust of human evil under the carpet, a state of affairs on which low-budget horror fiction and the sensationalist press thrive. As Jean Baudrillard (1990b: 89) argues in reference to the treatment in the West of Muslim fundamentalist terrorism supported by Iran, this reluctance to face evil reduces the rational discourse of the West to the low level of the imprecation, a totally useless tool by which to understand the root of evil:

Et d'ailleurs, au nom des droits de l'homme, nous finissons par traiter l'ayatollah de "Mal Absolu" (Mitterrand), c'est-à-dire par nous aligner sur son imprécation, en contradiction avec les règles d'un discours éclairé (est-ce qu'on traite aujourd'hui un fou de "fou"? On ne traite même plus un handicapé de "handicapé", tellement nous avons peur du Mal, tellement nous gorgeons d'euphémismes pour éviter de désigner l'Autre, le malheur, l'irréductible). Ne nous étonnons pas que quelqu'un capable de parler littéralement, triomphalement, le langage du Mal déclenche un tel accès de faiblesse des cultures occidentales, en dépit des pétitions d'intellectuels. C'est que la légalité, la bonne conscience, la raison même deviennent complices de l'imprecation.

This gorging on euphemisms and the complicity of reason with an irrational view of evil described by Baudrillard is also echoed in contemporary fiction about the moral monster, sometimes even from the point of view of the monster. Freddie Montgomery, an existential moral monster and the hero of John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* (1989), comments thus on the limitations of language - of human thought - to comprehend evil and wonders, indeed, whether it exists at all:

By the way, leafing through my dictionary I am struck by the poverty of the language when it comes to naming or describing badness. Evil, wickedness, mischief, these words imply an agency, the conscious or at least active doing of wrong. They do not signify the bad in its inert, neutral, self-sustaining state. Then there are the adjectives: dreadful, heinous, execrable, vile, and so on. They are not so much descriptive as judgmental. They carry a weight of censure mingled with fear. Is this not a queer state of affairs? It makes me wonder. I ask myself if perhaps the thing itself - badness - does not exist at all, if these strangely vague and imprecise words are only a kind of ruse, a kind of elaborate cover for the fact that nothing is there. Or perhaps the words are an attempt to make it be there? Or, again, perhaps there is something, but

the words invented it. Such considerations make me feel dizzy, as if a hole had opened briefly in the world. (p. 54)

This "queer state of affairs" is also leading to the wish to suppress the evidence of the existence of evil through censorship imposed mainly on films. Moral monstrosity poses other problems than aesthetic monstrosity with regard to audiences and readers, for it is widely believed that exposure to the fictional acts of evil monsters may trigger the wish to commit evil acts in imitation of the monster. Texts about aesthetic monsters, such as *The Elephant Man* (1980), do not cause sympathetic audiences to imitate its protagonist, despite Dunn's tongue-in-cheek discussion of the issue in *Geek Love* (1983) in relation to the grotesque cult of mutilated fans started by the legless Seal Boy, Arturo. As I have shown in Chapter 3, the fictional freak may even be used to conceal a moral callousness towards real-life natural, aesthetic monsters. The implication is that while sentimental texts are failing to move their audiences to positive, moral actions and reflection, texts featuring moral monsters - novels like *American Psycho* (1991) or films like *Natural Born Killers* (1994) - inevitably inspire audiences and readers with an irresistible wish to imitate their protagonists. The debate about copycat theories of criminal behaviour and the defense of censorship reveal the fears of a concerned minority for the moral soundness of these texts. However, this moral minority fails to take into account important factors in the popular perception of the fictional evil monster. One of the factors that should be analyzed in this regard is why evil occupies such a large space in contemporary fiction and whether this fact obeys to an attempt to shock people - desensitised in part by the loss of religious belief and by the failure of the influential media to keep a moral standpoint - into an awareness of how important a role evil plays in real life, or is merely a side effect of the generalised reluctance to face the human nature of evil.

#### 4.1. Explaining the Moral Monster: Between Hell and Psychoanalysis

##### 4.1.1. Evil and the Devil

Comparing his films on amoral human monstrosity with Martin Scorsese's moral treatment of good and evil, David Cronenberg confessed once to his inability to believe in the Devil: "My



curse is that I can't believe in the devil because I would have to believe in a purely evil being and I don't feel I've met anybody I could consider evil" (Rodley, op. cit.: 118). Cronenberg himself observes that Scorsese's Catholic upbringing has prepared him better to deal with the representation of evil, while Cronenberg is himself in this sense at a disadvantage, groping in the dark of the vast domain of human monstrosity. It is interesting to note that Cronenberg links belief in the Devil to the experience of human evil, as if the Devil were an emanation of human evil and not the other way round, as Christianity has claimed. Cronenberg's position is predominant among the artists dealing now with the evil monster. In fact, the scarcity of representations of the Devil in contemporary fiction, produced by a generation of artists mainly brought up without strong religious beliefs and addressing a public similar to themselves in this regard, may be explained by the redundancy of the Devil in a secularised world coming to terms with the fact that the nature of evil is human and not supernatural.

The Devil and the villain inspire the same dread as pure samples of evil and fulfil a similar function as scapegoats. In fact, the decadence of the figure of the Devil in fiction can be traced back to the rise of the Gothic villain, the missing link between Milton's supernatural Satan and Byron's human satanic hero. The years between Milton's unwittingly sympathetic representation of Satan as a proud fallen angel in the late seventeenth century and the rise of the rebellious Byronic hero of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century witness a process of humanisation of evil, in which evil loses its supernatural overtones to become purely human. Before the beginning of this transition the Devil had played mainly the role of keeper of God's prison for the moral monsters (Hell) in a harsh system of divine justice, used by the Church mainly to bully believers into submission and infidels into conversion. Hell - which etymologically means the hidden place - first appears in ancient cultures as simply the place where the dead go, once the idea that death is but a return to the Earth goddess is replaced by the idea of death as the absolute end, a new attitude which appeared about 2500 BC (Baring and Cashford, op. cit.: 159). Although the Greek Hades counts among its inhabitants men tormented eternally, their punishment is arbitrarily dictated by

the gods without a system of just reward and punishment.

Judaism constructs the idea of Hell as a place of punishment for the wicked run by teams of demonic torturers, though it is unclear how the principle of evil imported from Persian Mazdaism becomes the Devil, ruler of Hell, or why the Devil ultimately appears as God's civil servant in his role of Hell's governor and simultaneously as his main adversary in the struggle to capture the souls of men. The paradox is that Hell emerges from the popular Hebrew imagination as a consolatory fantasy build to appease the need for justice that is only imperfectly imparted by human judges, but when it is finally incorporated into the official doctrine of the Church - as late as the sixth century - it is used for the purpose of generalising the fear of God represented as a sternest judge. Ironically, the Church's repeated attempts to establish a clear, theologically sound construction of Hell finally led the way to Hell's decadence. The many theological inconsistencies and the lack of a scriptural basis finally undermined the foundation of the Christian system of punishment and had as a consequence the loss of the Devil's primordial role as an evil tempter (Minois, 1991). Proof that the process of updating Hell is not over yet is the Church of England's recent<sup>1</sup> and controversial redefinition of Hell as a converted Purgatory, an idea prompted by the wish to erase God's image as a sadistic monster fond of victimizing sinners (Stansford, 1996). The Catholic Church is likewise propounding a new image of Hell as, basically, a place of non-being and of total separation from God. Interestingly, neither the Anglican nor the Catholic Church refer to the role of the Devil in their new view of Hell; both also avoid discussing to what extent evil acts are the realization of a potential to do evil present in all of us or the result of the Devil's manipulation of the human soul.

It can be said that for the contemporary secularised Western world, Hell is not the prison where the moral monster is punished, but rather the condition of the moral monster's life and, by extension, that of the victims who survive the encounter with the monster. David Pocock (1985: 48) notes that "in traditional Christianity the persistent moral sinner is a human monster not

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<sup>1</sup>The Church of England recently issued a report at the end of 1995, *The Mystery of Salvation*, which contains these new ideas on Hell.

because of the effects of his bad acts, but because he appears to enjoy a perverse will contrary to the divine order, which among other things defines the end for which he is created." The sinner is, like the Devil, literally a pervert who corrupts the souls of those he tempts and who enjoys doing so. Born to do good and to follow God's will, the fallen angel Lucifer, who later becomes Satan and abuses (perverts) Eve's innocence, is the chief example of the sinner who carries Hell inside and who tries to pass onto others the pain and suffering caused by the punishment inflicted on him. The pattern is strangely repeated in the life of the contemporary psychopath, a man whose inner hell is often the result of his (willed or inescapable) refusal to conform to the moral norms of society. The impossibility of overturning the order that oppresses him transforms the chaos he carries inside into mental agony for him and physical pain for his victims, whom he probably sees not only as the hated representatives of this repressive forces but also as fellow companions in disgrace.

Whereas traditional Christianity believed in the idea that everybody had been created to do good and that evil arose from the Devil's abuse of his victims, the secular Western world cannot help feeling a certain sympathy for the figure of the Devil, especially because of the heritage left by the Romantics, who interpreted Milton's Satan sympathetically. The Devil is seen now as a Romantic victim who cannot help doing evil and who does not necessarily enjoy his situation, but who has assumed it as a consequence of his rebellion against God. He need not even be a tempter, just a supernatural tutor of the human moral monster, who, unlike him, is often defined as such not because of his will to disrupt God's order but because of his acts - something that totally subverts the definition of the Christian moral monster.

Absolute evil embodied in a supernatural being is rarely represented in fiction. When this is done, there is a dissociation of evil from traditional Christian values, or alternatively, a subversion of them. In Clive Barker's *Imajica* (1991) the patriarchal god Hepaxamendios is himself the source of all evil, which he has unleashed by imprisoning and condemning to silence (to the hell of non-being) the goddesses whose throne he once usurped. Stephen King's *It* (1986) and Robert

McCammon's *Swan Song* (1987) deal with shape-shifting evil monsters who embody the essence of evil and who subsist thanks to the capacity of human beings to do evil. 'It', an entity arrived on Earth from outer space and never related to Hell, creates a particular atmosphere of evil and destruction in the small town of Derry which is nonetheless sustained by the evil impulses felt by all its citizens rather than by the creature on its own. 'It' is, so to speak, the embodiment of the dark side of Derry's inhabitants. In *Swan Song*, the unnamed monster, who calls himself Friend, has returned to Earth because of the evil energy unleashed by the nuclear weapons employed in the war that has devastated the USA. His mission, as he sees it, is to ensure that the partial destruction of Earth, which has caused humanity to lapse into barbarism, is completed by the detonation of a secret weapon whose code only 'God' knows - 'God' being none other than the President of the United States, driven mad by the aftermath of the war. Unlike 'It', Friend is not a physical entity that can be defeated and destroyed but a supernatural creature who can always return provided enough evil is done on Earth. Yet, he is a particular kind of Devil for he pursues the total destruction of humankind, rather than their submission to him, as the only possible ritual of purification to regenerate Earth. His aim is, in his view, doing good by cleansing Earth of all the human filth left by the atomic war and so for him, paradoxically the task of regeneration that the heroine Swan starts is nothing but evil, a preaching of hope for a future than can never take place. Friend appears thus more as an embodiment of pure despair than of pure evil and symbolizes the idea that evil happens mainly when hope for the future is lost either at a personal or at a collective level.

Of all the films I have surveyed, only Ridley Scott's *Legend* (1985) follows a traditional representation of the Devil as a composite monster - partly human and beast - living in an underground residence similar to Christian Hell. The stereotypical plot of Scott's film is actually based on the ancient myth of the hero's descent into pre-Christian Hell to retrieve a beloved woman taken by force, sometimes by death. This is a topic narrated in many myths that are derived in fact from the Earth goddess' rescue of her sacrificed son-lover, which would ensure the

return of the spring. The plot of *Legend* is thus a belated descendant of the patriarchal myth of the solar hero's fight with the powers of evil identified with the night, darkness and death. The Devil, precisely renamed Darkness in the film, is a hybrid of the archaic Beast, the Christian iconography of the Devil and the later Gothic villain. Darkness' behaviour - especially in his lusting after the innocent, virginal heroine - and the triangle formed by him and the couple consisting of the virtuous hero and heroine are typically Gothic rather than inspired by classic myth. Rob Bottin's design for Darkness appropriates traditional elements such as the cloven feet, tail, sharp teeth, red skin, muscular body and horns of the medieval iconography of the Devil to compose an innovative, formidable portrait of the Prince of Darkness different from any other seen on the screen. Interestingly, the linking of supernatural evil to the natural predator is reinforced by the similar deaths of Darkness and the fierce predator in Scott's previous film, *Alien*. Both creatures are swept away into the void of infinite space after being tricked by resourceful heroines, who seemingly redress with their courageous rejection of evil the wrongs brought about by Eve's fall.

Another descent into Hell closes the long *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1980 - 1995) series. In the seventh episode of the Freddy Krueger saga, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, the heroine 'Heather Langenkamp' (the name of the actress who actually played heroine Nancy in the first film and who plays herself in this film) dreams herself into Hell in order to retrieve her five-year-old abducted by the evil Krueger. Mother and son (perhaps a repetition of the old goddess and son-lover couple) manage to imprison Krueger in one of his hell's furnaces, an idea inspired by the burning of the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" a scene which has impressed the child but which also recalls the undead Krueger's original death by burning. Nancy's mother confesses in the first episode how the failure of justice to control this evil child abuser prompted the angry parents of the children he had abused and killed to burn Freddy to death. This lynching recalls the sacrifice of those believed by the Inquisition to be possessed by the Devil, though in Krueger's case vengeful justice only results in the creation of an even worse evil monster, this time supernatural.

The fire supposed to 'purify' the suburb of the pervert's presence actually transforms

Krueger into the arch-pervert, the Devil himself. In a remarkable scene in the film, director Wes Craven, playing himself, explains to 'Heather' that Freddy is the modern incarnation of a very ancient force that has taken many shapes throughout history. According to Craven's tongue-in-cheek justification of his own creation of Freddy, this force has got used to its manifestation as Freddy but because this figure is wearing out, a renewal is due in order to imprison the force of evil into another figure of fiction that can be used as scapegoat. Krueger's success as postmodernism's bogeyman is due to a felicitous use of a supernatural gothicism based on popular notions of Jungian psychoanalysis, the collective unconscious, and child abuse and also on the horror motifs of traditional folk tales. Freddy is the best fictional representation of the Devil for the 1980s and 1990s because he has linked the contemporary psycho pervert to the category of the Gothic supernatural and because he has inherited from the traditional representation of the Devil not only the capacity to do unbounded evil but also mischievousness, which is probably the clue to his success and popularity.

The Devil appears most frequently in contemporary fiction as a supernatural being seldom identified with the Devil himself who offers an unsolicited Faustian bargain to an unsuspecting human. Those who enter into such pacts with the demons are not totally innocent though they can hardly be said to be moral monsters; the bond with the evil supernatural monster traps them in horrific situations out of which they cannot always extricate themselves, even though in some cases there is no clear reason why these new Fausts should deserve such harsh punishment. What makes them good prey for the diverse devils that tempt them is their personal ambition, mainly regarding professional success, rather than Faust's aspiration to immortal wisdom. Yet, since they are not believers, there is no question of eternal damnation at stake, which rather blurs the horror inspired by the devils. There is not even a Hell into which these victims may fall: in fact, their life after the meeting with the monster becomes Hell itself, which fits within the widespread impression that Hell is a condition of contemporary life rather than a place for the punishment of the wicked. Instead of condemning the sin of the man who tries to reach out for the forbidden fruit

of knowledge, the contemporary version of the Faustian pact deals with the dangers of greed and corresponds to the widespread materialism of the 1980s and 1990s. It seems, in fact, a warning against the expectations of achieving professional and material success easily, as many have done in the last two decades.

What the different devils seek in these bargains is usually an extension of evil through their own reproduction, sometimes understood in a literal sense. George Miller's *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) (based on John Updike's novel) deals with the failure of the Devil to seal a bargain with three witches. In this film Darryl Van Horn seduces three beautiful women of various artistic talents with bizarre promises about their future professional success, while in fact he wants if not their souls, at least their wombs in order to reproduce himself. However, in the twentieth century the Devil is such a weak creature that Alexandra, Suki and Jane finally trick him out of his paternity rights and keep their (apparently normal) children to themselves, untying the knot that had traditionally linked women to witchcraft and the Devil since the late Middle Ages. The demonic Doro of *Wild Seed* (1980), an ancient Nubian made immortal by a supernatural metamorphosis, also recruits human beings with a view to breeding them into a new super-race by making Faustian bargains with them for their bodies, offering in exchange long lives and material comfort.

Other Faustian pacts take place in *Spanky* (1994), *My Idea of Fun* (1993) and *Candyman* (1992). In *Spanky*, a monstrous demon incarnated in a handsome body that is dying tempts a young man, Martyn, to enter a bargain with him that seemingly brings in many material advantages to Martyn in exchange for nothing. Only at the very end does Spanky reveal his true aim, that of occupying Martyn's body. In *My Idea of Fun*, the Falstaffian Mr. Broadhurst, who has sponsored the business career of his protégé Ian since his childhood, finally claims from him the right to be reborn again in the body of Ian's own child. Candyman - a legendary local demon attached to a run down inner city state - traps PhD student Helen into a peculiar bargain: in exchange for confirming to her the existence of his legend, which she is researching, he claims her body and soul, and so Helen becomes herself another legendary figure of evil ready to lure more

into the same bargain. The body and not the soul is also the object of greed of Clive Barker's evil Cenobites. Actually, one of the stumbling blocks in the construction of the theology of Hell was how could disembodied souls be delivered to the very physical torments of Hell and why torture should be the right punishment for the moral monster. Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987) and the film series based on it retake the subject of the physicality of punishment - in fact it could be said that this motif permeates all of contemporary fiction, as if the soul had ceased to exist and only a Sadeian view of the body made sense. In this view evil is represented basically as the unbound capacity to do *physical* harm through cruelty and violence.

One of the most successful recent films about the motif of the Faustian pact, Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987), approaches the question of damnation from the perspective of an innocent man, Harry Angel, forced to give up his soul to an inflexible, unfair devil intent on making him honour a contract Angel has never signed. The plot gives a new twist to the theme of the Faustian bargain by narrating how the ambitious crooner Johnny Favourite, who has sold his soul to the Devil for fame, tries to back out of the agreement. Close to dying because of injuries received in service during World War II, Favourite and his witch girlfriend trick Lucifer out of Johnny's soul by killing Harry Angel, a young soldier chosen at random, whose heart Favourite eats. This ritualistic act of cannibalism apparently grants Favourite the use of Angel's soul and consciousness as a mask to conceal himself from Lucifer's greedy hands, though Angel is never aware that he and Favourite occupy the same body or that Favourite exists at all. When Louis Cypher or Lucifer, a pony-tailed, bearded gentleman fond of dressing in dark colours contracts Angel, then self-employed as a private detective, to find Favourite, a number of deaths ensue involving those formerly connected with Johnny who have met Angel in the course of his investigation. Finally, the enigmatic Cypher discloses to his employee in an anguished scene of revelation that, while he believes himself to be the innocent Angel, he is in fact Favourite, hiding behind Angel's stolen soul, and that the crimes have been committed by the hidden Johnny under Lucifer's influence.

These crimes and his old debt are enough to carry Angel off to Hell for ever, although by



the end of the film it is still unclear why Angel must pay for Favourite's deception and whether the man seen on his descent to Hell is still the desperate Angel, the callous Favourite, or both. Parker's film suggests that the dissociation of good and evil is so strong that we cannot literally see ourselves commit evil acts. We deny our evil side, which symbolically belongs to the Devil (it is literally his 'favourite') and end up thus destroying both the good and the evil side in Hell. Lucifer's system of reward and punishment does not make sense, as the innocent Angel is made to pay for Favourite's evil crimes, yet Lucifer's refusal to take only Favourite's soul and his unfair appropriation of Angel's, indicate that Favourite's appropriation of Angel's soul (the intrusion of evil into good) is an act that cannot be undone and, furthermore, that while there is certainly a Devil there is no God that will save Angel from his fate.

As is often the case with not fully successful films (and novels), *Mr. Frost* (1990) is based on an attractive idea that does not find a correspondingly successful artistic realization but that does integrate nonetheless important aspects of the current discussion of evil. Mr. Frost is the name of a rather aristocratic serial killer (played by Jeff Goldblum) who claims to be the Devil. Arrested for the deaths of more than twenty people, justice finally decides that Frost's aloofness in the face of his crimes is a sign of his suffering from a serious mental disease and so he is sent to a psychiatric hospital. There he insists once more to the psychiatrist who treats him - a woman - that he *is* the Devil and that to prove it he will inspire her with an irrepressible wish to kill him in a short period of time. However, when she finally kills him it is still not known whether Frost is an evil monster who does not deserve the care he is being given, as the policeman who arrested him claims, a mentally ill man or the Devil himself. Neither is it known whether the psychiatrist has discovered her so far unknown evil side or whether she has committed an unavoidable evil act, tempted by the Devil. This refusal to support either the supernatural or the rational-scientific explanation of evil without hesitation, together with the more or less radical rejection of the authority of psychology and psychiatry, characterize not only this film but also most contemporary fiction about evil monstrosity.

The greatest paradox in the fictional representation of the Devil is that even though this is

a figure that has lost a great deal of its popularity among believers it is still often found in films and novels, often, as I have remarked, represented as simply a supernatural evil monster not linked to Christianity. In contrast, the presence of God - or of corresponding principles of good - has diminished dramatically. Up to a certain point, this has been always the case. "Visionary literature", Yi-Fu Tuan (1980: 85) writes in reference to medieval times, "is largely devoted to the horrors of hell and has little to say about heaven." The same can still be said about the visualizations of horror in this secularised late twentieth century. The Devil remains in the background, perennially ready to be used to explain evil and constantly producing supernatural but profane offspring, while the once virtuous hero/ines of fiction are currently represented as weak, gullible, human beings, not too surprised by the discovery that evil lies within themselves. The trickster tricks only those who already have a capacity to be tricked. The traditional confrontation between good and evil is giving way to a murkier palette of blurred moral tones which can be used to portray the infinite variation on human evil but that has few colours, if any, to depict good.

#### 4.1.2. *The Evil Villain*

In *Love and Death in the American Novel* Leslie Fiedler (1973: 38) notes that "the final horrors, as modern society has come to realize, are neither the gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds." This realization has its first fictional expression in the Gothic novel, in a paradox that lies at its very core: even when it seems that the supernatural elements are real, such as in *The Monk*, what really matters in the Gothic novel is the horror created by the human villain moved by greed or lust. Gothic fiction is the first to denote an interest in the human mind as the site of evil and, as Elizabeth MacAndrew (op. cit.: 3) writes, the corpus of all Gothic novels composes "a picture of evil as a form of psychological monstrosity." This does not mean, however, that no links can be traced between the emerging Gothic villain and the supernatural Devil. The rabbinical tradition developed in the thirteenth century an evil lineage for Cain, the first human moral monster, by which he was actually not Adam's but the serpent's (i.e. the Devil's) son. The cursed, evil Cain,

traditionally represented as an ugly, deformed man, was also attributed with the fathering of the monstrous races, the evil spirits and Noah's son Ham, himself the father of the non-white races, a bizarre tenet which has been used to justify racism throughout the ages. Cain's offspring was, finally, identified in the fifteenth century with the low-class villagers (churls or villains) for, as was then seen, Cain had ceased to be a gentleman after murdering Abel. "This sort of social thinking," John Friedman (op. cit.: 102) writes, "was particularly popular in England where, in the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain*, the churl of the woods with club by the magic fountain is called 'a churl of Cain's kindred'". It is precisely in England where, through an almost fabulous inversion, the physically and morally base medieval villain descended from Satan through Cain later became the upper-class Gothic villain born of Milton's Satan, afterwards begetting the Satanic hero of Romanticism.

How is evil understood in the Gothic novel? According to MacAndrew (ibid.: 249), evil is "that which mars the harmony of the universe." She argues that in the Gothic novel evil is a monstrous distortion of potentially good feelings resulting in the individual's war "with God's harmony within and outside himself" (ibid.: 24). By the middle of the eighteenth century thinkers such as Adam Smith had already laid the foundations for the equation of goodness with beauty and ugliness with evil that so profoundly permeated sentimental and Gothic literature, and that is still a bedrock of conventional ideas about good and evil. The Gothic novel denies the benevolent optimism of the sentimental novel with its show of the inner monstrosity of man. Thus, while sentimental authors saw in the offering of positive moral models a path towards the redemption of man from evil, the Gothic novelists realized that the display of evil monstrosity could undermine the effect sought by sentimentalism. This led to a division among them between those who, like Anne Radcliffe, supported a happy resolution that would partly erase the effect produced by horror and terror and those who, like Matthew Lewis, did not, though one way or another, the moral monster always received his come-uppance.

The tensions between sentimental benevolism and Gothic are still alive in the definition of

the contemporary villain, who is still struggling to show a human side denied by the Manichaean distinction between virtue and vice in sentimentalism. The Gothic novel allowed some room for the humanity of the villain and discovered that his passions were but human passions felt by all in some degree, and that evil was not absolute in him but relative. The image of the wicked monk Schedoni in Anne Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), melting into tears at the sight of the sleeping heroine Ellena, whom he believes for a while to be his daughter, and transforming his murderous impulses against her into love, is one of the instances of the failure of absolute evil to dominate the Gothic villain. Up to a point it could be said that since the relativity of evil and its being attributed to the human psyche and not to an external agent are ideas that still endure, contemporary fiction about evil monstrosity is intrinsically Gothic.

The survival of the Gothic villain into the age of Freudian psychoanalysis, which is not based on moral, sentimental distinctions between good and evil, might seem at first sight an anachronism. However, the lasting success of the villain may be grounded precisely on his potential to transmit to postmodernity the generalised feeling that the moral monster is beyond explanation and even beyond religion. The villain also endures because he is placed at a crossroads between traditional morality and the Nietzschean superman in a way that the psychopath can never be. He is a strong mixture of rebellious amorality, irrepressible will, intelligence and individualism, a person who has put himself beyond good and evil and beyond the distinction between rationality and irrationality. The villain cannot be simply reduced to the madman because he is a figure that arises from the intuition that intelligence and irrationality are not fully incompatible; in fact, the villain's passion for doing evil is the dark counterpart to the rational intelligence of the often also passionate hero. Hero and villain are often the same man and can only be told apart because the villain's selfish amorality and his negative use of aggression have placed him beyond the pale of the tolerable.

The psychopath can be deconstructed by psychoanalysis, but the villain denies that psychology suffices to explain evil, hence his appeal in times when evil is regarded at a popular

level as a still unknown force of the human mind, too horrifying to be accepted as the accidental result of mental disease. A certain novelty is contributed by stories, such as Charles Sheffield's science-fiction novel *The Nimrod Hunt* (1986), which describe the Freudian roots of the villain's personality, perhaps following attempts at explaining the villains of history through their childhood, as psychologist Alice Miller (1991) did in the case of Adolf Hitler.<sup>1</sup> In *The Nimrod Hunt*, the root of Esro Mondrian's obsession for building the ultimate system of defence of the universe - an obsession that almost costs the total destruction of the confederacy that employs him to defend its boundaries - is an event that he has blocked out of his memory. As a three-year-old he was abandoned by his mother in the African savannah to be killed in the dark of night by roaming wild beasts. Surviving that night, Mondrian grew up to build a megalomaniac version of the protection from the beasts he had needed as a helpless child alone in the dark. However, this event still cannot justify why Mondrian employs mental cruelty and physical violence to achieve his ends, nor can it explain why he reacted with that particular obsession or whether any person would have reacted in the same way. Instead of the question of whether evil is something we do or we are, villains like Mondrian beg the question of whether evil is something innate in some of us or something that grows in us because of events in our childhood over which we have no control. The villain also questions to what extent the explanations of evil furnished by psychoanalysis and psychiatry explain human evil at all, lacking, as they do, precise tools to evaluate factors such as the will, intelligence, innate malice, or determination of each person.

Although he often acts alone, another characteristic that distinguishes the villain from the psychopath of fiction is that the former is frequently accompanied by minor villains - mere 'baddies.' The psychopath lives out a secret obsession that he fulfils through impulsive acts, whereas the villain masterminds the implementation of his obsession, making it public at least among his helpmeets and building around it a master plan that only the hero can thwart. The villain has a

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<sup>1</sup>Miller devotes a whole chapter of her book to analyzing Hitler's childhood. Although she does not follow the Freudian model, Miller discusses what aspects of Hitler's early years beyond the relationship with his parents may have contributed to the formation of his cruel personality.

capacity of leadership that the psychopath lacks, a capacity that is possibly a reflection of that of the Devil among the demons. Villains who act alone are easier to categorise as madmen, for the company the villain keeps functions as a guarantee that his amoral view of the world makes sense beyond the boundaries of his own self. Far from representing an individual deviation of the moral norm, the villain as a leader stands for an alternative, inverted system of moral values.

Villains often form partnerships with an inferior villain who is usually on the other side of the law, or who may represent the body in the composite monster of which the superior villain is the brain. The combinations are many. In the *Robocop* (1987 - 1992) series the first film features a duo of villains composed of a corrupt executive of the OCP corporation and the leader of a criminal gang that controls downtown Detroit; the second film shows a most peculiar alliance between a drug baron and a vicious twelve-year-old who is his business associate. Policeman John Spartan fights in *Demolition Man* (1993) the dangerous criminal Simon Phoenix, who turns out to be tyrant Raymond Cocteau's henchman. *Batman Returns* (1992) teams together the Catwoman, the Penguin and the businessman Max Schreck, an unusual threesome of villains allied against Batman, while in *Batman Forever* (1995), the hero faces another duo, formed by Harvey Two-Face and the Riddler. Apart from the common interest of destroying the hero or forming a partnership to gain money or power, sex may be also the basis of the partnership for some couples of villains. In *Basic Instinct* (1992), Catherine Trammel enjoys the company of a lesbian lover, who was once in prison for killing her brothers. The villain of *The Crow* (1994) is the incestuous lover of his stepsister, while in *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), Robert forms a partnership with his abused wife Caroline. These and many other instances of teams of villains imply that the hero is the really isolated figure in a landscape shaped by many more villains than heroes.

The role of the villain has been frequently played in recent American films by Europeans. Prestigious British actors such as Nigel Hawthorne, Alan Rickman, Michael Gambon, Ian Holm, Patrick MacNee, Jeremy Irons and Terence Stamp, among others, have been called to Hollywood in recent years to play secondary roles as villains. Even the very popular TV series *Dynasty* featured

British actress Joan Collins as the villainess Alexis Carrington. Only exceptionally have British actors, such as Anthony Hopkins (Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*) or Gary Oldman (Dracula in Coppola's film), played leading roles in American films after having appeared as evil monsters on screen. Among European actors other than British, Dutch actor Jeroen Crabbe seems to have become another prominent specialist in playing villains, while his fellow countryman Rutger Hauer (the replicant Roy in *Blade Runner*) has alternatively appeared on film as hero or villain like another European actor, the Austrian Arnold Schwarzenegger. In commercial films - particularly in action films - a British, or vaguely 'European', accent is one of the main signs of identity of the villain together with the ability to master other languages (German, Arabic and Japanese are distinctively suspicious), a fondness for classical music, literature and the arts, and elegant - or at least idiosyncratic - clothes. In contrast to these cultured villains, the all-American hero lacks any artistic or intellectual knowledge; cleverness, moral integrity, his defense of the law and his positive (controlled) use of aggression make up for his educational disadvantages and suffice him to defeat the apparently superior villain.

Harriet Hawkins (1990: 13) writes that the image of the American hero reflects "the premium traditionally placed on the egalitarian virtues of Frontier times, when a man was judged by what he was and not by what he knew and the lack of a classical education did not count against you". Education is nonetheless also the suspect patrimony of the villain because it connotes the Jamesian idea of the civilized, decadent Europe together with a certain degree of femininity, which the hero opposes with his rugged masculinity. In addition, the foreignness of the villains of recent commercial American films also reflects a xenophobia the more remarkable for originating in a country once famed among immigrants as a tolerant land. The moral monster of commercial films is essentially un-American, either a foreigner - mainly upper-class, preferably from a country with a more rigid class system than the USA, such as the UK, or less democratic, such as Japan - or a member of an ethnic minority that refuses to be fully Americanised. Despite the evidence of the many crimes committed by American citizens, American audiences appreciate

being told that the villain defeated by their all-American hero has not had the benefit of the American lifestyle and that terror is something introduced by ethnic groups that do not respect the American way of life<sup>1</sup>. Paradoxically, despite the popularity of the foreign villain, all-American heroes are also played by actors of other nationalities such as the Austrian Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Belgian Jean-Claude Van Damme or the Swedish Dolph Lundgren who have found in the USA their new home to the point that they are no longer seen as foreigners.

Obviously, not only European actors play the role of villains in American films. A number of American actors have also specialized in portraying evil villains. Ronnie Cox, Lance Henriksen, Michael Ironside, John Lithgow, Gary Busey, Christopher Walken, Ron Silver, Dennis Hopper, Eric Roberts, Michael Wincott are some of the names that are routinely typecast as villains. Regardless of their diverse quality as actors, what these men have in common is a physical appearance outside the standards observed by Hollywood heroes. This does not mean that villains are typically played by unattractive men and heroes played by attractive men - Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger who habitually play heroes cannot be said to be more attractive men than Walken or Roberts. As for offering differing images of masculinity, in fact the muscular hero frequently encounters a not less muscular opponent, so that many of the films featuring such confrontations do not offer alternative images of masculinity but just one, split between Jekyll (the hero) and his Hyde (the villain).

At any rate, the roles of villains and mere baddies make the variety of human types visible on screen, while heroes and heroines respond to a more homogeneous image of sexual desirability, which may not be evident from the bodies of the actors but rather from how studios market their images. The physical appearance of the villain ranges from grotesque ugliness to colossal 'musculinity' (the term coined by Yvonne Tasker) so that what really characterises the villain is not his body but the limited range of facial expressions he is allowed to display, which are

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<sup>1</sup>This was sadly reflected in the bombing of a government building in Oklahoma City in 1995: although the terrorists turned out to be white and members of an American right-wing militia organization, the first suspicions were directed against Arab terrorists. It remains to be seen how this deep shock will affect the representation of the villain in American popular fiction.



confined to sadism, anger, hatred and perhaps madness. When the villain smiles he is being ironic or sarcastic but never happy. The most successful actors in villain roles are those who overcome the limitations of the role by suggesting that something else - something evil but deeply human - is alive behind the mask.

In this section I have referred to the villain as a man, ignoring so far the villainess. In fact, the villainess is necessarily a more restricted character because she is limited by the intersection of beauty and power. Few women enjoy a great measure of power, and since power is one of the marks of the villain, it follows that the number of villainesses must be small, as it is. Furthermore, women actually appear in commercial films as possessions of the villain but hardly as independent villainesses in the roles usually attributed to villains: corrupt businessmen or politicians, terrorists, mercenaries, drug or arms dealers. The villainess is typically a femme fatale, beautiful and invariably sexually attractive, who fulfils her obsessions through the power she gains on men. The variety of physical appearances in the representation of the villain is not allowed to the villainess, always played by attractive actresses such as Sharon Stone, Linda Fiorentino, Rebecca de Mornay, Theresa Russell, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Michelle Pfeiffer or Greta Scacchi, among others. An unattractive villainess makes no sense, for her power depends on her beauty, whereas the villain needs no physical attraction to wield power; this comes usually from his capacity to lead others into crime and for this he usually needs his physical strength and his capacity to cause harm through psychological cruelty and physical violence.

Villains and villainesses (and non-human evil monsters) are always portrayed from the hostile point of view of the hero and on the basis of their evil actions, not of their personalities. During their confrontation the hero may learn more about the motivations and the obsessions of the villain, yet the appeal of the villain is that he can never be fully understood, either because not enough information is available about his personality, or because what is available is not the fruit of introspection but rather of reports made by others. This is perhaps exemplified best in the encounter of Marlow and Kurtz in "Heart of Darkness" (1902) and in its screen adaptation

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*Apocalypse Now* (1979). The former's efforts to decode the evil Kurtz are necessarily frustrated by the latter's refusal to explain himself, so that all that remains of Kurtz are Marlow's and the Company's reports, plus Kurtz's own voice in his ambiguous report about the possibilities of colonialism in Africa. Of the man - of the monster - nothing real remains. The villain lacks a voice of his own because granting him the use of one would make him become as human as the hero - an effect the Romantics discovered in their reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Since commercial cinema does not have much room for psychological introspection, the villain thrives on the screen much better than on the printed page. The contemporary novel is interested, above all, in psychological introspection and, particularly, in presenting the voice of the evil monster without authorial comment in first person narratives. When the villain is given a first narrative voice, as in many contemporary novels, it is much more difficult to keep the empathetic detachment necessary to believe that the villain is nothing but an embodiment of pure evil; instead, when hearing the voice of the villain, the reader and the viewer may even sympathise with him - sometimes despite themselves. This sympathy turns the moral monster into a moral hero of a category not sufficiently defined yet. No film about monstrosity has been, so far, narrated from the point of view of the monster, though films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) have challenged their audiences to consider the humanity of the evil monster. When at the end of *Blade Runner* the apparently villainous replicant Roy pronounces a moving speech just before dying about his life as a slave, the hero Deckard - actually a no less villainous exterminator - sympathises with him and so does the audience. After Roy's speech, he and Deckard can no longer be seen as opposite embodiments of evil and good but as human mixtures of good and evil trapped by a system of power that exploits their capacity for aggression.

Yet, since the end of *Blade Runner* is an exception and not the rule, it could be inferred that the success of the villain of film is based on the fact that film audiences *do not want* to let the villain justify himself. This attitude could be due to the fact that accepting stereotypes like the villain simplifies the matter of judging to what extent evil is part of all humans. If the evil villain appears to

be fully human, his humanity is, in any case, also ignored with, as David Pockock (op. cit.: 51) writes, "the angry 'I don't want to know', or a heightened sense of their monstrosity." As Victor Sage (op. cit.: 170) notes with respect to *Frankenstein*, when Mary Shelley takes the opportunity to give us the monster's testimony "it is this directness of effect, still carrying us into the heart of the labyrinth, as it were, which results in the moral ambiguity that so characterises this novel." It could well be that this moral ambiguity is not desirable, which would explain why the monster's voice is already literally missing in the first stage adaptation and is still mute in Boris Karloff's performance. Audiences probably relish the villain precisely because he confirms an unambiguous, Manichaeian, dangerous and conservative morality; this morality would be a consolatory myth that compensates for the actual ambiguity of morality in real life.

This does not necessarily mean that film audiences cannot exert adequate moral judgements applied to complex, ambiguous real life events. The non-human monster and the human moral monster are used if not as scapegoats, at least, as excuses for an escape into a fictional world in which good and evil are easy to distinguish. This escape, far from being an irresponsible evasion from reality, reinforces the social consensus on what is morally acceptable, rejecting the existentialism and moral nihilism more frequently found in the mainstream novel. It would be wrong to believe that the more conservative moral stand of film (shared up to a point by the so-called popular novel) is incompatible with the exploration of amorality of the mainstream novel, as many people consume both. In fact, they are complementary and nourish each other. They coincide in presenting the contemporary world as a place and time haunted by evil that cannot be controlled, much less understood. But while film thrives on consolatory fantasies of fair justice, the novel offers a complementary consolatory fantasy by offering the illusion of the rational discourse built by the madman to explain his own irrationality, as in *American Psycho*.

The ambiguous morality of *Frankenstein* has left an important double inheritance in fiction that might explain the current interaction of Manichaeism and amorality. On the one hand, popular fiction ceaselessly retells the plot of persecution and elimination of the horror created by

man, in which the monster is portrayed as a moral monster or villain. On the other hand, contemporary mainstream novels dealing with moral monsters repeat the scheme of the monster's psychological introspection. It is important to note that since Frankenstein's monster is born as an adult, the psychoanalytical model applies imperfectly to him, while the influence of society and his rejection play a major role in the stressing of evil impulses in his personality. The novel of the 1980s and 1990s abounds in descendants of Frankenstein's monster, moral monsters not of fragmented body but of fragmented personality, unable to understand why they behave as they do, despite their intense self-awareness, constant introspection and not less constant reflection on their material circumstances. These anguished self-portraits act as mirrors held up to the reader and force him or her to consider to what extent evil is present in all of us and not only in the villain or in the non-human monster.

#### 4.1.3. *The Age of the Psychopath*

##### 4.1.3.1. *The Construction of the Evil Psychopath*

The representation of the human evil monster in fiction was radically altered with the introduction of the psychotic killer in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and in Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960). These two films popularised the idea of the Freudian moral monster, rationalizing the criminal deeds of their 'heroes' - both serial killers of women - as the result of childhood traumas endured at the hands of an abusive mother and an abusive father, respectively. This presentation of evil caught on, possibly because beyond the different degrees of conviction offered by the psychological explanations of the crimes these two films offered "a sense of these men's psychosis as *potentially* present within any of us" (Tudor, 1989: 45). The films contributed to the development of a new tradition in the representation of evil characterised in its current wave, as Andrew Tudor (*ibid.*: 197) remarks, "by graphic portrayal of violence; insanity conceived as a routine expectation in everyday life; declining efficacy of experts, whether coercive or psychiatric; little or no explanation for psychotic behaviour, violent misogyny as a central

element in psychosis; and a narrative structure dominated by the tension requirements of the terrorizing narrative." The problem with this tradition is that it is, fundamentally, a corrupted reading of Freudianism that has seeped down from the screen to popular notions about madness, criminality and its punishment. Right now the word psychopath conjures up in the popular imagination an incomprehensible mixture of evil and moral irresponsibility of which psychiatry and the law are accomplices, a view never justified by Freud or his followers.

Madness and evil converge in the figure of the psychopath in a long process that begins in the Renaissance. According to Michel Foucault (1993: 70):

In the Renaissance, madness was present everywhere and mingled with every experience by its image or its dangers. During the classical period, madness was shown, but on the other side of bars; if present, it was at a distance, under the eyes of a reason that no longer felt any relation to it and that would not compromise itself by too close a resemblance. Madness had become a thing to look at: no longer a monster inside oneself, but an animal with strange mechanisms, a bestiality from which man had long since been suppressed.

The animalisation of the madman meant that madness was seen not as a curable condition, but as a condition in need of discipline. It was furthermore believed that the animality of madness made the madman resistant to disease and to harsh physical mistreatment. The reinvention of madness as a disease begins when the confined madman - segregated from 'normal' society in the seventeenth century mainly because of his social uselessness in a market economy - ceases being exhibited in the 'freak show' run by eighteenth-century institutions such the asylum of St. Mary of Bethlehem in London, popularly known as Bedlam. When the French physician Pinel and his British counterpart Tuke free the madman from his chains and from the curious gaze of his visitors, the development of the process of observation and cure that spans the nineteenth century and gives rise to modern psychology and psychiatry begins.

Parallel to the treatment of madness is the problem of how to deal with the aggressive madman. Foucault notes that until the seventeenth century evil could only be acknowledged by means of public confession; later publicity was increasingly avoided by fear of scandal and even

contagion and the aggressive madman was confined to the secrecy of prison to be kept or executed like any other criminal. With the rise of psychology there arises also a need to distinguish the aggressive madman who is not responsible for his acts from the evil criminal who is morally and legally accountable for them. The same evil act can be considered from two different judicial perspectives depending on whether the experts determine the capacity of the criminal to choose evil and hence whether s/he must receive psychiatric treatment, or a term in prison. The problem is that psychiatry and psychology have not developed so far infallible tools to determine the responsibility of the evildoer, though their place within the system of justice has been granted precisely on the basis of their alleged expertise in distinguishing responsible from irresponsible behaviour. This has caused a void in the system of justice that is the root of the resistance to the authority of the law and science to deal with evil articulated by contemporary films and novels.

The first to suggest that the penal system was failing society and that only a psychoanalytical criminology could help society by giving an unquestionable judgement on the psychology of criminals were Alexander and Staub, two German psychopathologists. Their book *The Psychopathological Concept of Crime* (1929, translated into English in 1931) defended the thesis that to properly judge criminals it was first necessary to ascertain their sanity. If proven insane, the criminal was entitled to psychiatric treatment for his or her mental illness but could not be judged by reason of diminished responsibility, the assumption being that only criminals who were fully responsible for their acts could be judged for them. The foundation on which criminal psychopathology rests is the concept of mental illness and the associated idea that psychiatry can treat and cure this type of disease. In fact, diagnosing a mental illness and pinpointing when and why it started is very difficult; furthermore, psychiatrists can seldom, if ever, assure society that an aggressive mental patient is cured and will not commit further crimes.

In the 1960s the American psychiatrist Thomas Szasz led the protest against the misuse of psychiatric diagnoses to exonerate evildoers from blame in court. His attack began by denouncing mental illness as a myth:

... the notion of mental illness is used today chiefly to obscure and "explain away" problems in personal and social relationships, just as the notion of witchcraft was used for the same purpose from the early Middle Ages until well past the Renaissance. Today, we seek and achieve the denial of social, moral, and personal controversies by hastily retreating to playing the medical case. (1961: 205)

Szasz was concerned that through treating mental illnesses as bodily diseases the principle of personal responsibility, basic in a democratic political system, would be undermined and thus antisocial behaviour would remain unpunished. According to him, psychiatry is an activity that is only medical in name and that should rather be regarded as a form of "social engineering" (1965: vii), concerned with changing the attitudes and behaviour of individuals and even of nations. In *Law, Liberty and Psychiatry*, Szasz stated that "actually, law and psychiatry are similar in that both disciplines are concerned with *norms of conduct* and *methods of social control*" (ibid.: 2). It is interesting to note that the term sociopath is now currently used for psychopaths who act criminally allegedly because of their hatred of society and that the discipline of abnormal psychology is applied mainly to the study of why some individuals deviate from the norm rather than to the study of what psychological normality is at all.

Apart from steadily denouncing the undue power that psychiatric experts have accumulated in medical institutions and in the courts of law, Szasz accused the American judicial system of denying the criminal the right to be judged and the right to be absolved for his criminal guilt if s/he was proven innocent. These rights were forfeited for what Szasz regarded as an unlawful commitment to a psychiatric institution where the untried, alleged criminal might be indefinitely confined until a cure were confirmed, if it ever was. Thus, a criminal offence of moderate importance might lead to a short term in prison if the criminal were declared responsible for his or her acts but it might lead to seclusion for life in a psychiatric unit depending not on the judge but on the diagnosis of the psychiatrist. The power of the judge backed by the law was thus transferred in many cases to the psychologist or psychiatrist empowered to determine when a patient could be returned to society on the basis of vague medical criteria the patient himself or herself could not challenge. For Szasz this is nothing but "an expedient method for "disposing" of

persons displaying certain kinds of antisocial conduct" (ibid.: 114) that serves justice badly and that is unfair towards the elemental rights of the allegedly antisocial person. What he proposes instead is to try the accused regardless of the psychiatric diagnoses of his mental disease, offering psychiatric treatment if it is deemed appropriate during the term of imprisonment. Szasz's conclusion is that as long as psychiatrists cannot guarantee a cure for mental illness, justice must not be hindered by their testimony.

Invoking the name of Freud in court is another of the sins Szasz condemns. Apart from the fact that Freud's work was devoted to the development of a therapy to cure neuroses and not psychoses, Freud did not actually intend his work to be used to explain or justify the moral monster. "Neither Freud nor the other early psychoanalysts paid much attention to the question of criminal responsibility. They wrote as if they believed that everyone was responsible for his actions" (Szasz, ibid.: 103). When asked to provide expert advice in the case of a man who had killed his father, Freud informed the doctor preparing the case that the Oedipus complex is always present and hence it is not pertinent to "provide a decision on the question of guilt" (ibid.: 105). Freud actually wrote in *Totem and Taboo* that one of the foundations of the human penal system is the assumption that "the prohibited impulses are present alike in the criminal and in the avenging community. In this, psycho-analysis is no more than confirming the habitual pronouncement of the pious: we are all miserable sinners" (1975: 72). This aspect of Freudian ethics has been either neglected or misread, leading to the "the mistaken idea that everything wrong with people is the fault of their parents, particularly of their mothers" (Midgley, 1984: 167), while in fact, as Mary Midgley notes, the immense achievement of Freudianism was the discovery that we are imprisoned by the emotional patterns of our early lives which we insist on reproducing in our adult lives and that this is the same for all and not only for mentally diseased criminals.

This serious misuse of the main factors in the biography of the evildoer in order to avoid judging his or her evil acts is not confined to *Psycho* and its subsequent imitations. It is still firmly embedded in the judicial cases that inspire the novels and films analyzed in this section and goes



beyond the formulation of mental disease in pseudo-Freudian terms. Thus, recently, an American jury was told that a twenty-five-year-old convicted killer, Tony Mobley, could not be held responsible for his crimes and sentenced to the electric chair according to the laws of Georgia because "genes inherited from his family played a crucial part in turning him into a cold-blooded killer" (Greig, 1994), that is to say, because he was born to kill, despite the fact that some members of his most immediate family circle were successful, law-abiding members of the community judging him. The article about Mobley was ironically accompanied by a photograph of Juliet Lewis and Woody Harrelson as Mallory and Mickey in Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), a film that despite its title suggests that evil is produced by the pressure the family, the media and society put on unhappy people born innocent. In Britain, another jury has been asked to determine whether a sixteen-year-old who stabbed a stranger to death, apparently in a mock ritual of initiation invented by his best friend, was or was not suffering from an incipient schizophrenia when he committed the crime, as the psychiatrists had claimed (Hicklin, 1995). Juries who lack psychiatric expertise but are asked to determine the legal responsibility of individuals may be thus increasingly forced to make decisions beyond the sphere of their competence because of the importance gained by the idea that evil acts are caused by mentally diseased individuals.

All these factors and other unfortunate occurrences, such as the fact that the leader of the Bosnian-Serbs in the recent war was the psychiatrist Radovan Karadzic whom no international tribunal seems capable of judging, contribute to creating an unfavourable attitude towards the authority of psychiatrists, psychologists and the law, which is faithfully rendered by contemporary fiction at all levels. Both popular fiction and the mainstream repeatedly expose the bogus explanations of evil offered by science and the law, preferring either no explanation at all as in the case of the villain or an explanation that is ultimately useless as in the cases of the evil psychopath and the existential moral monster that I will define later. The high number of villainous, ignorant or inept psychologists and psychiatrists in fiction is certainly a sign of this generalised mistrust - perhaps not so much for these sciences per se but for their usurpation of powers to delimit evil that

belong to morality, the law and religion.

The Hannibal Lecter of *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1989) and the Catherine Trammell of *Basic Instinct* (1991) must be understood against this background of disrespect for psychology and psychiatry. Both Lecter and Trammell are brilliant students of the human mind who have built a reputation on the strength of their unusual capacity to understand the evil acts committed by others and by themselves: he as an expert psychiatrist, she started her career as a popular novelist after getting a degree in psychology. They furnish explanations for the psychotic behaviour of others, whom they see as mentally ill, but will not see themselves as mental cases nor try to 'cure' themselves in any way. Instead, both Lecter and Trammell enjoy a self-awareness that is perverse to our eyes but that is for them liberating, placing them within an amoral framework which is not that of the law or the ordinary run of humankind. Lecter and Trammell are appealing despite the evidence of the horrific acts they commit (his even worse than hers because he is a cannibal in addition to being a killer) because they are not bound by moral constraints and, thus, enjoy a Nietzschean freedom beyond good and evil which is very different from that of the psychopath. Precisely, Trammell and Lecter can decode the sick behaviour of the killers they encounter because they are aware of their own superiority over those whose behaviour is uncontrollable and who are thus regarded as mentally diseased, in short, because they are villains rather than psychotic killers.

Significantly, both Trammell and Lecter remain free in the end, their narrow escapes being further proof of the incapacity of the law to control evil and of their own capacity to understand the system. Catherine literally seduces the law, first by flashing her bare sex in the famous scene of her interrogation at the police station and later by seducing Nick - the policeman assigned to her case - into a meek belief in her innocence. Lecter's many humiliations at the hands of his guardian, a frustrated psychiatrist who cannot apply his ineffective methods because Lecter can see through them, end with his final announcement to heroine Clarice that he is having this man for dinner in another of his ritualistic breaches of the taboo of cannibalism. Yet *Silence of the Lambs* is

especially ambiguous in its endorsement of moral values. On the one hand, the success of the intelligent and courageous heroine Clarice Starling, an FBI trainee agent, suggests that the organizations that uphold the law can benefit from a new generation prepared to avoid red tape by their use of common sense. However, the fact that Clarice's work leads to the serial killer Gumb's destruction but to Lecter's escape, suggests that the penal system devised to keep evil at bay will never be able to control the genuine moral monsters like Lecter or Gumb except by killing them. Expensive long-term confinement and the advice of psychiatry and psychology cannot serve the purpose of controlling evil; only the death of the killer, usually executed by a representative of the law in self-defence rather than after a fair trial, seems to satisfy the expectations of audiences. It is important to notice that the films and novels that deal with psychopaths and those who hunt them down routinely focus on the investigation to identify the criminal and on his subsequent chase but deal only superficially with the personality of the evildoer.

Many novels and films about the moral monster resist the principle that a criminal who is a monster does not deserve inhumane punishment. Michel Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* (op. cit.: 92) that

If the law must now treat in a 'humane' way an individual who is 'outside nature' (whereas the old justice treated the 'outlaw' inhumanely), it is not on account of some profound humanity that the criminal conceals within him, but because of a necessary regulation of the effects of power. It is this economic rationality that must calculate the penalty and prescribe the appropriate techniques. 'Humanity' is the respectable name given to this economy and to its meticulous calculations.

*The Silence of the Lambs* is not unique in questioning whether the evil monster deserves the treatment the humane law gives him. A film such as Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* (1991) also stresses the view of prison as a place where the force of evil is renewed rather than depleted, in part because of the humane treatment received by the convicted criminal. In this particular case, the criminal Max Cady, who has sadistically raped a teenage girl, receives in prison not only an education in the law but also an education in evil, for he becomes a rape victim himself. His shame, his new knowledge of the law and his desire to revenge himself on Sam, the lawyer whom

he thinks did not defend him properly, lead Cady to lay siege to the lawyer's family so as to force Sam to act outside the law in self-defence.

A comparison between the 1961 version of *Cape Fear* and Scorsese's, made thirty years later, reveals interesting changes in the presentation of the evil monster and the middle-class family that confronts him. In general terms, the 1990s family is a much grimmer version of that in the 1960s film and so is Cady. While the 1960s version stresses the idea that Sam's family deserves the protection of the law against Cady's threats, the 1990s version exposes many skeletons in the cupboard of suburbia that come to the light precisely because of Cady's challenging the family to prove that they will maintain their respect for the law under all circumstances. The conflict between Cady and Sam is not that between an honest citizen who upholds the law and an evildoer but between two men who know the law can be manipulated and that it cannot protect the victim. The Cady played by Robert de Niro in Scorsese's film is an illiterate redneck, who has re-made himself in prison mentally and physically. His reading of the Bible has turned him into a fanatical avenger, a defender of the eye-for-an-eye law of the God of the Old Testament, which is, obviously, intended to defend the victim and not the evildoer<sup>1</sup>. Cady's new beliefs have found expression in the tattoos displayed on his muscular body - quotations from the Bible and the scales of justice - so that he appears to be, literally, an embodiment of divine justice. The motif of Cady's discovery of religion is, in fact, one of the new elements added to his characterisation, together with his physical re-making. De Niro's Cady is lewd yet attractive in a singular way, cultured and coarse, intelligent but bestial while Robert Mitchum's original Cady is rather subdued, a villain whose acts need not be shown because his pertness before those who represent the law suffice to characterize him as evil.

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<sup>1</sup>*Eye for an Eye* (1995) is precisely the title of a new film by John Schlesinger, based on a novel by Erika Holzer, which narrates the struggle of a middle-class mother to see justice done when the killer of her teenage daughter walks free out of prison on the basis of a judicial technicality. As Schlesinger declared on a TV interview his film reflects the defencelessness of the average citizen in the face of vicious criminals like that of his film but also in the face of justice; its message is that we all can found courage if not to take justice in our hands, to force justice to act. This film contrasts, though, with two other films released in the same year, Tim Robbins' *Dead Man Walking* and Bruce Beresford's *Last Dance*, which expose the cruelty of the death penalty and the lack of compassion of the American judicial system.

The confrontation between good and evil is very different in each of these versions. While in the 1960s version Cady's hatred of Sam is grounded on Sam's preventing Cady from killing a teenage girl he had raped and on his acting as a witness against Cady, in Scorsese's version the bone of contention is whether Sam concealed evidence proving that the girl raped by Cady was promiscuous when he acted as Cady's counsel for the defence. This detail alone suggests an increasing corruption of the law, for what makes Sam appear as a good citizen is his avoiding the use of a legal though immoral strategy to gain Cady's freedom which involves humiliating Cady's victim before a jury. It can be said that while the moral monster remains the same, he has more reasons to be disgusted with the suburban family that confronts him and with what they represent as respectable citizens, precisely because Cady can best recognise the signs of their moral hypocrisy. The changes in Cady's relationship with Sam's women - his wife and teenage daughter - are significant in this regard. The happy housewife and the childish teen of the first film are replaced in the second by a depressive working woman embittered by her husband's infidelities and by an oversexed girl who may have even been abused by her father and who becomes an easy prey for the lascivious Cady.

In the 1961 film the issue is not how Cady can benefit from the moral weaknesses of Sam's family but how his threat to rape the daughter constrains the family. As a lawyer, Sam knows that the exposure endured by rape victims in the courts of justice is unbearable in most cases and only benefits the rapist. The fear of having to expose the daughter's shame if the rape occurs is the tool that Cady uses to force Sam to use illegal means to persecute him, whereas in the second film what is at stake is the physical survival of the members of the family. The first version ends with Sam's arresting Cady after having used his own wife as bait to distract Cady from his main target, Sam's own daughter. Cady is presumably sent to prison for life and so the film's end reinforces an optimistic belief in the ability of the law to control evil. Scorsese's version ends with Cady's death after a long, hard fight in which all the family is involved. The law is put aside in this confrontation and it is suggested that the confrontation between the monster and the

family and his death are not known by anybody else. Paradoxically, Cady's horrific death seemingly becomes the foundation on which a new family life is built: Sam, Leigh and Danny's sharing of the secret of Cady's death fills the cracks threatening the collapse of their family life.

In *Cape Fear*, a fatal combination of poverty, illiteracy and religious fanaticism is used to explain the roots of Cady's evil personality. His victims are a middle-class family who, despite being at first on the side of the law, do not hesitate in the end to use violence to stop him and survive.

*Kalifornia* (1993) offers a similar treatment of the topic of how class and evil are related from the point of view of the middle class. This film narrates the disastrous consequences of the fascination of writer Brian Kessler for the evil monstrosity of notorious psychopaths who are the subject of the book he is writing with the rather reluctant collaboration of his girlfriend Carrie, a photographer. Kessler's knowledge of the lives of the evil monsters he is researching does not prepare him for his chance encounter with a real monster, Early Grace. Early, a typical redneck like Cady, and his girlfriend Adele travel with Brian and Carrie to the mythical California where both couples expect their lives to take on a new direction, but the journey and the confrontation between these four people become the real turning point in their lives. This confrontation is articulated along two axes, class and gender roles, and questions Brian's irresponsible behaviour as a middle-class, white male who puts his morbid personal interests before the safety of his girlfriend. The film compares the positive effects of female bonding (Carrie teaches Adele to resist Early's constant bullying) with the dangers of male bonding, seen in Brian's demeaning himself in his search for a common ground in which Early and him can meet across barriers of class and education.

Brian's dissatisfaction with his life and his search for what he regards as 'reality' - that of the people who kill violently - force him finally to kill Early, though not before Early murders Adele and rapes Carrie. The final scene of the film, in which Carrie and Brian are seen in a wintry, wind-swept California having published their book and still together despite Brian's failure to foresee what Early would do, has a bittersweet tone: their brush with reality has left both badly bruised but this appears to be the price they had to pay for professional advancement. Their

typically middle-class, irresponsible, exploitative approach to the likes of Early appears as the equivalent of the exploitative violence of the working-class psychos they have researched. Brian's curiosity for the evil monster at the margins of society does not result in his taking up some form of social or political activism to prevent their existence but in the writing of a book that caters to the morbid tastes of the middle-class, those whose privileged background allows them to consider evil as something the others do. The nature of Early's evil remains unexplained, and so does the psychological harm suffered by Carrie after her rape; as for Brian, he does not seem to know 'reality' any better than before. *Kalifornia* and *Cape Fear* invite the audience to consider to what extent evil is a creation of the social and legal system rather than the fruit of personal circumstances or of mental disease. Both suggest that the middle class plays an insufficiently analyzed role in the construction of evil, indeed, that their fear of losing their privileged position prompts the working-class 'other' to harbour a hatred embodied by individuals such as Cady and Early. There is a danger in these films of identifying amorality with the middle class and moral monstrosity with the working class; in addition, the solution both propose, based on the physical confrontation between the male monster and the male law-abider, does not lead to a reflection in moral terms, but precisely to a reinforcement of the model of vengeful justice expounded by Cady.

The articulation of the confrontation between the evil monster and the middle-class no longer so respectable citizen is enacted in *Cape Fear* and in *Kalifornia* through the bodies of women threatened with rape by the monster. The misogynistic impulse has been present in the fictional figure of the psycho since Norman Bates appeared on the screen and is the foundation of the cycles of films known as slasher or stalker films, centred on the killing of a number of young people, usually women, by a faceless psychopath. The two most famous characters in this genre are Michael Myers, the psychopath in the *Halloween* (1978 - 1989) series and Jason, the protagonist of the *Friday the 13th* (1980 - 1989) series. Vera Dika (op. cit.: 17) notes that in stalker films the Oedipus conflict appears as a major theme:

Each one of these films is in fact some variation on the overvaluation of family ties, the viewing of the primal scene (or its variant in acts of illicit sexuality or violently

unlawful actions) and the horrible consequences of such perversions. Moreover, a psychological reading based on this early trauma is often given by the films themselves as the reason for the ensuing events.

But as Dika herself notes, films of this kind are not original but variations on the dramatization of the pseudo psychoanalytical material present in *Psycho*; they are a conscious remake and as such they are "a product of a postmodern impulse" (ibid.: 18). Yet film series such as *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th* offer such weak pseudo-Freudian explanations for the behaviour of the serial killers that the effect is, in fact, a radical undermining of Freudian ideas. This superficial use of Freudianism to explain evil is part of the reaction against Freudianism that is now at work and that is directed not so much against Freud himself but against the use of his theories about the human psyche to justify evil as he never intended to do. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), inspired by the same real life events that inspired *Psycho*, was possibly the first film to deny the value of all explanation and to show the evil monster - the infamous Leatherface - as part of a bizarre family living with horror in the midst of harmony.

Since *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, films and novels dealing with the monster of evil have abandoned the idea that interpreting the psychology of the evildoer does explain evil. This has led to two main currents. As I have noted, some films and novels offer no explanation at all for evil. Others offer carefully crafted explanations that, far from easing the mind of the reader or viewer from the horror of the evidence of evil, increase it. The serial killers who rationalize their behaviour or who will not accept that psychoanalysis may expose their real nature are many in contemporary fiction. In fact, it could be said that, through their lucid self-consciousness and their perfect awareness of the reasons why they kill, they destroy the myth of the evil, irrational madman and also challenge the reader or the viewer to dare to analyze themselves as deeply as they do. The effect of the confessions of these villainous psychopaths is always chilling, especially as often they do not take place in cathartic moments but rather in anticlimactic moments that precede an even more horrific realization of evil. They show that the evildoers know why they do evil but that they will not relent. In Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) - incidentally, the only text I have



come across in which the body of an attractive man is the object of the evil lust of the villain psychopath - the villainous Robert is fond of repeating his narrative about how his domineering father and the humiliation that his sisters inflicted on him have led him to become the abusive husband and killer he is now. Yet far from sounding genuine, this confession seems to have been concocted by Robert to stun his victims, the couple formed by Colin and Mary, who cannot understand why Robert brags about his unhappy childhood until they find themselves involved in his world of horror. A similar effect is achieved in *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1989) by Henry's casual confession of his having killed his mother and by his brief speech to his new companion Otis about the pleasures of killing victims chosen at random, something he does to fool those who insist on seeking patterns in the evildoing of psychos like himself in the belief that their behaviour can be decoded and understood.

The idea that the behaviour of the psychopath is characterised by a discernible pattern receives different yet complementary readings in two recent examples of what should be called the psycho film. *Seven* (1995) and *Citizen X* (1995) belong to a genre developed between the late 1980s and the early 1990s out of the crossing of the monster film with the detective film. This genre or sub-genre, which also includes *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Basic Instinct*, deals not only with the resolution of a plot centred on a number of gruesome killings committed by a psychopath, but also with the personal consequences of the investigation for the representative of the law in charge of identifying the evil monster. Both *Seven* and *Citizen X* deal with the topic of how the contact with the monster of evil may pollute the lives of those who must investigate him, but they do so from very different perspectives. To begin with, the contrast between the misdeeds of the real life psychopath portrayed in *Citizen X*, the infamous Andrei Chikatilo, known as the 'Rostov butcher', and the killer who calls himself John Doe in *Seven* reveal how far the latter is from the reality of the former. Doe's villainy is not the product of a long story of sexual repression, which is what led Chikatilo to abuse, kill and partly devour more than fifty children and young persons, but a carefully planned statement about the moral decadence of the world in which he lives, inspired by Dante's

description of Hell.

Doe tortures and kills people who, according to him, have committed one of the seven capital sins. His method finally leads him to the logical conclusion that he must include himself in the list of his own victims as a sinner guilty of envying the normal lives of the others. To punish himself, however, rather than kill himself Doe forces David Mills, the young policeman in charge of his case, to commit the last capital sin in his list, that of wrath. Doe wants to prove to Mills that we are all capable of doing evil and to make his point he first kills Mills' pregnant wife and then challenges Mills to either summarily executing him on the spot or giving him the chance of a fair trial. Before this crucial scene a long conversation takes place between Mills, his partner and Doe in which all the questions anybody would like to ask a monster such as Doe are asked. Mills' angry 'why?' is answered with nonchalance by Doe: he sees himself as an avenger carrying out God's designs not fanatically but in a coldly calculated way. Doe, who remains calm and rational throughout the conversation unlike Mills, curtly rejects Mills' idea that he is mentally diseased, which he regards as Mill's own consolatory fantasy, and foretells his own death when he taunts Mills by stating that he would kill him if he could, as he finally does, rather than hand him over to justice. Even though *Seven* is one of the few films ever made with a truly bitter, unhappy end, in fact Mills' arrest does not seem to be the prelude to his imprisonment for murder. The sympathy elicited by his ordeal suggests that he will not be sternly punished by the law for having killed Doe; the memory of what Doe did and forced him to do is his real punishment.

The method used to find Doe is most curious: the anonymous Doe, who has no fingerprints, no birth certificate and no social security number is one of the names in a list kept by the FBI recording all those who read dangerous books borrowed from public libraries. The fact that Doe's readings include, ironically, *Dante and Milton* suggests there is a strong connection between culture and evil, in the sense that any truly intelligent, sensitive person cannot help being overwhelmed by the portrait of evil painted by culture throughout the ages. Doe's reaction to redress the effects of sin is, in fact, to further evil and is, hence, intolerable, yet, the point he makes

about the intrinsic decay of civilization is perfectly coherent, especially as he is himself proof of this decay. In a sense, his killings are the equivalent of the texts on the corruption of the world and his own that he has written: the murders, always inspired or accompanied by quotations from literary sources, are in fact intellectual reflection led to the ultimate consequences. It is difficult to sympathize with Doe's sadistic expression of his ideas but it is not so difficult to understand his own discourse on evil. It is certainly hard to imagine that anybody would strike such balance between extreme violence and extreme ideology and survive psychologically unharmed, yet, in a sense, a serial killer like Doe follows a strategy not unlike that of the contemporary terrorist. The killings of the terrorists are also a mixture of provocation, punishment meted out to the victim for the sins committed (obviously according to the terrorists' aberrant code) and ideological statement. However, for reasons too complex to enter into now, terrorists are not treated in the same way as serial killers or mass murderers but are still regarded as guilty of political crimes.

*Citizen X* discusses to what extent Andrei Chikatilo's real-life crimes are the proof of the decadence of human beings in general or of the Soviet Union in particular, understood as an alternative to the American civilization that has produced the fictional Doe. The film deals partly with the resistance of the Soviet authorities to acknowledge the existence of a monster in the midst of the crumbling communist utopia. Thus, the detective Viktor Bukarov, who is in the film in charge of the investigation, finds his task constantly hindered by the local representative of the communist party, Bondarchuk, who curtly reminds him that serial killers are exclusively a phenomenon of the decadent West. Bukarov is thus forced to fight for eight years, from 1982 to 1990, not only the increasingly confident Chikatilo, but also the bureaucracy of the government and their stubborn denial that the USSR may have ever harboured such a monster. Alone against the sadistic criminal monster and the monster of bureaucracy, Bukarov risks his own mental stability to heroically unmask both. The arrival of Gorbachev's Glasnost finally allows Colonel Fetisov to support Bukarov's theories about the killer and to enlist in their aid for the first time in the history of crime in the USSR a reputed psychiatrist, Dr. Alexander Bujanovsky. The point of the film is to

show how, despite their total lack of material resources and the impossibility of benefiting from the knowledge accumulated by the FBI, who pioneered the research on serial killers, Fetisov, Bujanovsky and Bukarov could finally identify and arrest the monster. The contrast between the portrait of the world of the American police and the stark poverty of the Russian police is most effective in stressing the disadvantages faced by those who cornered Chikatilo. *Citizen X* suggests that criminals like Chikatilo are not the product of a determined social, political and economical structure but of human misery. Yet, this film also suggests that evil is perpetuated when its existence is denied and when those in charge of stopping the evildoer are not given moral or material help by the system of power that has allocated to them the task of keeping society safe.

Bujanovsky's accurate profile of the killer's personality, written without any knowledge of the information accumulated in the West about psychopaths, plays the part of Doe's confession in *Seven*. Bujanovsky's intuition and expertise has resulted in a portrait so precise of why the apparently normal Chikatilo kills that the killer is finally moved to confess. Far from being an avenger, Chikatilo is a weak man who lets himself be carried away by his need to make others suffer for his sexual and emotional shortcomings. However, the elaborate psychological explanation finally contributes nothing to Chikatilo's fate, for instead of being treated in a psychiatric hospital, he is sentenced to imprisonment for life and summarily executed in secret while in prison. Since *Citizen X* is based on real events, Chikatilo's execution cannot be read from the same perspective as John Doe's exceptional death. However, both ends suggest a similar conclusion: men like Chikatilo and Doe can be studied, classified and even understood by psychiatry or the average citizen but it is very difficult to feel compassion for them. It might be even argued that, implicitly, films like this are propaganda in favour of the death penalty. At least, they invite the audiences to consider whether the Christian view of the criminal as a sinner who must be given the chance to repent and the secular view of the criminal as a mentally diseased person who should be cured make sense in the face of some of the worst human monsters.

*Hawksmoor* (1985) and *Criminal Law* (1988), a rather underrated psycho film, also pitch

together a serial killer with extreme ideas of justice based on a sadistic misreading of the Bible and a representative of the law unable to sustain a sound, alternative system of justice. In fact, they can be said to belong to the same sub-genre as *Seven* and *Citizen X*, though *Criminal Law* also has points in common with Scorsese's *Cape Fear*: Nicholas Hawksmoor, a seventeenth century architect and Satanist, causes evil so forceful that it endures the passage of time and reverberates down to the twentieth century in which murder cases like the ones he committed - or might still be committing - reach the attention of his modern counterpart, Scotland Yard Inspector's Nick Hawksmoor. The original Hawksmoor's moral pessimism and his embracing of a religious cult that demands ritualistic sacrifices lock him in an insanity that is, nevertheless, profoundly rational and well argued. The most the new Hawksmoor can do before this evil is to understand the pattern, though not its real depth, and to finally see that there are no longer sides in the confrontation but a uniform and pervading invasion of evil.

A similar situation is reflected in *Criminal Law* when lawyer Ben Chase realizes that the upper-class, educated young man he has successfully defended is in fact a monstrous serial killer of women. Martin Thiel justifies his activities on the grounds that by killing the clients of his mother's family planning clinic - women who have had abortions - he is applying God's justice and claiming one life for each lost life. However, the religious strand is typically mixed in the film with a pseudo-Freudian case (Martin witnessed at age four the gory results of an abortion that went wrong and blames his mother for the killing of innocent babes and for her alleged attempt at also aborting him) and with a moral reflection about the role of lawyers. The point of Martin's brutal killing of yet another woman after his trial is to force Ben, who has accepted his defence again expecting to find proofs to incriminate him and secure a death sentence, to take justice into his own hands, exactly as Cady does to Sam in *Cape Fear*. The resolution of the plot shows Martin's inciting Jill, the policewoman who is investigating his case, to shoot him dead, as she does, to defend Ben, who finally resists the temptation to kill his former client. Despite Martin's death and the symbolic revenge of his female victims by Jill, the legal system proves to be ineffective in

controlling Martin; his own brand of justice is what finally triumphs as with his death, the shortcomings of justice - represented by Ben and Jill - are exposed.

The tongue-in-cheek confession of evil acquires more disturbing overtones in novels that mimic the voice of the moral monster in first person narratives. These literary exercises in ventriloquism are imaginative forays into the territory of evil carried out by writers stretching to its limits the power of literature to recreate the workings of the human mind. These explorations of the dynamics of obsession and evil are subversive recreations of the evil mind, written no doubt to challenge readers to feel empathy for these heroic monsters. This wide ranging field of the irreverent confession has given rise to novels as different as Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) and Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991). Between them there is a subtle gradation ranging from the pure existentialism of Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* (1990) and the relative existentialism of John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* to the blend of madness, comedy and horror in Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factor*, Will Self's *My Idea of Fun* or Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, apart from the plunge into the madness of the socially dispossessed of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992).

As can be seen, with the exception of *American Psycho*, all the novels in this list are British; on the other hand, all the films I have surveyed are American, which, together with the fact that Ellis gives the adjective 'American' a prominent position in the title of his novel, suggest that the USA is more resistant than Britain - or Europe in general - to considering evil from inside the mind of the evildoer. The paradox is that *American Psycho* is the most solid rendition of the blend of the villain and the psychopath on the contemporary cultural scene and also, within this group, the novel that best articulates the interaction between the perverse mind and the perverse society that harbours the evil monster - and that is in itself evil. Ellis' novel can be read as a black comedy, for it is a parody of *Psycho* in which the Oedipal motel owner Bates has become the successful Manhattan yuppie Bateman, a psychotic killer who cannot explain what turned him into the monster he is, despite his ironic insistence on something that could have happened in his Harvard

years. Nothing in Bateman's privileged background explains why he kills with such sadism, although at one point he speaks of his need for love - possibly another of Ellis' ironic reversals of common sense beliefs held by society. Class is important in *American Psycho*, as, first, the novel attacks America through the exposure of its yuppie elite in the 1980s and, second, because Bateman differs from upper-class villains like Trammell or Thiel in his lacking the will to carry out definite plans. He kills on impulse like the working-class evil monsters of the slasher films, though despite his taste for popular culture - mainly pop music, and horror films - he cannot be said to sympathise with those below him. Bateman is, simultaneously, a bigoted hater of women and all minorities and a moderate conservative who believes in solidarity, a madman and a most rational philosopher, an evil villain and a distressed soul, an inhuman monster and any human being, which is what makes him so appealing and terrifying.

Bateman tells his reader repeatedly that there is no key to understanding his mind; the naive efforts of his secretary Jean to love him and the futile visits to his psychiatrist, are no use at all, though Bateman considers at one point entering normality by marrying Jean. The only reality in Bateman's life is that the mask of sanity is slipping away and exposing insanity. However, this alleged insanity does not prevent Bateman from articulating his pain and despair in terms that are not those of an irrational madman but those of a man daring to say what the 'normal' others cannot say; this gives his alleged madness another dimension beyond the concept of mental disease. Far from not knowing in what predicament he is, Bateman's opinions about his own evil acts are the same that any reader gains from observing his behaviour from a distance:

There are no more barriers to cross. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed. I still, though, hold on to one single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed. Yet I am blameless. Each model of human behavior must be assumed to have some validity. Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do? My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this - and I have, countless times, in just about every act I've committed - and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this.

This confession has meant *nothing* . . . (p. 376)

This confession, on the contrary, has meant much. It enunciates the dilemma that Bateman himself cannot solve: how the validity of each model of human behaviour clashes with that overwhelming pain that he must inflict on others. This is why the moral monster inspires fear: his model of human behaviour would lead to the chaos of constant pain. His cruelty and violence are what ultimately deligitimise the truths proclaimed by Bateman. Without his sins of blood what remains is a pessimistic, contagious outlook on reality, which is, like Doe's, a coherent exegesis of the decadence of the civilizing values of the Western world.

#### 4.1.3.2. *The Female Evil Monster*

Bateman's idea that evil derives from the need to inflict on others the unbearable existential pain felt by the moral monster is one of the main keys to understanding the relationship between the world of the victims and the world of the killer. Many of the fictional villains and psychopaths are moved to do evil by a wish to avenge themselves on an unfair world: they act because of a general animosity against the world in a way that recalls Satan's temptation of the sinners. The Devil wants the sinners to suffer the same pain he is suffering because God rejected him for disobedience; the devilish villain and psychopaths of fiction see their victims as either sinners who deserve their punishment or as innocents whose undeserved punishment doubly terrorises the society that made the monster. However, there is a subtle distinction in the way men and women are portrayed as moral monsters. The female evil monsters fall neatly into the categories of the villainess and the madwoman, whereas the female psychopath is, so far, a rarity. Although there may be other factors - which I review in Chapter 7 - for the lack of psychotic female killers in fiction, the Freudian model has been used to explain female neurotics but cannot, seemingly, account for the behaviour of female psychotics - at least, in fiction. On the other hand, the theory that abuse in childhood leads to a wish for revenge in adulthood also fails in the case of women: abuse usually turns little girls into women willing to endure the company of violent men



similar to their fathers but rarely results in the desire for revenge against the other sex that moves so many male psychopaths in fiction and in real life.

The vague idea of madness explains the female evil character, possibly because of the idea that it is not in woman's nature to behave violently unless she is insane<sup>1</sup>. Despite this presumption of innocence, the villainess and the madwoman are misogynistic constructions, less well defined in terms of the current concerns of psychology and psychiatry, yet they share with their male counterparts this wish to cure themselves of their pain by inflicting it on others. If they are the more threatening, this is because their anger is usually directed against men, which makes men in the audience feel insecure. Curiously enough, while some feminist critics have deplored some women's interest in art horror on the grounds that horror films and novels typecast women as victims, hence in their view it is pure masochism for a woman to 'enjoy' horror, little or nothing has been said about men's masochistic enjoyment of films or novels in which men are victimized by women. In fact, most of these films and novels have attracted the attention of feminist critics who have disparaged them on the grounds of their being misogynistic portraits of woman.

A small group of fictional mad women will give an indication of how female aggression is dealt with in contemporary fiction. Alex (*Fatal Attraction*, 1987), Heddie (*Single White Female*, 1992), Peyton (*The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, 1992), and Annie (*Misery*, 1987) are all women maddened by psychological pain which pushes them to act desperately and aggressively against victims with whom they have an ambivalent love-hate relationship. These women find themselves in triangular relationships, interposing themselves between a couple, even when the triangle is as unconventional as that of writer Paul Sheldon, his star character Misery and his number one fan, Annie. The idea of replacing the 'normal' woman is central for Alex, Heddie and Peyton, so that they actually focus their hatred on another woman they may even admire or envy, whereas what fuels Annie's madness is the loss of her fictional idol, Misery, in a sense the woman she most

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<sup>1</sup>As far as I know, only *Natural Born Killers* claims that a woman who has been abused can also vent her rage on society by killing indiscriminately, though here she is presented always in the company of her boyfriend; the film was derided by feminists who claimed that Mallory was a not a credible female character.

admires. The intrusion of the madwoman into the middle-class home of her victim is also important in these films, though it is also reversed in *Misery* by the accidental invasion of the home of his fan Annie by middle-class writer Paul Sheldon.

There is no one, single moral point of view unifying the construction of the fictional madwoman. Madness is justified in these stories by a variety of reasons. Thus, for instance, Alex is a successful career woman who cannot cope with the stress of being abandoned by the latest married man she has seduced. The moralistic reading of *Fatal Attraction* did not escape its many detractors: the film condemned the double standard of morality, which makes male infidelity more tolerable than female infidelity, but did so by stressing the risks run by men when having affairs with women who might turn out to be mentally unbalanced. The film in fact decries the single woman's free choice of sexual partner and rewards the endurance of the wife who loyally supports her husband despite the consequences of his infidelity. The misogynistic presentation of Alex as a monster whose only function is killing her callous lover and destroying his family prevents a deeper consideration of her lover's morality. Despite having been warned by Alex of the possible consequences of his acts, her lover chooses to have sex with her without ever acknowledging his betrayal of his family. In a first version that was rejected after several test screenings previous to its release, Alex was seen to commit suicide with a knife with her lover's fingerprints, a proof sufficient to sentence him for life. This end, which was found too disturbing by the men in the audience, was finally rejected, and replaced by another, showing his and his wife's killing of Alex in self-defence.

Heddie and Peyton intrude in the lives of their victims because of a past trauma that justifies only vaguely why they kill. Heddie is traumatised at age nine by the loss of her identical twin, accidentally drowned, and seeks in her flatmates a new twin to replace the missing sister. When, Allie, her newest flatmate, is horrified by the progressive transformation of Heddie into her twin (she imitates Allie's hairstyle and clothes) and Heddie's manipulation of her personal life, a confrontation ensues, which ends with Allie's killing of Heddie in self-defence. *Single White Female* is based on the motif of the double and on countless stories about twins, for which it is comparable to

*Dead Ringers*. However, it also belongs to a distinct group of films made at the turn of the decade, dealing with the intrusion of strangers into middle-class environments, and including among others *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*. This film also deals with the confrontation between two women, one of whom has brought about the disrepute and suicide of the other's husband - a gynaecologist - after accusing him of having sexually abused her, as he actually had. Peyton, this man's distressed wife miscarries as a result of the events and she plans an elaborate scheme to become first, the nanny of Claire's newly born baby and, later, the new mother and wife in the family. *Single White Female* and *The Rock that Hand the Cradle* end both with the fight for survival between the madwoman and her female victim, who is weaker, less aggressive and has been left unprotected by the madwoman's previous attack on the men that could defend her. It could well be that these fights and the killing of the madwoman are attractive in the same sense in which the moral victory of the heroine over the 'other woman' is attractive for the readers of romance. The fact that Allie is a single, successful career woman while Claire is a married woman and mother of two, together with the very different reasons why Heddie and Peyton enter their lives, make it difficult to find an overt moral point that unifies both stories, or that links them to *Fatal Attraction*. What they suggest, especially if they are considered together with other films in which men are the intruders, such as *Unlawful Entry* (1992) or *Pacific Heights* (1990), is that paranoia is not a condition suffered by the mentally ill but a characteristic of contemporary American society, dramatized in the films made for audiences worried about violence and who probably feel unsafe in their own houses. There seems to be a clear dividing line between those whose privileged middle-class status makes them feel constantly threatened and those who do threaten them out of envy for those privileges they also feel entitled to.

One of the most idiosyncratic studies of the postmodernist madwoman is Stephen King's *Misery*. This novel is a gripping tale but also a deep study of the meaning of sadism and pain and, incidentally, a very poignant portrait of the predicament of the writer at the hands of his fans. The most relevant point in the treatment of female madness in *Misery* is Paul's identification of the

unattractive working-class Annie with a formidable goddess of destruction. The knowledge of pain that Annie accumulated in her years as a nurse - years in which she killed all those in deep pain, especially helpless malformed babies, dying old people and the victims of car crashes - is applied in her nursing back Paul to life after a car accident lands him at her door. The relationship between Paul and Annie passes from love to hate when Annie discovers that Paul has killed her beloved heroine Misery in the last novel of the series. Annie reacts to what is for her a moral injury by transforming her power to heal her prisoner's wounds into formidable power to administer pain at will. His physical pain is thus an extension not only of the deeper disturbance in her mind but of the immediate pain she feels at the loss of the consolatory fantasy that Misery was. The bone of contention between Paul and Annie is the new Misery novel that he is forced to write to keep pain at bay, although in the course of his accidental impersonation of Scheherezade, Annie rewards his attempts at subverting her view of Misery with the amputation of a foot and a thumb, mutilations that symbolize Paul's castration as a man and as a writer.

Paul's discovery of a scrapbook in which Annie keeps a record of all the deaths she has caused allows him to understand that Annie's killings of the healthy and the unhealthy responded to "her deepening psychotic spiral" which caused her "to see all of them as poor, poor things" (p. 214). The scrapbook also reveals that Annie was tried for the death of several infants but was declared innocent because of lack of evidence, a point that stresses once more the failure of justice to deal with evil. Yet all this recital of atrocities is never accompanied with an explanation as to why Annie acted in this way, except for the bogus suggestion that she pitied those she killed. At the end of the novel, only Paul's fevered deliriums about Annie's being a goddess of destruction who demands human sacrifices to appease her sense of the futility of life remains, together with her image as Paul's terrible muse. Even though with Annie's destruction Paul frees himself from the obligation of having to return to Misery, he does publish *Misery's Return*, possibly as a secret homage to the misery out of which writing emerges, before embarking on the re-writing of the mainstream novel that he was taking to his publisher when the accident happened and that was

destroyed by Annie. Annie transcends, thus, the (mad)woman to become the goddess, a type of pagan goddess (like the Babylonian Ishtar and the Egyptian Sekhmet) who once symbolized the arbitrariness of pain, suffering and death, and who was actually derived from a distorted view of the prehistoric Earth goddess. Madness and terrible divinity find thus a new incarnation in the female evil monster of the 1980s and 1990s.

#### 4.1.3.3. *The Existential Moral Monster*

Three recent novels - Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* and Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* - focus on the predicament of a man whose whole life is altered by a murder he commits. Although the reasons for this murder are diverse, these three novels present evil as the crossroads between accident and fate, rejecting the notion that evil acts invariably point to the existence of an evil agent. McCabe's novel emphasises the role of the degraded family background in the transformation of the unstable child into the adult murderer, and is thus comparable, up to a point, to Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*. Nonetheless, since Francie Brady writes his memoirs in the institution where he is confined - a prison or a psychiatric hospital - *The Butcher Boy* is also similar in tone and intention to Banville's *The Book of Evidence*. Actually, these three novels and others which also present murder from the evil monster's point of view could be grouped together under the generic label of 'books of evidence', since they purport to be the testimony that the killer offers society to judge him. McCabe's, Banville's and McEwan's work depict the innocence of the killer in different shades: Francie, the evil monster in the first novel, is a man whose unhappy life and disturbed mind are seen to lead inevitably to an absurd but not less tragic murder. In the second the murderer's background is not as unhappy, but Freddie is also entangled in a mixture of fatalism and absurdity at the time when he kills a woman. McEwan's Leonard breathes the same corrupt atmosphere for just a very short time, yet his fatal killing of a man condition his life for ever.

The marketing strategies for selling contemporary novels work in mysterious ways, as can

be seen from a comparison of the cover of *The Butcher Boy* with that of *The Wasp Factory*. Even though both novels are very similar in content (both narrate the passage from childhood to adolescence of a very disturbed child who kills) and even in tone (both are first person narratives, with an explosive mixture of amoral callousness and black comedy), the publishers of Banks' novel have placed before the actual text a collection of very negative reviews received by the book. In contrast, the very cover of *The Butcher Boy* - shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1992 - contains not less than eight recommendations of the book, without counting those on the back cover and on the initial pages. Curiously enough, one of those notices even links McCabe's book to Banks' on the grounds that both books can be said to be studies in derangement that contemplate how the naughty little boy becomes the evil adult monster. An issue that deserves more attention is why literary reviewers and critics praise as good literature the writers' impersonation of the madman and to what extent this type of novel is valued because of the proficiency shown by the different writers in the exercise of ventriloquism without real regard to its actual horrific content. It could well be that there are, in relative terms, so many 'books of evidence' *because* they are regarded as literary exercises that put to test the skills of the writer, and not so much because there is a genuine interest in exploring the roots of evil. Furthermore, since most of them are first person narratives, it is extremely difficult to judge whether these confessional novels reflect the author's moral abhorrence of the monster s/he has given voice to. In fact, it could even be argued that novelists choose the first person narrator so as to delegate in the reader the responsibility of making any moral judgements about these monsters of evil.

*The Butcher Boy* runs through the whole gamut of factors considered as the main reasons why evil arises, beginning with the negative influence of parents. Francie's father is a failure and a drunkard, while his mother suffers from depressions and dies by her own hand. The neglected Francie stands only one chance of redemption in his friendship with a middle-class boy, Joe, but when Joe prefers another middle-class boy (Philip Nugent) as his new companion, Francie's life is doomed. Mrs Nugent's profound dislike of Francie and his family symbolizes for him the rejection

of all society. This is the reason why she becomes for the teenage Francie a scapegoat on which to vent his mounting rage and pain through the gruesome murder that lands him in prison or, perhaps, in the same psychiatric hospital, where his mother was once an inmate, for life. Yet, for all the detailed circumstances of the petty conflicts between children that form the basis of Francie's animosity against Mrs. Nugent and society in general, the theory that an unfavourable family background determines the emergence of aggressive psychosis or, put plainly, evil, only manages to shift the question of why individuals commit evil crimes onto the shoulders of society as a whole. Not all unfortunate children become killers in adult life, nor have all adult killers been unhappy children. Francie's own 'book of evidence' is valuable as a description of how reality appears to the mind of a psychotic, of somebody who cannot keep a clear distinction between reality and fiction; however, since it is literary fiction and not the genuine autobiography of a psychotic it is impossible to decide to what extent this and the many other similar novels are offering a true portrait of madness and evil or a fabrication based on stereotypical ideas.

*The Book of Evidence* contains the version of events that the convicted murderer Freddie Montgomery has not been allowed to deliver in court. A pressing need for money leads Freddie to attempt the robbery of a painting owned by a friend, but when he is discovered by a maid a series of absurdities end in her death. Freddie's version rejects not only the pseudo-Freudian interpretation of his act suggested by his lawyer and any other interpretation of his case proposed by those he calls amateur psychologists, but also the sensationalist representation of him by the media. Freddie claims that far from being the cold-blooded beast described by the media, he is the victim not of the Beast inside but of 'the inner man', a Mr. Hyde imagined by Freddie as a fat, vulgar man he has nicknamed Buster. Freddie's inner man is not literal, but a symbol that allows him to dissociate himself from the crime and, what is more significant, from his companions in prison, whom he calls monsters. The dissociation of the outer from the inner man is ambivalent, because although Freddie claims that the crime happened after the onset of his inner split, his arrest allows him to abandon with evident relief the mask of normality he had been wearing

throughout his life, becoming, as he says, human for the first time. The emotional detachment with which he follows his own trial and his insistence on the idea of having become a stranger to himself strongly recall those of Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus *L'Étranger* (1942), a text fundamental in understanding the moral nihilism of the contemporary 'books of evidence'. Like Meursault's, Freddie's crime is not a matter of moral choice but a proof of how the banality of death envelops victims and murderers. Obviously, the problem with this attitude is that it silences the suffering of the victim, exonerating the evildoer without explaining why not everybody indulges in the same trigger-happy philosophy of life. Nevertheless, while Meursault hardly thinks of his victim as he awaits the day of his execution, Freddie comes to the conclusion that the only way in which he can redeem his sin is by living for him and for her.

This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible. What I told that policeman is true - I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive. And so my task now is to bring her back to life. (p. 15)

The undeserving victim is thus partly vindicated by her murderer but only because he also vindicates her partial guilt - her not resisting him - and his own partial innocence, based on his construction of the inner man and on his dissociation from the crime. Evil, however, remains unexplained and so does the suffering of the victim.

Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* is a grim version of *Casablanca* (1942) - a point accentuated by the choice of Isabella Rossellini (Ingrid Bergman's daughter) to play the role of Maria in the film adaptation. Instead of the street-wise Rick, McEwan's novel has a less heroic protagonist, an unglamorous young Englishman posted to Berlin in the 1950s, infatuated with a German woman, Maria, whose jealous estranged husband, Otto, is eventually killed by the couple in self-defence. Although the plot is not especially original, its main interest lies in how the ordinary Leonard and Maria cope with the moral guilt of having killed a human being and with the memory of the gruesome moment of the killing and its aftermath. In fact, the price they pay for digesting this



unexpected intrusion of violence into their lives is a long separation that in the novel ends with the hope of immediate reunion and that in the film adaptation is compared, of all things, with the reunification of the two Germanys that forms the background of Maria and Leonard's meeting after thirty years.

Up to a point, Otto's murder prevents Leonard's degradation by putting an abrupt end to Leonard's dangerous fantasies, in which he imagines himself as a soldier raping the conquered Maria, symbolizing all of Germany. For a brief period, there is no difference whatsoever from Maria's point of view between the brutal husband and the gentle lover suddenly forcing upon her his fantasies of rape. Maria shows Leonard how thin the dividing line between the monstrous man and the innocent is, and how his potential for evil is in fact greater than Otto's: Leonard is trying unconsciously to destroy Maria while teaching her to trust him, whereas Otto's violence is part of an impersonal hatred easier to foresee and deflect because of his alcoholism and because the abuse that Maria had endured from him was physical rather than psychological. Although Maria and Leonard are helped by Leonard's superior, Colonel Glass, whom Maria ends up marrying, they do not really overcome their fall but remain in a kind of moral limbo, not having been allowed to present their own 'book of evidence'. As he awaits his arrest, Leonard's feelings are remarkably alike to those of Freddie Montgomery and summarise the attitude of the contemporary existentialist moral monster:

He was innocent, that he knew. Why then should his hands shake? Was it fear of being caught and punished? But he wanted them to come, and quickly. He wanted to stop thinking the same thoughts over, he wanted to speak to someone official and have his words written down, typed up for his signature. He wanted to set out the events, and make known to those whose job it was to have truths officially established how one thing had led to another, and how, despite appearances, he was no monster, he was not a deranged chopper-up of citizens, and that it was not insanity that caused him to haul his victim around Berlin in two suitcases. (p. 216)

If neither insanity, nor moral monstrosity, but only the string of accidents that put the murderer and the victim in the same path can account for the brutality of Otto's death and his dismemberment, there is no other possibility but to conclude that evil is a form of fatalism, another of the accidents

of life. The renewal of Maria and Leonard's love at the end of the story marks the end of their purgatory and suggests that while convicted criminals like Freddie or Francie may be forced to feel the weight of their evil actions by the system of justice for a very long time, without the impositions of the law, which Maria and Leonard escape, moral guilt subsides and finally disappears, together with the memory of the victim.

## 4.2. *Watching Evil, Acting Evil*

### 4.2.1. *The Theory of Copycat Behaviour and the Role of the Censors and Critics as Moral Guardians*

Considerable amounts of research have been undertaken on novels and films about monstrosity analyzing their process of creation, their critical reception and their subsequent impact on their cultural context. However, very little research has been carried out at the level of consumption. Researchers may use reliable data about the systems of production and marketing of books and films, but we are forced to rely on intuition and personal impressions when discussing the actual effect of books and films on the general public. This is why the allegations about the harmful effects of films and novels dealing with evil monsters must be considered with a certain wariness. In general terms, it can be said that the theory of copycat behaviour, that is to say, the claim that some cultural products dealing with the monster of evil (from films to comics) may invite morally unsound people to imitate the monster and do evil, has no statistical or scientific validity whatsoever. As a matter of fact, it is the fruit of a biased moral judgement passed on to those who consume these products by critics and reviewers who, rather than limiting themselves to defending artistic principles, are defending conservative moral and class principles.

The moral monster is ubiquitous in the films and novels of the 1980s and 1990s, appearing in all genres, in the mainstream and in works of diverse artistic quality within each category. The critical reception of each of the texts surveyed in this chapter has been conditioned, above all, by the idea that good art bolsters good morals. In general terms, novels and films judged

to be bad art have been also disparaged because of their alleged defense of evil and, what is more, it has been assumed that first, their audiences and readers were likewise immoral and, second, that they were at the greatest risk of becoming agents of evil in real life because of the influence of those works. In contrast, good art about moral evil has been praised by reviewers and critics, and its possible moral influence has been characteristically considered positive. Furthermore, those who appreciate the films and novels acclaimed as good art have been seen as a separate audience from those who seemingly 'enjoy' their self-imposed diet of bad art and bad morals. In fact, this limited view fails to account for two important points: first, why the same novel or film about evil monsters can have opposite effects depending on the morality of the viewer/reader and second, why such sweeping assumptions are made when in fact very little reliable information about who the actual viewers/readers of these 'immoral' works is available. Grahame Murdock (1984: 66) observes that "despite the massive amounts of time and money invested in trying to find out, we simply do not know enough about the tangled links between what people watch and how they think and behave." He adds that so far, all the research has been carried out in the artificial environment of the psychology laboratory, mainly with university students as subjects who are by no means representative of all film audiences. Most contemporary criticism and censorship (masked with euphemisms such as 'film classification'<sup>1</sup>) is based, however, on the supposition that the ways in which people are affected by certain kinds of fiction can be predicted. This behaviourist theory of morality has many drawbacks and cannot be sustained for lack of consistent evidence.

An instance of the ambiguity of the responses elicited by the moral portrait of the evil monster is the reception of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). This film has been regarded as a masterpiece and has been commended for its sound morality - the Jewish World Congress has even suggested that seeing it is a duty for all, as a sign of respect for the Jewish victims of

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<sup>1</sup>The British Board of Film Censorship became in 1985 the British Board of Film Classification when it was felt that censorship was a term too strongly objected against by liberal segments of society. Despite its change of name the BBFC's attributions are now the same of the period before 1985 and include expunging certain shots or scenes from the films it classifies.

Holocaust. The sanctioned morals of the film did not prevent, however, some groups of young Neo-nazis from causing incidents in a few German cinemas, due to their enthusiastic reception of the impressive portrait of a veritable evil monster, the Nazi Amon Goeth played by British actor Ralph Fiennes. Indeed, few critics failed to notice how appealing this character was, as Spielberg has given a human dimension to the evil acts of the Nazis lacking in other works about the Holocaust. In the case of *Schindler's List* it is safe to assume that the presence of the evil monster and the horror of his actions ensure a cathartic reaction that shocks the horrified and tearful audiences into an awareness of the reality of evil, especially as the events narrated by the film are based on real life events. The presence of the moral monster in fiction is, therefore, tolerable provided its defeat reinforces the belief in the fundamentally good nature of people, a point that Spielberg makes only at the cost of ignoring Thomas Keneally's insistence in the original novel on the arbitrary boundaries between virtue and vice. A sign of the moral pessimism of the 1980s and 1990s is that both Spielberg and Keneally wonder in their respective versions why Oskar Schindler chose to be good, when being evil seemed the easy path. The cathartic value of both the film and the novel lies therefore in the exploration of that moral dilemma, which reflects substantially contemporary common sense beliefs about evil.

How does the morality of *Schindler's List* relate to the alleged immorality of films and novels of lower artistic quality and of, allegedly, lower morals? When faced with so-called splatter films such as Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1983) or Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (1992) in which all that seems to concern the filmmaker is depicting gory scenes against a background of sadistic amorality, it may be thought that there is a point in decrying the moral standards of their audiences. Although there are no reliable statistics about who those audiences are, the overall impression (taken from observant critics in their forays into cinemas and video-clubs) is that they are young, relatively uneducated, mostly working-class and, possibly, too numb emotionally to appreciate Keneally or Spielberg's *Schindler's List* or similar artistic, moral works. Despite the fact that there is virtually no research on how teenagers themselves understand horror fiction and why they see or read it, nor

on who the adults consuming that kind of fiction alone at home on the video are, many critics have argued that the low moral standards of teenagers are the result of their unhealthy diet of horror. Few researchers have faced the question of whether this teenage pleasure for extreme forms of evil monstrosity is, in fact, a way of rebelling against the adults' somewhat hypocritical insistence on morality. Slasher and splatter films often allow teenagers a (nervous) laugh at the adult, serious, moral view of the world that has ceased making sense for them and which they know to harbour a greater share of evil than many people would care to acknowledge. These films confirm their belief in the widespread existence of evil and dramatize the weakness of their positions in a world in which adults criticize the (un)artistic tastes of the young and their loss of morality without judging first their own role in shaping the worldview of the younger generation.

This point is discussed by Jeffrey Sconce in his comparison of the critical reception granted to the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series with that given to *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*. According to Sconce, even though *Henry* presents a stark portrait of irredeemable evil against a realistic background potentially more likely to affect its audience negatively than the grotesque fantasy of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, the former has won its director, John McNaughton, a reputation as a respected artist, while the latter has been systematically decried as part of the diet of immorality and inanity on which young audiences feed. Sconce attributes these contrasted critical opinions to the fact that adult critics can understand the artistic strategies of *Henry*, which is a horror art-house film, but do not master the codes to correctly read the horror films teenagers appreciate. They resort then to condemning their quality and their morality, and by implication the morality of their audience and its capacity to emit valid critical judgements:

What is at stake in valuing one film or another, or even in attempting to define systematically a group of films, is a struggle over cultural meaning and power. Just as representation, enunciation, and identification are political processes, so too are the cultural classification and evaluation of texts. To say that one film is "good" horror and the other is not, or even to say that one film is horror and the other is not, presents a situation where a critic occupying a certain social and cultural position passes judgement on the viewing experiences and values of other social groups. (Sconce, 1993: 119)

The paradox of the conservative position of most film critics is that it fails to acknowledge the fact that Freddy Krueger and Henry are evil monsters born of the same pessimistic moral background who could be better understood together. Instead, the artificial discrimination between art and sub-art horror films supposes that only adult, mature audiences who understand art can deal with the presence of evil in fiction, wrongly presuming that younger audiences do not have the same capacity. In fact, it would be more accurate to speak of morally mature or immature viewers and readers on an individual basis since, as reality sadly proves every day, evil acts are caused by people of all social classes and ages.

In this particular case it is also necessary to stress that *Henry's* moral nihilism sharply differs from the Manichaeian values of most horror films for teenagers. These generally achieve a cathartic effect frequently thanks to a particular sense of humour that its audience hardly ever misses and that also helps them to draw the line between fiction and reality. The more artistic texts, such as *Henry* or the novel *American Psycho*, are much more difficult to read precisely because they rely on the sophistication of their viewers and readers, who are invited to judge by themselves the evil acts they witness. It could be argued that many contemporary film directors and novelists miscalculate the powerful effect their products may have on impressionable audiences, by which I do not mean exclusively young audiences but also those adults who cannot cope with the representation of evil and monstrosity in fiction. The deeply moral exposure of evil in both *Henry* and *American Psycho* can be easily mistaken for an endorsement of the evil monster by both teenagers and adults who do not master the codes to interpret fictional horror, though only those who are already inclined to doing evil will imitate the exploits of Henry and Bateman in real life. It might be the case that in some extreme circumstances reading a certain novel or seeing a certain film awakens the capacity to do evil we all have, yet if this is the case, the novel or the book will be in all likelihood just the straw that breaks the camel's back and not the reason why a perfectly ordinary person may become a mass murderer overnight.

How to write moral works at the end of the twentieth century, avoiding the pitfalls of

sentimental smugness and the callousness of postmodernist irony is the question faced by filmmakers like John MacNaughton and writers like Brett Easton Ellis. The answer they and many others have given to this dilemma is the direct depiction of the evil monster without any moral comment, a model which is particularly difficult to interpret. This confusion about the actual effects of films and novels dealing with monstrosity is due to the fact that there is considerable perplexity about how positive values should be represented in fiction. The most widespread theory in this regard is that positive moral values ought to be reinforced by offering fictional examples of good behaviour, especially of good behaviour of people resisting evil and being rewarded for this. Yet this model has become outmoded in the 1980s and 1990s in so-called 'high-art', basically because of the negative critical attitude towards sentimentalism and because of the appeal of irony among postmodernists, which have resulted in the deconstruction and rejection of the language of sentimentalism. "In the twentieth century" Jane Todd (1986: 142) writes, "when the taste is for the ironic and self-reflexive in literature, the impossibility of ironic interpretation makes the method of sentimental drama repellant. Characters stating their exemplariness become ridiculous and ... they seem opportunistic and smug." This does not mean, however, that the need for an adequate artistic code to express moral certainties has disappeared with the rise of self-reflexive irony. The postmodernist critical depreciation of the sentimental model often seems an acknowledgement of the impossibility of showing authentic sensibility in this twentieth century of horror, and in fact signifies nostalgia and even envy for lost moral certainties replaced by an unsatisfactory moral nihilism descending from existentialism.

With this refusal to take up an overt moral position, the writer or filmmaker places in the hands of the public the responsibility for judging, trusting that the public will recognise evil and will, accordingly, make the right moral judgements. As Emma Forrest (1994) notes about *American Psycho*, "the reader is assumed to be as intelligent as the author and is left to make his or her own moral judgements. Bret Easton Ellis trusts his art. He trusts his readers. That's the only moral defence he needs". That this trust may backfire was proved precisely by the angry rejection of

Ellis' book by many intellectuals and by many educated people in the general public. Why is, however, this implicit morality so ambiguous, so difficult for both teenagers and adult critics to read? An obvious answer is that there is no social consensus about the definition of good and evil, and, hence, of morality. Since there is no central moral authority - a function that used to be fulfilled by religion, education and the family as an institution - each person feels entitled to build his or her own moral system, limited only by the boundaries set by the legal system and social uses. The law in the Western countries is in the process of detaching itself from morality and of assuming a pragmatic standpoint that determines illegality but not immorality, the latter regarded now by most people as a matter to be shaped by personal beliefs and by the interaction of the individual and society. The issue of abortion is, for instance, one of the sites of struggle between morality and legality; abortion cannot be defended on moral grounds - an argument its opponents, usually religious believers, use for its being made illegal - yet it is legal in many Western countries because there is a great degree of social consensus about its convenience. Likewise, the existence of censorship - tutelage on the moral judgements that the general public might make on works of fiction - signifies a great social consensus about the inconvenience of trusting individuals to pass their own moral judgement on fiction.

The problem with film censorship<sup>1</sup>, apart from its political implications in undemocratic

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<sup>1</sup>There is no literary censorship in the USA or the UK, though there still is in both countries an organization created by the film industry itself, and formally outside the control of the government, which has been empowered to classify films since the first quarter of the century. In America the MPAA (Motion Picture American Association) performs the function of fixing the categories under which films are classified; in Britain this is done by the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification). Unlike their American counterparts, the British BBFC may not only demand cuts in films before issuing the corresponding certificate (even in the cases in which films are rated '18' or 'R18') but may also ban films outright, usually with the excuse that they are being reconsidered. This means that, even though in theory classification should work to prevent young persons from seeing unsuitable material, in fact films for adults are routinely censored. In the USA the situation is leading to strong self-censorship. In 1990 the new category NC-17 (no children under seventeen) was introduced at the request of a group of reputed Hollywood filmmakers who wanted their films for adults to be clearly distinguished from pornographic films. Until that moment the rating 'X' covered all, though people tend to associate the 'X' with pornography alone. However, films that get now an NC-17 rating are in practice treated as if they were pornography, that is, they are not advertised or reviewed in major publications and they are restricted to smaller distribution networks. Given the high cost of producing a film, this means that producers and filmmakers tend to make films that skirt the feared NC-17 rating for fear of not recouping the investment. The result is that self-censorship is preventing Hollywood from making genuine films for adults. Paradoxically, books are not classified, which means that theoretically a child would not be restricted from reading any novel for adults. Obviously, books for children bear indications of the suitable age for which they are intended, but this is not the same as film classification.



countries, is that it is based on a moral system of values that is not that of the works it judges. This may sound simplistic but it is the true root of the reasons why recent moral works of fiction are being misread as invitations to immorality or as Senator Robert Dole says, as attempts to create moral confusion. The discussion of censorship applied to the horror film<sup>1</sup> became the object of a heated debate in the mid 1980s in Britain during the so-called 'video-nasties' campaign. Members of associations in defence of morality such as Mary Whitehouse led a strong protest against low-budget horror films that could be rented from video-clubs. This campaign helped the Thatcher government to pass the Video Recordings Bill in 1984, which formally empowered the BBFC to control the booming industry that was catering to the clients of the then also booming video-clubs. This means that the BBFC - renamed British Board of Film Classification in 1985 - was given permission to censor material that Britons might choose to see in their own homes, when in theory the sole duty of the BBFC was classifying and censoring material that was the object of public exhibition. According to Martin Barker, writing in the midst of the campaign, the passing of the Bill

... represents the biggest growth of censorship in this country for very many years. First, there are to be new controls on what people may be allowed to see. And, for the first time for a very long time, Parliament is taking powers for potential state political censorship. The political campaign has been so successful and its associated propaganda so effective, that hardly anyone has noticed. (1984a: 2).

The fact that the Parliament dominated by Thatcher's Tory majority chose to set up a commission to study low-budget horror films which led to the passing of the controversial Bill, whereas the Home Office had traditionally kept itself always at a discrete distance from the BBFC, can be no accident. The representation of monstrosity in film was and is still demonised in Britain because it gives conservative governments a good excuse to show their voters that the institutions that rule the country are concerned with the moral issues that (allegedly) worry citizens most. Taking measures to reinforce censorship gives the general public the impression that something effective

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<sup>1</sup>Sex scenes used to be the main target of film censors but with the increased permissiveness of recent years, violence rather than sex or violence accompanied with sex has become the main worry of censors and classifiers, at least in Britain. In the USA sex is notoriously less well tolerated than violence. Britain rather than the USA shows a constant preoccupation with theories of copycat behaviour, especially as regards American films.

is being done against immorality and criminality, when, in fact, this is not the case at all.

Those who see horror, and its central figure the monster, as a sign of the moral decadence of the late twentieth century argue that exposure to that kind of fiction, especially in film, can lead to the imitation of violent acts. They argue that since the access to violent materials by young persons, including children, cannot be controlled it is best to censor films (and also publications such as comics) for the entire population. The active moral minorities of the USA and the British Board of Film Classification in the UK are staunch supporters of this view. Those who believe that the fictional representation of horror in film and the novel (and by extension comics, cartoons, TV series, video-games, etc.) is therapeutic since it gives a measure of the true horrors that human beings inflict on each other, are against all forms of censorship. Martin Barker (1984b) argues that we can only be shocked out of our complaisant outlook on the world by being shown violence at its rawest - though in my view it is important to note that film does not reflect violence as it is in real life but as filmmakers choose to represent it. Total freedom for the artist seems preferable to Barker, although this entails the authorities' and the film industry's trust in the maturity of the viewers and readers. It is clearly not the case that all people are equally prepared to understand the reasons why extreme fictional violence can be effectively used to denounce the reality of human everyday violence. However, defenders of the disappearance of all forms of censorship are willing to take the risk and to redirect the efforts of the defenders of censorship towards the examination of the causes that lead a very small minority of psychotic individuals to mistake reality for fiction. As Nigel Andrews (1984: 39) suggests, "art should be the one area of human conscious activity, as dreams are the one of *unconscious* activity, where 'anything goes.'"

In fact, works of fiction that are criticized (and even censored) on moral grounds usually attract a great deal of attention, resulting in high sales figures and box-office receipts, as if censorship and criticism had become an inverted index of what is worth seeing and reading. This happened recently in Britain, when the BBFC delayed the release of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* on the grounds that police abroad had linked it to at least ten killings (Lees, 1994b). The

debate between the defenders and detractors of the BBFC and the publicity that this controversial decision received in the media ensured that by the time the film opened, a few months later than in any other European country, it drew crowds to the cinemas of Britain. The reviews showed in addition that there is an important generational rift between the older, more conservative critics, who derided the film, and the younger, less conservative critics, who praised it. Although certainly there must have been diverse opinions among the audience that *Natural Born Killers* attracted, the very fact that many Britons disregarded the opinions of the BBFC and the conservative critics and chose to see Stone's portrait of evil monstrosity proves this lack of social consensus about moral values that I have underlined, questioning simultaneously the function of the censors and the critics as moral guardians<sup>1</sup>. People choose to enjoy the spectacle of evil monstrosity in films and novels because we are all potentially evil, a truth few are prepared to admit. The extreme portrait of evil will certainly affect in a negative sense those who are already losing control over their vices, but it will help those who are not to strengthen the tight reins kept on their own deficiencies because of the cathartic power of the portrait of the evil monster. Up to a point, censorship corroborates this pessimism by not discriminating between the morally immature or mentally ill people who may be led to commit copycat crimes and the average film-goers or clients of video-clubs, implying - especially in the case of the young - that the crimes occur because most human beings tend naturally to imitate evil monsters rather than virtuous heroes or heroines.

It is important to note that film (including video) and TV, together with comics, are the main targets of censorious criticism and that, in general, the theatre and the novel are free from the accusation of helping to spread unsound moral values. Speaking of the 1991 police raids on comic shops in the UK in a campaign that included threats of prosecution against artists, the

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<sup>1</sup>The release of Stone's film for video rental was delayed by its distributor, Warner Home Video, after the Dunblane 'Slaughter of the Innocent' (March 1996) in which sixteen children were gunned down by sociopath Thomas Hamilton, who then committed suicide. Even though there is no indication whatsoever that Hamilton was inspired by the film and despite the fact that no children are killed or threatened in any way in Stone's film, the BBFC showed with this decision that it backed the national moral outrage caused by the killing of the Scottish children. In contrast, the subscription TV channel Canal + broadcast *Natural Born Killers* in April 1996 in Spain, where the film has been available for video rental since January 1996 and where it was released months before it was released in the UK. As far as I know, the Spanish media did not link in any way Stone's film with Hamilton's killing, nor was there any call for censorship.

confiscation of several American and European imports by customs authorities and the seizing by the police of UK comics, Roger Sabin (op. cit.: 113) notes that "almost all of the material objected to would have gone unnoticed in a novel, and while much of it might arguably have been indefensible on aesthetic grounds, it was clear that freedom of expression did not extend to comics to the same degree it did to other media." There are two complementary reasons for this state of affairs. First, attending the performance of a play and reading a novel are generally regarded as activities in which only educated people, people who do not need moral supervision, engage. Naturally, in this sweeping generalisation there is no distinction between different audiences and readers within the wide fields of the theatre and the novel. Second, films and TV attract a great deal of media interest and are aimed at mass audiences, usually including large segments of the population with average or low levels of education, who are allegedly less prepared to make sound moral judgements. The abolition of censorship on plays and novels, achieved in Britain as recently as the 1960s, was welcomed as a victory of intellectual and artistic freedom over constricting old-fashioned moral guardianship - the reason being that 'good' works of art had finally been freed from the tyranny of the censor and made available to all. In contrast, the film-goers, TV viewers and comics readers who oppose censorship arguing that it curtails freedom of expression cannot be presented as people fighting a battle for the defence of worthy, artistic material that should be made available to all, for in many cases the censored material has not been designed with art in mind. Artistic values are not the issue at stake, but the right to choose what to see or read and how. However, those who have assumed a position of moral critical authority use the alleged lack of good taste of the majority of people as proof of their lack of good morals, purposefully confusing the defense of the freedom of choice based on the individual's moral responsibility supported by those who reject censorship with the defense of bad taste and bad morals.

The question of who is morally responsible for the work of art, whether the artist or a body of officially or unofficially appointed moral guardians can be viewed from perspectives as distant

yet simultaneously equally paranoid as those of Tom Davies and Geoffrey Pearson. Writing from a religious, nostalgic standpoint, Davies argues in his book *The Man of Lawlessness* - a title that refers to the human evil monster - that the current reign of the evil monster in fiction is due to the exaggerated emphasis that Romanticism laid on the individual and on the positive view of the individual's struggle to achieve his or her ends, regardless of religion and morality. According to him, the same old Romantic themes have returned with a vengeance after a period of apparent restraint, as if they had been dictated by the "collaborating ghosts of Rousseau, Byron, Blake and de Sade":

The Noble Savage (Rambo); freewheeling anarchism (the work of Henry Miller); the alienated violent man (the works of Colin Wilson and Norman Mailer); the emphasis on the macabre (Stephen King and James Herbert); the dreams of perfecting the world by committing crimes (Bonnie and Clyde and James Bond films); the pictorial celebration of perversion (Francis Bacon); a virtual rewrite of de Sade's *130 Days of Sodom* (every book of pornography and many news stories in Rupert Murdoch's the *Sun* and *The News of the World*); the constant streams of blood (most adult videos and almost every American film made for television); and the fascination with violence and war (nearly every edition of television news). (1989: 21)

What Romanticism is teaching to the citizens of Western democracies living in the late twentieth century is, according to Davies, that pursuing the realization of one's goals is legitimate, no matter how excessive those goals might be, and even if that pursuit impinges on the rights of others to pursue their own. The psychopath (and the evil monster in general) would thus be an extreme version of Romantic individualism, while the contemporary Romantic individual could be viewed as a potential moral monster. The ubiquitous presence of the evil monster and its feared role as an appealing model of behaviour can, in consequence, be explained by the individualistic, post-Romantic atmosphere breathed by the Western world, which is mainly the monstrous creation of the amoral artist. The solution that Davies suggests is a return to Christian values, a path which many people have already taken in the current revival of conservative religious values, most visibly in the USA, and which he recommends with an indisputable religious fanaticism.

In contrast, Geoffrey Pearson suggests in his book *Hooligan: A History of Respectable*

Fears (1983) that the current debate about the harmful effects of some types of fiction is not directly related to the rise of individualism and Romanticism but to the increasing importance of the role played by the working class in the definition of culture and to the resistance of the middle class to the democratisation of society. Going backwards from the 1980s to the 1750s, taking leaps of about twenty years justified by the nostalgic idea that 'things were different - better - twenty years ago', Pearson shows that there is abundant written evidence in each period of the middle class's fears that some kinds of entertainment might incite the working class to engage in copycat acts of violence. The first important text in this history of respectable fears is Henry Fielding's 1751 pamphlet "Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers", which is the first to link criminality with entertainment of low artistic quality and low morals. Similar accusations were directed later against Victorian music hall, the early silent films and the new Hollywood 'talkies' about gangsterism, culminating in Britain in the campaign against the so-called 'video-nasties'. Pearson's argumentation leads to the conclusion that censorship is actually a mechanism set up by the conservative middle class to control the working classes, which would explain why censorship affects mainly so-called 'sub-art' forms typical of popular culture.

As a matter of fact, even though censorship affects popular culture today more than ever, as I have already noted, all kinds of novels and plays were censored in the UK until the 1960s. What is more, popular novels such as Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) escaped the attention of the censors at a time when "Zola's English publisher was imprisoned for indecency and Havelock Ellis' clinical studies of sexual behaviour were banned" (Tracy, 1990: 41). More research is needed to establish whether it is true that the consumption of culture is always determined by class boundaries or whether, on the contrary, only a small minority consumes exclusively certain types of cultural products ('high' or 'low') while most people feed on an omnivorous cultural diet, something which would undermine the arguments of those who see a connection between popular culture and lax moral standards and that would also radically alter the ideas about the need for censorship.

The representation of evil in fiction in the last two decades is at an impasse in which the cult of horror and the culture of sentiment seem hopelessly locked. It is almost impossible to draw a line between the necessary - healthy - exposure to fictional evil, which should help the general public to reflect on real life evil and the gratuitous - unhealthy - consumption of sadism, which is wrongly evaluated now in terms of age, class and education. In fact, this dilemma is not new. It emerges with Gothic fiction, itself an offspring of sentimental fiction in which vice rather than virtue comes to occupy the foreground. According to Elizabeth Napier (1987: 143) "that sensitivity can through repeated exposure be converted to callousness is one of the most troubling moral paradoxes of the Gothic", which is the reason why she considers that Gothic fiction failed in its alleged goal of forming readers with a moral awareness of good and evil. This, of course, can be easily contested by pointing out that although Gothic fiction derives from the earlier sentimental fiction, it follows Sadeian directives as well: it exposes sensitivity and the optimistic view of man naturally inclined towards good as pure wishful thinking. The mistake made by people like Napier who reject the experience of facing the monster of evil through fiction because horror desensitises is to confuse fiction with reality. Only individuals lacking strategies to understand the mechanisms of deconstruction of the text - lacking the self-consciousness to separate their imagining self from their real self - make that mistake. If they are children, the most effective way to prevent them from imitating what they see is not censorship sponsored by the state but the participation of the parents in the decisions about the choice of cultural products the child consumes. If they are adults, teenagers or older, there is simply no effective way of preventing them from mistaking reality and fiction, except trust. The fictional monster of evil does not desensitise sensitive, sensible individuals, just as sentimental fiction does not make unfeeling individuals truly sensitive, for indulging in fear or tears for fictional events does not mean that the same strategies will be necessarily used when facing real life events. What horror and the evil monster do to audiences and readers is rather to persuade them that sentimentalism is the escapist attitude in a world dominated by the mass media's exploitation of the image of the many moral monsters who have

chosen or have been led by more or less enigmatic factors to do evil.

#### 4.2.2. *The Moral Responsibility of the Media in the Presentation of the Moral Monster*

Our ideas of evil are not only derived from fiction. The mass media play an important role in the social construction of evil. They are, however, less exposed to censorious criticism for the obvious reason that the mass media offer reports on 'reality' - regardless of how they actually exploit reality - while the artist is free to choose his or her subject, bearing thus a greater responsibility as to why some subjects are preferred to others. Philip Schlesinger and Howard Tumber have recently analyzed in their book *Reporting Crime: The Media Politics of Criminal Justice* how the media reflect the reality of crime. Despite the evident fascination with criminal activity and law enforcement that according to these authors is "at the very heart of popular culture" (1994: 6), and despite the many books analyzing this fascination, they conclude that "we know virtually nothing about what crime news means to readers, viewers, and listeners" (*ibid.*: 207). The most that can be done is to discuss what relation the reality of crime statistics bears to the percentage of crime coverage in the media. What emerges from this comparison is an important piece of information: in the USA and the UK, violent crime against the person - especially sexual crimes - is systematically over-reported in the media, while crime against property is always under-reported. Moreover:

Of the totality of crime covered by the press and television in Britain, violent crime against the person is given disproportionate attention by all news outlets. Violent crime ranges from almost a quarter of crime items covered in the quality press, through some 39 per cent of those in the mid-market press, to almost 46 per cent in the popular press. On national television news bulletins, violent crime occupies 40 per cent of crime-related items and it occupies more than 63 per cent of such items on local bulletins. Moreover, in terms of news prominence, violent crimes against the person constitute as much as 22 per cent of front-page crime items in the quality press and 45 per cent of those in mid-market and popular papers. (*ibid.*: 140)

What might seem definitive in this abundant representation of crime in the media is the ebbing



interest of the general public in everyday crime and the growing interest in more and more sensational crimes - though it could also be argued that the media presentation of crime is what is raising the level of sensationalism required to interest audiences and readers.

There are significant variations in the tone used to present evil in quality journalism (including quality press, state-owned TV channels and radio stations) and the sensationalistic tabloids which can be classed together with some TV channels - mostly private - and radio stations. Schlesinger and Tumber analyze in this regard how Gary Taken, who raped and murdered a 19 year old girl in 1988, was presented from very different angles by different sectors of the market:

For the popular papers, and ITN, Taken was a 'weirdo' or 'sex beast'. The popular papers drew a firm line between the world of abnormality, therefore, and that of wholesome normality. However, the extent to which graphic detail of the killer's sexual obsessions was employed also made some newspapers part of the voyeuristic world that they described. What was placed in the realm of the sexual horror story by the popular press was handled differently by both the mid-market and quality papers, which tended to talk more neutrally of Taken as a 'killer' or 'murderer', and to some extent, to use clinical designations such as 'psychopath'. (ibid.: 145)

This use of different terminology to name evil in the media would suggest that the reaction against psychiatry and the law embedded in the films I have analyzed is backed by uneducated rather than by educated viewers. This seems to contradict the fact that most mainstream novels about monstrosity also reject the same clinical and legalistic explanations of evil. There is seemingly a convergence of interests between sectors of the working classes and the middle classes against the minority that holds the scientific and legal power to define evil: both the media and fiction can be said to enact that conflict. In any case, the use of 'clinical designations' by the quality press and the mainstream novel does not signify a basic agreement with the view of evil propounded by clinical psychology and psychiatry, but embarrassment. The word 'monster' is not easy to use for those who want to describe human evildoers within contemporary notions of decorum. Describing a 'psychopath' as a 'monster' is, for many, succumbing to the sin of using exaggerated, colourful language more apt for describing fantastic non-human creatures. Even the moral monsters of the

'books of evidence' shy away from the word, repeatedly claiming they are not monsters, but an indefinite something else.

In any case, it would be wrong to assume that only tabloids adopt biased, sensationalistic stances in the depiction of evil. The information given by the media about the two middle-class Spanish teenagers (aged 20 and 17) who killed a middle-aged working-class man in the course of a sadistic role game of their own invention is a case in point. Since the game was interpreted as *the cause* of the crime, the misinformation provided by most Spanish mass media damaged the reputation of the many peaceful role game players all over Spain. Far from taking the chance to rectify the unfortunate association of role games with the teenagers' crime, even a newspaper as prestigious as *El País* published a certainly questionable report in which everything except the sadistic personality of the boys was blamed for the crime. Among other dubious statements, the author of the report, Francisco Peregil (1994) argues that the elder boy may have been driven mad by the horror films and books - especially "Cly Barker's" (sic) - found in his home. The last page of the article offers an extract of *American Psycho* - the scene in which Bateman kills a black beggar - and an extract of the elder boy's diary, narrating the horrifying crime he had committed, without any other comment. Nothing is said about the fact that *American Psycho* is fiction or about the place that the scene chosen occupies in the book. The immediate suggestion is that the young killer's diary *springs* from the reading of the novel, so that questions such as the boy's family background, education, mental stability and, above all, moral responsibility are put aside. Bateman is thus misrepresented as the cause and not as the symptom of the real life evil monstrosity of which this twenty-year-old killer is living proof.

The behaviour of the media in the face of evil is the subject of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and of John Waters' *Serial Mom* (1994) both black comedies that question to what extent the media's glamorising of the evil monster is the main cause for the undue attention paid to crime and for copycat crimes. *Natural Born Killers* is a satire not only against the presentation of crime in the mass media but also against the police and the prison system in the USA. Although the film

drew the attention of the British censors because of the high number of killings performed by Mickey and his wife Mallory, the film's main aim is not the justification of these crimes but the exposure of the contradictions in a society that hails the couple as heroes in the media but demands the police and the prison system to control them. Mickey and Mallory Knox are in their own view killers in love, born to do evil; Mallory is the product of a working-class home that has taught her nothing in terms of morality, except that power belongs to the abuser. Nothing is said, however, about Mickey's family background. According to him, evil people are people who belong to another species, as he tells Wayne Gale, the ambitious reality show host who interviews him in prison. Mickey's tongue-in-cheek explanation is ironically underlined by the bizarre blurring of his face for a brief moment, suggesting that evil monsters like Mickey are faces shaped by what we see in them and not by what they truly are. In this paranoid world of sadistic policemen, abusive prison governors and exploitative middle-class media stars, Mickey and Mallory seem by comparison to make sense regardless of the amoral ambiguity of their personalities.

Beyond the question of the moral responsibility of the media, what *Natural Born Killers* reveals is that both audiences and media stars nurse an unspeakable secret: they want to be on the other side of the camera. Mickey and Mallory become the heroes of the day first because they are romantic outlaws in love and on the run, second, because many envy the way in which they have freed themselves from all restraints by killing and lastly, because the long police chase and their brutal arrest make them appear as the vanguard of a submerged resistance against authority and the law, a stance secretly supported by their many admirers. What the couple achieve in their mad flight into nothingness and with their bloody escape from prison is the unmasking of the real desires of sensationalist journalism and its audience. When he is taken as a hostage by the couple, Wayne Gale, the star journalist following Mickey and Mallory's case, thinks that he has crossed the same fundamental barrier between moralistic conservatism and amoral freedom that they had crossed before. Gale declares then that he feels alive for the first time in his life - an effect that his sensationalist reports have not quite managed to achieve on himself or his audience - but

the final irony is that just as in *The Silence of the Lambs* Hannibal Lecter avenges himself by having the psychiatrist Dr. Chilton 'for dinner', Mickey and Mallory give Gale a taste of 'reality' by killing him in front of his TV camera, producing thus more fodder for the media.

Celebrity and its associated glamour have become a kind of prize that perversely rewards the actions of the moral monster. Mickey and Mallory find themselves unexpectedly in the eye of the hurricane, but the coveted public exposure may never reach other monsters, such as Freddie in Barville's *The Book of Evidence*, who resent the media's neglect. The way in which he fancies himself in his imprisonment is similar to the treatment given to Mickey and Mallory, though in their case love and not culture mark the essential difference from the cold-blooded beast:

Somehow I pictured myself a sort of celebrity, kept apart from the other prisoners in a special wing, where I would receive parties of grave, important people and hold forth to them about the great issues of the day, impressing the men and charming the ladies. What insight! they would cry. What breadth! We were told you were a beast, cold-blooded, cruel, but now that we have seen you, have heard you, why -! And there am I, striking an elegant pose, my ascetic profile lifted to the light in the barred window, fingering a scented handkerchief and faintly smirking, Jean Jacques the cultured killer. (p. 5)

It may well be that, as David Cronenberg, notes "in a way, killing someone is the ultimate human experience" (Rodley, op. cit.: 119) or that, finally aware that evil cannot be explained by external causes, we have turned to the moral monsters - fictional or natural - to hear from their lips what it is like to be evil. They become thus an authority, superior to us in their knowledge of what it is like to kill, hence their appeal as reflected in the media.

Instead of the cultured killer or the romantic killer couple, *Serial Mom* portrays the suburban mother and wife as a serial killer. Waters' film parodies simultaneously the evil monsters of the films and novels I have surveyed and the role of the media in the presentation of evil, a combination resulting in a film that while seeming a radical indictment of America is at heart a conservative defence of suburbia and its values. Beverley Sutphin, a housewife married to a moderately successful dentist, and mother of two teenagers, kills all those who do not respect her family and her suburban moral values, even down to the need to recycle one's rubbish. The

values on which suburbia thrives are attacked through Beverley's violent crimes, but since she is herself a rather affectionate caricature of suburbia and an altogether implausible serial killer, the film wittingly or unwittingly stresses the point that evil is done by other than middle-class people.

*Serial Mom* is more successful in its satire of the media. Like Mickey and Mallory, Beverley becomes a celebrity while on the run from the police to the point that her final crime, the burning of a teenage neighbour who has discovered her deeds, is committed in front of a cheering crowd at a rock concert. The trial, in which Beverley acts as her own defence counsel, exposes all the legal (and illegal) trickery to which lawyers can turn in order to free evildoers. As Beverley busies herself in the preparation of her own defence, her daughter and a boyfriend - a tabloid journalist - start running a booming business selling memorabilia and a book about her crimes while Beverley's son and the brother of one of her victims discuss the rights of TV dramatization. The trial reaches its peak when reality show hostess Suzanne Sommers attends it: for her Beverley is "an innocent woman wrongly accused", a feminist heroine and, as Beverley tells the jury, a person "as normal as any of you". Having won her freedom again for lack of incriminating evidence, Beverley immediately resumes her habit, killing a member of the jury (played, of all people, by Patricia Hearst) before Sommers' eyes. The appeal of the film is, thus, based on the running joke that, given her looks and her middle-class background, nobody is ready to believe that Beverley is guilty. Once they know who she really is, the reaction is fascination rather than fear or disgust. Ironically, even though Beverley's crimes are as violent and explicit as those seen in *Natural Born Killers*, *Serial Mom* did not create the same controversy on its release. This might be due to several factors: *Serial Mom* is a comedy produced by an independent filmmaker and not by a major studio, it is not related - not even remotely - to any similar case in real life and it was possibly assumed that a murderous middle-class housewife would not inspire copycat crimes but only wholesome laughter, unlike the bitter laughter at the arbitrary cruelty of life elicited by *Natural Born Killers*.

#### 4.2.3. *The Attraction of Horror and the Moral Monster : Sadistic Scopophilia and Empathetic Masochism*

As I have argued in the previous section, given our ignorance about who the public for the evil monster of fiction is, establishing why and how horror is consumed is certainly risky. Vera Dika (op. cit.: 17) argues that audiences of horror films "respond as a group, *regardless* of the class or the social background", which suggests that the personal supersedes the social in the consumption of horror. This is, however, debatable, as most people consume horror because of a mixture of personal and social reasons. Typically an audience exclusively composed of women will react in a different way to horror than one composed of men, gender being a more determinant factor than social class in this regard, though this does not mean that a particular man and a particular woman may 'enjoy' horror in the same way as any other man or woman.

How horror is consumed is another important question that has received insufficient attention. Horror films seem to be quickly moving out of the cinema and into the video-rental outlets, so it is necessary to know who sees this kind of film alone at home and who complies with the ritual of seeing them in a cinema. In *American Psycho* Brett Easton Ellis satirises this point by showing how his yuppie hero rents mainly pornography and horror from his exclusive video-club. While the teenagers make themselves visible as horror audiences by flocking together to the cinemas to see horror in a kind of ritualistic group ceremony to test their endurance, presumably older audiences keep a lower profile by consuming horror offered on TV and the video-club. Besides, group reactions to the evil monster are not the same as individual reactions, for there are psychological strategies for dealing with horror films in one's own home when watching a video-tape or TV that are simply useless in a crowded cinema in the dark. Seeing videos at home, holding the power over the screen and not the other way round as happens in a cinema, is much closer to the experience of reading a novel. Presumably, this must also bear a relation to the way in which the monster of evil is appreciated by different audiences.

Noël Carroll discusses the pleasure we find in fictional horror from the viewpoint of what he

calls 'paradoxes of the heart', namely, "1) how can anyone be frightened by what they know does not exist, and 2) why would anyone ever be interested in horror, since being horrified is so unpleasant?" (op. cit.: 8) The first question belongs in the same paradigm as questions such as, 'How can anyone feel empathy, love or erotic attraction for a character of fiction?' or 'How can one shed tears for fictional misfortunes?' Part of being human is having the psychological capacity to tune into the emotional content of stories about real or fictional events. Whether we are all frightened in the same way is another matter, although Edmund Burke's indications about the important role played by emotional distance might furnish an important clue in answering the question that summarises Carroll's twin questions, namely, why is horror attractive? Burke (op. cit.: 42) writes of the pleasure we feel in the misfortunes of others in his classic essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*:

I am convinced we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others; for let the affection be what it will be in appearance, if it does not make us shun such objects, if on the contrary it induces us to approach them, if it makes us dwell upon them, in this case I conceive we must have a delight or pleasure of some species or other in contemplating objects of this kind... for terror is a passion which always produces delight if it does not press too close.

This is the approach that I call 'sadistic scopophilia', that is to say, the pleasure of looking at the victims of the monster of evil that confirms our freedom from the evil we see represented. Faced with the images in the media and the images of fiction, the individual's sadistic scopophilia ensures that s/he feels pleasure - maybe the basic pleasure that the visible outcome of the presence of evil justifies his or her pessimistic view of the world. The opposite of this attitude is 'empathetic masochism', that is to say, the ability to feel for the victim of the monster of evil; this is not exactly the same as sympathy, for by empathetic masochism I imply that the reaction provoked by horror is projected towards the subject and not the object. This attitude springs from and confirms a pessimistic view of life by which we are all potentially victims of evil. Sadistic scopophilia and empathetic masochism are not exclusive and can coexist in the same individual without any contradiction, depending on whether we sympathise with the monster or the victim. When we

cheer the actions of the hero that exterminates the monster, sadistic scopophilia occupies the foreground; when we feel with the victims but enjoy nonetheless the fullness of the portrait of the monster - as in *Schindler's List* - empathetic masochism prevails. Masochism and sadism are integral parts of the human mind, and not simply perversions of it, that may help explain our reactions when confronting fictional or art horror, beyond judgements about the morality or immorality of those who produce and those who consume horror fiction.

Carroll's own answer to his questions about the paradoxes of horror, that the pleasure of horror is the pleasure "involved in engaging our curiosity in the unknown" (op. cit.: 185) for which disgust is the price, is not really sufficient to explain the attraction for the monster of evil. It simply transforms the problem of why the horror of evil is pleasurable into the problem of why curiosity should be punishable. On his side, Stephen King writes in *Danse Macabre* (op. cit.: 27) that "we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones", touching on what he calls "phobic pressure points", that is to say, the points that are reached by the creator of a horror story when his conscious mind touches the subconscious mind with a potent idea. King does not say how fictional horror helps to cope with actual horror, but since for him the job of the horror is to appeal "to all that is worst in us" (ibid.: 205), sadistic scopophilia would be the root of the appeal of the monster of evil. According to King, horror films - and by extension horror novels - present a model of evil monstrosity that is fascinating because it is liberating and because it has the power to temporarily release "the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us" (ibid.: 55). Horror would fulfil the task of controlling the negative impulses that move us to try to dominate and even harm others by showing us the disastrous consequences that the monster of evil faces. The worst in us is the capacity to do evil that requires the strict control that only a conservative morality ensures. This agrees well with the view of the fictional monster of evil as a scapegoat receiving all the hatred and sadistic impulses that cannot be manifested towards others if a tolerant society is to survive.

In Will Rockett's (op. cit.: 127) view, what he calls the 'Cinema of Cruelty' offers a view of



evil monstrosity in which horror lies "in the degree to which the phenomenon surpasses human intellectual capacities... , placing it beyond human comprehension"<sup>1</sup>. The attraction of the monster of evil is grounded on the fact that s/he questions the definition of irrationality and of intelligence, blurring the line that separates the homicidal rage caused by madness from the will to do evil of the intelligent, methodical villain. The madman or madwoman is a minor mystery compared to that of the person who chooses to do evil not on impulse but systematically, which is what characterises the genuine moral monster. Rockett further notes that "in feeling a strong attraction toward certain films usually identified as horror, audiences are seeking transcendence, or at least confirmatory contact with the sublime or transcendent" (ibid.: 6). That is to say, there is a search for a confirmation of a transcendent idea of evil that explains why evil occupies such an important place in human nature. The fictional human monster of evil is the interface between that idea and its manifestation in the evildoers that appear in the media. Neither the monster of fiction nor the various criminals of real life can be fully understood, but at least the monster of fiction provides the satisfaction that something transcendent, mysterious and sublime explains evil while the monster of reality produces the dissatisfaction and the uncertainty of banality and random cruelty, implying that there is no transcendence but an all too human propensity to do evil if the chance arises. The preoccupation with evil and the fact that transcendence is sought in our secularised world in confirming the presence of evil - perhaps of the Devil - and not of good or God, are signs of a moral pessimism that has pervaded and is still pervading the last two decades of the twentieth century.

The middle way is Eric Rabkin's alternative: the monster is a part of a strategy to overcome 'tedium vitae' through fiction. "Boredom", Rabkin writes (op. cit.: 42), "is one of the prisons of the mind. The fantastic offers escape from this prison." Since the monster of evil thrives in neo-Gothic narratives in which suspense is fundamental - despite the habitual predictability of the plots - and in

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<sup>1</sup>Rockett follows Antonin Artaud's ideas about the Theatre of Cruelty: the spectator must be shocked out of his or her complacency by terror so that facing monstrosity even in a fictional narrative is no trivial entertainment but a deep jolt that alters the frame of mind of audiences.

which death is at stake, it can be said that one of the functions of the fictional monster of evil is lifting for a while the mantle of predictability that envelops everyday life and minimising the impact of the myriad of everyday, ordinary problems, proposing instead of boredom an extraordinary proximity to death. This obviously presupposes that the audience for the monster of evil are people who observe suffering and death from a privileged distance, but who find in the monster's arbitrary use of violence and in the no less arbitrary choice of victims a healthy reminder of the always threatening presence of death. After meeting the fictional monster of evil, this *tedium vitae* is transformed into the feeling that life is worth living even if it is uneventful, for death always presses too close. Will Rockett indicates that horror enables people "to rehearse their own deaths" (op. cit.: 3) and to prepare themselves for the inevitable, perhaps by identifying with the victims. This should not be taken in the literal sense that particular forms of death are imagined by each particular viewer or reader but that our awareness that we are not - yet - one of the victims of death renews the impulse to go on living. The horror caused by the evil deeds of the fictional moral monster halts the death wish that Freud proposed as the complement of *eros* and allows audiences and readers to minimise trivial concerns, paradoxically transmitting an exhilarating, exciting view - through the visceral impact of the fear of death and the fight victims put up against the monster - of why life is worth living after all.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I have reviewed the construction of the moral monster in recent films and novels and the issue of the moral responsibility of artists and audiences concerning the representation of evil. I have argued that while philosophers make a point of distinguishing the moral responsibility of evildoers from the reasons why evil acts are committed, psychiatry, psychology and the law are confusing the definition of responsibility by failing to acknowledge that their accounts of the causes of evil do not suffice to explain evil to its victims. Taking the position of the silent victims, both commercial films and mainstream novels address the question of evil by

denying the authority of psychiatry and the law and by approaching the mind of the evildoer directly, in order to find alternative explanations or to confirm the common sense belief that evil cannot be explained.

The presence in fiction of the supernatural pure agent of evil, the Devil, is diminishing in favour of the villain, who, beginning with the Gothic novel, embodies the idea that evil is caused exclusively by human agents. The villain thrives because, like the Devil and the Beast inside, he can be used as a scapegoat in order to discriminate between non-aggressive 'normality' and the evil ways of a minority of evil monsters like him. However, the rise of the fictional psychopath since the 1960s and the blurring of the margins between this figure and the villain in contemporary films and novels implies that there is a strong reaction at work against pseudo-Freudian explanations of evil and that pure, unexplained evil is preferred, perhaps as a consolatory fantasy that will mitigate the realization that we are all potentially evil. Many novels defend the view that potentially we are all moral monsters, that is to say that within a nihilistic, existential morality we are all prone to committing acts of evil for which there is no possible justification and that it is therefore meaningless to search for one.

The remarkable interest of audiences and readers in the representation of the evil monster is read by conservative critics and by censors as a sign of the moral decadence of the late twentieth century, although unlike liberal critics they regard it as a cause and not as a symptom. The theory of copycat behaviour has led to attempts to curtail the freedom of expression of artists and the freedom of choice of the consumers of culture, even though there is not enough evidence to enable us to understand how the portraits of both fictional and real life moral monsters affect audiences, nor to determine who those audiences are. Given the success and popularity of films and novels about moral monstrosity, it would be advisable to do more research on why people are attracted to them. My own answer in this regard is that these films and novels minimise everyday concerns by putting the reader or viewer in the presence of arbitrary death and of moral horror, which, experienced in the safety of the distance from the monster of fiction, enable readers and

viewers to feel the absolute value of being alive.

