

Death and Magic in Clive Barker's *Lord of Illusions*: A Terror Management Perspective

Director Clive Barker's film *Lord of Illusions* (MGM, 1995) illustrates the prominent role that death anxiety plays in human psychology. *Lord of Illusions* is a blend of horror and film noir genres that intermingles the logical deduction of the world of the private detective with the supernatural world of the occult. The story involves a group of former cult members (Swann, Quaid, Desiderio, and Pimm) who return to save a kidnapped girl from the sadistic and supernatural cult leader Nix. In a seemingly successful struggle to destroy the cult leader, Swann acquires some of Nix's magic but at the cost of teetering on madness. Thirteen years after burying Nix, Swann has married the kidnapped girl Dorothea and has used his powers to become a famous entertainer, performing spectacular illusions. As a counterpoint, the most devoted of Nix's followers, Butterfield, is determined to find Nix's grave and resurrect him. Harry D'Amour, a private detective with a tendency to become entangled in the supernatural, inadvertently stumbles into the struggle among the cultists when he thwarts Butterfield's interrogation of Quaid. Dorothea and Harry become romantically involved after she has hired him to investigate the deaths of Pimm and Quaid in hopes of keeping Swann safe. The cultists return to their desert haunt, where Butterfield successfully resurrects Nix. Nix murderously betrays his followers and holds Dorothea captive, hoping to draw Swann back to him. Swann and Harry save Dorothea and destroy Nix, but Swann is killed in the process.

Death is by far the most prominent visual element of the film. The death imagery is relentless, beginning with the opening credits. The film starts with two cars speeding through the desert in a cloud of dust. The camera switches rapidly between shots of the cars and the surrounding landscape. In the desolate landscape we see chicken corpses in abandoned coops, a decapitated and eviscerated bird carcass on a chopping block, a dead hog in a pen, and an animal skull mounted on a pile of debris. As the cars draw nearer to the cultists' hideout, we see a young Butterfield carving a skull effigy. Once inside the cult's lair, we see numerous skeletal and death's head figures drawn on the walls and encounter a group of cultists carving meat from a ribcage. The prevalence of death imagery in the opening moments sets the tone for the remainder of the film.

The movie illustrates the powerful psychological aversion to reminders of death and corporeality. Nix's real magic derives from his ability to get inside people's heads and make them crazy by taking away their illusions and forcing them to confront the reality of the human condition. This power is revealed in the opening confrontation between Swann and Nix. It is during this confrontation that Nix tries to regain Swann's loyalty by showing him the corporal nature of people. By magically inserting his hands into Swann's head, Nix forces him to see people as sacks of excrement. He gives Swann the disturbing ability to "see flesh through God's eyes." Through special effects, we are able to see what Swann sees – the veneer of his comrades' appearance ripped apart, leaving only blurs of indistinguishable viscera and filth. Swann is disgusted by the corporeality of his friends. "Take a look, Swann," Nix taunts "These are your friends. You want to be like that Swann, mud and shit?" Swann never seems to recover from Nix's revelation, since he is plagued by death anxiety throughout the movie. Later, when Harry and Swann reach the site of Nix's grave, they discover his body gone and Valentin dead. Swann says to Harry (regarding Valentin's death), "You don't get it, do you? This is where we are all going."

Because of the centrality of death in *Lord of Illusions*, any attempt to fully interpret the movie calls for a theoretical lens that gives death an equally prominent place in human psychology. Terror Management Theory (TMT; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) offers an ideal lens for such an interpretation. TMT is a social psychological theory derived most notably from the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973, 1975). Becker

argued that “of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death” (1973, p. 11). According to Becker, the key conflict in human psychology is the awareness of a contradiction between our symbolic minds and our physical bodies – a problem he labeled creatureliness. Lurking beneath our awe at human cultural, artistic, and technological endeavors is the gnawing suspicion that we are just animals crawling around looking for our next source of sustenance or next opportunity to copulate. Echoing Becker’s sentiments, Fromm stated the incredulity of the human reaction to the problem of creatureliness, writing “Why did man not go insane in the face of an existential contradiction between a symbolic self, that seems to give man infinite worth in a timeless scheme of things, and a body that is worth about 98 cents?” (1955, p. 34).

TMT builds on Becker’s (1975) claim that through the manipulation of symbols, culture allows people to construct alternative meanings of reality in which their existence is conceptualized as both more permanent and valuable than if it were based solely on their physical bodies. People look to culture to provide symbols of their identity and value that will persist even when their body is no more. “Man erects cultural symbols which do not age or decay to quiet his fear of his ultimate end” (p. 3).

TMT (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004) is based on the premise that the awareness of personal mortality produces the potential for paralyzing terror and that people are able to function in the face of death awareness only because they are protected by a cultural anxiety buffer. From the perspective of TMT, culture emerged, in part, as a solution to the uniquely human awareness that personal death is inevitable and that the causes of death are never completely predictable or controllable. Culture acts as a buffer against what would otherwise be a debilitating terror in response to this awareness by providing a socially constructed and consensually validated conception of reality. These cultural worldviews mitigate the experience of death terror by making the world seem like a safe, orderly, and controllable place in which right living can prevent premature death. Further, cultural worldviews attenuate the finality of personal extinction by describing the means through which constituents can achieve literal or symbolic immortality.

From a TMT perspective, the horror experienced in response to watching *Lord of Illusions* is derived from the power of the film to make salient

the unpalatable existential realities of corporeality and mortality. Such an interpretation is consistent with an intellectual history of viewing horror as a means of expressing repressed fears. However, TMT differs from previous perspectives as to the nature of these repressed fears. Therefore, some historical context is needed.

Tudor (1997) suggested that one of the most popular accounts of horror involves the psychodynamic concept of the return of the repressed. Wood (1986) exemplified this approach by asserting that horror serves the function of giving expression to those aspects of existence that society represses. However, Schneider (1999) pointed out that in Freud's original theory of the uncanny, horror resulted from the return to consciousness of both repressed infantile anxieties (e.g., castration anxiety) and previously surmounted beliefs (e.g., omnipotence of thoughts and ability of the dead to return to life). Echoing the psychoanalytic approach that horror gives expression to repressed fears, author and director Clive Barker, in an interview with Paul Wells, described the goal of horror as producing "confrontations with things that we forbid ourselves — forbidden sexual ideas or fantasies, fears of death, or anxieties that we just cannot, or will not, articulate." Barker goes on to say that "horror fiction, whether it be on the screen or on the page, gives our conscious minds a vocabulary by which we can confront those fears, and hopefully, shape our world view with the understanding that they are part of us" (Wells, 2002, p.177). In his integrated-interactive model of horror, Walters (2004) makes a similar argument: "Horror pictures afford people the opportunity to articulate, identify, and manage their fears by taking an abstract concept like fear and concretizing it into stimuli that are projected onto a television screen or a movie screen" (pp. 22-23).

If horror is a way to give expression to culturally repressed topics, then from a TMT perspective, death and not sex is the modern taboo. Gorer (1965) popularized the idea that in the 20th century death had replaced sex as the most unacceptable aspect of human experience which culture must conceal. Foltyn (2006) expounded on this idea by stating that in the 21st century, the proliferation of graphic images of corpses in electronic media has occurred to fill the psychological need created by the fact that most people in industrialized cultures do not come into contact with actual corpses. *Lord of Illusions* gives viewers the opportunity to confront their usually

repressed awareness of the inevitability of personal mortality in lurid and gruesome detail.

The movie makes clear the TMT claim that avoiding death is the paramount human concern by placing the quest for immortality as the main appeal both of the illusionists to their audiences and of Nix to his followers. The relation of illusion and death is symbolized in the only on-stage performance by Swann presented in the film. The new illusion that Swann has put in, as a means of staging his own death, involves being shackled to a spinning wheel while swords suspended from the ceiling are dropped through a time-release mechanism. The falling sword imagery calls to mind the character Damocles from Greek mythology, who was terrified by the chronic salience of his mortality because a sword hanging by a horse hair continually hovered over his head. An even more striking presentation of the appeal of illusion being based in death transcendence comes in the first on-stage illusion, in which a skeleton is locked in a transparent sarcophagus. As sands from an hourglass rush in covering the skeleton, there is an explosion and Swann emerges, signifying the power of magic to prevent the passage of time from ending in death.

The idea that the role of the illusionist is to thwart death anxiety is expressed explicitly by Swann when he tells Harry that "It's important to distract them from their banality for a few minutes. It's like a public service. It doesn't mean much in the end. They're all going to die." Here magic is like Marx's opiate for the masses, except it offers distraction not from social injustice, but from the angst of personal finitude. More than being just distraction, illusion also offers hope that there may be a way to bend the rules of the physical world that impose the stark existential reality of death. The illusionist Vinovich makes this point in his frequently offered statement that there is a "narrow path between divinity and trickery." After the failed illusion, when Harry thinks Swann is dead, he takes his investigation to a hangout for other illusionists called the Magic Castle. It is here that he encounters Vinovich, who claims to bring belief in miracles back into people's lives. He states that all the saints and Messiahs were illusionists and that he can replicate any miracle in the Bible with enough preparation.

In contrast to the trickery of Vinovich that offers only the illusion of divinity, Nix has real magic, which might then offer real immortality. Barker says, "Nix is a villain I think we can relate to; he's not unlike Charlie Manson

. . . . So I thought, supposing we had a villain like that, but instead of this guy just being somebody who can weave words and make promises, he genuinely has a great power? That, to me, is scary and interesting” (Lamanna, 1995). So what is it about Nix’s actual power that makes him compelling to his followers?

The answers from the cultists themselves reveal that it is their hope that his magic means he has the power to overcome death. In one scene, while Butterfield and his associate are regrouping after Harry has interrupted their torturous interrogation of Quaid, Butterfield is concerned that Harry might continue to be an obstacle to their plans to resurrect Nix. He says that “all of us” waited too long to have the Puritan’s (Nix’s) homecoming spoiled. When asked what he means by “all of us,” he responds by saying a lot of people believed Nix and his claim that death was illusion. In a later scene, Swann and Harry are riding in a car in preparation for their final confrontation with the resurrected Nix. In response to Harry’s question about whether Swann will die, Swann replies “Oh, I was going to discover the secret of the universe. That’s why I liked Nix. He promised me all these explanations.” So both Butterfield and Swann indicate that Nix’s allure stems from the hope that magic has the power to conquer death because the physical laws of the universe that impose death are merely an illusion.

The allure of those who offer death-transcendence is completely consistent with TMT, for as Becker noted, in his analysis of heroic myths, “the hero was the man who could go into the spirit world, the world of the dead, and return alive” (1973, p. 12). There is much Christ imagery around Nix. When Swann first encounters him in the opening confrontation, Nix is floating on a structure made from bones with his arms outstretched in semblance of crucifixion. Swann and Harry first discover Nix’s empty tomb and then later his discarded grave-clothes. After he has been resurrected by Butterfield, Nix dons a white robe, refers to his followers as children, and offers them wisdom from the grave. Despite the Christ imagery, Nix is not offering immortality but death. He reveals that his purpose is not to show people the error of their ways but to murder the world. Nix states his mission to Dorothea, saying “I am going to show the world what is waiting at the end and I am going to make it despair.” Here the film offers an intriguing contrast. Although the desire to transcend death is presented as

the source of fascination with magic, the denial of human corporeality is so entrenched that it takes the power of a magician to unmask its reality. Whereas Vinovich presents the Messiahs of the past as using fake power to offer false hope of immortality, Nix uses his real power to destroy any such hope.

Lord of Illusions maintains a sense of tension about the truth of the physical laws governing death and whether magic transcends or reveals those laws. The film's juxtaposition of uncertainty about the reality of magic with uncertainty about the reality of death and resurrection illustrates the TMT assertion that the basic human response to reminders of corporeality is to seek social validation of the symbolically-constructed worldviews that imbue existence with death-transcending meaning. *Lord of Illusions* challenges the audience's conception of reality by keeping us in limbo about whether magic transcends or reveals death. The film is horrifying because it presents a dual psychological threat by priming the source of anxiety (human creatureliness and vulnerability to death), while simultaneously undermining the typical defense against this anxiety by calling into question the validity of our symbolically constructed sense of meaning about the world.

In a 1995 interview with McDonagh, Barker describes the psychological experience of the audience in response to magic. He focuses on the scene with Valentin and Harry in which Valentin performs a simple illusion by making a flower disappear. Harry's question, "Where did the flower go?" reflects the audience's reaction. The audience is trying to figure out Valentin's illusion; they want a rational explanation. The need for meaning as a way to abate existential anxiety is the central tenet of TMT. This need is expressed nicely in the film when Harry is talking to a psychiatric orderly about Jennifer Desiderio (one of the dissenter cultists who now fears Nix's resurrection and retribution). When the orderly tells Harry that Jennifer has no grasp on reality, Harry humorously retorts, "Do any of us?" The orderly is not amused but offended by this statement and vehemently corrects Harry by saying, "Oh yes! We all have to agree on what is real and what is not." The horror experienced when watching *Lord of Illusions* is a product of its relentless death imagery coupled with an ambiguity about what is real and what is not.

The need to know what is real and what is not becomes increasingly important in discerning the relation of magic and death. The movie begins with the following epigraph: "There are two worlds of magic: one is the glittering domain of the illusionist, the other is a secret place where magic is a terrifying reality where men have the power of demons and death itself is an illusion." Is Swann an illusionist or a magician? Does Nix's magic transcend death or reveal it? These are the questions that the audience struggles with during the film. Dorothea tells Harry that Swann was fond of saying that "flesh is a trap and magic sets us free." However, in his later discussion with Harry, Swann reveals that he has no hope of transcending death. Further, the movie ends with the echo of Dorothea's voice reciting Swann's saying about flesh against the shot of his fleshless corpse. The transition between the worlds of the illusionist and the magician in *Lord of Illusions* is characteristic of a pattern previously identified in Barker's work.

Goh (2000) characterized Barker's work as an example of what he labels heterocosmic fantasy in which, rather than being transported to a radically different world, the story unfolds in a series of transitions between parallel worlds. He characterizes a theme in Barker's work in which the protagonist is usually an ordinary man disillusioned by the corruption and banality of existence. After accidentally coming into contact with the heterocosmic world and being briefly infatuated with it, the protagonist soon recognizes the same flaws that fueled his dissatisfaction with ordinary reality. Goh posited that heterocosmic fantasy does not allow its consumers the possibility of overcoming moral or existential concerns because the resolution often offers no clear morality tale of good's victory over evil. According to Goh, the alternative worlds of heterocosmic fantasy are characterized by "the fascination with deviance, alterity and the freedom to imagine these differences, while reinforcing a perceived image of bleak social reality" (p.32).

The consumption of heterocosmic fantasy then serves as a means of vicarious rebellion against mainstream cultural conventions. Consuming these media is also made safer in that they do not promote overturning or replacing existing social structures. Although Barker is highly critical of the ability of conventional beliefs to meet the basic human psychological needs, the flawed nature of the alternative heterocosmic world in Barker's work undermines any call to subversive social change by demonstrating the inevita-

bility of human dissatisfaction. Goh ends by showing the similarities between heterocosmic fantasy and new age cults. In making this comparison, he draws on the work of Bozeman (1997), who argued that new age cults reject the mainstream cultural value systems but go on to construct beliefs that maintain many of the conservative aspects of the social system they were seeking to replace.

Lord of Illusions nicely illustrates the principles of heterocosmic fantasy described by Goh in that the story unfolds in a series of frequent transitions between the world of the illusionist (exemplified by the repository of tricks at the magic castle) and the world of the magician (exemplified by the cult hideout in the Mojave Desert). Although Barker's own description of his work seems to be consistent with Goh's amoral characterization, the moral impact of *Lord of Illusions* seems richer than the mere highlighting of the inevitability of dissatisfaction. In the introduction to *The Books of Blood* volumes 1, 2, and 3 (1998), Barker writes, "I don't think it's useful to judge moral import, to try to tease out the lessons these narrative might seem to teach. Though I may occasionally use the terminology of the pulpit these aren't sermons for either a white or a black mass" (xiii).

Barker's claims about his intentions aside, *Lord of Illusions* does seem to offer insight into how people confront existential concerns. These insights are consistent with the speculations of existential psychologists that served as the foundation for TMT. Several theorists have posited a tradeoff between personal freedom and existential anxiety. For example, Heidegger (1927) believed that an inauthentic life meant living conventionally according to the roles and expectations imposed by outside forces. Such a life was based on the denial of death and produced no enthusiasm for new experiences. Inauthentic people were spared from the anxiety over dealing with the certainty of death but at the price of guilt over not maximizing their potential.

Brown (1959) described this as a tension between fear of death and fear of life. May (1953) offered a similar sentiment in his description of the tension between normal and neurotic anxiety when he wrote "the conflict is between every human being's need to struggle towards enlarged self-awareness, maturity, freedom and responsibility and his tendency to remain a child and cling to the protection of parents or parental substitutes" (p. 193). The desire to tap into larger powers offers solace from existential anxiety but at

what cost? As Fromm (1941) noted, “Religion and nationalism, as well as any custom and any belief however absurd or degrading, if it only connects the individual with others, are refuges from what man most dreads: isolation” (p.20). Similarly, Lipman-Blumen (2005) suggested, “Leaders offer us various reassuring illusions. The most seductive illusion of all promises escape from death” (p. 50).

This tension between freedom and anxiety is illustrated in the contrast between Harry and the members of Nix’s cult. Certainly there are similarities. Like Nix’s followers, Harry is disillusioned with conventional worldviews, and he is searching for answers in the occult. As he tells Valentin in the graveyard, “I’ve signed on for all of them at one time or another . . . you can never have too many saviors.” The difference lies in the balance between freedom and anxiety. Nix’s followers are all too willing to submit to his toxic and eventually fatal leadership out of flight from death anxiety and a quest for his “wisdom from the grave.” In contrast, Harry remains in a state of moratorium. He is seeking some source of meaning but has not found comfort in anything he has yet encountered.

In one of the more powerful sequences in the movie, cult members are shown making ready to return to the desert in preparation for Nix’s resurrection. In one scene we see a man dressed in a postal uniform packing a suitcase; when he slides open the closet door, we see a woman’s dead body. In the next scene we see a housewife washing the blood off a butcher knife with her husband flopped over dead in his breakfast and her daughter lying lifeless in a pool of blood on the floor. All this disturbing imagery happens against the soundtrack of gospel music repeating the chorus “you better get yourself religion while the blood runneth warm in your veins.” These chilling scenes illustrate the power of the quest for immortality to motivate violence against others and offer a commentary on the inability of conventional worldviews (government and family) to inoculate against existential anxiety. In the end, Nix’s followers are deceived and destroyed. They revel in the floods that Nix unleashes, viewing them as the precursor to their salvation, only to sink to their deaths in a pit of mud. Nix shows his disdain for their blind faith in his statement, “You just waited like lambs, but alas I am not your shepherd.” This scene fits the pattern Goh (2000) presented as characteristic of heterocosmic fantasy in general and Barker’s work in particular, in which the alternate reality is revealed to have the same flaws

as conventional reality. The selfish ulterior motives of those offering salvation in the conventional world are shown to exist in the alternate world as Nix unveils his motive to “murder” rather than save the world.

Even if the movie presents the heterocosmic world of magic as flawed, it still might be instructive for personal confrontations with existential problems. Existential anxiety may be an ineluctable aspect of the human condition, but courageous confrontation and tolerance of anxiety are morally preferable to inauthentic denial. The message the film leaves us with is that what is to be avoided is allegiance to any worldview that attempts to negate death anxiety at the cost of infringing on personal freedom and the welfare of others.

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