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THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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**The Metafictional Narrativization of the Traumatized Body and Monstrous  
Femininity in Stephen King's Horror Fiction**

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Probably there is no other genre which has prompted so much discussion as to its *raison d'être* as horror literature. Over the past two-hundred years, scholars have repeatedly examined the curious nature of horror fiction, posing the question of how we can find pleasure in something so horrifying. Beginning with Anna Laetitia (Aikin) Barbauld's essay "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" (1773), various scholars have offered differing solutions to the paradox of horror, which Barbauld described as "a paradox of the heart."<sup>1</sup> Buttressing ourselves with psychoanalytic, sociological or even philosophical arguments, we feel better-equipped to defend our chosen genre from its critics.

The horror genre often occupies the same marginalized position in the academic establishment as that occupied by the monstrous beings represented within the texts. Horror novels, doubly condemned because of their blood-chilling content and their belonging to popular literature, are often the objects of prejudice. This problem is further complicated by moral issues, since horror is often theorized by its radical opponents as a source of "moral pollution."<sup>2</sup>

The aim of my dissertation is to provide the reader with a critical overview of the horror genre, followed by an in-depth analysis of two novels by Stephen King, probably the best-known representative of this field. The organizing principle during the first part was to highlight a wide range of thought-provoking critical approaches, focusing on less widely-known literary historians, whose ideas I explored in parallel with more canonized theoreticians' propositions. My goal was not to take sides with any of the approaches, but rather to outline the impressive variety of interpretive takes on horror which prove to perfectly illustrate the challenging heterogeneity of the genre. This methodological attitude, by shedding light on the multiple possible ways of uncovering various textual strata of the multilayered horror narrative, also helped to undermine the common devaluation of horror as a low literary genre. Its popularity proves to be a sign of its complexity and not its simplicity, since horror fiction seems to transmit a message to readers of all kinds.

Horror is famous for its richness in meaning, and the same applies to its probably most notorious figure, the monster, who is not anchored to a single referent: it is a polyvalent entity, which changes its meaning periodically, serving the needs of a different audiences, embodying the free-floating anxieties of the given place and time. Regarding the concept of monstrosity, I deliberately refuse to adopt any restrictions, and avoid any single notion as the ultimate definition of monstrosity. I believe that this methodological decision is in line with the malleability of this open-ended concept.

The first part of my dissertation will set the genre of horror in a literary and historical context, complemented by filmic references with an introduction into the oeuvre of the master of horror. I offer a brief introduction to the most important critical approaches and opinions: I have attempted to include all the major theoreticians whose works inspired the study of the horror genre (Freud, Todorov, Jackson,

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<sup>1</sup> Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 9. This was originally published in a collection of essays co-authored with her brother, John Aikin, entitled *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose* (1773).

<sup>2</sup> Hills, *op.cit.*, 3.

Douglas, Kristeva, Lovecraft). Beginning with a short historical overview, I trace the development of the genre both in literature and cinema, starting with the progenitor, the founding text of Gothic fiction, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765).

One of the first theoreticians to devote sustained critical attention to a genre usually relegated to the periphery of the field of literature was Noël Carroll, whose *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) constitutes the backbone of the first chapter. Carroll uses a cognitive approach and sets up various useful categories during his discussion. He places special emphasis on the underlying deep structure of horror narratives, claiming that in spite of surface variations, the stories often bear a strong resemblance to each other (he distinguishes between two major plot variations, "the complex discovery plot" and the "overreacher plot").<sup>3</sup>

Carroll surveys all the major theories when searching for an explanation of the attraction of the horror genre. Although he finds them lacking and not comprehensive enough to account for all the texts belonging to the genre, his method is useful because thereby we are given a brief introduction to all these critical accounts (theories ranging from psychoanalysis to structuralism, to theories of subversion and containment). In his conclusion, he accounts for the attraction of the genre by tying it to an intellectual pleasure, the satisfaction of curiosity.

There is a crucial point where I differ from the position held by Carroll: this concerns the human monster, which figure has come to occupy a prominent position with the advent of slasher films and various books/films detailing the deeds of serial killers. Admittedly, Carroll devotes ample attention to monsters and considers them to be the 'protagonists' of the genre. However, by defining them as categorically contradictory, interstitial, or impure creatures, he excludes human monsters, who, in my opinion, are a major constituent of the genre. In spite of this blind spot, the various groups Carroll creates for the different types of monsters are quite convincing.

In addition to Carroll's cognitive approach, I introduce three theoreticians whose views upon the genre differ significantly from one another. Martin Tropp's *Images of Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture (1818-1918)* (1990), can be best described as defined by social criticism, since he inserts his analysis within a wide historical, social framework. He argues that the widespread presence of such literature in society influenced the way people looked upon their world, serving as a coping mechanism, a filter through which to view and interpret experiences. Horrifying images, however, were not only used to describe traumas (the memoirs of soldiers is a case in point), but Tropp also traces their presence in philosophers' or sociologists' works. Images originating in horror literature are often utilized when giving voice to the fears and anxieties of a given culture, and I chose to include the three undisputed master texts of Gothic/horror literature, namely, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to exemplify how horror can be viewed as a vehicle carrying social criticism and commentary.

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<sup>3</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 99.

The same seminal texts also feature in the next part of my dissertation, where I introduce the work of James Twitchell, who, in his *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985) and *Preposterous Violence* (1989), claimed that these “fables of aggression”<sup>4</sup> are essential in the education and socialization of the young. He relies upon two important terms during his research: procreation and ritual. Essentially, he claims that the major horror myths could all be interpreted as revolving around the important question of procreation, and thus he calls them “fables of sexual identity.”<sup>5</sup> His other term, ritual, coming from the field of cultural anthropology, emphasizes the cultural function of horror tales. They are seen as rites of passage, guiding adolescents on the bumpy road towards adulthood. Twitchell also offers various explanations for the endurance of the popularity of the genre, and details the functions it fulfills in society (overcoming objects of fear, liberating people of unsavory feelings and pent-up aggression).

The last theoretician I mention is Linda Holland-Toll, who narrows her focus upon contemporary American horror texts and examines them from the point of view of community construction and how they reflect the values of community and society in her *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie: Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (2001). She defines a spectrum ranging from affirmative to disaffirmative texts, and carefully places the novels under scrutiny along that scale. Affirmative fictions tend to be of a conservative nature, and a reestablishment of order usually follows the irruption of disorder and chaos. These texts tend to reflect a positive, optimistic view of people and society. Disaffirmative fictions, on the other hand, leave the reader disturbed and haunted because they do not offer easy solutions and the problems highlighted by the books stay in place.

Holland-Toll argues that horror’s task is to reveal the unpleasant realities and truths, offering us a warped-but-true image of ourselves (like a carnival house mirror), thus shocking us into a reappraisal of our complacent self-image. A journey on the dark side could be illuminating, bringing clarity of vision. She selects various texts to illustrate her theories and also changes the perspective from which these are examined: the viewpoint of the individual, the community and the government are all utilized during her discussion. Her book proved to be especially useful since she examines contemporary American texts, among them several King novels. Another reason for her inclusion is that she deals with the type of monster almost completely neglected by Carroll: the human monster. Serial killers, horrible mob behavior, man’s inhumanity towards his fellow beings are at the center of her attention, and the overriding theme connecting the texts is community construction. Hence, strategies of exclusion are detailed (demonization, scapegoating, demarcation)<sup>6</sup> and the so-called process of monsterization is described, during which a community ‘breeds’ its own monsters, further complicating its guilt by not admitting to its role in creating them.

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<sup>4</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>5</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Holland-Toll, *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie: Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 2001), 13.

As an ending to the first part of my dissertation, I inserted a brief introduction to the work of Stephen King, describing his stylistic characteristics, typical themes, recurring characters and his position regarding the conservative v. subversive nature of horror.

Following this theoretical part, primarily relying on current King scholarship, but also employing an array of diverse theoretical approaches (ranging from feminist psychoanalysis to reader-response criticism and trauma studies), I proceed to offer a close reading of two texts by Stephen King, where the traumatized body receives major emphasis. I chose novels where the monsters are not supernatural creatures: both in *Carrie* (1974) and in *Misery* (1987), the protagonists are human beings, who, either owing to the manipulation of society or because of a debilitating sickness of the mind, end up becoming veritable monsters.

The first novel, *Carrie* (1974), is paradigmatic in the sense that it perfectly illustrates the template for which King has become famous: colloquial prose, small town setting and the sudden irruption of the supernatural into the everyday. It shows us the tragic consequences of “casual demonization”<sup>7</sup> and details the mechanism of Othering through the sad life of an abused teenager. Carrie could be considered a representative of the monstrous feminine, and to detail the ubiquitous presence of this figure in horror narratives, I utilized Barbara Creed’s groundbreaking study, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), since Carrie’s monstrosity is intrinsically linked to her being female.

I argue that Carrie’s monstrosity does not stem from her weird talent, her telekinetic ability: instead, it is her environment, the school system and her community which have constructed her as the Other, deploying various demarcation strategies to exclude her from the fabric of society.

The second novel, *Misery*, is devoid of supernaturalism. Its protagonist, Annie Wilkes, could be seen as the embodiment of the castrating mother, another guise in which the monstrous female often appears in horror fiction. The monstrosity of Annie, who holds writer Paul Sheldon captive after rescuing him from a car crash and then forces him to write a book just for her, seems to mirror the fears of many popular authors, who feel their artistic freedom compromised by the incessant demands of the reading public.

The novel’s originality lies in the fact that King reversed the usual formula of a female victim held captive by a male, and the reversal of this power dynamic can also be observed in other aspects of the novel. Annie and Paul’s curious relationship could be examined as a victim-victimizer, reader-writer or mother-child bond. The shifting nature of these relationships is demonstrated, how easily the characters exchange places with one another.

While in *Carrie*’s case bodily sensations, pain and immense power are linked to the female protagonist, in *Misery* we examine the same topics through the male hero. Through his systematic torture, mutilation and eventual liberation from captivity, Paul learns that he cannot free himself of the bodily dimension of existence and even learns how to turn this suffering to his advantage. In the concluding part

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<sup>7</sup> Holland-Toll, op.cit., 77.

of my analysis of *Misery*, I detail a real life incident in author Stephen King's life, which directly connects it to Paul Sheldon's trauma.

King has a tendency to weave an intertextual web around his texts, so most of his stories enter into a dialogic relationship with one other. Thus, during the course of my analyses, I will not limit myself to an examination of only these two texts, but I will also examine further relevant titles from his oeuvre.

Following the conclusion, I have inserted a short analysis of a novella, "The Body", to illustrate how this research could be carried on. These three texts are all related due to their particular emphasis on corporeality, the physical dimension of existence, the various traumas and sufferings the body can go through and how (and whether) these experiences can be communicated and how this process of narrativization contributes to the healing process of the traumatized subject and whether it can fulfill a "restorative purpose."<sup>8</sup>

This final text also features a writer protagonist, though he is at the tender age of only 12. The bodily focus of the story is already signaled by its title: essentially, it is a rite of passage, detailing the journey of four young friends to find the dead body of a missing boy. The story is set within the framework of a mythical quest narrative, during which the hero's development and his maturation are closely followed. It is a highly autobiographical, very gentle work by King, once more lacking supernatural details but constantly directing our attention to the perishable nature of our bodies, and to the fact that however much we pride ourselves on being creatures of the mind, our existence is grounded in physicality.

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<sup>8</sup> Laub and Podell, quoted in Ganteau and Onega, op.cit., 2.

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- “Female Masochism in Stephen King’s *Gerald’s Game*” (Gender Studies vol.1, No. 6/2007, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2007)
- A nő mint szubjektum, a női szubjektum* (szerkesztette: Séllei Nóra, Debrecen, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2007), “Női mazochizmus Stephen King *Bilincsben* című regényében”
- “Writers’ Miseries”, <http://husse-esse.hu/conferences/husse-8-conference/>
- “Fairy Tales in Stephen King’s *Carrie*”(Gender Studies vol.1, No. 7/2008, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2008)
- “In the Name of My Daughter. Female Bonding in Stephen King’s *Dolores Claiborne*” (Gender Studies vol.1, No. 8/2009, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2009)
- “Carrie: Angyal vagy Démon?” *Tudományos és Művészeti Műhelymunkák* (Szegedi Tudományegyetem, Juhász Gyula Pedagógusképző Kar, Szeged, 2009)
- “Fall from Innocence: Stephen King’s “The Body”” (AMERICANA – E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary; Volume V, Number 2, Fall 2009)
- What Constitutes the Fantastic?* (szerkesztette: Sabine Coelsch-Foisner et.al., Szeged, JatePress, 2010), “Dilemmas of the Horror Genre in Stephen King’s *The Shining*”
- “The Figure of the Double in Stephen King’s *The Dark Half*” (Caiet de Semiotică, nr.21/2010, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2010)
- Ambiguity Conference Proceedings* (szerkesztette: Jela Kehoe, Ružomberok, Verbum, 2010) “The Ambiguity of Hannibal Lecter’s Evil”
- “Distorted Love à la Stephen King: *Christine*” (HUSSE10-LitCult, Hungarian Society for the Study of English, Debrecen, 2011)
- The Iconology of Law and Order (Legal and Cosmic)* (szerkesztette: Kérchy Anna et.al, Szeged, JatePress, 2012), “Images of Lawlessness in Stephen King’s *The Long Walk*”
- “Literary Influences in Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary*” (Caiet de Semiotică, nr.23-24/2012-2013, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2013)
- “Symbols of Difference and Haunting in the Works of Stephen King” (*HUSSE 2013: Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English*. Szerkesztette: Ruttkay Veronika és Gárdos Bálint, Budapest, L’Harmattan, 2014)