



TheoFantastique is one of the friendliest places on the Internet to discuss spirituality and the possibility of transcendent experiences with science fiction, fantasy and horror in pop culture. Run by John Morehead, the wide-ranging blog is quickly becoming a go-to place for theorists, commentators and authors as well as a solid, fun read for fans who want to think more deeply about their own spiritual journey.

In addition to his TheoFantastique duties, John is also a regular contributor to the League of Tana Tea Drinkers (LOTTD), a columnist for CineFantastique Online and Famous Monsters of Filmland and a contributor to the upcoming anthology BUTCHER KNIVES & BODY COUNTS: ESSAYS ON THE FORMULAS, FRIGHTS AND FUN OF THE SLASHER FILM (Dark Scribe Press) and John Kenneth Muir's HORROR FILMS OF THE 1990s (McFarland).

DAVE CANFIELD: How do spirituality and horror mesh for you?

JOHN MOREHEAD: To begin, let me express my thanks for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you and your readers. I hope what I have to say at least gives people something to think about, even if they may disagree with my ideas and conclusions.

I find this question interesting, in that I want to respond initially with another question: Why wouldn't spirituality mesh with horror any more than it meshes with the majority of life's experiences? I think for people with conservative religious convictions, the assumption is that there are "no go" areas for the divine and legitimate spiritual expression, and horror is one of those areas. In my view, and as I've argued on my blog, this perspective is based on unfounded assumptions that desperately need to be reconsidered, particularly in light of the continued popularity of not only horror, but other forms of the fantastic in popular culture. I believe conservative religious people also tend toward fear of horror as something evil, and they lack a robust theological imagination that can conceive of the Spirit speaking in such realms. Spirituality is constantly being expressed in horror and the fantastic, and often religious people are not part of the conversation because of our assumptions on the matter.



CANFIELD: Specific examples?

MOREHEAD: To answer your question directly, a few considerations come to mind. First, some have noted the similarities between religious experiences of fear and awe and what Rudolf Otto has called the numinous and reactions to horror. In addition, scholars like Timothy Beal in *RELIGION AND ITS MONSTERS* have noted that various religious traditions have their creatures, including the Judeo-Christian tradition with Leviathan, Behemoth, Satan and, perhaps most uncomfortably, even Yahweh himself, who can be interpreted as acting in monstrous fashion in various biblical passages of judgment. Further, Douglas Cowan in *SACRED TERROR* has noted the connection between religion and horror as it expresses cultural fears.

So with these thoughts in mind, it is quite natural to find examples of the meshing of the two, as human beings express their religious hopes and fears through horror. I believe it is easy to find such examples, most especially in the Gothic horror tradition, which includes more of a Christian orientation, but also a very different kind of spiritual question in late modern or postmodern horror, which often turns the Gothic on its head by expressing incredulity regarding more traditional Christian perspectives reflected in the genre. This is not surprising in a post-Christendom context. Even so, spirituality and horror mesh for many people quite well.

As for me personally, I find the spiritual and religious questions and issues posed in horror and other genres of the fantastic intriguing, and such things fuel a lot of personal reflection for me.

CANFIELD: What about the extremes that dominate the genre's iconography? Can we talk about graphic violence and sexuality in the same breath as spirituality?

MOREHEAD: Certainly there are extremes. I have my preferences, my likes and dislikes in regards to horror, just like everyone else has. Personally, I don't care for graphic violence or sexuality in my horror because I don't find them frightening or thought-provoking. But having said that, I believe we can talk about spirituality in connection with graphic violence and sexuality; indeed we must, because religion has a long and often unfortunate connection with these things. The tough thing is to wrestle with them appropriately so that we don't have an unrealistically rosy picture of religion—any religion—which often incorporates these aspects, and to bring reflective religious convictions to bear on horror that contains violence and sexuality. How are these things a part of the human condition? How does horror help express and portray them? What does a given religious tradition say in response to this? These kinds of questions need to be addressed for those who want to reflect on horror from this end of the spectrum.

CANFIELD: Do you see these ideas becoming more and more accessible or prevalent in the cultural and spiritual journeys of fans?

MOREHEAD: Of course, market considerations play a part here. From what I have seen, teenagers are a large market segment, and they have a preference for extremes. More surprisingly, I read recently that women represent a large market in horror, a genre that used to be the domain of younger males. For some reason, women seem to have a preference for even more graphic and violent types of horror. We also need to remember that horror is an expression of cultural and social dynamics, and as such it changes over time as the culture changes which produces it. We might benefit from using horror as a mirror and ask ourselves why this form strikes a chord with many fans.

CANFIELD: The horror fan culture is becoming more and more homogeneous. I'm thinking of the packaging of conventions with film, music and every conceivable horror delivery device. Do you think there will be a place to bring in more depth of content in providing for discussions, debate and exploration of ideas in the convention culture, or are we stuck with a general partying type of atmosphere?

MOREHEAD: I believe there's a small but growing audience for more reflection on horror. I knew when I started my blog that it was a niche, but given my interest in horror, as well as cultural and religious studies, it was a niche I wanted to explore. I encountered academic books and journal articles exploring various facets of horror and other forms of the fantastic, and decided I wanted to share these important considerations with readers to make it accessible to a broader audience.

I'm not exactly burning up the blog stat-tracking features with hits, but I have tapped into a group of readers who are interested in such questions. We are in the process of putting together a small network of scholars exploring the fantastic, and I have been asked by publishers to review manuscripts and to provide endorsement statements for forthcoming books. All of this indicates that there is a growing desire to probe horror in more depth, and my hope is that perhaps in the near future, such explorations might move beyond academic conferences on religion, film and popular culture to become a facet of more mainstream horror conventions.



CANFIELD: From a spiritual focus, what were your favorite horror films of this last decade?

MOREHEAD: I am very picky about the horror that I find notable, and within that collection we find even fewer that include a spiritual focus. But a few come to mind. I was pleasantly surprised by *THE MIST*. I appreciated that film's exploration of religious zealotry, and how religion, politics and law function to restrain human evil. But what if these elements disappeared? Would we be able to act humanely in the midst of an inhumane situation? And the ending is gut-wrenching—great stuff that raises important spiritual and cultural questions. *[REC]* and *28 DAYS LATER* are important expressions of the apocalyptic from contagion. Although these are expressions of secular apocalyptic, they shed light on concerns over the end of human civilization which dovetail with religious expressions of this same concern.

If "decade" is defined as going back ten years to incorporate as far back as 1999, *THE NINTH GATE* is a neglected horror film that includes an interesting interpretation of Satan as a figure of enlightenment rather than the Christian figure of one opposed to God. And if we're willing to consider zombie comedy/horror, then another significant but neglected film in this regard is *FIDO*. In addition to being almost as funny as *SHAUN OF THE DEAD*, this film incorporates strong cultural and theological commentary.

CANFIELD: What about the new 3-D trend. Do you think 3-D really affects the way people experience horror films?

MOREHEAD: I believe the jury is still out on 3-D. It has largely served as a gimmick over the years, but James Cameron's use of it in AVATAR has raised the bar in a variety of areas, and it may be that 3-D can and will play a more significant part of the horror-film experience. Time will tell. But even if it does, my hope is that moviemakers will focus on telling good stories and not on superficial elements to hook an audience.

CANFIELD: So-called torture porn *à la* HOSTEL and the SAW series seems to have lost favor with the mainstream box office, yet many of the best horror films of the last few years have been more violent than ever. I'm thinking about films like INSIDE, MARTYRS, MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN and FRONTIER(S). Why the sudden synergy between horror films of real depth and graphically violent imagery?

MOREHEAD: I am at a disadvantage in that I haven't seen these recent films you mention. I have seen the first of the SAW films, which I thought was well-done and came across more like SE7EN, before quickly degenerating into torture porn with the sequels. But to answer the related question, my thoughts are similar to what I've expressed previously. We are in a cultural and social trend that prefers such things, but the question is why. One scholar has suggested in the GOLEM journal that, at least in the SAW sequels, such "torture porn" is a cathartic expression of post-9/11 cultural angst. This is very different from what we see in SE7EN, with its kind of twisted moral dimension that draws upon judgment against sinners *à la* medieval Catholicism.

CANFIELD: Is apocalypse the monster for the new millenium?



MOREHEAD: Perhaps one of the monsters. Another is the chaos monster. I wrote a brief article on this very subject for a forthcoming book on the slasher film. I argue that in the ancient near east, one of the great monsters was that of chaos that threatened the order of the cosmos. The slasher in horror films may be the most readily identifiable personification of the chaos monster for us moderns, but we aren't too terribly different from the ancients in expressing this fear. The

forms change, but the substance is still there.

Having said that, apocalypse remains an ongoing form of expression for horror. I recently read a very interesting book that explores postmodern takes on apocalyptic, and the author rightly pointed out that this often turns more traditional Judeo-Christian concepts on their head, as most recently evidenced by *THE BOOK OF ELI* and *LEGION*. Human beings have their myths of origins and the end of all things, and with all the challenges facing humanity in the 21st century, we frequently express our angst over how things might end through apocalyptic in horror.

CANFIELD: Any thoughts on *TWILIGHT*?

MOREHEAD: Not much. I've written on this a bit. It's not my cup of tea where horror is concerned. I prefer my vampires and werewolves with a bit more bite, pardon the pun. I know there is a great deal of debate in horror fandom about whether this represents genuine horror, but from my perspective the vampire has been expressed in many ways, some of which have strongly emphasized the romantic, so while it may be horror-lite, I believe it has to be considered horror in some fashion.

The interesting thing for me in this is the Mormon background of the author [Stephenie Meyer]. Any creator of a cultural product brings their background to their subject matter, and we should not be surprised to find Meyer bringing her Mormon faith into the story. This is reflected in the reserved sexual ethic, the strong focus on "choosing the right" and the imprinting among werewolves in selecting mates. As a scholar who studies religion and popular culture, I find religious influences like this of interest even if I am not a fan of the franchise.

CANFIELD: What about people who have no religious convictions? Why should they bother examining spirituality in the genre?

MOREHEAD: Spirituality is a pretty broad topic these days. In the past, religion used to be engaged in by people involved with traditional religions convictions and communities, whether church or synagogue. Over the years, a general distrust in institutional religions has arisen, and with it a rise in interest in a personalized spiritual quest. As this process has continued, we now find people identifying with neither religion nor spirituality, and yet still interested in things that

Beyond the Pale: TheoFantastique

Written by Dave Canfield

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they would identify as sacred. Gary Laderman has written on this topic, and he explores a variety of sacred aspects of life and pop culture, from Graceland to the undead. So even those who would not identify with specifically religious or spiritual convictions can still find sacred aspects of life that have meaning for them addressed in horror. There is also a strong bit of critique brought against traditional religiosity in late modern horror, so those who share concerns about contemporary religiosity might benefit from considering this through an exploration of spirituality in horror.

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