

# Heidegger, the Uncanny, and Jacques Tourneur's Horror Films

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Most horror films are not very horrifying, and many of them are not especially frightening. This is true, of course, of the bad or mediocre productions that populate the genre. Since the failure rate among horror films is very high, it should come as no surprise that we frequently remain unmoved by what we see on the screen. But if we are honest about our reactions, then we must admit that even some of the classics neither horrify nor frighten us. They must have acquired their classic status by moving us in some significant way, but how they managed to do so is not always obvious. We need an explanation of the fact that some of the most successful horror films fail to move us as the genre seems to dictate they should. After all, we typically think that horror films are supposed to horrify and, by implication, to frighten us.<sup>1</sup>

Excessive familiarity with some films tends to deaden our response. However much we might admire the original *Frankenstein* (1931), it is difficult for us to be horrified or frightened by it any longer. We respond favorably to the production values, director James Whale's magnificent visual sense, Boris Karloff's performance as the monster, and so forth. The film no longer horrifies or frightens us, yet we still consider it a successful horror movie, and thus not merely of historical interest for fans and admirers of the genre. We can still be moved by it in ways that depend on its possessing the features that we expect to find in a horror film.

Some successful horror movies were not especially horrifying or frightening when they first appeared, yet we consider them worthy

additions to the genre. Therefore, unlike the case of *Frankenstein*, here we are not dealing with something where the capacity to produce its intended effect has deteriorated over time. Instead, we are reacting to them more or less as we are supposed to do. Arguments about artistic intention and its role in the audience's reception of the work of art aside, we commonly recognize that a particular horror movie is attempting something besides trying to horrify and frighten us. Naturally, horror and fear are often present in us. But it is frequently the case that neither is our most powerful response to the film; nor is it always the case that these feelings are the most important ones that the film is trying to elicit in us. In fact, horror and fear may be entirely absent in us—and rightly so, since the film was not striving to produce them in us in the first place.

It is not always easy to describe this type of reaction that stands apart from horror and fear. We might resort to calling a film “spooky,” “creepy,” or “disturbing” in our efforts to tell others how it moved us. These terms are far from exact, but others agree with us and say that they have felt the same way. Furthermore, they recognize that we are praising the film with such language. It is doubtful that we are dealing with only one response, since films work on us in many ways. The purpose of this chapter is to look at the experience of the uncanny, which is sometimes aroused in us independently of feelings of horror or fear.

The most famous discussion of the uncanny is Freud's 1919 essay “The ‘Uncanny’.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the usefulness of Freud's account, I intend to extend the notion of the uncanny beyond psychoanalysis into the realm of ontology. The source of my discussion will perhaps surprise most readers, since I shall draw on §40 of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. His discussion of angst and the related notion of the uncanny, so I claim, will prove helpful in understanding one type of response to horror films.

To readers who hesitate to deploy the heavy artillery of Heidegger's fundamental ontology against the battered redoubts of the horror film genre, let me say the following: Given that monsters play a significant role in horror films, it is appropriate to investigate a genre populated by ontological misfits in terms that take their peculiar ontologies seriously. Noël Carroll has done this superbly. Carroll, though, concentrates on the emotion of horror engendered by thoughts of monsters with cross-category natures that are regarded as impure and hence as disgusting and threatening. My recommendation is that we also look at the philosophical responses that works containing such

creatures can produce in us. Heidegger can help us to understand these reactions, as well as the experience of uncanniness that can arise in the complete absence of monsters.

In order to illustrate the Heideggerian view on these matters, I shall apply it to Jacques Tourneur's horror films of the 1940s and 1950s. I shall also very briefly touch on how we might use my reading of Heidegger as a justification of the horror genre as a whole, that is, as one way of possibly understanding its value to us. Contrary to those who might mutter that Heidegger is to horror as cause is to effect, I shall suggest that Heidegger is to horror as Aristotle is to tragedy.

### **Concepts of the Uncanny in Freud and Heidegger**

Freud's concept of the uncanny is often employed in horror film criticism.<sup>3</sup> Because of the sexual nature of many horror films, it pays to interpret them in light of a theory disposed to take their sexual elements seriously. As a result, Freud's essay has been employed to explain how horror films are often manifestations of repressed sexuality (or not-so-repressed sexuality, as is frequently the case nowadays). But there is more to the uncanny, he says, than repressed sexuality.

Freud claims that the feeling of uncanniness is not to be identified with horror and fear; however, he also claims that it is related to such feelings, especially to fear. He initially formulates the concept of the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."<sup>4</sup> Freud never defends the assertion that the uncanny includes some element drawn from our past mental life; he simply takes this as part of his starting point. We might quarrel with this assumption, but any exposition of Freud's account must begin with it. As Freud's analysis progresses, we learn that the two main sources of the uncanny are repressed infantile beliefs and desires (e.g., the Oedipus complex and all that accompanies it), and surmounted beliefs (e.g., the omnipotence of thought and the idea that the dead can return as spirits). In general, surmounted beliefs are outmoded ways of thinking that are reactivated and confirmed in the experience of the uncanny.

That we once accepted these notions, says Freud, accounts for the feeling of familiarity in the experience of the uncanny: their reappearance in consciousness reminds us of our former beliefs. Furthermore, the reappearance of repressed beliefs and desires is not simply a matter of recognizing some part of one's past mental life, but also a source of disturbance, given that repressed material is always

accompanied by anxiety as it returns to consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Surmounted beliefs do not seem to be subject to repression, and thus their confirmation is not accompanied by anxiety. When we confirm a surmounted belief, it is as if, Freud writes, we say to ourselves that “the dead *do* live on” and the like.<sup>6</sup> But is this also painful? Freud does not say. Perhaps the reemergence of surmounted beliefs signifies a painful loss of intellectual mastery. Such a dynamic—we might call it “the confirmation of the disavowed”—could account for any disturbance that might be found in the case of surmounted beliefs. This type of disturbance, regardless of whether or not it is implicit in Freud’s essay, will reappear in our discussion of Heidegger.

Freud regards E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” as an especially effective uncanny tale. The eponymous figure of the Sandman, a mythical being who tears out children’s eyes, he argues, is the primary source of the feeling of uncanniness aroused in the reader. Freud interprets the fear of losing one’s eyes as an expression of castration anxiety. Nathaniel, the story’s protagonist, identifies the lawyer Coppelius, a figure from his childhood whom he holds responsible for his father’s death, with the Sandman, since Coppelius used to appear every night before the child’s bedtime to visit his father. Several years later, while at the university, Nathaniel encounters a barometer-seller named Coppola; he is immediately convinced that Coppola is in fact Coppelius, and that Coppelius has come back into his life once more to harm him. Nathaniel’s obsession with Coppelius/Coppola alienates him from his sweetheart Clara, as well as from the other people who care about him. Freud significantly points out that the Sandman always appears in the story as a disturber of love.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, Nathaniel commits suicide.

Another uncanny element in the story, says Freud, is the figure of Olympia, a mechanical doll created by Spalanzani, who is one of Nathaniel’s professors, along with Coppelius/Coppola. She seems to have been created so that Nathaniel will fall in love with her, and thus, it seems, as a test of how convincing of a human simulacrum the two men can devise. Olympia, Freud says, is a living doll, and as such she confirms a surmounted belief that is common among children, namely, that their dolls can come to life. Such a belief, he says, is an expression of an animistic conception of the world that we outgrow as we mature.

Freud’s reading of the story satisfies his criteria for the uncanny: the Oedipus complex is expressed in symbolic form in the figure of the Sandman, and the figure of Olympia confirms a surmounted belief in animism (at least, Freud would add, in those readers who still possess

some vestige of the belief). According to Freud's reading of Hoffmann's story, these are its uncanny elements. Strangely enough, though, Freud never mentions the story's most uncanny aspect: the conspiracy against Nathaniel extending at least from his days at the university to the end of his life (but perhaps all the way back to his early childhood and the death of his father).

Since neither the narrator of the story nor any of the characters openly declare that there is a conspiracy against Nathaniel, the reader is left to infer its existence. Many incidents in Nathaniel's life are best explained as elements of a plot designed to manipulate him for unknown reasons and purposes. Nathaniel himself has an intuitive grasp of his situation: he frequently refers to malevolent forces when he gives expression to what sound like the paranoid delusions of a deranged mind. He believes that these forces control his life and have some terrible fate in store for him; his friends and loved ones, especially Clara, tell him that they are merely figments of his imagination. Nathaniel considers them supernatural forces. Ultimately, though, we see that they are mundane in origin, consisting principally of Coppélius/Coppola, Spalanzani, and some students at the university. Perhaps his father was part of the conspiracy; even Clara might be a part of it, as the final moments before Nathaniel's suicide might be taken to intimate. It is unlikely, though not completely impossible, that Olympia is of supernatural origin; she really seems to be nothing more than a cleverly constructed mechanical doll. One of Nathaniel's childhood memories, which is probably best interpreted as a fantasy expressing his adult feelings of paranoia and persecution, suggests that he too is a mechanical doll (or at least that he saw himself as such at one point in his life, and thus that his thoughts about dark forces controlling his life go all the way back to his childhood).

Many of the details are open to interpretation, but by the end of the story the reader realizes that Nathaniel was right all along. He really was in the grip of forces beyond his control, contrary to what everyone told him all his life. We cannot be sure of exactly when the conspiracy began and ended. Nor can we precisely determine all of its participants. But the inescapable conclusion is that there was a plot against Nathaniel. If we read many of the most significant events of "The Sandman" as manifestations of a conspiracy, then it affects us differently than Freud would have it. Freud looks to the uncanny as the reappearance of that which was once familiar to us. He begins his analysis with this claim and then proceeds to explain its possibility through an appeal to psychoanalysis.

We rightly wonder how Freud's reading can aid us in interpreting the conspiracy against Nathaniel. The apparatus of psychoanalysis does not seem too helpful here. Freud actually mentions "secret injurious powers" as a possible source of the feeling of uncanniness (in its second form as the confirmation of a surmounted belief), although the essay nowhere reveals why he thinks that we possess a surmounted belief in such powers.<sup>8</sup> But he never lets on that he considers such powers relevant for interpreting Hoffmann's story. Instead of speculating about how we might apply Freud's account to the conspiracy against Nathaniel, I shall now turn to Heidegger. Once I have set out Heidegger's view of the uncanny, I shall briefly return to "The Sandman."

Some knowledge of Heidegger's project is required for understanding his views about the uncanny.<sup>9</sup> What follows is necessarily a simplified picture. Heidegger says that *Being and Time* deals with the question of being, and is thus a work in ontology. Past difficulties in answering the question—which stretch all the way back to the ancient Greeks, he claims—lead him to raise it again. He argues, though, that these persistent difficulties are a sign that we do not know how to formulate the question properly, much less how to answer it. We have one hope, he says. Since human beings possess some understanding of their own being prior to any philosophical investigation of their being, Heidegger believes that we can study what it is to be a human being in order to learn how to ask and answer the question of being in general. As a result, the focus of *Being and Time* shifts from the question of being to a study of the being of human beings (i.e., to employ Heidegger's terms, the focus shifts to an analytic of Da-sein).

Da-sein in its very being, says Heidegger, is concerned about its being. In other words, Da-sein is essentially caught up in some sort of interpretation of what it is to be a human being, even if its self-understanding is inchoate and incorrect. Regardless of the truth or falsity of this interpretation, he argues, Da-sein has some pre-reflective understanding of its being. Once this pre-reflective understanding is subjected to philosophical scrutiny, it can be articulated into an ontology of Da-sein that will serve as the model for raising and answering the question of being in general.

Heidegger never completed *Being and Time*, and thus he never returned to answer the question of being. Nonetheless, the analytic of Da-sein is quite impressive. As it unfolds, Heidegger argues that Da-sein's fundamental mode of existence is being-in-the-world. The world

includes “innerworldly beings” (i.e., the instruments and tools of the surrounding environment that draw their being from Da-sein’s purposes). Heidegger famously provides the example of a hammer in §15. Such things are said to be “handy,” i.e., useful. When things fail to be handy, we then see them in terms of “objective presence” (i.e., the type of being captured by mathematics and the theories of the natural sciences). Handiness and objective presence make up the realms of being of the beings that are not Da-sein. How Da-sein understands its relationship to these beings, and to the world in general (which also includes other beings that are Da-sein), is of great importance for Heidegger.

Typically, Heidegger claims, we have tended to see the world in terms of objective presence, and, as a result, Da-sein has tended to interpret itself in the same terms. For Heidegger, this is the cause of many mistakes and distortions. In particular, it is one source of the inauthenticity that characterizes Da-sein in its “average everydayness” (i.e., the manner in which it relates to the world and to itself prior to any explicit philosophical reflection on its being). Da-sein, without even realizing it, is in the grip of some self-understanding that it has failed to make its own. In other words, regardless of whether or not that self-understanding is true or false, Da-sein has never made it an explicit object of reflection and hence of critical evaluation. Instead, Da-sein exists in accordance with the unexamined beliefs, values, and choices of “the they”; it possesses a “they-self” with a view of the world (and thus, according to Heidegger, of itself) acquired uncritically from its surroundings—hence its inauthenticity.

Da-sein refuses to understand itself as potentiality of being (i.e., as a being for which there are many possible ways to live, act, and understand itself); and this refusal stems in part from seeing itself in terms of objective presence. For Heidegger, this is a lamentable ontological failure. Furthermore, this refusal is not accidental; in fact, it is highly motivated. Da-sein is said to escape into the they-self for the same reason that it flees from some frightening object: that is, it finds itself threatened. I might flee in fear from a bear in the woods. Da-sein does something similar, says Heidegger, in that it flees in angst from a threat which it poses to itself. Angst, for Heidegger, is not primarily an emotion like fear, although it may appear in the more familiar psychological guise of anxiety from time to time. Instead, it is a mode of insight into Da-sein’s very nature.

The threat that angst reveals to us, says Heidegger, is posed by our very nature; as a result, we have a perpetual motive to flee from

ourselves. The threat lies in the fact that Da-sein is a scene of possibility that burdens it with responsibility and uncertainty. The easiest thing to do is to flee into the comforting arms of the they-self and to surrender to its cheap bromides and flattering self-deceptions. Sometimes, though, we face up to ourselves and to the world around us. In moments like these, says Heidegger, we enter into the uncanny.

The main element of the uncanny is not-being-at-home in the world. We lose, so to speak, our ontological balance and become unsure of ourselves and of our understanding of the world around us. The main form that this can take is the realization that more possibilities exist for action and understanding than we ever thought. Perhaps we revise our ideas in light of experiencing the uncanny; perhaps our ideas remain the same. The point is that the experience of uncanniness forces us to appropriate or reject accustomed ways of thinking and acting. In this way, we make some small step towards authenticity.

Heidegger's style of writing attempts to elicit the uncanny in us. In §7 he says that we lack both the words and the grammar for the project that he envisions. His esoteric language is supposed to jolt us out of the philosophical complacency we have inherited from our predecessors. Part of the intent of *Being and Time* is to effect the very transformation in the reader that Heidegger advocates throughout the book, namely, the movement from inauthenticity to authenticity. His writing style has probably revolted as many readers as it has attracted, but it is always motivated by an important element of the project.

Heidegger never explicitly associates the style of *Being and Time* with the goal of provoking uncanniness in us. Furthermore, he gives no concrete examples of uncanniness, nor does he provide criteria for recognizing it. He leaves it to us to experience and explain it for ourselves. My contention is that works of art can arouse Heideggerian uncanniness in us. If we interpret "The Sandman" in a Heideggerian spirit, especially the conspiracy that Freud overlooked, we can see why this is so.

Hoffmann draws us into a vividly rendered life that is destroyed by mysterious forces for no apparent reason. The conspiracy is so vast that it undoes our ordinary notions of the world around us. It hardly seems possible, yet by the end of the story we must entertain the thought of its reality in order to make sense of Hoffmann's tale; otherwise, too much goes unexplained. But such a thought is greatly disturbing. This is not merely because Nathaniel is a sympathetic character who comes to harm, but also because the very context of his life resists

comprehension. Who could do such terrible things to him? And why? We hesitate to think that there can be such people, yet we must imagine that they exist in the world that Nathaniel inhabits, if not in our own. To think this, though, is to entertain the revision of some of our fundamental notions about our fellow human beings and about how to live our lives. The world slips from our grasp. Furthermore, this is so even if the story contains no supernatural elements at all. In fact, the shock caused by the thought of a vast conspiracy against Nathaniel might be lessened if we imagined that supernatural agency was also involved in his undoing.

But, of course, Hoffmann's story is only a story. We know this, and so it is unlikely to cause us to revise our actual thinking. Nonetheless, we entertain various thoughts long enough to disturb ourselves, which might lead to actual revisions in our thoughts about the world. However briefly, we are no longer at home in the world, even if only in our imagination. Perhaps we are also horrified and frightened, but neither emotion is required for experiencing uncanniness. All that is required is that we lose our ontological equilibrium. We right ourselves as we leave Hoffmann's fictional world, but perhaps we return to our world slightly changed.

Freud recognizes the role played by esoteric ontologies in many stories involving the uncanny, as his discussion of surmounted beliefs shows. Some of these beliefs (e.g., those involving the omnipotence of thought) commit those who hold them to supernatural views of the world. For Freud, however, the important point is not so much the metaphysical content of the beliefs, but rather their confirmation as they return to consciousness. Heidegger's concept of the uncanny essentially relies on the overthrow of our ontology, even if it lasts for only for a moment. This loss of intellectual mastery is almost certain to disturb us—hence the uneasiness that we usually feel in uncanny circumstances. Sometimes we also feel fear, perhaps even horror, but neither emotion is a necessary condition for feeling uncanniness. In fact, their presence often inhibits the experience of uncanniness, which is more subtle than either horror or fear and is thus easily crowded out by powerful emotions.

### **Tourneur and the Heideggerian Uncanny**

Tourneur directed four horror films during his long career: *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *The Leopard Man* (1943), and *Curse of the Demon* (1957).<sup>10</sup> The first three were made by Val

Lewton's production unit at RKO.<sup>11</sup> Lewton's films typically imply more than they show, relying on viewers to supply a great deal for themselves in their imagination. *Cat People* contains a monster, Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon), but her monstrous nature is unambiguously revealed only at the end of the film. *I Walked with a Zombie* may or may not contain a zombie; the audience can never be certain that Jessica Holland (Christine Gordon) is anything more than a mental case. Since *The Leopard Man* appeared shortly after Universal's *The Wolf Man* (1941), the original audience was primed to expect some leopard-like monster akin to a werewolf. No such creature appears, however. We do not directly witness the killings of the three women, yet we never really have any reason to think that the first victim is killed by anything but a leopard. By the end of the film we discover that Dr. Galbraith (James Bell) is a sexual psychopath who has disguised his two murders as leopard attacks.

Unlike the Lewton productions, a monster appears in spectacular fashion only minutes into *Curse of the Demon*. The demon employed by Julian Karswell (Niall MacGinnis) to kill Professor Henry Harrington (Maurice Denham) is unmistakably supernatural. It is a creature from some nether region summoned by means of black magic to do Karswell's bidding; this is unambiguously clear to the audience from beginning to end. In this respect, therefore, *Curse of the Demon* is strikingly different from Tourneur's other horror films.

These four films contain moments that are frightening, if not especially horrifying. The first killing in *The Leopard Man* is quite disturbing, even though we only hear Teresa Delgado's (Margaret Landry) screams for help as she is mauled to death by the leopard in front of her house. The effect is heightened by the blood that seeps under the front door, indicating how savage the attack was. Since we experience Teresa's death from within the house, we can only imagine how the leopard kills her. A scene in *Curse of the Demon* convincingly depicts Rand Hobart's (Brian Wilde) terror at the thought of being passed the parchment that summons the demon. We sympathize with his terror and understand why he jumps from a window to his death.

These are isolated moments that do not accurately reflect the overall tone of these films. The dominant mood, I submit, is one of uncanniness. In what follows, I propose no criteria for producing or experiencing the Heideggerian uncanny, but we will see that these films give rise to precisely the feeling of uncanniness that concerned Heidegger. They might also produce feelings of horror and fear, but this is a secondary concern for us.

*Cat People* slowly reveals that Irena Dubrovna's fears about her ancestry are fully justified. Initially, it seems that she has heard too many tales about the history of her village, which is said to have fallen into Satanism after being captured by the Mamelukes long ago. Years later, so it is said, the village was liberated by King John of Serbia; some of the village's witches were executed, while others escaped into the mountains. She relates this legend to Oliver Reed (Kent Smith), her new American friend. As their relationship develops, it becomes clear not only that she believes these stories, but also that they govern her life. After Irena and Oliver declare their love for each other, she shies away from kissing him, hinting darkly at some evil that he cannot understand. On their wedding night, Irena is too afraid of this unnamed evil to consummate their marriage.

Irena seems to be nothing more than a neurotic with an overactive imagination—except for the fact that the animals from the local pet store are afraid of her. This oddity is revealed during the couple's courtship. Its significance seems slight, though, given that the store owner herself says that some people simply cannot come into her store because of the animals' reaction to them. Since Irena's problems continue to come between them, Oliver arranges for her to see a psychiatrist. Dr. Judd (Tom Conway) learns the secret of her sexual anxiety: Irena believes that if aroused by jealousy, anger, or passion she will turn into a panther and kill her lover. Under hypnosis, she revealed a childhood trauma: Her father died in "some mysterious accident in the forest" before her birth, and the children of her village called her mother a cat woman. (The viewer is left to infer that her father was killed by her mother when she was conceived.) Oliver obtusely tells Alice (Jane Randolph), a friend from work, that Irena is seeing Dr. Judd, thereby marking the beginning of Irena's jealousy toward Alice.

The thought that Irena is in fact a cat woman is now slowly forced on the viewer. Irena stalks Alice through the park one night. Tourneur uses sound to suggest Irena's transformation into a panther. Her clicking heels suddenly stop echoing, and we no longer see her following Alice. Alice comprehends the menace behind the sudden silence and runs to a bus stop. A growling sound grows louder and comes closer, but is nothing more than a bus suddenly coming into the frame from the right side as Alice looks to the left. We see moving branches above a wall, several dead sheep in the zoo, paw prints that turn into tracks made by a woman's high heels, and then Irena herself. She arrives home looking disheveled. She spends a restless night dreaming of cats, King John of Serbia (who appears as Dr. Judd

wearing armor and wielding a sword), and the key to the panther's cage. The next day she steals the key while the animal's keeper is preoccupied.

In another scene, Irena follows Alice to the swimming pool of Alice's building. Frightened by growling and a shadow on the staircase, Alice dives into the water. More growling is heard, and more shadows appear around the pool. One shadow looks suspiciously like that of a large cat. The lights come on to reveal Irena as we had seen her earlier. After she leaves, Alice discovers that her robe has been shredded.

Alice tells Dr. Judd that she has been pursued by Irena in her cat form; he is reluctant to believe her, but the torn robe puts him on guard. He interviews Irena again, and she seems to him to be more psychologically disturbed than before. Yet he seems to have helped her, since she tells Oliver later that day that she is no longer afraid. Oliver spoils her breakthrough, saying that he is now in love with Alice. The new couple becomes the target of Irena's rage.

Alice and Oliver are at the office when a panther enters their studio—after the door has been mysteriously locked. As the panther approaches, Oliver picks up a T-square, which casts a cross-like shadow on the wall. The panther is heard once more, but no longer seen; the locked door is now open. Alice and Oliver see the open elevator and head downstairs. We see the elevator door close; a revolving door to the outside stops spinning. Finally, Alice notices Irena's perfume. Dr. Judd has contrived to be in Irena's apartment when she returns home. He takes Irena in his arms and kisses her; the screen darkens a bit as her eyes take on a malevolent glow; she moves forward out of the frame. Dr. Judd steps back in horror and draws the sword hidden in his cane. A struggle erupts. Shadows of a man and a large cat fighting each other are cast on the wall, and at the final moment, a panther leaps on a man on the floor. Alice and Oliver arrive to hear Dr. Judd's screams. They rush upstairs, passing Irena, who has hidden herself. She walks to the zoo, nursing her shoulder. She opens the panther's cage. The frightened creature draws back, like the animals in the pet shop; it then leaps out, striking Irena in the head. She falls to the ground, with part of Dr. Judd's cane protruding from her left shoulder, and dies.

Because Irena had stolen the key to the panther's cage, it is remotely possible that the creature that appeared in Oliver and Alice's studio was the panther from the zoo. How Irena could have managed to lead it there is unclear, given her effect on animals. But since the panther seems to leave the room in response to the cross-like shadow

on the wall, we are meant to infer that it was Irena, and that she was driven away by the power of the cross. In the climactic struggle with Dr. Judd, we clearly see a panther, and we have no reason to think that it is not Irena. Thus, the legend about Irena's village is unambiguously confirmed. Irena says on several occasions that she has always told the truth about herself; no one, of course, was willing to believe her until the truth became obvious to everyone.

*Cat People* forces its viewers to entertain an ontology involving ancient curses, shapeshifters, and evil fraught with sexuality. Hardly the stuff of everyday life, in other words. Tourneur's direction does much to heighten the uncanny feelings evoked by the action of the tale. Darkness and sound contribute to the otherworldly atmosphere that follows Irena; shadows and clicking heels intimate danger of an esoteric sort. None of this is especially horrifying or frightening, but it is disquieting and eerie.

*I Walked with a Zombie* conjures up a similar atmosphere, but never unambiguously reveals that Jessica Holland is a zombie. Betsy Connell (Frances Dee), her nurse, looks for a scientific cure for her condition, which Dr. Maxwell (James Bell) says resulted from a fever that burned out her mind. Insulin shock treatment fails. Alma (Theresa Harris), a family servant, tells Betsy of voodoo cures. Since Betsy has fallen in love with Paul Holland (Tom Conway), Jessica's husband, she will try anything to make him happy, even if it involves voodoo magic.

Betsy and Jessica make an atmospheric journey to the Houmfort, the site of the voodoo rituals. They pass Carrefour (Darby Jones), a watchman who looks like a zombie. Betsy speaks to Hungan, a voodoo deity, only to learn that Mrs. Rand (Edith Barrett), Jessica's mother-in-law, impersonates him (from behind a closed door) in order to deceive supplicants into practicing ordinary health measures like boiling water. The scientific worldview remains in place.

Meanwhile, however, the cult members have been watching Jessica. The saber man cuts her hand to discover that she does not bleed. (We must take everyone's word for this, since we do not see the cut.) In the ensuing uproar, Betsy leads Jessica home. Carrefour is sent to retrieve her, but Mrs. Rand intervenes and orders him back. (A slightly out of focus close-up of Carrefour efficiently conveys the thought that he is not human.) To avoid an investigation, Mrs. Rand confesses that she had asked Hungan to turn Jessica into a zombie because Jessica was planning to run away with her son Wesley Rand (James Ellison), who is Paul Holland's half-brother. She sincerely believes that she is responsible for Jessica's condition. Dr. Maxwell

points out that Jessica had not died or gone into a coma, that is, had not met a necessary condition in voodoo lore for being turned into a zombie. Once again, the scientific worldview seems to triumph.

The cult members attempt to draw Jessica back to complete their tests. We see them pulling a doll resembling Jessica on a string. It is revealed that Jessica did in fact lapse into a coma on the night when her mind burned out. Jessica no longer obeys commands and attempts to leave the plantation. Wesley, who believes that she is a zombie, opens the gate and follows her. The voodoo summoning suddenly stops, and we see Wesley standing over Jessica's corpse. He has stabbed her with an arrow. He wades into the ocean with her body, as Carrefour approaches, and drowns himself.

The mere recitation of significant incidents from *Cat People* and *I Walked with a Zombie* is enough to put us in mind of ontologies different from our own. Both films force us to think of supernatural forces and creatures in order to make sense of what we see. Tourneur presents normal realities out of which the uncanny arises. As the weirdness sets in, our sense of the ordinary slips away; our expectations are flouted as the supernatural (or perhaps only the thought of it) invades the everyday world.

*The Leopard Man* and *Curse of the Demon* apply different means to the same end of arousing the uncanny. In many respects, the former film is just a murder mystery presented under the guise of a horror film. An escaped leopard kills the first girl because it is scared and too tame to hunt its natural prey any longer. Jerry Manning (Dennis O'Keefe), who suggested using the leopard in a publicity stunt for his client and girlfriend Kiki Walker (Jean Brooks), understandably feels guilty about Teresa Delgado's death. After the second attack—this time on Consuelo Contreras (Tuulikki Paananen), who was inadvertently locked inside the cemetery while waiting to meet her lover—Jerry begins to suspect that the leopard was not involved this time. No one pays attention to him, reasoning that he is trying to excuse his complicity in the second death. Signs of a leopard attack are discovered at the scene, but it seems improbable to Jerry that a leopard would deliberately climb over a cemetery wall to attack a young woman, especially when it would make more sense for it to flee to open country away from people. Clo-Clo (Margo), the dancer, is killed on a dark street in the middle of town. She was putting on lipstick right before the attack because she thought that her lover was coming toward her. Jerry becomes even more convinced that the attacker is human. As events unfold, Dr. Galbraith, a former college professor who is now the

curator of the local museum, becomes the prime suspect, and Jerry and Kiki try to prove his guilt. They manage to do so (quite improbably, unfortunately), and after he confesses to killing Consuelo and Clo-Clo, Raoul (Richard Martin), Consuelo's lover, shoots him dead.

Joel Siegel calls the film "a thin, nasty-minded story," which fails to do it justice.<sup>12</sup> It subtly depicts the theme announced in a conversation between Jerry and Galbraith. (This scene occurs between the first and second killings.) Galbraith points to the fountain on the nightclub floor and says: "I've learned one thing about life. We're a good deal like that ball dancing on the fountain. We know as little about the forces that move us, and move the world around us, as that empty ball does about the water that pushes it into the air and lets it fall and catches it again." Nathaniel, as he went through life in terror of the Sandman, could have said the same thing. Like the ball in the fountain, Galbraith is in the grip of forces that he does not understand. A similar thought is aroused in us by the scenes of the fortune teller who constantly reads Clo-Clo's impending death in her cards. Clo-Clo's rising panic strikes a chord with us. Perhaps some supernatural force is driving her into an encounter with the thoroughly human killer. None is ever confirmed for us, but the thought remains.

*Curse of the Demon* announces its alternative ontology at the outset, and so viewers are not slowly drawn into it. An unabashedly supernatural film tends not to produce the feeling of Heideggerian uncanniness, since we usually accept its ontology as the operative one without reservation (just as we accept the world of fairy tales in order to understand them properly). Horror and fear might be aroused in us, but our initial commitment to one ontology is not overturned by subsequent events, and thus we ordinarily do not experience the uncanny in viewing such a film. Instead, *Curse of the Demon* depicts an American psychologist named John Holden (Dana Andrews) whose world becomes uncanny.

Holden, a complete skeptic about the supernatural, has come to England to attend a conference devoted to investigating Karswell's cult. (This is Karswell's motive for killing Harrington, since he too was part of the investigation.) Too many inadequately explained things or incidents accumulate to be dismissed as superstition: the disappearing writing on Karswell's calling card, the windstorm at Karswell's estate, a repeated melody associated with witchcraft that Holden hears on several occasions, the strange behavior of the parchment that Karswell passed to Holden, the smoky shape that pursues Holden through the

woods next to Karswell's house, and so forth. They slowly prove to Holden what the audience has known from the beginning.

Karswell accurately predicts the psychic collapse that will undo Holden's faith in science:

I'm sorry that you remain so skeptical. But as the time gets closer, mental disintegration will set in. First, weakness and unsureness, and then horror as the fear of what is behind you grips your heart. Because it's there, Dr. Holden, it's there! It has been from the moment we met in the museum.

Holden realizes that Karswell was speaking the truth: The parchment passed to him during their first meeting in the British Museum is his death warrant. His only hope, he learns, is to pass it back to Karswell. He manages to do this at the film's climax, but this is hardly the sort of thing that the brash psychologist who came to England to expose superstition would ever have considered doing. He saves himself, but at the cost of his worldview. He was the close-minded one, given over to prejudice parading in the guise of science. We sympathize with his mental plight, besides fearing for his safety. The effect of having one's world rendered uncanny is convincingly portrayed for us, so much so that we cannot avoid entertaining the uncanny thoughts ourselves. Holden's comeuppance might inspire a moment of *schadenfreude*, but we understand all too well what he is experiencing.

## Conclusion

The ability of Tourneur's horror films to make the world uncanny in our imagination—which is, after all, where we would prefer that this happen—depends on typical features of the genre. His four horror films either contain monsters and supernatural powers or intimate that they contain them, and thus all produce thoughts of ontologies different from our own. Each film contains at least one representative of the scientific worldview who is at odds with the ontology confirmed or suggested by the unfolding action.

The representatives of scientific rationality in *Cat People* and *Curse of the Demon*, Dr. Judd and Dr. Holden, respectively, experience total refutations of their views about the supernatural. Betsy Connell and Dr. Maxwell, the nurse and doctor of *I Walked with a Zombie*, are unable to cure Jessica Holland. This failure leads Betsy to consider voodoo as an alternative, which she would never have done in her

native Canada. We are drawn in as well, and begin to wonder whether or not Jessica really is a zombie. Galbraith, the college professor turned museum curator in *The Leopard Man*, explains all three killings in familiar terms. He does so before we suspect that he is trying to deflect attention away from himself. But even when we learn that he is the killer, we realize that he was right in what he said about the ball in the fountain, at least as it applied to himself. He was, in fact, in the grip of forces that he did not understand. True, the explanation would be a piece of abnormal psychology, but thoughts of less mundane forces arise in us. Clo-Clo certainly had such thoughts before her death.

Heidegger claims in §40 of *Being and Time* that the uncanny leads us to no longer feel at home in the world. I have sketched out ways in which Tourneur's horror films provoke the feeling of uncanniness in viewers. They produce occasional feelings of horror and fear. (This viewer has never felt them too strongly, but was obviously sufficiently drawn to the films to write about them in this chapter.) But they also produce the discomfort of the uncanny. The quiet uneasiness provoked in us reflects the subtlety of Tourneur's direction. The effects are muted largely because the means to them are also muted.

The loss of intellectual mastery present in the Heideggerian uncanny is bound to be unpleasant. Yet, as is the case with horror and fear produced in artistic contexts, we find ourselves drawn to the uncanny. Why does it appeal to us? Heidegger's account of the uncanny and its role in angst suggests a compelling reason for why we are drawn to certain horror films that neither horrify nor frighten us. Uncanny horror films act as aids to self-understanding. They slowly turn us toward different ways of looking at the world; they confront us with characters in situations progressively shown to be far different from our own. The characters are always faced with mystery; frequently, with the supernatural and genuine evil; sometimes, only with their own imaginations.

Their struggles are artistic expressions in dramatic form of a more ordinary activity, which, according to Heidegger, we are engaged in all the time. Da-sein, he says, is always ontological. Although the uncanny thoughts might be ones that we ultimately reject (for good or bad reasons), it is the entertaining of them that is of greatest importance for the Heideggerian account of the uncanny. By engaging in a rudimentary form of ontological reflection, we prepare ourselves for reflection of a more sustained sort. As we watch uncanny films, we must revise or abandon the ontology that we initially used to understand what we see on the screen, and by doing so we become

more explicitly aware of our own ontological commitments. We might, of course, also be horrified and frightened, but the feeling of uncanniness is paramount. If some horror films are capable of arousing feelings associated with Heidegger's concept of the uncanny, then we have at least one good reason to take the genre seriously, just as Aristotle gave us reason to esteem tragedy. We no more live the lives of the characters in Tourneur's horror films than we live the lives of Achilles or Oedipus. But being confronted with the lives of such people can not only be moving, but can also be revelatory in unexpected ways.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. I agree with many of the views that Noël Carroll puts forward in *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990). In particular, I accept his claim that an emotion exists, which he calls art-horror, that combines disgust and fear. This is why horror implies fright. I think, though, that the legitimate boundaries of the horror genre extend beyond works that produce, or merely attempt to produce, art-horror (as Carroll understands it) in us. In this chapter I concentrate on articulating one understanding of the uncanny response that is elicited by some films that are acknowledged instances of the horror genre. The larger question of the boundaries of the genre will have to be deferred.

2. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 17*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 217–56.

3. For a recent example, see Steven Schneider, "Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror," in *Horror Film Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 167–91.

4. Freud, 220.

5. *Ibid.*, 241.

6. *Ibid.*, 248.

7. *Ibid.*, 231.

8. *Ibid.*, 247.

9. I employ the terminology of Joan Stambaugh's translation of *Being and Time* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), although I speak of "angst" without capitalizing and italicizing the term as she does.

10. For studies of Tourneur's films, see Chris Fujiwara, *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998); and Kim Newman, *Cat People* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

11. For studies of Lewton's films, see Edmund Bansak, *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, Inc., 1995); Joel Siegel, *Val Lewton: The Reality of Terror* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973); and J. P. Telotte, *Dreams of Darkness: Fantasy and the Films of Val Lewton* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

12. Siegel, 116.

13. Thanks to Sarah Norman and Steven Schneider for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter.