The COVID-19 pandemic is by far the weirdest thing I’ve ever lived through. It’s been weird in so many ways, but for me the most acute was the sense early on that pretty much all of us—the entire world—was simultaneously gripped by concrete fears about getting sick, profound uncertainty about the future, and a rushing undertow of existential angst as we were abruptly torn from our lives. One of the most surreal experiences of my life was navigating panic at the grocery store as we dodged strangers who appeared to be breathing a little too enthusiastically.

One of the very first things that happened on the day when Trump restricted travel from Europe and America went into panic mode was that someone asked me to put together a list of pandemic-themed horror movie recommendations. The most popular movie on iTunes immediately became Contagion. From the point of view of a philosopher immersed in the literature on the so-called “paradox of horror,” this might be surprising. It is a nearly universal assumption in this literature that part of the reason we are able to enjoy the negative emotions we experience in connection with horror fictions is that we in some manner distance ourselves from the content of these emotions. When we see the green slime onscreen and are frightened by it, we are aware at the same time that it’s fictional—that it’s not really going to hurt us—and the distance that this awareness creates is what clears the way for fear to function positively in our aesthetic engagement.

What we saw happening at the beginning of the pandemic was the opposite: we saw a mass urge to dive deeper into a very real fear in aesthetic contexts. Of course, not everyone shared this urge, but it was stunningly commonplace. The question of why people reacted this way is ultimately empirical, but I can think of two possibilities worth considering.

The first is self-administered exposure therapy. When I’m genuinely scared of something, I rarely have much success ignoring it. It tears and claws at me until I confront it. I often find that a better coping strategy is to dwell on the fear and try to accept that whatever it is that I’m afraid of might indeed come to pass, but that if it does I will be able to endure it. Perhaps many of us dove straightaway into nightmarish pandemic fictions as a way to confront and process our fears.

The second possibility is that many of us experience the emotional impact of horror films as expressive potency. That is, we value these movies because they tap into our most intense personal fears in a way that is aesthetically exhilarating. Theories of horror that place too much emphasis on distance may underestimate what we are happy to put ourselves through in aesthetic contexts. Few things impress me more than artist who can make me feel something that I can barely stand to feel. Covid has been a time of big, outsized feelings—feelings that many of us have apparently had an urge to dive even deeper into in our aesthetic lives.

But perhaps the most striking thing to me about watching horror movies during the lockdown was the way that so many movies that have nothing directly to do with viruses and pandemics suddenly felt like they were about COVID-19. I had a reciprocal germ-sharing arrangement with my pal Jesse, and even during the lonelier months he came around once a week or so to watch horror movies with me. We constantly found ourselves saying things like, “wow, this really feels like it’s about COVID,” or, “it’s so uncanny how relevant this feels.”

Consider, for instance, John Carpenter’s The Thing. The thing about the Thing is that it could be anyone. Like the T-1000, it can imitate any person it encounters. When someone leaves the room and then comes back again, for all you know they could now be the Thing. The extraordinarily tense middle section of the movie depicts the paranoia that
As Jesse and I watched the movie together, I started giving him the side-eye. Eventually, I looked over at him and asked, "Bro, you been on Tinder lately? Bumble?" The movie made me vividly aware that every time he leaves my house and then comes back he could have been replaced with a COVID monster who looks and sounds like my friend Jesse.

"Horror reflects society’s fears" is perhaps the most over-used platitude in all of horror criticism. Of course it does. These observations about what it has been like to watch horror movies during the pandemic give us an opportunity to move beyond the bluntest version of this thesis and consider the rich phenomenology of the many different ways in which horror can reflect the fears of society. The case of Soderbergh’s *Contagion* isn’t especially interesting: we are now very afraid of pandemics and it’s about a pandemic. It’s more interesting to think about how Soderbergh’s *Unsane* (which I much prefer), has gained new resonances. Taken literally and in terms of narrative subject matter, it has nothing at all to do with the pandemic. It’s about a woman who is committed to a mental health facility on a false basis and then tormented by a stalker. But the emotions that it explores—feelings of captivity and powerlessness, of being suddenly torn from one’s world—are all too vividly COVIDesque. Moreover, the digital textures of the movie, which was filmed on an iPhone, call to mind the way that our lives have become so pervasively mediated by digital cameras and microphones.

Or, consider Joe Dante’s classic *Gremlins*. It’s now a COVID movie. You had three rules: keep the mogwai away from bright light, don’t get it wet, and never, ever feed it after midnight. But you couldn’t follow the rules, could you? Gizmo got wet, then he multiplied, then the resulting flock of mogwai were given chicken after the appointed hour. And what is the result? Abject chaos. Gremlins literally swinging from the chandeliers. We had three rules: wear a mask, stand six feet apart, wash our hands. But we couldn’t follow the rules, could we? And what was the result? ABJECT CHAOS.

The horror movies with the most enduring appeal are often the ones that can be about almost anything—the ones that tap into our most fundamental and pervasive fears. I’m talking, for instance, about the place deep down in our collective gut where we don’t really trust society not to fall apart at the seams. Do I really trust my neighbors? They are friendly enough, but will they pillage my house if food shortages become critical? Movies like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (any version), *The Mist*, *The Happening*, *Time of the Wolf*, and *The Purge* tap into this fundamental fear, and thus can feel like they are about anything from a war to a pandemic to a natural disaster.

As I write this, the smoke has begun to clear and the world has started to return to something resembling normal. It is a new landscape, where we can no longer assume that the store will have the thing we want to buy and where one’s six-foot personal bubble has taken on new significance, but it is more or less recognizable as the world we knew before the pandemic. Thinking back to the phenomenology of the first few months after the plague took hold is like trying to remember a nightmare the next afternoon. I can recall flashes, but I have trouble immersing myself imaginatively in what it was really like. I am waiting with bated breath to see the next wave of COVID-inspired movies. Sure, there will be highly literal depictions like *Songbird*, which is too on the nose for greatness (though it does have its trashy pleasures as a piece of COVIDsploitation). What I really look forward to are movies that burrow into the deep, dark undercurrents of the pandemic and immerse us once again in the elusive, nightmarish pall that was cast over the world during those early months.

It’s definitely not for everyone, but Abel Ferrara’s *Zeros and Ones* comes the closest of anything I’ve seen. It has some literal COVID markers (masks, group video chat, and so on), but that’s almost beside the point. It’s like a transmission from the end of the world—dark and muddy and hard to make out, possessed at once with feverish urgency and resigned desolation. And that’s kind of what it was like, wasn’t it?

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