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Through a Dark Lens: Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* as Abject Horror

Abstract

Shows how Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy makes more sense "read" as horror than fantasy, drawing on definitions of horror from film theory and on Jackson's own previous work.

Additional Keywords

Horror films; The Lord of the Rings (film trilogy). Dir. Peter Jackson

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THROUGH A DARK LENS: JACKSON'S *LORD OF THE RINGS* AS ABJECT HORROR

R.D. HALL

THERE is no doubt that Peter Jackson makes excellent horror films. Linda Badley says in *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, "Jackson is one of several talented young directors who found in splatter and grotesque fantasy the elements of a distinctive expressionistic style" (156). Since he is primarily known as a horror director, it is interesting that he chose to adapt J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to the screen. Jackson's splatter movie background does not blend well with Tolkien's fantasy . . . or does it? When we look at Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* as a horror movie, as opposed to a fantasy film, we realize it is his grotesque horror we delight in, instead of ethereal fantasy.

Certain rules or clichés characterize the horror film. While many of these elements exist in Tolkien's fiction, Jackson focuses on the traits that mark his *Lord of the Rings* as horror in the explicit detail of his camera work—for example, the close-ups Jackson uses for the slimy birth of an Uruk-hai or the loving way his camera strokes Gollum's emaciated body. Jackson's obsessive love of the grotesque paints his *Lord of the Rings* films as horror.

Man versus the un-man, or beast, is a common horror cliché. Linda Badley says, "Monsters by definition violate boundaries" (75). For instance, in Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste* aliens land on earth for the sole purpose of gathering up humans for food. These aliens are the sort of non-human element that horror directors commonly pit against the human protagonists. *The Lord of the Rings* lends itself well to this horror film trait by pitting human, or at least human-like, individuals against monsters (it is important to note for the purposes of this paper that the viewer's identification with the so-called good characters in the fellowship, i.e. elves, hobbits, humans, dwarves, makes it simpler and more correct to include them all under the umbrella of human). Man versus beast is an important element in identifying Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films as horror.

In Peter Jackson's *Dead Alive*, Lionel (the protagonist) tries to protect his mother (who has become a zombie) from the outside world. Ultimately he is unable to control his mother's hunger for flesh and a body count ensues. This film features many horror standards such as amputation, cannibalism, and gore. When these same elements show up in *The Lord of the Rings*, we do not instantly recognize them as horror.

Jackson blends cannibalism and amputation into both *Dead Alive* and his *Rings* films. Zombies cut up and eat humans throughout this film; Jackson reenacts these cannibalistic moments in his version of *The Lord of the Rings*. Saruman alludes to this in Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* when he says to the Orcs, "You will taste man flesh" (scene 40). Jackson's *Towers* portrays cannibalism visually when the Orcs, who have captured Merry and Pippin, consider eating the hobbits. This is resolved when the Orcs turn on each other and eviscerate one of their comrades. After ripping an unfortunate Orc apart the lead Orc exclaims, "Looks like meat's back on the menu, boys" (*Towers* scene 10). Both amputation and cannibalism are not difficult horror elements to find in Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films. If we recognize these elements as such, we can recognize these films as horror films.

Mutation is another horror cliché Jackson readily uses in *Dead Alive* and *The Frighteners*, which he also applies to *The Lord of the Rings*. Bruce Kawin states, "Horror is fascinated by transmutations between human and inhuman (wolfmen, etc.), but the inhuman characteristics decisively mandate destruction" (552). Zombies, like the ones in *Dead Alive*, are humans turned into flesh eating monsters. Orcs, which are elves twisted into evil forms, are zombie-like in Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*. Both zombies and Orcs eat humans and sometimes eat their own kind. Their altered, inhuman states make them abhorrent to the viewer. The twisted nature of the one-time human reminds us of what we could become. That which is corpse-like and grotesque reminds us of our own mortality.

Jackson's *The Frighteners* presents its own reminder of death in the form of a reaper who marks each of his victims with a consecutive number. This creature was once a human murderer. In death, the murderer is transformed into a grim reaper that a viewer of *The Lord of the Rings* could easily mistake for one of Jackson's Ringwraiths. It is interesting Jackson made the Ringwraiths so similar to his previous film creation.

Perhaps Gollum is Jackson's most blatant occurrence of mutation. Jackson's Gollum may remind the viewer of an earlier Jackson creation, the Sumatran rat monkey which appeared in *Dead Alive*. *The Two Towers* introduces Gollum in an interesting way. The scene begins with a common horror technique: Gollum is voyeuristically watching the hobbits sleep, then we cut to Gollum looming in front of a moonlit sky (*Towers* scene 3). The moon is important; it reminds us of werewolves and shape shifting. Gollum is a shape shifter; he has shifted from hobbit to monster and can never return.

If Gollum cannot return to hobbit form, perhaps he is really something else. Vampires are mutated humans who traditionally cannot return to human form. It makes sense to look at Gollum as a vampire since he is a sort of parasite. Gollum needs the Ring; he cannot live without it. Gollum feeds on the One Ring's

power as a vampire would on blood. Gollum is also corpse-like; his features are drawn, his skin is gray, his body is skeletal. We associate these traits with vampirism.

Gollum also has an aversion to what are assumed to be pure and good items on Middle-earth. The Elven ropes in which Sam binds Gollum physically hurt him. Gollum cries, "It burns us, it freezes [...] take it off us" (*Towers* scene 3). As with vampires, bright light hurts Gollum. Added to these traits is a touch of *Dracula's* Renfield—Gollum craves living flesh to eat. These elements add to Gollum's filmic relation to vampires.

It is difficult to look at Jackson's casting choices without realizing their indebtedness to the classical horror genre. In choosing Christopher Lee, a man known all over the world for playing Count Dracula in many Hammer Horror films, Jackson makes it hard for the knowledgeable viewer to separate the roles. In particular, the sycophantic Gríma Wormtongue, Saruman's servant, lends himself even more than Gollum to the Renfield comparison. Like Renfield in *Dracula*, Gríma wants his master to grant him power. It is important to note that Brad Dourif, who played Gríma, also voiced the maniacal Chucky doll in the *Child's Play* film series. While not specifically relevant to the story, casting plays a role in classifying this film for the astute viewer.

Now that we have established what horror is, and that Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* can be seen as horror, what does it mean to the film viewer? Gregory A. Waller says, "What horror films offer, after all, is the representation of violence—violence embedded in a generic, narrative, fictional, often highly stylized, and oddly playful context" (260). If what Waller says is true, why does violence against others fascinate us? The answer may lie within Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject.

Kristeva's theory is too wide-ranging and far-reaching to apply in its entirety in this essay. For my purposes, I will invoke her theories on borders and mortality as they relate to the abject. Most importantly, I will suggest how Kristeva's theory of the abject applies to my discussion of Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* as a horror film.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva says the abject is that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Horror films often feature characters that do not respect boundaries. Creed says that in these films, "that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject" (66). When we look at zombies or Orcs there is definitely something that crosses the border of what is normal. Kristeva also addresses a key element of horror, the corpse. Kristeva says corpses "*show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (3). The violence portrayed in horror reminds us, as viewers, that we are going to die.

Jackson further reminds us of death in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. One of the most significant moments in which this occurs is when the hobbits first encounter a Ringwraith. Shortly after Frodo and Sam meet up with Merry and Pippin, the hobbits must hide under a tree root to evade a Ringwraith. When the Ringwraith sniffs for the One Ring the ground begins to swell under the hobbit's feet. Worms and bugs emerge from the ground. If we look at this in terms of the abject, the worms and bugs symbolize the things that will eat our corpses when we die. This is a very pure instance of the abject working through Jackson's cinematic narrative.

The abject is also evident in the birth of Uruk-hai. When Jackson depicts these births in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the Uruk-hai wiggles out from the muck and slime of the earth. He is born from the slimy refuse. This reminds the viewer that we too are born from the same primordial slime as these miserable creatures, and will one day return to it.

Horror films cross boundaries as a rule. In Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films, the border of inanimate and animate is crossed. The One Ring has a voice and is referred to as having wants and desires. Gandalf says of the One Ring, "It wants to be found" (*Fellowship* scene 10). There is something inherently unnerving in the inanimate gaining cognizance. It breaks a border between that which can think and that which cannot think. Kristeva says breaking the border "disturbs identity, system, order" (4). This disturbance makes us uncomfortable.

Gollum's cadaver-like visage also serves as an instrument of the abject. Barbara Creed says, "The ultimate in abjection is the corpse" (65). Gollum is a fallen man. The Ring has stripped him of his mortal life, and given him a miserable existence that makes him crave its return. As I mentioned before, Gollum looks like death: his eyes are bulging, his skin gray and mottled; we can see his vertebrae protrude from his foul body. Gollum reminds us, as film viewers, of our own mortality.

Gollum also forces Frodo to ponder his own moral mortality. Frodo sees, in Gollum, what he is in danger of becoming. He feels the weight of the Ring bear upon his soul. As I said before, Gollum is the fallen hobbit (man). The One Ring has debased Gollum into almost nonexistence. The One Ring operates, on Middle-earth, as a taboo symbol would on our own earth. Taboos disrupt the natural order, and Gollum is a victim of such a taboo. Frodo says about Gollum in *Two Towers*, "Now that I see him, I do pity him" (scene 3). Frodo is in danger of becoming a victim of the One Ring's taboo, and therefore succumbing to its power. I think this is why Frodo has so much empathy for the loathsome Gollum. Frodo realizes if, or when, he falls, Gollum is his own could-be future. This also forces Frodo to trust Gollum: Frodo must hope that there is some good in Gollum, since it may be Frodo's only way to have faith in his own goodness.

If horror disrupts our sense of order and reminds us of our own mortality, then what draws us as moviegoers to horror? Bruce Kawin says in *The Mummy's Pool*, "One goes to a horror film in order to have a nightmare" (550). Nightmares are unnerving and terrifying; they are something you would not want to experience in the waking world. Yet we seek them out on a movie screen. Perhaps, as Kawin suggests, we have a desire to "fulfill and be punished for certain conventionally [...] unacceptable impulses" (550). Our own aversion towards its subject matter draws us to horror.

Now that we have established Peter Jackson's version of *The Lord of the Rings* films are actually horror films, the question to ask is why? First, we gain tremendous insight into the characters through examining these films as horror; into Gollum and Frodo most of all. Looking at these characters in terms of the abject, we discover their deep psychological motivations. Perhaps in understanding the mental underpinnings of their core characters we, as viewers, develop our own empathy for Gollum. We may also understand the tremendous weight the One Ring places upon Frodo. Secondly, after viewing Jackson's *Rings* films as horror, we look at these characters as more than just Tolkien's creations; they become mirrors into our own psyche.

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