



DEATH WARMED OVER

opinion

By RAY BRADBURY

movie ghouls aren't what they used to be—and the world's the worse for it

ONCE EACH YEAR, a small fete occurs at my local NBC, CBS or ABC television studio. I am invited for my annual love match with the new producers and vice-presidents, who shake my hand, dine me well and cry.

"Ray, tell us about your horror-film TV special!"

I then describe the kind of extraordinary Halloween show I would like to write

and produce some fortunate season.

Finished, the producers throw confetti, shout Huzzah, call me genius and promise to call tomorrow.

They never call again. Until the next year, or the year after, when I am asked to recite my piece for a newer, fresher face.

This year, lacking an audience, I'm telling *you*. Quite simply: I love and revere the old horror films. I do not care what your snob psychologist fears for their effect on the young.

To me, Dracula, Frankenstein's Monster and the Mummy are only good, tonic and superb. Before God and country, I will defend them. And not out of late camp sentiment, either. It is not so much nostalgia that moves me, but practical hair-ball psychology.

But before calling down the lightning to strike and the Wolf Man to sick your professional alarmists, allow me to sketch in my one-hour TV special. Imagine this:

It is night in a small Midwest town. Autumn and a good wind and the city-hall clock edging toward 12. Along the dark and empty Main Street comes a man, myself, walking with a brisk cloud of autumn leaves rustling at my heels. Before a deserted theater, I glance up at the broken marquee bulbs that read: LON CHANEY IN "THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA." BELA LUGOSI IN "DRACULA."

Even as I watch, the bulbs begin to flicker on and off. I peer at the dusty foyer. The ticket booth is empty. A spider web covers the round glass hole where you chat through at the ticket seller. As I approach, a spider hung at the web's center skims down to the brass cashier plate. A ticket jumps with a cough of dust into my hand. All to itself, the theater door hushes open.

I hesitate. The autumn wind blows a scuttle of those dark leaves about my knees. I enter the dim and totally deserted theater. My feet are soundless in the heavy carpeting.

I survey the Gothic interior, the uninhabited seats, the opera boxes, the chandelier like a vast constellation of tears above, the dust-throttled Wurlitzer organ below.

"You're late," a voice calls, softly.

The town clock strikes midnight.

"No. Just on time."

I move down the aisle.

"Are we all here?"

A second whisper makes me glance up at the right-hand box. The Phantom of the Opera, pale-masked, is there. We nod. I sit.

"Please to begin."

The wind from out in the autumn night blows those dark leaves chattering on the air. The leaves beat dryly at the heavy velvet portieres, then strike at the projection booth.

Flying in through the projection-room windows, they drop one by one by one into the projector. The fierce bright bulb

blinks on. And we see that these are not autumn leaves at all, nor insects or bats, but fragments of film that flick, shutter, fall frame by frame into place. Their images flash across the velvet abyss. The waiting ghost screen shapes up forms and spirits. Voices whisper from beyond time.

With the Phantom asking questions and myself trying for answers, we begin *The Beneficial Results of Horror Films* or *Why Dracula?*

And during the next hour, we would watch and comment on such pictures as *Nosferatu*, *Vampyr*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (comparing, perhaps, the performances of John Barrymore in the double role in the Twenties, Fredric March in the Thirties and Spencer Tracy in the early Forties). Inevitably winding up with *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mummy*, *The Bride of Frankenstein* and, maybe, for mere peevishness and perversity, *King Kong*.

Repeatedly, we would ask, Why tolerate the horror film? What good is it? What does it mean? Why, for a short time, did we make fine ones? Why do we rarely make the excellent ones anymore? Who today can equal the quality of such films as *Isle of the Dead*, *The Body Snatcher*, *The Cat People* or *The Curse of the Cat People*?

By my simple listing of these naïve titles, I sense I have alienated and lost some of you. Good riddance. Those remaining expect answers to the questions posed. And they all must deal with civilization and death.

When we, the human race, were very young, death was immediate. We had no time to think on it. We collided with it, had it done to us, did it to others, stayed to be slaughtered or ran to lick our very real wounds.

Life was short, sometimes sweet, more often brim full of panics and living nightmare. Death, always a mystery, was embodied in real actions that lay no further off than the campfire rim or the edge of the cave. Its spirit lurked in the very fire itself that, momentarily tamed, gave warmth, but uncontrolled might burn a thousand miles of forest in a night. Death, as well as life, lurked in everything we could see, hear, smell or touch in those terrible twilights and impossible dawns.

Then, when the nit-picking ape named himself quite possibly human and left knuckle marks in the jungle dust on his way to brick cities, we walled out real death. Death still happened, of course, but we had more time to speak of it, to consider that blank bottomless abyss.

And from these night chats came raw mythologies about that great mouth that eats us all. We reared up folk tales, religious dreams and finally short stories, novels and motion pictures to help us make do with the incurable and inescap-

able emptiness down which each must fall one day soon or late.

Our opinion of death is not much different today than on those darling afternoons in primitive times when, as ax-wielding dentists, we cracked the fangs of the sabertooth. Very simply, we do not approve of death. We hate the rules he plays by. He must be cheating. He always wins.

Somewhere along the path, we named this thing that stops our breath. We saw animals sleep away, humans go silent, and knew that the stuffs were gone, the lightning bolt come out of the body, returned to earth and sky. The soul, the *élan*, whatever it was, indescribable, had done an even more indescribable thing: disconnected itself, vapored off. We called it death and finally even gave death a gender. We spoke not of it but of he who comes with the scythe and emptied hourglass.

Even Popes, in Baroque splendor, had tombs reared with winged skeletons and scythes harvesting the marble air, to show that if the great in all their pomps must fall, the small must surely follow.

What were we doing? Naming the unnamable. Why? Because man by his very nature must describe. The names change from generation to generation, but the need to name goes on. We were picturing the unpicturable. For, consider, does death have a size, shape, color, breadth, width? No, it is "deep" beyond infinity and "far" beyond eternity. It is forever incapsulated in the skull we carry, a symbol to itself, behind our masking face.

Our religions, our tribal as well as personal myths, tried to find symbols then for the vacuum, the void, the elevator shaft down which we must all journey and no stops evermore again. We had to know. We had to lie, and accept the lie of labels and names, even while we knew we lied, for we had work to do, cities to build, children to rear, much to love and know. Thus we gave gifts of names to ward off the night some little while, to give us time to think on other things.

The skeleton as symbol of death and inhabitant of tales moves among the races of the world. Death as creature, death as masculine being, reaper of souls, fills that void, gives us a thing to see, hear, smell and touch.

The business of the fine horror film, then, could be summed up as follows: For 90 or 100 minutes the writer, producer, actor says to the pale customer: Instead of the void, the unknown, the unnamable, allow us for a little while to name names, rear up shapes. Tonight the Prince of Darkness walks among you. We hold him high, shake his bones. We fan his wings, expose his teeth. His shadow quakes your seat. Is he not magnificent,

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is he not beautiful? Shiver sweet agonies from this encounter.

But then, behold, at the penultimate moment, as death moves to cull you in, with camera and story and swift-edited art, we hand you yet another symbol: a cedar stake.

Death lies before you. The afternoon grows late. Now, here in the tomb, before the nightshades rouse up death disguised as Dracula, strike!

So you, the acting, as well as acted-upon, audience, seize the cedar stake, place it against the dread heart of Dracula and strike it, once, twice, three times with a sledge!

Bang! The echoes flee! Bang! The echoes run. Bang! The echoes die.

And Dracula is dead.

And for some little while this night, death, why, he is dead, too.

And with a great sigh, having bested the void two falls out of three, having buried the void in cedar shavings and wolfsbane, you leave the theater and, smiling, make your way home. At the price of a splendid lie, an incredible myth, you have borrowed a cup of immortality. Tomorrow, perhaps, you will find it mere water, bacterial and possibly fatal. But tonight, through the transmutation of materials, through light and power, through film and imagination, you are larger, stronger, more powerful, more beautiful than death.

These are the stuffs of dreams that went to make the best old horror films. How rarely today do we bother to act out the most solvent, the most creative and therefore our most curative dreams.

We have fallen into the hands of the scientists, the reality people, the data collectors.

I do not for a moment demean their function. They are the vital necessities without which we would remain ignorant. We need as much information about our universal situation as can possibly be found.

But once found, data must not remain data. Fact fused to fact must become more than those facts.

The horror film began to kill itself off when it began to explain itself. Fantasy, like the butterfly, cannot stand handling. Touch the wing the merest touch, brush some of that powder with finger tips and the poor thing won't fly again. You cannot explain a dream. The dream exists. It is. It cleanses itself. It is the mountain spring that, traveling dark distances underground, purifies itself. We do not know all the reasons. We will never know. But the modern horror film, by merely cutting back a man's skull bone to show us his transistorized Grand Guignol stage, all miniaturized in the frontal

lobe, bypasses the dream to capture and kill with facts, or things that appear as facts.

So the pure, delightful, strangely life-enhancing terror of *Frankenstein*, where we make the Monster and it acts at one remove from us so we can watch and learn from it, becomes the modern robot-brute of *Our Man Flint*. We stare incredulous as high-I. Q. modern man Flint roughly escorts his enemy into a public toilet, sits him on the bowl and cuts his throat, while toilet tissues fall in a dreadful snow about his feet.

Instead of imagination, we are treated to fact, to pure raw data, which cannot be assimilated, which cannot be digested. And, as most of us have already guessed, we already know the "facts" of our position as humans in this world. We do, indeed, know the facts of murder, torture, sickness, greed and death. We do not have to have the facts repeated in crude detail. Those who offer us the cut throat or the asphyxiated face stuffed in a plastic bag offer only reportage and not their reactions, their philosophy, about that reportage.

So the modern "horror" film, be it *Our Man Flint* or *Charade*, merely hands us a larger hair ball and demands that we cat-sick ourselves trying to eat it whole rather than dislodge it. We are asked to devour but are given no chance to vomit.

For what is sickness? Sickness is a way of becoming well. That is all it is. If we remain sick, we die. And any art that teaches only fact is a sick art and will sicken us and finally kill us or itself.

As I have said often to friends in affiliate art fields, your trouble is *you* want to give everyone polio. *I* wish to give them polio vaccine. One destroys. The other sickens us but to make us whole.

What are we saying here? Let me recapitulate. The basic facts of man's life upon earth are these: You will love. You will not be loved. People will treat you well. People will treat you badly. You will grow old. You will die. We *know* this.

You cannot tell a man that death and age are after him again and again all his lifetime without freezing his mind ahead of the reality. He must be told these truths by indirection. You must not hit him with lightning. You must polarize the lightning through transformers, which are the arts, then tell him to grab hold of the one-cent Electrocute Yourself for a Penny Machine. His hair may stand up, his heart beat swiftly as he juices his veins. But the truth, thus fed, will make him free.

Count Dracula, Baron Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and his friend Mr. Hyde, Dorian Gray and his portrait are all such agents of freedom. They take on the

problems of mankind and, by shaping them in symbols, enable us to act our feelings toward death, the strange evil in man that has provoked us from the Garden gate to the edge of space, and the mystery of our love in the midst of envy and destruction.

Any horror film that lingers only on that cedar stake plunged into the grisly heart of a vampire loses its chance to transcend raw fact. The symbolic acts, not the minuscule details of the act, are everything.

For the time being, we must wait in the wings with the Phantom while *Virginia Woolf's* horror tale is acted out, even more frightening in some ways. For, while Count Dracula cannot be seen in a mirror, even as we watch, the four tormented men-boys in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, they are themselves invisible. They do not exist, even to themselves. They were never born. So they can never die. They are raw fact and only fact, which has no significance. Fact without interpretation is but a glimpse of the elephants' bone yard.

How much longer will American jackdaw intellectuals run about collecting reality, holding it up, declaring this to be the truth? One hardly dares guess. But a day must come when we turn full about to our intuitions, our collective creativity, our full rounded sufferance and digestion of facts to give us a full philosophy.

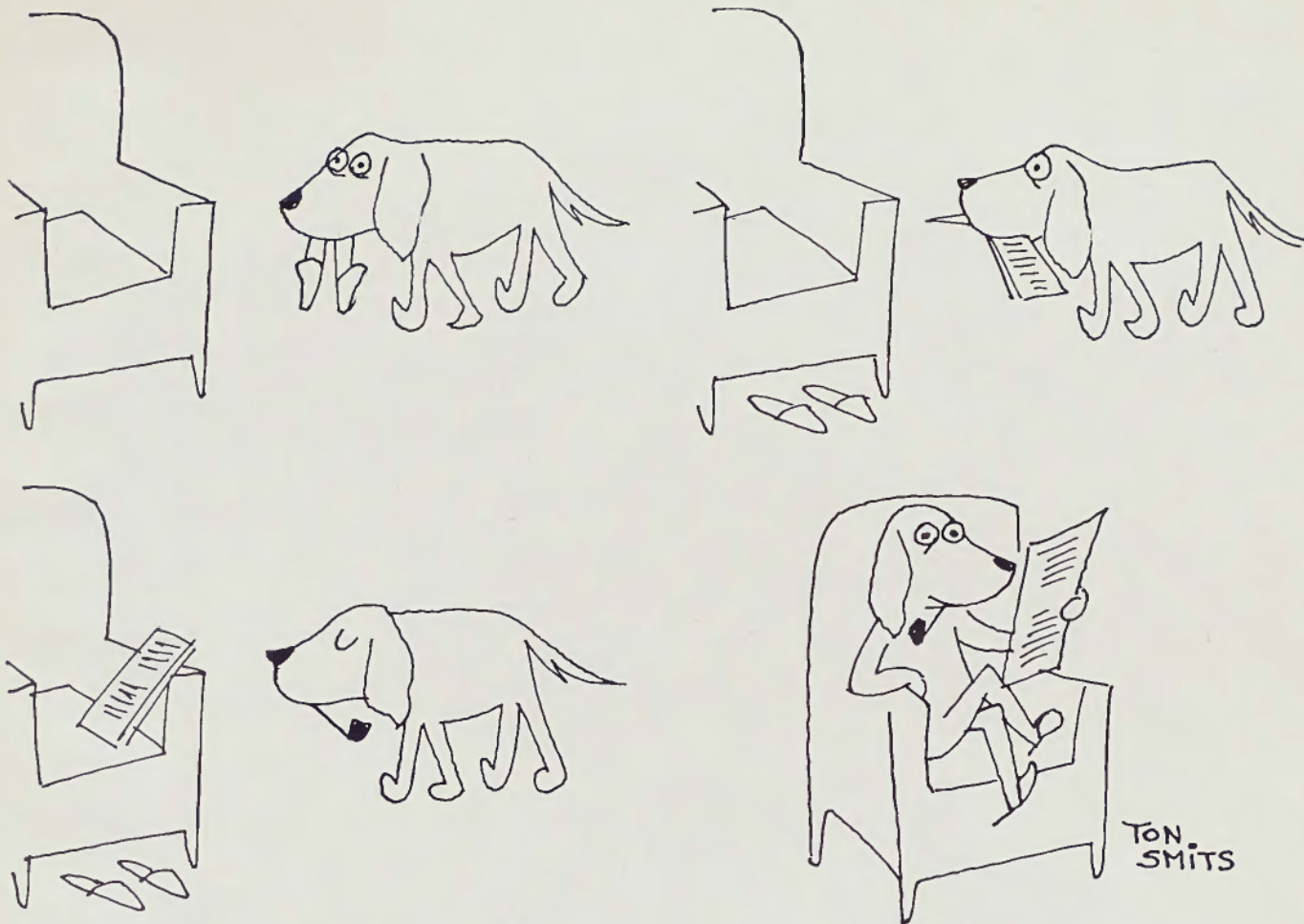
Meantime, we will have to suffer the book-burning intellectuals who, like Dr. Spock, fear Batman without having seen him; Dr. Wertham, who finds murder under every comic book; and the librarians who won't allow the *Oz* books on their shelves because "they are not good for children."

A new generation will scramble the sick bones of this one. And the health and strength of that generation will be built on the old ability to fantasize. To fantasize is to remain sane. The moment we hand over this tool to our bullying intellectuals of left or right, the sabertooth will come over the transom even as we lock the door.

Beneath our suitings, man the hairy anthropoid stands. Inhabiting cities, he saves up assassinations and rapes most foul, in order to be human. He cannot forever save hair as one saves string. The great bramblebush will choke him to death. He needs *Dracula*, then, and *Frankenstein* as depilatories. It is as simple as that.

The puritans are ever with us. The new scientific intellectual puritan will deliver us from evil, he says, by denying all of Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and the headless horseman.

There is a scene in one of my *Martian Chronicles* where rocket men, come to Mars, sense there the fleeing spirits of all our best fantasy writers. Hid deep in the Martian hills, victims of the computer-



data-fact-collecting age, the shades of Dickens and his Christmas Ghosts, Poe's falling House of Usher, Baum's Emerald City of Oz wait to be summoned back by a greater age of tolerance. A new age that will take raw fact in one hand and transcending intuition in the other. Only with a grasp on each rein can man move forward in space and time.

These characters of our needful dreams have been exiled not only by our blind intellectuals but by an even worse species of commercial fool, your fly-by-night on-the-cheap producer of such stillbirths as *The Monster of Blanket Beach* and *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*. With canned laughter, or unintentional humor outcropped from vulgarity, they have driven our monsters off. The jackal has, indeed, bested the werewolf.

To these I say: Give us back our small fears to help us cure the large. We cannot destroy the large death, the one that takes us all. We need a tiny one to be crushed in our hand to give us confidence. The complete and utter truth, completely known, is madness. Do not kick us off the cliff and send us screaming down to that. For God's sake, give us our morsel of poisoned popcorn to munch in the cinema dark.

May the day be soon in coming when

the bright critics who damn Disneyland, for instance, without ever having seen it, and the moneygrubbing Munchkins who laugh all the way to the bank are equally banished from the wild strange gift of night we find in motion-picture houses, leaving this art form to people who, stationed between the extremes, know how to shape the dream.

And on that day, not distant, the orangutan of Poe will vault from the shadows and stuff the doctoral nonsense wrong side up the chimney. The clockwork men and their dusty facts will lie unscrewed on the jungle floor. Kipling's Phantom Rickshaw will run them down. The very Emerald City they tried to dynamite will, falling, bury them with intuitions. And man the fact collector, hand in hand with man the secret creator, will move forward in one body, sensing and beautifully guessing.

Then we shall call the ghosts home and the dead will return to teach us about death. Dracula will fly the night and the mad Baron will pull that switch that should best be pulled only by God. Mr. Hyde will sprout hair only to lose it, only to sprout it yet again. And Dorian's portrait will grow old, then young, then old again forever, and so cycle in cycle, fact circling dream and dream circling

fact, Man, not the one thing but many, will continue his journey out of the Garden, on his way to becoming a thing he cannot now name nor know nor guess, but wish upon.

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The motion-picture projector stops.

My TV special on horror films is over.

The small autumn leaves of film fly out the projection-room window into the night.

The lights come slowly on.

The great opera chandelier shivers above me, as if struck a blow with a sledge. It threatens to fall. I wait. The tremble of glass subsides.

I walk to the far exit. I nod to the high box, where the Phantom moves his hand in a shadowed farewell.

The doors fall shut.

I walk along the dark street, accompanied by those autumn leaves that nibble my shoes.

I turn the corner. The leaves settle. I am gone.

PULL CAMERA BACK ALONG THE EMPTY STREET.

IF YOU MUST HAVE A COMMERCIAL, INSERT IT HERE.

THE END.

