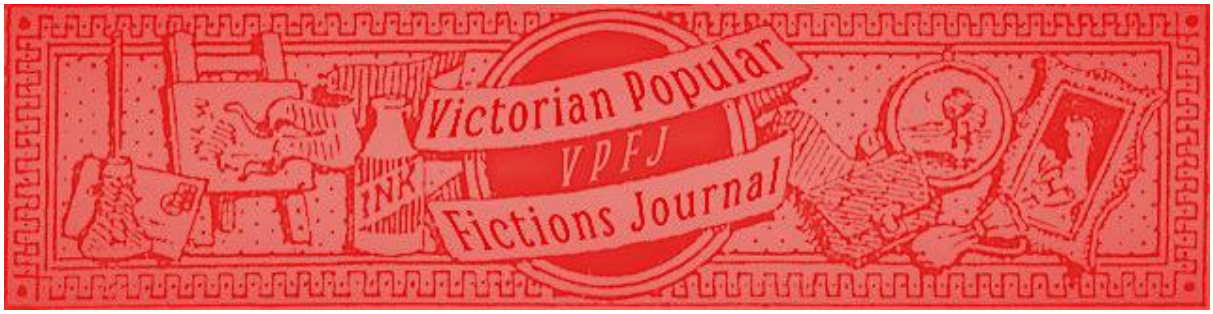

Translating Awe into Evil:
A Cognitive Perspective on Arthur Machen's Use of the Horror Genre

Anna Shane

Abstract

"Here, of course, was my real failure; I translated awe, at worst awfulness, into evil," Arthur Machen wrote about his 1890s Gothic novels and stories. In these works, Machen aimed to use horror to generate in readers an intense spiritually and mentally enriching experience of awe that he termed "ecstasy," a project that he came to believe he did not succeed in. This article uses cognitive critical work on horror to argue that Machen's use of the genre was not a 'failure.' Cognitive critics now theorise horror as not only having the very effects that Machen intended, but as working according to the mechanisms that he suggested. Cognitive critical analyses support Machen's earlier, more hopeful notion that horror is a highly successful vehicle for his project of using literature to generate particularly intense emotions and crucial realisations about the human condition in his readers. This article further analyses how Machen's understanding of horror (and of fiction generally) was part of his understanding of the human mind as productively incapable of assimilating certain kinds of knowledge. While the general tendency in accounts of the human mind is to focus on its abilities and capacities, Machen's approach demands that we also consider its limitations and inabilities, and how they shape and, paradoxically, enable intense experiences of both art and life. This paper reads Machen's 1890s fiction as an attempt to make readers aware, through the use of horror, of how the mind's failure to process knowledge might be productive.

Keywords

Gothic; cognitive criticism; Horror Studies; awe; sublime; Arthur Machen

Date of Acceptance: 1 July 2026
Date of Publication: 3 July 2026
Double Blind Peer Reviewed

Recommended Citation:
Shane, Anna. 2026. "Translating Awe into Evil: A Cognitive Perspective on Arthur Machen's Use of the Horror Genre." *Victorian Popular Fictions*, 8.1 (Spring): 106-19. ISSN: 2632-4253 (online) DOI: https://doi.org/10.46911/VMYR8909

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Translating Awe into Evil: A Cognitive Perspective on Arthur Machen's Use of the Horror Genre

Anna Shane

"Here, of course, was my real failure; I translated awe, at worst awfulness, into evil," wrote Arthur Machen in 1922 (123). He is referring to an earlier phase of his career, when he published the Gothic novels and stories he is best known for today. These works were written with the intention of using horror to generate in readers an intense spiritually and mentally enriching experience of awe that Machen termed "ecstasy." Subsequently he came to believe that horror was unsuitable for carrying out this artistic goal. This article utilises the critical methodology of cognitive literary criticism to analyse Machen's intentions for his horror fiction, and demonstrates that his use of the genre is not a "failure." On the basis of cognitive research and philosophical approaches to horror, critics now theorise horror as having the very effects that Machen intended, and as working according to the mechanisms that he suggested. Cognitive work on horror supports Machen's earlier, more hopeful notion that horror is a highly successful vehicle for his project of using literature to generate particularly intense emotions in his readers and to recalibrate their understanding of the world around them. In many respects, however, Machen's views do not align with those of today's cognitive critics, and I go on to consider Machen's understanding of the human mind as productively incapable of assimilating certain kinds of knowledge. While accounts of the mind have been and remain focused on its abilities and capacities, Machen's approach demands that we also consider its limitations and inabilities, and how these shape and, paradoxically, enable intense experiences of both art and life.

Machen believed the aim of all literature (not just horror) to be the inducement of a spiritually heightened state ("ecstasy") in readers. In his 1902 book-length essay on this topic, *Hieroglyphics: A Note Upon Ecstasy in Literature*, Machen defines ecstasy as a "withdrawal from the common life and common consciousness" accompanied by emotions of "rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown" ([1902] 1912: 24). As Christine Ferguson summarises, Machen's "ecstasy" is "a productive flight from the every day towards...the hidden platonic reality that undergirds human existence," accompanied by "a sense of occult awe" (2016: 50). The theories that Machen put forward in *Hieroglyphics* were directly linked to his fiction; the book "consolidates much of the thinking about cultural value and aesthetic experience that informed his fiction over the

previous decade" (McCann 2014: 151). The production of the feeling of "ecstasy" in his readers was Machen's central concern throughout his career, and he sought to achieve it through a range of aesthetic experiments in his fiction, as Nicholas Freeman demonstrates (2010: 243-53). In the 1890s, Machen published several short novels and stories, such as *The Great God Pan* (1894), "The Inmost Light" (1894), *The Three Impostors* (1895), and "The Red Hand" (1895), which use the devices of the genre we now label "horror" to "articulate" (Freeman 2010: 253) and "dramatise" (246) his theory of "ecstasy". These stories and novels form a distinct phase in Machen's career, as he later moved away from using horror to communicate "ecstasy." They are also inspired by Machen's personal "ecstatic" experience. In a 1923 letter to a fan, Machen explained how an episode of intense emotional engagement with the landscape inspired him to write *The Great God Pan*:

> the story really arose from an impression of my childhood. In those days I lived at Llanddewi Fach Rectory, in Gwent or Monmouthshire, & from the windows one looked across a strangely beautiful country to the forest of Wentwood, above the valley of the Usk. Beneath this forest, on the slope of the hill there is a lonely house called Bertholly, & to my eyes & imagination this house was a symbol of awe & mystery & dread. And this is the house of the first chapter of "The Great God Pan"; & the whole book, in a sense, was "written to fit" Bertholly; it is an attempt to translate into a tale the vague terror of the little boy looking out of the Rectory window…I endeavoured to pass on the emotion, the indefinable emotion, that I had experienced myself…"
>
> (1993: 5-6)

It is this "endeavour" that Machen came to see as a "failure." He located the reason for this "failure" in his choice of the horror genre, his recourse to the theme of "evil" to communicate "awe, at worst awfulness" (1922: 123). But should we accept Machen's own estimate of his lack of success? His horror fiction is often viewed as some of the best in the genre, has been an inspiration to several generations of horror writers, and pioneered the genre of weird fiction (Worth 2018: x-xi), a legacy that can hardly be described as a "failure." Cognitive literary analyses of horror suggest that Machen does succeed in his project for his horror fiction. Recent work on horror and awe in the field of cognitive literary studies has offered a range of theories about how and why horror works, theories that echo Machen's intentions for the genre and for fiction more generally. These cognitive critical approaches to horror make the same argument for the unique capacities of the genre as Machen does, and see it as functioning through the same processes that he theorised. Cognitive criticism offers new, more empirical, evidence to substantiate Machen's 1890s belief that horror was an ideal medium for carrying out his project of "passing on" uniquely heightened emotions and crucial understandings to his readers.

Cognitive literary criticism is an "umbrella term" for a range of diverse approaches which utilise findings from neuroscience and current theories of cognition to analyse texts (Caracciolo 2016: 187-204). Cognitive criticism usually (though not exclusively) analyses how literary devices and strategies interact with readers' cognition to produce certain effects, and it is within this trend that much cognitive work on horror is located. This makes cognitive criticism particularly appropriate for considering Machen's use of horror: both Machen's theorisation of fiction and cognitive approaches to horror are interested in understanding what fictional narratives do to their audiences.[1] In my analysis, I draw mostly on research and

[1] Machen's horror fiction has been the subject of another type of cognitive analysis in Aaron Worth's article "Arthur Machen and the Horrors of Deep History." This article also seeks to theorise how Machen's works affect his audiences, but from a different perspective. Worth uses Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's cognitive theory of conceptual blending to argue that Machen's horror fiction

theories concerned with offering solutions to what Noël Carroll terms "the paradox of horror" (1990: 10). Horror is a "genre that aims to evoke feelings of fear and anxiety in its audience" (Scrivener 2024: 330), feelings which are typically "aversive", that is, ones that humans actively avoid. The "paradox of horror" is that those who enjoy horror seem to seek out these emotions, rather than avoid them (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Johnson 2020: 214). In offering solutions to this paradox, cognitive critics of horror make arguments about the genre and its affordances that echo Machen's 1890s project for it. This demonstrates that Machen's theories about horror, dismissed by himself and long overlooked by critics, have considerable traction in light of contemporary cognitive research and understandings.

In utilising cognitive criticism, however, I am not claiming that cognitive research offers some ultimate objective "truth" about literature. The methodological value of cognitive criticism does not lie in asserting that empirical studies and theories based upon them can account for how literature works and justify its value to human experience. While all cognitive critics do share the view that "findings about human psychology and behaviour might prove illuminating for the study of human artefacts" (Easterlin 2012: 11), the value that they locate in these findings in relation to human artefacts differs widely. I see cognitive criticism as drawing on insights from cognitive studies and theories strategically, and integrating them with the methodologies of literary studies in ways that enrich those methodologies. As Alan Richardson describes cognitive approaches "at their best," they are "complimentary rather than antithetical to contextualist approaches," open to being integrated within the paradigms of historicist and literary methodologies and theories ([2004] 2016: 24). Cognitive findings, rather than "trigger[ing] an inexorable slide toward biological determinism or preclud[ing] serious attention to historical context and cultural specificity" (Richardson 2010: 10), can be strategically deployed to "generate new, alternative hypotheses for literary analysis" (16). I do not prioritise the objective "truth" of cognitive work, but its potential for generating understandings of minds and cognition, and for considering how these understandings can reposition readings of texts. In my analysis, therefore, I will not be relying exclusively on cognitive approaches to horror, but also drawing on more philosophical understandings of the genre, which shape these cognitive approaches. I will also use the texts I analyse to question some of the assumptions that underlie cognitive studies.

How Horror Works: Machen's Theories and Cognitive Theories Compared

Machen characterised the emotion that he sought to "pass on" to readers of his horror fiction as "indefinable" (Machen 1993: 6). However, Machen's descriptions of the experiences that produce such an emotion do allow us to define at least one important aspect of it: it is a seemingly contradictory state in which positive and negative affects coexist. At the heart of the childhood experiences that inspired Machen's horror fiction was a delighted perception of beauty in the world around him. In this state, "the soul thrill[s] with an emotion intense but vague" and Machen describes a heightened and joyful awareness: "everything to me was wonderful, everything visible was the veil of an invisible secret" (1922: 24-5). Yet this overwhelming perception of beauty was accompanied by "dread" and "terror" (1993: 5). It was this clash between affects typically understood as positive and those typically understood as negative that fascinated Machen and served as the inspiration for his horror fiction. He describes *The Great God Pan* as "an endeavour to pass on the vague, indefinable sense of awe and mystery and terror" that he himself experienced (1922: 20). Machen thus locates the power

"intuit[s], and articulate[s], collectively suppressed acts of conceptual integration," causing particularly intense unease and fear in readers (2012: 225).

of the horror genre in its ability to evoke with particular intensity this unique affective state, which, like Edmund Burke's sublime (discussed further below), involves both "positive" affects (delight, wonder, reverence) and "negatives" ones (dread, terror, disorientation).

This notion of a combination of two seemingly opposed or incompatible elements as being central to the appeal of horror is popular in cognitive approaches. Noël Carroll, whose philosophical analysis of horror has been very influential for cognitive studies, argues that it is "essential to an understanding of the genre" that "the works of horror are in some sense both attractive and repulsive" (1990: 160). For both Machen and Carroll, fictionality and aesthetic representation are crucial in this balancing act. Both locate the source of the unique mix of affects that horror produces not in explicit representations of frightening creatures or events, but in the way the devices of the horror genre function. Machen writes that the task of "the man of letters" is to "realise" or "actualise" an intense emotion "by inventing a tale" about something that evokes it (1922: 24), which he worked to do through the plots of his horror tales. Carroll argues that "what is attractive... in the horror genre need not be, first and foremost, the simple manifestation of the object of art-horror, but the way that manifestation or disclosure is situated as a functional element in an overall narrative structure" (179). Both Machen and Carroll are here making the point that "the aesthetic contrivance of normally upsetting events depends upon their contextualisation in structures like narrative" (Carroll 1990: 181). The purpose of narrative in horror, they argue, is not to frighten the audience by the explicit depiction of specific events, but to give shape and structure to a particular experience, the pleasure of which emerges, seemingly paradoxically, from that which is normally frightening or repulsive. Narrative can thus mediate and reconcile "positive" and "negative" affects in a pleasing way that is impossible in "reality."

Cognitive critic Mathias Clasen argues that tension between seemingly incompatible frameworks is the mechanisms behind the appeal of horror fiction on the level of cognitive structure. Like Carroll, he highlights the unique and paradoxical quality of the experience of consuming horror media: "[k]nowing that something is safe while feeling that it is unsafe produces a peculiar frisson" (2017: 28). Taking an evolutionary approach, Clasen theorises that "the foundation" of horror fiction's appeal is "the parallel processing [that takes] place in the brain" as "evolutionarily older" and "younger" structures come into conflict (28). He describes this process thus:

> [d]eeply conserved, primitive circuits located primarily in the limbic system – an evolutionarily ancient structure that we share with other mammals – perceive a cue that might signal a threat and set into motion the fear response. Meanwhile, evolutionarily younger structures located in the prefrontal cortex – a part of the brain that, among other things, is responsible for controlling emotional responses and inhibiting impulses – carefully assess the cue and can modulate the response produced by the old fear system.
>
> (28)

This "struggle between primitive emotional prompts and rational decision-making" (28) produces a "neurochemical payoff" of "pleasure." Clasen sees this mechanism as the source of the "primary and irreducible appeal of horror" (54). Clasen's analysis demonstrates that the tension or conflict between seeming incompatible frameworks that Machen identifies in horror fiction is key to how the genre interacts with cognitive structure. Machen and Clasen also reach similar conclusions about the importance of such experiences. Clasen argues that "horror works to widen one's emotional experience" in important ways (53), while Machen sees the "indefinable emotion" that he sought to communicate through horror fiction as leading to an awareness of the 'wonder latent in all things" (1922: 24).

Nicholas Freeman argues that in the 1890s, the influence of "his reading of medieval theologians" led Machen to realise that the "same techniques" he used in his stories "could be utilised for the evocation of awe rather than nameless evil" (2010: 249). His later concern about his use of the horror genre was due to his subsequent conviction that "awe" and horror are incompatible. The nature of awe's relationship to fear is a topic that cognitive studies of awe are deeply concerned with. Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt define awe as an emotion "in the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear" (2003: 297), which "involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast" (304). Cognitive perspectives on awe regard it as a "mixed emotion" (Stellar, Bai, *et al*. 2024: 160-1), which can be "disorienting," "frightening," and simultaneously "involve feelings of enlightenment and even rebirth" (Keltner and Haidt 2003: 304). It also "increases one's sense of the self as part of a greater whole" (Shiota, Keltner, Mossman 2007: 960), and differs from most other varieties of positive emotion in that it "tends to direct attention away from the self and toward the environment" (961). According to this definition, Machen's "ecstasy" can be understood as a form of awe, especially as it figures in his horror fiction, where it is associated with fear. Fear can be an important element of awe: Keltner and Haidt identify five "flavourings" of awe experiences, one of which is threat-based awe, "flavoured by feelings of fear" (304). They argue that this type of awe is linked to the frustration of the "need for accommodation" of new knowledge structures that awe involves: awe becomes "terrifying... when one fails to understand" (304). Since Machen's horror fiction hinges on the inability of characters to grasp the power and extent of the forces that surround them or to account for mysterious events, it is an ideal vehicle for generating this "threat-based awe." Awe studies also suggest some theories as to why Machen might have become disillusioned with using this type of awe to evoke "ecstasy." Cognitive studies of awe emphasise that it is a highly variable emotion, whose characteristics "[depend] on the context and how it is appraised" (Gordon, Stellar, *et al.* 2017: 310). Crucially, the experience of awe varies across time and cultural contexts. Jennifer Stellar, Yang Bai and their coauthors argue that "awe experiences have become less fearful over time in Western cultures," as these cultures become "less inclined to experience mixed emotions" in response to historical shifts and changes (2024: 161). Machen's career spanned many decades and vast cultural changes; it is possible that a catastrophic event such as the First World War (alongside more subtle and long-term changes) may have led to a tendency to distinguish more categorically between positive and negative emotions and to recalibrate "mixed" emotions such as awe towards their more positive aspects. Both Machen's own and cultural understandings of awe might have shifted in response to cultural, social and political changes, and caused him to view the use of horror to evoke "ecstasy" as a "failure."

Other cognitive analyses of horror similarly emphasise its ability to elicit a uniquely ambiguous combination of fear and positive affects. In a study that uses cognitive experiments to test Edmund Burke's argument that fear is an essential component of the sublime, Kendall Eskine, Natalie Kacinik and Jesse Prinz present evidence that fear does indeed "increase sublime feelings" (2012: 1072). The concept of the sublime, and particularly the Burkean sublime, with its emphasis on the role of fear, is clearly closely related to Machen's notion of "ecstasy," which makes work on the sublime relevant to Machen's ideas about "ecstatic" experience and art. Eskine, Kacinik and Prinz argue that "[t]he capacity for a work of art to grab our attention and interest, to remove us from daily life, may stem from its ability to trigger our evolved mechanisms for coping with danger," and that horror, which "seizes one's attention" and "increases vigilance" is therefore particularly effective at triggering such mechanisms (1073). Mathias Clasen and Coltan Scrivner make a similar argument for the capacity of horror to compel attention and make audiences more receptive by exploiting fear: "[t]hreat-related information in particular has a premium on our attention, spreading more often

and more reliably than information that is positive, neutral or generally negative" (2022: e297). Clasen and Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen further elaborate this point: "[b]ecause stories of danger and its avoidance transmit survival-relevant information, they capture our attention and stick in the memory" (2019: 124). Such cognitive research and theories support Machen's idea that horror can make its audience more attuned to aspects of the world and of experience that they might otherwise have overlooked, more receptive to the richness of the world around them. Moreover, Clasen and Kjeldgaard-Christiansen further argue that the cognitive "challenge" that horror offers is "intensely stimulating", which is why "studies have found that the negative emotions associated with horror are complemented by positive emotions such as anticipation, bravery and joy" (126). This argument again indicates that interacting with horror media can lead to positive emotions, supporting Machen's 1890s conviction that the seemingly negative affects of horror can induce unique and beneficial emotional and spiritual experience.

Among the synonyms that Machen lists for "ecstasy" are a "sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown" ([1902] 1912: 24). As Andrew McCann writes, a "mystically inclined symbolism" that "orients to the unrepresentable" is "at the core of [Machen's] evolving account of literary distinction" (2014: 151). Since Machen used fiction to articulate these ideas (Freeman 2010: 245, 253), the unknown is an essential component of Machen's horror fiction, which consistently hints at or indirectly represents that which is not and cannot be known. This both stimulates the "desire for the unknown" in Machen's readers and propels the plot, as characters' curiosity drives them to attempt to understand the mysterious events that prove resistant to explanation. As one character declares, "[t]here lies the strangeness of it all. Those who know the secret cannot tell it if they would; it is positively as ineffable as the central doctrine of Freemasonry" (1895: 70). The desire to "lift the veil" and understand that which is mysterious drives the plots of *The Great God Pan* and "The Inmost Light," as scientists and experimenters attempt to discover fundamental but ultimately impenetrable truths about the human soul. A character in *The Three Impostors* describes how she "burned with curiosity" (76) and "was seized with pangs of mingled curiosity and fear" (89). These characters are manifesting (though often in a misguided form, as I will go on to discuss) the "desire for the unknown" that Machen saw as a crucial component of "ecstasy." The lure of the unknown, which engages the desire to understand, was for Machen a central element of horror fiction and its relationship with "ecstasy." By powerfully stimulating the "desire for the unknown," his horror fiction works to foster ecstatic experience.

Cognitive critics of horror similarly argue that the genre capitalises on curiosity and a basic urge to explore. Mathias Clasen and Coltan Scrivner identify "the human predisposition for exploration" as central to all "imaginary worlds in entertainment," but especially so to horror (2022: e297). What Clasen and Scrivner term "morbid curiosity" – "the motivation to gather information about dangerous situations" – is particularly intense due to the component of fear, which makes people especially vigilant and alert (e297). Since "the human fear system evolved to be hypersensitive to cues of danger" (Clasen 2017: 26), these cues in horror media heighten ordinary curiosity to a singular intensity. Noël Carroll also argues that "the horror story is driven explicitly by curiosity" (1990: 182). He acknowledges that this is true of all narrative, but views horror is a special case in which curiosity plays a uniquely central role in the pleasures to be derived from it (182). Carroll writes that "what attracts us to... horror... is the whole structure and staging of curiosity in the narrative" (190). For Carroll, horror fiction "works" because "the plots of discovery and the dramas of proof pique our curiosity, and abet our interest, ideally satisfying them in a way that is pleasurable" (185). Cognitive critical work therefore supports Machen's notion that what makes horror fiction effective is the specific way in which it stimulates curiosity through the structure of its

narratives. This central role of curiosity again associates horror closely with awe, since a similar drive is crucial in awe experiences: the "need for accommodation" of unfamiliar knowledge structures is one of constitutive components of awe (Keltner and Haidt 2003: 304). This dynamic substantiates Machen's 1890s linkage of horror with "ecstasy."

A related element that Machen identifies as central to "ecstasy" is risk. As he writes in *Hieroglyphics*, "risk means uncertainty, and uncertainty connotes the unknown" (17). Machen thus equates "love of a risk" with the "desire for the unknown" that is central to the kind of ecstatic experience he wanted to foster through horror. He argues that even when someone wins a minor bet, "[f]or the moment he is the man who has succeeded in solving the enigma of the Sphinx, in discovering the unknown continent, in reading the cypher, in guessing at the song that the Sirens sang, in unveiling the hidden treasure that the buccaneers buried on the lonely shore; he has ventured successfully into the dim region of surmises" (16). The element of risk in even something as trivial as gambling or as prosaic as financial decisions makes those who run such risks "treasure-seekers, and mystery-mongers, and delvers after hidden things spiritual and material" (17). Machen thus sees risk as elevating "common characters and objects" in what Alison Milbank describes as a "mystical, theurgic ascent into a kind of enchantment" that lies at the heart of "ecstasy" (2018: 272).

This emphasis on the role of risk in the pleasures of horror media is something that cognitive critics of horror concur with. In one study, Clasen, Andersen *et al*., view engagement with horror fiction as a form of play, with play understood as a "[behaviour] in which the individual approaches situations in which the amount of uncertainty or surprise associated with them is "just right" for that person" (2020: 1498). Creating these "just right" arousal dynamics involves negotiating risk and safety: "[p]henomena associated with little to no uncertainty or surprise would render an experience boring and unmotivating, whereas too much uncertainty and surprise would render it chaotic, unmasterable, and displeasurable" (1498). The results of their study indicate that there is "an optimal fear level – a sweet spot – for [audiences] in which enjoyment is maximised" (1507). Andersen, Clasen and their coauthors' findings indicate that the ability to balance risk, uncertainty and danger against safety and security is at the heart of what makes horror an enjoyable form of play. Both Machen and these cognitive critics view a controlled and manageable amount of risk as integral to the way horror can intensify experience, whether through measurable increased arousal (in the context of cognitive research) or through inducing a heightened spiritual state (such as Machen's "ecstasy").

Thus far I have argued that Machen's horror fiction is underpinned by a theoretical approach to the genre[2], one which has been substantiated by today's cognitive research, despite Machen's own subsequent perception of the "failure" of this phase of his aesthetic experimentation. The findings, arguments and theories of cognitive approaches to horror support the validity of Machen's intention of using horror as a tool for generating particularly intense and unique emotions and for making his readers more receptive to the wonder of the world around them. This is due to the unique combination of positive and negative affects that horror produces (especially its exploitation of the relationship between awe and fear), to the increased attention and intense engagement that it compels, to the way it structures and manipulates curiosity, and to its simulation of risk or danger. This congruence between Machen's and cognitive understandings of the genre demonstrates that Machen intuitively had a very nuanced perception of the varied possibilities of horror, allowing him to put forward the

[2] While Machen did not have a consistent and elaborate "theory" of horror, he used his fiction throughout his career to illustrate his notion of "ecstasy" (Freeman 2010: 253) and his horror fiction is thus underpinned by an intention to use literary forms to convey an experience of "ecstasy".

kinds of theories about it that scholars are only now beginning to consider in more detail. But what else might this tell us about Machen's theories and fiction, especially from a cognitive perspective? His strong and effective understanding of how the horror genre "works" by interacting with cognition suggests that Machen's other ideas about the mind merit more critical attention. In the next section, I analyse some aspects of Machen's 1890s horror fiction to identify and explore his unique and challenging concepts of the mind and cognition, and suggest how these concepts might prove an important corrective to taken-for-granted notions and little-questioned assumptions about the human mind.

Not Lifting the Veil: The Unknowing Mind

Neuroscience studies "the human mind" as an objective reality. The mind, however, is also to a large extent a representation, and it is understood, imagined and depicted in culturally specific ways. One of the most pervasive ways of understanding and representing the mind is what I will call the "information-processing device" model: as Alan Palmer, citing Daniel Dennett and Steven Pinker, puts it, "it is a basic, operational, working assumption of cognitive scientists that the mind is an information-processing device," designed to accurately evaluate, interpret, and control the world around it (2004: 88). Arthur Machen's horror fiction offers powerful challenges to this "information-processing device" view of the mind. Machen departs from narratives that represent the mind as having the power to make meaning out of and master the world around it, and instead depicts a mind which is unable to control or interpret a world full of incomprehensible agencies. His horror fiction suggests how we might conceive of the human mind differently, in ways that crucially resonate with critical movements such as the nonhuman turn and ecocriticism.

The narratives of Machen's Gothic stories are full of gaps and propelled by undefined agencies, which suggests that the world is inaccessible to ultimate understanding, let alone control. In contrast to the dominant conception of the mind as having successful interpretation and objective understanding as its aim (the "information-processing device" view), Machen depicts the mind as suspended between this active drive to know and an equally powerful need to refuse or conceal knowledge and meaning. In his representations of cold experimenters and rapacious collectors, Machen critiques the normative attention to only the knowing, interpreting part of the mind. Machen instead suggests a model of constant and ecstatic cognitive failure – the desire to know continually thwarted and continually pursued regardless. This focus on cognitive non-fulfilment, rather than on cognitive achievement in the form of interpretation or control, is underpinned by Machen's wider spiritual and religious beliefs. The worldview that Machen adopted personally and represented in his fiction can best be described as esoteric, in that he believed in an ineffable reality underlying and occasionally illuminating the everyday world. A devout Christian throughout his life, whose faith never seems to have wavered, Machen understood this faith through an esoteric cosmology (Reynolds and Charlton 1963: 2). His personal brand of esotericism is based on a belief in the essential inaccessibility of a numinous world to humans, and emphasises the experience of helplessness or insignificance in the face of cosmic forces, rather than the achievement of knowledge, accurate perception of an external reality, or exercise of control. In this, his esoteric beliefs diverge from the general trend of the late-century occult revival. As Alex Owen has identified, the occult revival "allied itself with the idea of scientific validation" to produce a system by which "the universe and the place of humankind within it were rationalised" (2004: 8). Like many other turn-of-the-century disciplines, this esotericism was "characterised by the will to both know and control the natural world" (14). This was an aspiration that Machen completely rejected. The idea of the unknown is central to his worldview; as he wrote to his friend A. E. Waite,

"you know well that we are surrounded by mysteries; that it is of the definition of man that he can ask many questions which he cannot answer" (1988: 52). Machen's esotericism thus diverges sharply from the prevailing form of late-century esotericism in his alternative epistemological position towards knowledge and reality.

In his horror fiction Machen repeatedly uses the figure of the veil to thematise the tension between a condition of unknowing and the desire to achieve knowledge. In the esoteric cosmology of his fiction, "piercing" (Machen 1894: 125) or "lifting" (10) veils is a highly dangerous activity, even as it is intensely desired. Experiments such as Dr Raymond's in *The Great God Pan*[3] are driven by the compulsive need to "see" clearly and directly, "without knowing or caring what might pass forth or enter in" (1894: 154), as characters apply the aims and procedures of scientific empiricism indiscriminately, eager to become "master of the secret" (1895: 116). The work of such misguided scientists is associated with seeing behind various events and objects to an arcane meaning, while refusing to accept the inaccessibility of the underlying reality: "there *is* a real world, but it is beyond this glamour and this vision… you and I shall see [the veil] lifted" (1894: 10). Professor Gregg in *The Three Impostors* likens his investigations into supernatural happenings to "a day with the geological hammers" (1895: 101), representing himself as excavating a buried meaning which is singular, fixed, and newly accessible through scientific procedures. Such characters think of themselves (and by extension, of humans in general) as "information-processing" creatures, for whom veils exist to be lifted, mysteries exist to be interpreted and meaning exists to be identified and safely contained.

However, as these narratives unfold, the figure of the veil turns out to be not only obscuring, but also protective. In contrast to the model of the mind which takes uncovering as its defining mechanism, Machen suggests that the mind's ability to conceal or refuse knowledge is equally crucial. This mental operation of veiling underlies happiness: "[n]o doubt you have read of the Witches' Sabbath, and have laughed at the tales which terrified our ancestors; the black cats, and the broomsticks, and dooms pronounced against some old woman's cow. Since I have known the truth I have often reflected that it is on the whole a happy thing that such burlesque as this is believed, for it serves to conceal much that it is better should not be known generally" (1895: 176). The horrifying and inexplicable events in Machen's tales, by their contrast with the absurdities of these "burlesques," demonstrate that such concealing myths are a way of making certain knowledge bearable, and the mental operation of veiling is the cognitive mechanism that is essential to our happiness, if not survival. In *The Great God Pan,* gaps in knowledge and an inability to know are not conditions of anxiety, but again the foundation of human happiness and sanity: "I will not read it; I should never sleep again" (1894: 134). The text is full of such warnings: "I could tell you certain things which would convince you, but you would never know a happy day again" (56); "blot out the story from your mind… or you will be sorry" (87); "what he saw I hope we never shall" (121). The "lifting of the veil" on forbidden knowledge results in the destruction of the mind: "I am sure that he did not see me; he saw nothing that you or I can see… that man no longer belonged to this world; it was a devil's face I looked upon" (121). The loss of the ability to "see" the protective veil leads to insanity, various forms of physical collapse, and suicide. In the esoteric cosmology of Machen's tales, the goal is not to "lift the veil" (as misguided experimenters attempt to do), but to become aware that the veil is there and to live in that awareness. This esoteric doctrine can be restated from a cognitive perspective – instead of celebrating the reasoning and interpretative capacities of an "information-processing" mind,

[3] *The Great God Pan* begins with Dr Raymond carrying out an experimental brain surgery on his servant Mary, intended to unlock a hidden part of her mind, and which results in the birth of a demonic child, Helen Vaughan.

Machen foregrounds the mind's capacity to exclude or refuse meaning, and its frequent incapacity to accurately interpret information in a meaningful manner and exercise control over the world.

The Gothic imagery of the veil is instrumental in Machen's horror fiction because veils do not simply prevent seeing, but encourage our desire to see and enable a particular kind of incomplete or thwarted seeing. The veil thus epitomises Machen's depiction of cognition as a dynamic tension between the drive to know, uncover and perceive, and the imperative to remain in a state of at least partial unknowing. Much of his horror fiction is concerned with this tension. The conflict between the imperatives to know and to remain unenlightened is played out in *The Great God Pan* through characters' alternate movement forward, towards knowledge, and back, shrinking away from it. The drive to access a "real world… beyond this glamour and this vision" (1894: 10), which propels the plot forward, is counterbalanced by a backwards movement of retreat from such knowledge. As one of the characters reads the early history of the tale's antagonist, the demonic Helen Vaughan, "his mind shuddered and shrank back" (1894: 46). Later he writes to a friend that "I am like a traveller who has peered over an abyss, and has drawn back in terror… I have resolved… to explore no whit farther" (87). When another character examines the account of a hellish "entertainment" at Helen's house (presumably involving a terrifying magical rite), "sick at heart… he fl[ings] the paper down" (134). The mind is caught between the imperatives to know and to refuse knowledge, as it both demands objective and accurate understanding, and retreats before this possibility. Machen thus encourages a cognitively double condition, in which two contradictory imperatives and frames of reference come into collision. As I have discussed above, such tension between two seemingly opposed impulses or affects is central to how horror "works" on a cognitive level, which again demonstrates the privileged place the horror genre holds in relation to Machen's understanding of the mind.

Horror allows Machen to test his theories about the mind by experimenting with immersing his readers in the experience of being unable to understand, or even accurately perceive, crucial events and agencies. Writing to an American scholar in 1930, Machen remarked that the ending of one of his works (*The Terror*, 1917) was flawed because "[i]t would have been much better to leave the mystery without explanation" (1988: 236). Leaving mysteries without an explanation was his consistent strategy in his 1890s horror fiction. As McCann observes, "Machen's texts turn on the failure of representation" (2014: 154). The narratives of these stories are driven by agencies that are implied rather than explicitly stated. In "The Inmost Light," for example, characters move randomly through London; the entire plot of the story is driven by a set of seeming coincidences taking place in the city streets, from the two central characters' chance encounter for the first time in five years, when Dyson "jostled against" Salisbury in passing (1894: 157), to the arbitrary appearance of the crumpled paper that "fell at Salisbury's feet" (185), and which eventually proves to be a crucial clue to the central mystery of the story. Dyson and Salisbury are propelled not by their own intentions, but by a series of external forces acting upon them: the wind and rain that "tore down upon the street," forcing Salisbury to take shelter (180), the random gestures of the woman who throws the paper away (185), and most often, by the streets themselves, which they walk "not bound for anywhere in particular" (202). Dyson and Salisbury are passive and given up to what seems to be the unfettered play of coincidence, but which, acting cumulatively to drive the plot forward, coalesces into an impression of an external agency that is only implied, never directly defined. Through his frequent use of this narrative strategy, Machen's fiction became one of the origin points of the weird – "a mode of fiction that does not want to be known" (Alder 2020: 6). The weird hinges on the realisation that "the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid" (Fisher 2016: 15) and uses encounters with

phenomena that cannot be adequately expressed or even conceived to "recognise that human agency and certainty about the present or the future are limited and provisional" (Alder 2020: 4). As became typical of weird fiction, the horrific events at the centre of Machen's stories and novels are left to varying degree unexplained. As Marco Pasi has argued, this stems from Machen's "negative epistemology" – "the idea that... human beings do not naturally have the capacity of perceiving or interacting with the reality that hides behind the one commonly accessible in everyday life" (2007: 73). This epistemology is notably rare in fiction: Pasi writes that although Machen had predecessors in this approach, such as early esotericists and philosophers, and writers like Edward Bulwer-Lytton, he was the first to put this "negative epistemology" into practice in his fiction so consistently and categorically (73-6). Through his groundbreaking refusal to be explicit, Machen creates the sense of something that is not merely resistant to explanation or utterance, but something which cannot be conceived, which is inaccessible to the human mind.

This ultimate refusal of knowledge and mastery runs counter to the prevailing "positive epistemology," which is defined by "confidence in man's epistemological abilities, and a belief in the importance of exerting them to the utmost" and "the conviction that knowledge... is something positive" (Pasi 2007: 64). Most accounts of knowledge and the mind continue to be oriented towards this positive epistemology. Perceiving clearly and accurately is usually understood as the mind's most important capacity and function, and accounts emphasise utility, understanding, control, and adaptive advantage (what I have called the "information-processing device" view of the mind). Even those disciplines that focus on what is seemingly irrational about the operations of the mind and the psyche (such as psychology) investigate such phenomena in order to explain and rationalise them. Today's cognitive theories and the assumptions underlying them focus on the ability of the human mind to find meanings hidden behind, beneath or within the seeming chaos of the world, thus bringing it under rational control through sense-making activities.[4] The ability of the mind to refuse or conceal meaning is typically ignored; as Gillian Beer puts it, "[o]ne of the most remarkable powers of the human mind – less often commented on than its power to proliferate senses – is its power to exclude, or suppress, feasible meanings" (1999: 156). The tendency to ignore these aspects of the mind obstructs what H. Porter Abbott calls the "wisdom in accepting with a full cognitive embrace the fact that there are things we simply do not and cannot know" (2013: 115). Machen is part of a minority tradition in fiction, which's focuses on the ability to not see, to fail to find meaning, to conceal and obscure. Fictional strategies that engage with this theme can, as Abbott argues, "[exercise] and [enlarge] the reader's emotional, intellectual, and ethical faculties" (11). The revised understanding of the mind which such works suggest may prove relevant in multiple ways, for example, in the context of the ecological crisis. The "information-processing device" view of the mind has resulted in what Lorraine Code calls the "Enlightenment legacy," which "makes knowledge-as-mastery possible" by emphasising "the calculability of the world" (2006: 9). This orientation towards the non-human world erases its agency and results in its irreparable damage (2006: 9). As Abbott argues, "the heroic quest to penetrate the unknown can be hard to separate from the desire to appropriate and to tame" (2013: 146). Alternative

[4] To cite a few examples from various works of cognitive criticism, Arnold Modell views metaphor as "the selective interpreter of corporeal experience" (2003: xii), Elaine Auyoung suggests that the unique cognitive capacity to "recognise what fragmentary clues imply" is central to how realistic fiction functions (2015: 581-3), Raymond Gibbs argues that "much of our everyday talk reflects people's ability to think in ways that go beyond the literal" (1994: 3), and Lisa Zunshine defines theory of mind as "our ability to explain people's behaviour in terms of their thoughts, feelings, belief, and desires" (2006: 6). All these definitions and arguments centre on and elevate the cognitive ability to see behind something, or to reconstruct a lost whole out of fragments.

conceptions of the mind, such as the one Machen suggests, can help to shift this orientation to a more ecologically aware one.

Conclusion

Cognitive critical perspectives on horror media substantiate Machen's 1890s conviction that horror is a genre particularly suited to producing unique, heightened, insightful and sometimes pleasurable states. Machen argued that what "differentiates fine literature from a number of grammatical, or partly grammatical, sentences arranged in a more or less logical order" is the feeling of "ecstasy" that such works induce in their readers ([1902] 1912: 22-3). He adhered to this conviction throughout his career, and experimented with a range of aesthetic strategies to induce this experience, with horror being his preferred tool for carrying out this project in the 1890s. Similarly foregrounding audience responses, cognitive work on horror has explored the paradoxical pleasures of the genre and analysed how they are generated in audiences, reaching conclusions analogous to Machen's. Both Machen and cognitive critics argue that horror elicits a singular combination of positive and negative affects and functions through tension between opposed needs and impulses, that horror is capable of making its audiences particularly attentive and receptive to the world around them, that horror is driven by curiosity, and that elements of danger and risk contribute importantly to the pleasures of horror. These congruences indicate that Machen was intuitively attuned to how the horror genre works on a cognitive level, and further suggests that his ideas about how horror interacts with the mind merit closer attention, both within cognitive studies and beyond.

In his horror fiction, Machen repeatedly evokes but never explicitly depicts, defines or explains events or overarching agencies, suggesting that these events and agencies are ultimately resistant to human knowledge. Across the various phases of his career, he meditates on the way even the most mundane things and events are not simply mysterious, but fundamentally unknowable, a view which positions the human mind as insufficient to know, process, or understand the world in which we exist. This stands in sharp contrast to how the mind is usually regarded, both within cognitive science and more broadly. We tend to take it for granted that the mind is there to accurately apprehend, evaluate, and control the world around it. Machen, however, foregrounds the extraordinary ability of humans *not* to know, and to use various heuristics to function in a world which we ultimately know very little about. In this, Machen's understanding of the mind is profoundly sympathetic with today's critical perspectives which work to displace the centrality of the human, such as the nonhuman turn and ecocriticism. In this respect, Machen was instrumental in pioneering weird fiction as a genre which depicts "a cosmos decidedly *not* organised around the fulfilment of human narratives" (Alder 2020: 12, emphasis in original). Machen's writings, including his horror fiction, challenge us to consider what it might mean not to regard the human mind as an instrument of knowing, and how the inability to know or understand might be productive.

Works Cited

Abbott, H. Porter. 2013. *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable.* Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.

Alder, Emily. 2020. *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Auyoung, Elaine. 2015. "Rethinking the Reality Effect: Detail and the Novel." In *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, edited by Lisa Zunshine, 581-92. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beer, Gillian. 1999. *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Caracciolo, Marco. 2016. "Cognitive Literature Studies and the Status of Interpretation: An Attempt at Conceptual Mapping." *New Literary History*, 47.1: 187-207. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2016.0003

Carroll, Noël. 1990. *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge.

Clasen, Mathias. 2017. *Why Horror Seduces.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Clasen, Mathias, and Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen. 2019. "Threat Simulation in Virtual Limbo: An Evolutionary Approach to Horror Video Games." *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds,* 11.2: 119-38. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.11.2.119_1

Clasen, Mathias, Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and John A. Johnson. 2020. "Horror, Personality, and Threat Simulation: A Survey on the Psychology of Scary Media." *Evolutionary Behavioural Sciences*, 14.3: 213-30. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/ebs0000152

Clasen, Mathias, and Coltan Scrivner. 2022. "Why Frightening Imaginary Worlds? Morbid Curiosity and the Learning Potential of Horror." *Behavioural and Brain Sciences,* 45: e297. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X21002259

Clasen, Mathias, Marc Malmdorf Andersen, Uffe Schjoedt, Henry Price, Fernando E. Rosas, and Coltan Scrivner. 2020. "Playing with Fear: A Field Study in Recreational Horror." *Psychological Science,* 31.12: 1497-510. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620972116

Code, Lorraine. 2006. *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Easterlin, Nancy. 2012. *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Eskine, Kendall, Natalie Kacinik, and Jesse Prinz. 2012. "Stirring Images: Fear, Not Happiness or Arousal, Makes Art More Sublime." *Emotion,* 12.5: 1071-4. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027200

Ferguson, Christine. 2016. "Reading with the Occultists: Arthur Machen, A. E. Waite, and the Ecstasies of Popular Fiction." *Journal of Victorian Culture,* 21.1: 40-55. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2015.1123170

Fisher, Mark. 2016. *The Weird and the Eerie.* London: Repeater Books.

Freeman, Nicholas. 2010. "Arthur Machen: Ecstasy and Epiphany." *Literature and Theology*, 24.3: 242-55. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frq032

Gibbs, Raymond. 1994. *Poetics of the Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gordon, Amie; Jennifer Stellar, Craig Anderson, Galen McNeil, Daniel Loew, and Dacher Keltner. 2017. "The Dark Side of the Sublime: Distinguishing a Threat-Based Variant of Awe." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 113.2: 310-28. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000120

Keltner, Dacher, and Jonathan Haidt. 2003. "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion." *Cognition and Emotion*, 17.2: 297-314. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930302297

Machen, Arthur. 1894. *The Great God Pan and The Inmost Light*. London: John Lane.

Machen, Arthur. 1895. *The Three Impostors, or, The Transmutations*. London: John Lane.

Machen, Arthur. [1902] 1912. *Hieroglyphics: A Note Upon Ecstasy in Literature.* London: Martin Secker.

Machen, Arthur. 1922. *Far Off Things*. London: Martin Secker.

Machen, Arthur. 1988. *Selected Letters: The Private Writings of the Master of the Macabre*, edited by Roger Dobson, Godfrey Brangham and R. A. Gilbert. Wellingborough: Aquarian.

Machen, Arthur. 1993. *A Few Letters from Arthur Machen: Letters to Munson Havens* with an Introduction by Roger Dobson. Wirrall: Aylesford Press.

McCann, Andrew. 2014. *Popular Fiction, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Milbank, Alison. 2018. *God and the Gothic: Religion, Romance, and Reality in the English Literary Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Modell, Arnold. 2003. *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Owen, Alex. 2004. *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Palmer, Alan. 2004. *Fictional Minds*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Pasi, Marco. 2007. "Arthur Machen's Panic Fears: Western Esotericism and the Irruption of Negative Epistemology." *Aries* 7.1: 63-83. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/157005906X154719

Reynolds, Aidan and William Charlton. 1963. *Arthur Machen: A Short Account of His Life and Work*. London: The Richards Press.

Richardson, Alan. [2004] 2016. "Studies in Literature and Cognition: A Field Map." In *The Work of Fiction: Cognition, Culture and Complexity*, edited by Ellen Spolsky and Alan Richardson, 17-46. Routledge: London.

Richardson, Alan. 2010. *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Scrivner, Coltan. 2024. "Bleeding-Heart Horror Fans: Enjoyment of Horror Media Is Not Related to Lower Empathy or Compassion." *Journal of Media Psychology*, 36.5: 330-41. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000405

Shiota, Michelle; Dacher Keltner, and Amanda Mossman. 2007. "The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effects on Self-Concept." *Cognition and Emotion*, 21.5: 944-63. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930600923668

Stellar, Jennifer; Yang Bai, Craig Anderson, Amie Gordon, Galen McNeil, Kaiping Peng, and Dacher Keltner. 2024. "Culture and Awe: Understanding Awe as a Mixed Emotion." *Affective Science*, 5.2: 160-70. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-024-00243-3

Worth, Aaron. 2012. "Arthur Machen and the Horrors of Deep History". *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40.1: 215-27. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150311000325

Worth, Aaron. 2018. "Introduction." In *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* by Arthur Machen edited by Aaron Worth, ix-xxx. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zunshine, Lisa. 2006. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.