Stephen King interview, London, May 1983

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Do people read horror to see that their fears can be rationalised in supernatural terms?

Yes; I think that whenever we read a horror story, whether it's about vampires or ghosts, or cars – like in Christine, cars that run by themselves - it's telling us all this stuff that we don't believe in one ear, in a very loud voice, but in the other ear, in a very quiet voice, it's whispering about things we really are afraid of. That's why I tell people that I think a lot of the horror movies of the last three or four years are riddled – no pun intended - with cancer; the alien, the thing, the chestburster, the thing that incubates inside this guy is a tumour image; the same thing is true of John Carpenter's remake of The Thing – it's more like John Campbell's original story, but informed with our present interests and things like that; it's full of this kind of cancer imagery that has to do with our bodies in revolt. The same thing is true of the Cronenberg films where there are parasites inside, like kind of sexual cancer or in Scanners where the guy's head explodes – pretty vivid tumour image. And the thing is, we're afraid of cancer, y'know, your generation, my generation, same thing. We live in a world where the informational inflow to us, probably in one day exceeds what our grandfathers would have gotten in a year, y'know, in terms of hard information in every day's paper. Every day there's something else about 'This causes cancer', 'That causes cancer', 'cancer is a virus', or it isn't a virus – whatever. And so consequently we live in a world where we're afraid that if we smoke, we get lung cancer, eat too much beef, you get cancer in your intestines… the air in London supposedly causes sinus cancer; ultra violet; if we spend too much time on the Costa Del Sol, Miami Beach or wherever, you get skin cancer – it seems now to be an unescapable disease. It's all around us, and there's no cure for it, and this is just like, one example. The cancer of living - it kills you sooner or later. And so I don't think it's surprising to see these kind of images of horrible mutations actually incubating inside the human body; I mean, that's not all horror movies, but those images have been in a lot, and I just named some: there's Humanoids From The Deep, same thing, there's Embryo…

Is writing it off in supernatural terms avoiding the issue?

Avoiding the issue is one way to put it – another way to put it might be, we were told as school-children that if you looked at an eclipse of the sun dead-on the corona or the edge of the sun could blind you; but we were told to turn our backs to it, take a piece of paper and poke a hole through it with a needle, and hold

another bright piece of cardboard and then focus, and that you could see it with your back turned to it, and that you could view something that would put your eyes out if you looked at it directly, obliquely. In a lot of cases that's what the horror story is, it's like if you ever play pool, it's like when you kiss it off into the opposite pocket by banging it in a different direction. It doesn't solve anything, and people who think that it does are wrong, they say 'Well you can confront your fears', but as you pointed out, it's not exactly like that; to read a story about vampires is not really to confront one's fears, I believe, unless you're a superstitious peasant from the Carpathian mountains, who believes that there really are, seriously, beings who can live thousands and thousands of years by sucking blood. I don't believe that a bit, but on the other hand there's a story in the British papers about this guy who apparently cut up about 27 people, and put 'em down his drain, and if that isn't a vampire, I don't know what it is. So if you look at one, maybe it's a way of looking obliquely at the other, and symbolically facing fears. I don't know if you accept the Freudian interpretation of dreams. I don't, exactly, but I do think when we have bad dreams or good dreams, that it's concretisation, images which express real fears, but they just happen to be a little bit more elegant because those images always are.

Do you think Freud unnecessarily complicated our way of perceiving good and evil?

Yes, because Freud is the beginning, isn't he, of our ability to say that nothing is anybody's fault. That's what's the matter with the judicial system in the United States right now, and it's also what's the matter with the ability to govern of most European governments, and I think the communists are finding this out now too, in places like Poland and East Germany, and those are just the ones that we know about, those are the European ones that we can get in touch with. 'Nothing is anybody's fault'; 'there are reasons for everything that stretch beyond absolute good and absolute evil' – it takes away the idea of free will and makes us less divine beings than we were before. It even takes away some of the glory of doing something really nasty; let's say…I have a fairly puritanical upbringing, so let's say that I take my trenchcoat that I have upstairs and take a pair of pants and I cut off just the bottoms of the legs and wrap rubber bands around them and go out and find a nice-looking girl and I stand in front of her and just throw my trenchcoat wide open, totally naked underneath and I flash her and run away cackling madly. Well, in a Calvinistic world where you have Biblical precepts of good and evil, I have therefore performed an evil act, and that has its own twisted nobility because I decided to do evil; to go out and risk the cops and public exposure – not to coin a pun - but evil worse for me, because the headlines would say 'Famous Horror Writer Performs..' what? Flashing, exhibitionistic act in Hyde Park or something like that, so it would be a really brave thing to do in a twisted sort of a way. But no, the Freudians make it so that you just say, 'Well probably he was toilet-trained too early' or something, and as a result he has these things… it takes it away. It just becomes the equivalent to an ants trundling around a piece of bread or something.

Are you still exorcising the Monster In The Closet?

My grandfather used to call it amamaguzalan, a red-Indian word, and the old Britishers used to tell their children that Jack Ketch was in the house – the executioner. He's there. I think he's there. I can't get rid of that guy. Y'know, cos he's in my closet – he's up here (indicates head). The boogeyman in the closet is the guy that's gonna come out of the crowd at Lauderdale airport in Jerusalem with an Uzi and plug about 40 spectators; my supernatural boogeyman is much more comforting, I think. It's a rehearsal for our own death. But it's fun, too. There's an imaginative aspect to the fiction that takes people away. When we talk about horror fiction we are always concentrating on certain outlaw elements of the genre; I think a lot of guys who write this stuff and direct the films – and I'm one of them, God knows - will try to pretty it up from time to time, in an effort to say to people in the press, 'Look – I'm not anti-social, I'm not anti-society or anything like that', but it's…maybe it's a little bit easier to admit it to a guy like you, because you're younger than the last people that I saw, but we're in the business of selling public executions here. People come by the droves. The same way that they used to come to Tower Hill to watch the executioner chop off people's heads – they want to see blood flow. But the other side of that coin is that people also want somebody who can make them fly, and can put on that magic dust – Tinkerbell - and make 'em see something different or take them away to a world where there is vampires, monsters, or something like that. People need that, man, they gotta have it. Without a little imagination, it's just like…salt; don't eat enough salt, you get this goitre neck, y'know. And people who don't dream, who don't have any kind of imaginative life, they must…

they must go nuts. I can't imagine that. What would you do in doctors' offices? You'd just sit there.

Lorimar productions were producing The Dead Zone a while back…?

It's done. It went through a number of hands and ended up with Dino De Laurentis, and directed by David Cronenberg. I'm gonna see a rough cut on Monday when I'm back in New York. But I saw twenty minutes of it cut together and I thought it was gorgeous; it looks great when the sky –have you read the novel? You know Frank Dodd, the renegade cop who's actually done it goes into his bathroom, cuts his throat with a razor – but in the movie…I could barely watch this, I watched it sorta like this [through his fingers]. He gets into the tub, he's wearing his raincoat and he has a pair of these barber's shears, very long, pointed ones, and he fixes them to one of the taps of the tub so that they're pointing up at an angle, like this [demonstrates 45 degree angle], and he looks almost Japanese; he begins to nod his head, and suddenly he just drives his head down on the shears and one of them goes up his nose and the other one down his throat and he's just fixed that way on the shears. Otherwise you'd never know it was a Cronenberg picture, because it looks like a series of Norman Rockwell paintings, very pastoral.

How about John Carpenter's Firestarter?

Oh no, it's ironic, he's doing Christine; Christine's in production now. Universal Pictures junked Firestarter and there's no real explanation for what they did, or why they junked it. The nominal explanation is that the budget was too much, and the budget was very high, it was about eighteen million dollars, something like that. They may have been leery of Carpenter because Carpenter's last movie The Thing had cost a lot of money and it was a box-office failure, but otherwise the industry in general has always seemed very high on Carpenter, and I'm surprised in a way that they didn't go ahead with it. But Carpenter was tapped to direct Christine and they're in their second week of production now. For a while, Firestarter was dead. The reason that I can't understand the budgetary problems is because Universal made so much money on E.T. that they could bankroll at this point probably sixty eighteen-million-dollar films and never feel the pinch. The movie has made just undreamed-of amounts of money for them, in terms of what it cost. So yeah, it's gonna be another Dino De Laurentis picture, I guess; he's picked it up and he's had a pretty nice screenplay done by somebody whose name I should be able to think of, but I can't; Sidney Furie, I think, did the screenplay. Cujo's done, that'll be out in the summer, directed by Lewis Teague. He didn't start the picture, the guy who started the picture, I don't remember his name, but I wanted Teague from the beginning, because he did Alligator, and I thought that Alligator was a really classy, low-budget movie, so they went ahead and got him and they fired this other guy; I've seen some of that [footage] and it looks extremely intense. The dogs are great – they got a number of different dogs that, y'know, work in tandem and all look exactly the same. Scary.

Is there any news on the production of The Stand?

That's George Romero. I don't think it'll be bad at all. The problem is entirely mine; I've done two drafts of the screenplay, and George has been very patient with me. It's a very long novel, and I'm…the first draft was half as long as the novel, which means that it was about four hundred pages long. Well they say the rule-of-thumb for screenplays is one page of the screenplay equals a minute on the screen, so you figure, a four-hundred page screenplay it's longer than that Bertolucci…so I did another draft and got it down to three hundred pages, and I'm gonna go back this summer and do a third draft, and I think if I can get it down to about a hundred and eighty pages, at that point we can maybe go on and sell it on a negative pick-up basis; there's a lot of interest in doing the film, but it's gotta be our way because somebody else …this is sorta unique and somebody else'd fuck it up.

What was your final view regarding Kubrick's adaptation of The Shining?

I get asked that question a lot, you wouldn't believe; and my feelings about it are fairly complex; suffice it to say that on the whole my feeling for the film has grown as time has gone by. I think that every viewing rewards a little bit more, which is a sign in any book of film that there's something more going on than simple film-making, putting the camera here…that somebody was thinking. That's one of the things that I appreciate. It's obvious that even from the conversations that I had with him in pre-production, that Stanley Kubrick was thinking very deeply about what he was doing. From a plotting level, I don't think the film

works very well, and in terms of execution I think some of the choices that he made about where to set his cameras and how to shoot certain scenes were amazingly bad. And I know that it must sound…not just pretentious but downright…almost arrogant for me to say that because he's a great film-maker and I've never even…you know, yelled 'cut' at the end of a scene or anything. And it is pretentious, it is arrogant, and yet from the standpoint of film-goer…any film-goer who's seen enough films turns into a film critic, even if it's only in their own mind. Some of the choices that he makes…for instance, when Wendy is reading the manuscript finally, and it just says 'All work and no play make Jack a dull boy' over and over again…

Was that your input? It's not in the novel.

No no no, that was his, and it's great. It's a wonderful wonderful wonderful scene; her growing horror as she turns page after page and realises they're all the same, it may be written in different forms or something…and then we're cutting back and forth between her and the book and her and the book and we have a situation that's as old as bluebeard, as old as Pandora's box – we have someone who's looking at something they have no business looking at; it's not gonna cause her anything but grief to be looking at that, and we know it, and the one thing we're afraid of above all else is that he will catch her at it. It's the childhood fear, 'I'll be caught, Mommy will come home and I'll be caught'. The most popular book that Dr. Seuss ever wrote is called The Cat In The Hat, and it's about a cat who comes to these two little kids while their mother's out and persuades them to mess up the entire house. Finally mother's coming back, and the story's very funny for an adult, but when you read it to the little ones, you see their eyes are getting very big and you know what they're thinking: They'll be caught. And it's the worse thing you can think of, to be caught like a rabbit in a trap. And Kubrick does that all very well. And then for some reason, some perverse reason that I don't even understand, he draws away and we see Nicholson coming up behind her. And his line is great; he just looks at her and he says [as Nicholson] 'How do ya like it?'. And you know at that point, if you didn't know before, that the man is utterly out of his gourd. But why in the world he wanted to draw away and show us that, to allow us to see him before she saw him, I don't know. It's a mistake that a freshman director wouldn't make; it's certainly not the way Kubrick would have shot the scene twenty years ago. I'm sorry, I go on about that, because there are other things…the atmosphere of the film, and the angles, the steadicam work, the hotel itself… using the hedge maze instead of the hedge animals in the book was probably a mistake, but though I also think the hedge maze was an interesting idea, I don't think it was used very well.

Kubrick almost made the supernatural angle ambivalent enough as to suggest group hysteria rather than ghosts.

That didn't bother me, but then we zero in and we understand that something supernatural has happened here because there's a picture of him in the twenties, and yet at the same time even that ending shows a remarkable misunderstanding of the genre, or ignorance of the genre, because that conclusion is presented as a sort of fait accomplis, the kind of Oh Henry twist. But everybody's done it; Kirsh has done it; Jack Finney has done that; Bradbury's done that ending. It's the whole déjà vu thing about 'I've been here before'