

Mike Flanagan, Regarding the why

As HUSH has been making the rounds on Netflix, I've seen a handful of comments about people wishing that they'd known more about John Gallagher Jr's unnamed killer. A few people have tweeted their displeasure at not knowing more about his backstory, and a (very small) number of critics have even cited this lack of backstory as some kind of fault with the film.

This is something that interests me quite a bit, and represents a philosophical opinion I have about the horror genre (and about life in general, come to think of it.) This isn't the first or last time I'll deal with complaints that I don't address the "Why" in the manner they'd prefer, and I have to say that I tend to take this as something of a compliment.

When it comes to horror, I strongly believe two things to be true:

- 1) What you don't see is always scarier than what you do, and
- 2) The explanation is never as satisfying as the question.

I first bumped into this when ABSENTIA was released in 2012. We chose not to show the creature at the heart of that story for numerous reasons - of course, budget was a factor - but even if I'd had more money, I doubt I would have shown much more than we do.

Some viewers wanted a much more explicit image of the creature, and others wanted the film to explain what the creature was and where it was taking its victims. "This movie sucks, you never even see the monster, so its garbage" reads one of my favorite IMDB reviews.

I believe that what a viewer can picture in their imagination is always, always going to be more frightening than what I can explicitly show, especially with a budget like we had on that film. Instead, I focused on giving the viewer ingredients to create their own creature. We lingered on closeups of insects, including spiders and silverfish. We did everything we could to imply the size and placement of the creature when it was meant to be on screen, and then added a monologue to provide a basic framework for a description.

Once those ingredients were provided by the film, the idea was that the viewer would use them to build their own monster. And by and large, they did.

The idea of a backstory is a tougher one. The same complaints that ABSENTIA and HUSH have seen were far more prevalent when OCULUS was released in 2014. While the film gives a thorough history of the haunted mirror at its center (a 17-minute sequence loaded with anecdotal evidence), there was a certain faction of viewer that wanted to be told explicitly 1) where the mirror came from, and 2) Why it was evil.

This wasn't unique to viewers, either. When Relativity Media purchased the film and agreed to a wide release, they also had these questions. It was quite a battle, in fact, to prevent such a convoluted backstory from being added to the film.

I argued at the time that no matter what we said, it would not be satisfying. "The mirror frame was carved from a tree where they hung witches," "the glass was made from sand from a beach where the devil played volleyball" - there simply isn't an answer to the question "where does an evil mirror come from" that isn't, frankly, stupid.

There's a reason we don't buy explanations like those... it's because, I believe, evil in the world doesn't have an answer. We try so hard to understand evil. The Why is one of the driving forces of our very natures. When horrible things happen, either by natural disaster, by accident, or by some kind of sickness within human nature that makes us do monstrous things... we try to understand it. That's where the Why comes from.

We want desperately to reconcile these horrible things, to make them make sense. To fit them into some kind of narrative that make the world somehow still "okay." We want to believe there is a "reason" for these horrible occurrences... in fact, I think that this Why is the reason religion exists at all.

Evil in the world exists, we know that. We can see the evidence of that all around us. And there isn't an answer to the Why. But wouldn't it be great if there was? What if the bad things were part of a loving god's plan all along? What if they had a lesson to teach us?

Or even better - what if it was the work of an evil outsider, like Satan? That takes the Why out of the realm of human experience entirely... it is much better for us, if we want to sleep at night, to tell ourselves that evil humans are simply under the influence of a supernatural being that is not, and was never, a human being. That is easier. That is attractive.

But these are just the things we tell ourselves. Most of the time, there isn't an answer to the Why of the horrors of real life. That is, ultimately, where the real horror lies. When we try to create explanations for evil in the world, it falls short. It rings false. So, too, in fiction. I believe the horror genre is a way for us to meditate about our fears, our natures, and the darkness in ourselves and in the world. I believe horror lets us do this in a safe and cathartic way. But it is, ultimately, simply a distorted mirror. There are no easy answers in life, and so there shouldn't be easy answers in our fiction.

It's funny how selective we are with our Why. The horror genre is uniquely ill-equipped for that question. We accept answers that aren't answers. For example, why is Freddy Krueger able to enter the dreams of victims and kill them? The answer, we're told, is that he was a child killer who was murdered by the parents of the town. Now, he's getting revenge on their children.

But that isn't an answer to the Why. Sure, that's a good backstory, but Why is he able to enter dreams? There are more convoluted answers to this, involving demons and even ancient evils being captured by storytellers... but these additional explanations don't surface until the sixth and seventh entries in the franchise.

Everyone loves THE RING. There's a videotape, and the ghost of a little girl uses it to kill people. So Why is this little girl able to imprint herself on a VHS tape? The solution we're given is that she was an evil girl, and she died before her time. So... why don't her victims get to make their own VHS tapes? What's so special about her? She's evil, you see. That's it.

Why is the Overlook Hotel haunted? According to the film, the ghosts captive in the hotel could feed on the energy of young Danny Torrence, and it made them stronger. But why were they there in the first place?

Why did the devil possess little Reagan in THE EXORCIST? Because the devil possesses people. But... why? The question isn't necessary beyond that point.

So back to HUSH... people want to know more about this killer. What is his backstory? Why did he target Sarah? Why did he continue to stalk Maddie? Well, why did Ted Bundy kill people?

Now, we provide a few clues as to who this Man is. His expression when he says the word "jock" when talking to Sarah's boyfriend John, who towers over the killer, gives us a clue. His choice of crossbow, and his chosen wardrobe, gives us more. We see him collect trophies (a common trait of psychopaths and serial killers) from his victims, and that tells us even more.

But Why is he killing people? For the same reason that Ted Bundy did. For the same reason that Dennis Rader did. For the same reason that John Wayne Gacy did. This reason, I believe, is far scarier than any other. This reason, I believe, is the heart of horror, both in the world and in fiction. BECAUSE.

Serial killers are fascinating. We can learn about their childhoods, we can learn about their taste in victims. But when it comes to the Why, they are horrifyingly elusive... they don't know either. It simply IS. The more we try to understand it, the more we try to answer those questions, the more we stare into an abyss that is too horrifying to comprehend.

And the bottom line is that anything else we try to shove in there isn't going to be as frightening. I could have written in a scene where he says "I kill people because I was rejected by women all of my life." I could have him say "I was abused by my father and I grew up to want to inflict that kind of pain on innocents." He could say "I served two tours in Afghanistan and came back traumatized, so I don't have an outlet for my violent tendencies."

But is that really what you want to hear? Which of those reasons is going to be more horrifying than the answer given by the killers in THE STRANGERS when asked why they chose their victims... "Because you were home."

Evil doesn't have an answer, and for me anyway, the more we try to force answers onto it the more false it becomes. That philosophy has informed my work before this, and will remain.

Finally, I think it's interesting to look this complaint in context with another: namely, that the Man removes his mask early in the story. This is also brought up occasionally as a complaint about the film, that it was "scarier" when he had it on.

The Man removes his mask at the exact point in the story where he should, in my opinion. Up until that point, the fact that Maddie hasn't seen his face gives her hope that they can still walk away from this. It's one of the first thoughts a real person would have in this situation. By removing it, he says "You've seen my face... only one of us leaves alive." This is, for her, a far more frightening thing than his mask was.

But what I find interesting is that this complaint is often made by the same people who want to know "more about him." I find it fascinating that some people simultaneously want him to be more and less mysterious.

This speaks to a duality that we have. We want to understand evil, we want it to be familiar, relatable, and classifiable... but we know that that isn't real. And so for some horror viewers, both of these exist at once... they want to "understand" the evil on display, but they also don't. They want their evil unmasked and explained in painstaking detail... but they also want it keep its mask on, without a face or a story, because that's "scarier."

Evil in the world doesn't have a good answer, and it never will. That scares me deeply. And because I'm always starting from a place of dealing with something that scares me, if I can help it, the evil in my films won't ever have an easy answer either.

If people must know more about the Man, I'll happily leave them with this... he's a Pisces.

UPDATE: 5/9/16

So I didn't really expect this note to catch on the way it did, but it's gotten quite a bit of circulation in the last 24 hours. I'm thrilled for the discussion. A few people have brought up some points I wanted to acknowledge:

Someone cited Hannibal Lecter and Francis Dollarhyde as examples of killers who remain terrifying even though we know more about the backstory. I'd argue that we know about their backstory, sure, but still don't really address the Why. We know a lot about the How, and the Who. But that's different.

I adore Lecter as a character, as much as anyone else... I think, though, that it's important to consider that the lead characters in both RED DRAGON and THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS are F.B.I. profilers, and so diving into the backstories of the people they investigate is a necessity of the character and plot.

Maddie, on the other hand, is a victim... she shouldn't (and can't) spend her time playing Will Graham with the Man outside her window. And, to be sure, it's HER movie.

Additionally, while it's true that we learn a lot about what "motivates" Hannibal (his sister was devoured by cannibalistic soldiers when he was a kid), we don't learn that in THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS. That comes later. And I have yet to meet someone who found HANNIBAL RISING, which delves headlong into the Why of Hannibal Lecter, more terrifying than THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, in which he is simply something that IS. (Also, by the time we got into the second movie, I'd argue that Hannibal has become the hero of the franchise, as opposed to its monster.)

And finally, I've seen a few comments basically wondering - if I believe that what you don't see is scarier than what you do - why I showed ghosts and explicit violence in OCULUS. I'm not suggesting that the horror genre should embrace the restraint of ABSENTIA as a rule... there are no absolutes, in any argument, and of course I'm not suggesting that we're better off not showing anything.

The requirements of a wide-release movie, which OCULUS was, change the level of restraint you can get away with. People have expectations if you're going to release a movie on 3,000 screens, and it's naive to think those don't come into play.

But it's more than that. Sometimes, to be sure, it's better to show it. There are no absolutes, everything has its place... Frankly, I'd hate to live in a world where I never saw Kayako crawl down a staircase. :)

(Finally, I should mention something about BEFORE I WAKE... an interesting film in respect to the Why that we're talking about. Assuming Relativity finally gets their act together enough to properly release this film, it'll make an interesting addition to this argument. It is an entire movie that is built around the Why... the whole damn point of the movie is an answer, given at the end, to that question. The problem is, despite how it's being marketed, BEFORE I WAKE is not a horror film... curious to see how that plays into all of this!)

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