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Voices of the Dead: Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse* and the Horror Genre

ABSTRACT

This article examines the 2019 film *The Lighthouse*, directed by Robert Eggers, which follows the descent into madness of two 19th-century lighthouse keepers as they become stranded on a desolate New England island and confronted with threats both natural and supernatural. The focus of the article is primarily on the film's employment of the cinematic language associated with the horror genre, discussed primarily in reference to the theoretical framework proposed by Noël Carroll, and thus it serves as the argument for *The Lighthouse*'s inclusion into the genre. I place particular emphasis on the considerations of human nature present in the film. *The Lighthouse* illustrates the disastrous impact of finding oneself outside of the boundaries of civilization; without the constraints imposed by society, but also without the sense of security it offers, the evil that can be found in every human being is revealed and the characters turn against each other.

Keywords: horror, cinema, Robert Eggers, Noël Carroll, genre.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2016 interview with the British film magazine *Sight & Sound*, Robert Eggers offers an explanation as to the source of the obsession with history which came to characterize his filmography; what interests him are the "voices of the dead" and "exploring who we are by going backwards" (Bitel). In this article I take a closer look at Eggers's second feature, *The Lighthouse* (2019), his attempt to transport the audience into the past and the film's depiction of the impact that being stranded on the border between civilization and wilderness can have on the human psyche, with particular emphasis being placed on the considerations of human nature present in the film. Without the constraints imposed by society, but also without the sense of security it offers, the characters in the film become helpless, as their isolation turns into a catalyst for the evil that can be found in every human being and may reveal itself in extreme situations. The focus of the article is primarily on the film's employment of the cinematic language associated with the horror genre, discussed primarily in reference to the theoretical framework proposed by Noël Carroll, and thus it serves as the argument for the inclusion of *The Lighthouse* into the genre.

Set in the late 19th century, *The Lighthouse* tells the story of two lighthouse keepers, Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe) and Ephraim Winslow, real name Thomas Howard (Robert Pattinson), stationed on a remote island off the coast of New England. As the story unfolds, a raging storm hits the area and prevents the two men from leaving the island. Running low on rations and deprived of freshwater, they begin to consume copious amounts of alcohol and grow increasingly distrustful of each other. The harsh weather conditions and the tasks assigned to him by the elder man eventually start to take a toll on Howard's mental health. He becomes increasingly curious about Wake's uncanny obsession with the light atop the lighthouse and, as the time goes by, convinces himself that his supervisor must have murdered his previous colleague. Meanwhile, Wake believes that the storm is a punishment brought upon them for the killing of a one-eyed seagull by his subordinate. Supernatural occurrences begin to plague Howard as he finds himself unable to distinguish between his visions and reality. Wake's vastly conflicting testimony regarding what is happening—from the amount of time that they have spent on the island to his insistence that it was Howard and not him who destroyed their boat—further fuels the tension between the two men, which eventually leads to a violent confrontation.

THE LIGHTHOUSE AS A HORROR FILM

The Lighthouse has left critics divided when it comes to its classification as a horror film. While some, like Manohla Dargis, refer to it as such, others, including Peter Bradshaw and Owen Gleiberman, contend that its generic identity is more ambiguous. Thus, the claim that *The Lighthouse* represents the horror genre deserves an adequate substantiation, perhaps even more so due to the fact that Eggers has expressed scepticism about "specific definitions of what genre is" and more specifically, about classifying his sophomore feature as a horror movie (see Ebiri; Johnston), instead referring to it as a film more akin to the subgenre of weird fiction, defined by writers such as Clark Ashton Smith or H. P. Lovecraft (Miéville 510). One could undoubtedly put forward an argument that the distinction between horror and weird fiction is hardly clear and that the latter could be considered a broad grouping of horror, fantasy and science-fiction authors, both those associated with *Weird Tales* magazine (the first issue of which was published in the US in 1923) and some who predate them (the most notable and influential of whom was Edgar Allan Poe). While a great degree of similarity, both aesthetic and thematic, can be observed among these works, it stands to reason that many researchers would consider most of the weird fiction texts to be examples of horror fiction. Eggers's comment might have been influenced by the desire to market his film in a way that would be more appealing to the award committees, as horror and horror-adjacent films rarely get nominations from the most coveted institutions such as the Academy Awards or the Golden Globes, with some rare exceptions like William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), Roman Polański's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or, more recently, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). In fact, the last two of these have been referred to with terms such as "suspense drama" or "thriller," the latter of which, in the case of *Get Out*, stemmed from its own director's description of his film as a "social thriller." The attempt to present some of the more recent horror films (among them *The Lighthouse* and *Get Out*) as different from the average representatives of the genre—and therefore more deserving of critical attention—can also be seen in the discourse around them. Terms such as "elevated horror" or "post-horror" came to be used to describe these texts throughout the second half of the previous decade. In his 2021 book on the subject, David Church discusses these labels, focusing both on the features shared by the films usually associated with the aforementioned labels—which he describes as an "aesthetically linked cycle within the longer . . . tradition" (3) of arthouse cinema and which are characterized by a slower pace, "visual restraint and stylistic minimalism" (10)—but

also on their origin and the criticism levelled at the proponents of the terms, which often points out their lack of genre literacy or cultural capital in general (28) and the solely evaluative nature of the epithets such as an "elevated horror." While some of the films included in Church's provisional corpus of post-horror cinema (14) would not be considered horror films when analyzed in the context of definitions adopted further on in this article, *The Lighthouse* can indeed be considered as such both in the view of Church and other critics discussed below. That being said, it is not the goal of this article to dismiss Eggers's choice not to describe his film as horror. Instead, I would like to argue that *The Lighthouse*'s employment of the poetics of horror plays a crucial role in setting up the film's central themes and allows Eggers to showcase the toll that seclusion can take on the human mind and create an environment that mirrors the internal turmoil of the characters.

In order to tackle the question of *The Lighthouse*'s generic identity, we need to adopt a definition of horror and, more specifically, horror as a genre of film. In his seminal book *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), Noël Carroll puts forward the term "art-horror," by which he refers to the emotion that is supposed to be caused by the narratives and images that appear in works that belong to the genre (8). Carroll's approach is rather unique, as it assumes that "emotive responses of the audience, ideally, run parallel to the emotions of characters" (17) and thus the way in which the characters respond suggests how we should react to what is depicted in horror films, whether on screen or on the page. In such a way, Carroll steers clear of the problem of the diverse range of emotional responses to works of horror that the audience is undoubtedly bound to have. While people will react to these books or films in different ways (some hardened horror fans will remain unfazed when confronted with what most people would consider terrifying, while other members of the audience may, for example, become scared after being confronted with seemingly innocuous imagery connected to their phobias), focusing on mirroring the protagonists of these stories instead centres the theoretical framework on the texts themselves, thus allowing us to conduct a more objective analysis of the emotions that they intend to elicit.

EGGERS'S APPROACH TO HISTORICAL ACCURACY

One way in which Eggers tries to immerse the audience in the experience of the characters is the film's meticulous attention to period accuracy, from its set pieces, through the costumes, to the way in which the

characters interact. This devotion is rather unusual for a film set in the past, most of which are inevitably bound to contain numerous anachronisms. Some of these are deliberate representational strategies adopted by filmmakers, often going as far as to purposely incorporate contemporary imagery into its historical setting, as in Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986), Andrzej Wajda's *Pilate and Others* (1972) or, more recently, Marie Kreutzer's *Corsage* (2022), while most of the filmmakers maintain the pretence of transporting the viewers to the past, yet do not care whether the exact piece of clothing used as a costume belongs to the 15th century rather than, say, the 13th century, in which this hypothetical film may be set. What matters to them is that the audience members who are less knowledgeable about the history of fashion will recognize said costume as something at least vaguely medieval. This is the case with many well-known historical epics, from Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995), through Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel* (2021), to David Michôd's *The King* (2019). *The Lighthouse* and Eggers's other two features, *The Witch* (2015) and *The Northman* (2022), are among the few films, another example being Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), which take an approach that is much more concerned with historical accuracy.

Eggers had spent years conducting research for the film before it entered the pre-production stage of filming; his own work, discussions with his collaborators and further consultations with experts resulted in painstaking accuracy. *The Lighthouse* was mostly shot on location, with some of the additional interior scenes for the latter being filmed at the Yarmouth Airport and on soundstages in Halifax (Thomson; "Jarin Blaschke on *The Lighthouse*," 05:30–06:53). The buildings which serve as the main setting for the story were built from scratch, something made even more impressive by the remoteness of the place in which they were constructed. Period-accurate furniture, household items, and props were carefully sourced or crafted to enhance the authenticity of the setting, including the lighthouse's functional components, such as the working lantern and the custom-built Fresnel lens (Thomson). An impressive amount of effort was put into studying the clothing of the time and then recreating the chosen items for the costumes of the characters. Part of the unique black-and-white colour palette of the film—a stylistic choice that Eggers and Jarin Blaschke, the cinematographer of the film, agreed on very early on during the development process—is the unusual orthochromatic look achieved by Blaschke through the use of a custom cyan filter, which emulates the look of late 19th- and early 20th-century photographs by preventing red light from entering the camera. The effect that he produced with it not only anchors the film in the time in which it is set by bringing its look closer to the photography of the 1890s, but also

greatly heightens the local contrast. As a result, it emphasizes the textures of the world inhabited by the two lighthouse keepers. Most remarkably, the use of orthochromatic emulation enables the audience to perceive even the slightest imperfections, pores, and blemishes on the actors' faces, as it accentuates the reddish tones in both skin and pores, thus making both men look more weathered and beaten down, displaying their difference in age and highlighting through their appearance how they become increasingly affected by the dangerous elements and isolation (Thomson). Furthermore, Eggers and his team tried to ensure that the actors sound like the individuals they are portraying. When writing the script for *The Lighthouse*, Eggers and his brother Max turned to literature: the reading list included Edgar Allan Poe—whose unfinished story "The Light-House" was the initial inspiration for the film, even though the brothers abandoned the idea of adapting it early on during development (Fear)—Herman Melville, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. P. Lovecraft. However, the writer whose work proved to be the most influential for the film was Sarah Orne Jewett, whose output included interviews with people from that era. The brothers studied Evelyn Starr Cutler's dissertation "Representation of Maine Coast Dialect in the Work of Sarah Orne Jewett" (1976), which included an analysis of the dialects used by the interviewees, based on which they created a set of rules which they followed while writing the dialogue. The language used by Dafoe's character was modelled after the old seamen from Jewett's stories, while Pattinson's echoes the Maine farmers from that era (Primo; Fear).

The care put into these elements of *mise-en-scène* ensures that everything depicted on the screen feels tangible for the audience, thus creating a sufficiently believable backdrop for the supernatural elements of the film. This matches what Eggers set out to achieve in the script for his debut film, *The Witch*:

> In order to effectively depict this world in which ordinary people understood supernatural occurrences to be an expected part of life, it is essential that all aspects of the film be carried out with utter naturalism. The characters must appear as real farmers, not actors with dirty faces. Even the supernatural elements must be photographed as realistically as possible. Yet, with all this authenticity and "realism," it is still a folktale, a dream. A nightmare from the past. (Eggers ii)

While Eggers himself may call his approach "fetishistic" in interviews (Crucchiola), his meticulousness results in instilling into a period drama a feeling which we would normally associate with contemporary-set horror films and psychological dramas: the safety of our immediate surroundings

being trespassed by the dangerous Other, taboos being broken, all in a way that not only manages to reduce the distance between the contemporary audience and the time depicted in his stories, but also subverts schemes of cultural categorization.

THE LIMINAL NATURE OF A HORROR MONSTER

This crossing of cultural boundaries is important for Carroll especially when it comes to discussing the figure of the monster and its role as the catalyst for art-horror. The presence of supernatural monsters is, of course, not limited to horror, as they appear in myth, legends, folktales, fantasy, and science-fiction stories. That being said, what separates horror texts from these is that "in works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" (Carroll 16), as opposed to being an integral part of the world, like in fairy tales or fantasy. For example, one can think of the protagonist of Disney's 1989 adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (dir. John Musker) or Syrena from the 2011 fantasy film *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (dir. Rob Marshall) and compare them with the mermaid that we encounter in *The Lighthouse*; the former two are humanized and fairly non-threatening, while the lattermost is presented to the audience as uncanny and off-putting through the way Howard reacts to her. After initially being attracted to her (not unlike the way in which the character of the missionary is enamoured with Syrena in the aforementioned *Pirates of the Caribbean* film), he then suddenly starts being threatened by her, as characters in horror stories usually do when confronted with the supernatural (Carroll 28), in this case his realization that she is not a human female, but rather a hybrid of a human and a fish.

While I will discuss the idea that monsters occupy a "space between fear and attraction" (Cohen 19) slightly later in this article, I would like to examine another characteristic of the horror monster that is partly connected to the feeling of fear and which Carroll considers to be particularly significant when defining horror, that is, the idea that the characters consider monsters to be disgusting.

Carroll observes that the feeling of disgust is supposed to stem from impurity (28). The idea of the impure/unclean and its role in horror fiction was greatly inspired by two influential texts, *Purity and Danger* (1966) by Mary Douglas and *The Powers of Horror* (1980) by Julia Kristeva. Referring to Douglas's text, Carroll puts forward the interpretation that she "correlates reactions of impurity with the transgression or violation of schemes of cultural categorization"; similarly, in Kristeva's *The Powers*

of Horror, the abjection that is filth or the presence of a corpse stands in opposition to the current order of things that governs our lives, it shakes our culture of cleanliness and order at its very foundation (Carroll 3). The monster is a liminal being, always at the margins of what a human being can make sense of and what they would perceive as the Other. What makes monsters threatening is their hybrid status and the resulting inability "to include them in any systematic structuration" (Cohen 6).

They are dangerous not only because they may physically harm the characters, but also because they actively threaten their understanding of reality. This is precisely what happens in Eggers's film: the mere belief in the existence of the supernatural entities makes the two lighthouse keepers spiral into madness and turn against each other. These supernatural creatures do not have to interact directly with humans; in the case of *The Lighthouse* such contact is, in fact, fairly limited, which is further emphasized by the ambiguity as to whether or not they are just a figment of the main character's imagination. One effect that the choice of shooting the film in black-and-white has on the audience's perception is that the lack of colour automatically makes everything seem much less familiar to us and blends the surroundings and characters together, fuelling the oneiric atmosphere of the film and making it harder to distinguish between what is real, as the main character descends into madness. This, of course, may remind the audience of a number of horror films that preceded it, for example Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961), an adaptation of Henry James's 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw*, which seems to have inspired *The Lighthouse* both aesthetically and thematically (i.e. in terms of repressed sexuality being a possible source of the main character's deteriorating sanity, an idea that will be explored further in this article).

Carroll assumes that the monster can be everything "not believed to exist now according to contemporary science" (27), therefore making it easier for us to square his definition with the fact that the characters of *The Lighthouse* do not share our contemporary point of view and thus may believe in the existence of the supernatural (even though the main character is initially much more sceptical towards it than his far more superstitious colleague). Additionally, the ability to *imagine* the existence of something or even the mere assumption that something *may* exist (i.e. the belief that killing a sea bird brings bad luck, recognizable from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" [1798] and voiced in the film by Dafoe's character) does not necessarily equal being convinced through either experience or another form of proof that something *does* exist. Carroll refers to Descartes' distinction between an objective reality and a formal reality, according to which the entities that

possess a formal reality exist, while the objective reality of something means that we can imagine it could exist, but it really does not (see: vampires, unicorns, werewolves, etc.) (29–30). To once again illustrate the definition with an example from the film, seagulls have a formal reality, but the assumption that the seagulls which inhabit the island in the film are, in fact, the reincarnated seamen is an idea that only exists in the realm of an objective reality. Returning once again to the concept of impurity, Carroll notes that it "involves a conflict between two or more standing cultural categories" (43) or in other words, two distinct categories that are combined in a way that they cease to be familiar to us and instead become threatening: monsters in horror are an example of this. Carroll divides the means of creating them into five categories: fusion, fission, magnification, massification, and horrific metonymy (52).[1] *The Philosophy of Horror* would posit the seagulls from *The Lighthouse* as an example of fusion in horror, as they can be seen as either part animal and part human (or, to be more accurate about their alleged nature: they are spirits that took the form of an animal), and massification as well, especially in the final scene where a whole flock of them feasts on the unfortunate protagonist.

Seagulls are not the only example of fusion in *The Lighthouse*. The above-mentioned mermaid is an obvious example and in the same film we also have the titular lighthouse, which could be interpreted as something akin to the haunted house, which Carroll also considers an example of fusion, though not the one that is visually perceptible, as it condenses "different ontological orders," namely "the animate and inanimate" (45). Alongside their isolation, the lighthouse indeed remains the most important external factor that fuels the mental breakdown of the characters. Thomas Wake's unhealthy fascination with the light of the

[1] Carroll defines these categories as follows:

a. Fusion happens when two contradictory categories, for example "inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on" are combined in a single entity (e.g., zombies or vampires that combine life and death) (43).
b. Fission also assumes the coexistence of two contradictory identities; they may share the same body like in fusion, though not at the same time (temporal fission, e.g., werewolves or alter-egos like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde) or they may be multiplied in space (spatial fission, e.g., doppelgängers) (45–47).
c. Magnification is the act of making a being (especially one that is already "adjudged impure or disgusting within the culture") larger than it is in real life (e.g., giant spiders or insects) (48–49).
d. Massification is multiplying entities (e.g., swarms of insects, Gremlins, etc.) (50).
e. Horrific metonymy is used when the monster is not disgusting at first glance, but it is instead surrounded by beings and objects which are considered to be disgusting and betray the monster's true nature (e.g., Dracula, who initially does not look monstrous, yet is surrounded by all manner of impure creatures) (51).

lantern is established early on in the film; he is extremely protective of access to it and forbids Howard from entering the lantern room. Wake's behaviour towards the lamp is rather concerning, as Howard observes that the older lighthouse keeper undresses when in the presence of the light and seems to experience some sort of religious epiphany during this ritual, which may signify the supernatural nature of the lantern, as the ending of the film could suggest. Howard becomes obsessed with the light, which eventually becomes one of the reasons for the characters' violent confrontation and the murder of Wake, after which the younger character finally manages to enter the room. We observe as his hand reaches for the light and he starts laughing maniacally, at first in a seemingly euphoric way, before he begins to turn more and more distressed, eventually falling down the stairs. In the final shot of the film, we see him gravely injured, with an eye damaged in a way that reminds us of his predecessor and the seagull as which he was supposedly reincarnated (and which was killed by Howard earlier in the film). Wake considered the killing of the bird to be the reason why the two lighthouse keepers got cursed; his act would bring them bad luck and accordingly, it was soon followed by a storm which prevented them from leaving the island. Howard becomes a somewhat promethean figure; he claims the forbidden light, but in the aftermath of it we see him lying among the rocks, alive, but with a flock of seagulls feasting on his entrails. As the camera zooms out, we do not see the lighthouse anymore, as if it had disappeared, further suggesting either the supernatural nature of the lantern or the passage of time; perhaps, just like Prometheus, Howard remained alive, forever trapped in the cycle of torture, and the lighthouse crumbled and ceased to exist.

Considering the lighthouse itself a monster would allow us to deal with one problem with Carroll's definition of horror—namely, the fact that the existence of a monster and its role in the story are of utmost importance for him when deciding whether something can be considered a part of the horror genre. In *The Lighthouse* it is not that obvious who the monster is. The mermaid is certainly monstrous, but her role in the film is somewhat limited. She seems to represent Howard's repressed sexual desires; a lifelike version of a tiny, wooden mermaid figurine that he finds after arriving on the island. It is ambiguous whether she is real or whether she just appeared to him in a dream. This ambivalence is integral to Carroll's understanding of the role that nightmares have in horror fiction. The products of such dreams are, according to him, "simultaneously attractive and repellent, insofar as they function to enunciate both a wish and its inhibition" (169). This proves to be true in this case, as the main character is initially fascinated by the mermaid but runs away horrified as he discovers her true nature.

Fig. 1 & 2. Howard's visions of violence and sexual gratification (01:08:07 and 01:08:10).[2]

In "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that "the monstrum is etymologically 'that which reveals'" (4); monsters often represent human fears and anxieties. Numerous critics and audience members have noted the homoeroticism in the behaviour of the two main characters of *The Lighthouse*. Howard seems to be repressing his sexuality; perhaps the mermaid and his dreams represent his latent homosexuality. As Cohen suggests, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Susan Stewart,

[2] All screenshots were taken by the author of the article.

the figure of the monster often symbolizes forbidden sexual practices (14). This once again invites a comparison to the previously mentioned *The Innocents*, in which case we can similarly interpret Miss Giddens's belief in the existence of ghosts that supposedly plan to harm the children in her care as a projection of her own repressed sexual urges toward the young Miles. In Eggers's film, Howard repeatedly tries to fantasize about having sexual intercourse with the mermaid, first masturbating to the tiny figurine, then dreaming about meeting her near the sea and finally, masturbating again while thinking of her. What characterizes the two later scenes is that he comes to perceive the female body as disgusting; not only does he run away from the mermaid in a dream, but also her female parts remain that of a fish in his fantasies and during the final attempt at masturbation these images are mixed with the memory of a man whom he left to die and whose identity he assumed. For this scene, Blaschke used a set of old Petzval lenses, the design of which goes back to 1841, which distort the out-of-focus backgrounds in a very unique way, especially near the edges of the frame. The strong effect that the choice of lenses for this scene has on the visual language of the sequence emphasizes how the distinction between reality and the protagonist's visions becomes almost completely blurred at this point. The scene highlights how for Ephraim, his (repressed) sexuality and violence are gradually projected onto each other and eventually become inseparable; his failure to find another form of release, combined with other forms of extreme pressure that pile on him (visions of supernatural occurrences, isolation, lack of food combined with an excessive consumption of alcohol and later also turpentine) eventually result in one final outburst of violence as Howard and Wake come to blows and the younger man murders his supervisor.

Fig. 3. The eponymous structure towers over the main character (00:16:29).

The Lighthouse provides us with a look at the process of implosion of a social structure, namely the dichotomy that governs the relation between the two lighthouse keepers. The pair ends up trapped together both on the island and in the film's boxy, almost square 1.19:1 aspect ratio, a rare sight mostly associated with the advent of sound cinema in the late 1920s and the early 1930s and the films such as Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) and Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930). The narrowness of the frame emphasizes the height of the vertically positioned elements of the background, most notably the eponymous structure which looms over the island, but even more importantly, the aspect ratio encloses the characters in a tight space, highlighting the feelings of claustrophobia and isolation from the outside world. The characters end up confined together as the tensions rise, leading to the inevitable outbursts of violence.

Fig. 4 & 5. Early in the film, Wake towers over his subordinate; eventually, the roles are reversed (00:41:36 and 01:36:34).

With the help of the skilful use of blocking, Eggers and Blaschke put the ever-changing dynamic between both Thomases in *The Lighthouse* onto the screen. At the beginning, Dafoe's character towers over his subordinate, either through being placed closer to the camera or in a position from which he can look down at Howard; at the end, the protagonist played by Pattinson takes his place in the frame, eventually forcing the older man to crawl on all fours and then putting him in the ground and burying him alive while standing over his would-be grave. The older man, a guardian of the phallic tower, can perhaps be interpreted as a kind of a Lacanian father figure.[3] On the island, he is the law and his act of forbidding his younger colleague from entering the lantern room can then be seen as a form of primal prohibition; the lighthouse then symbolizes the mother figure. This illustrates the ambivalent nature of the building; while the aforementioned phallic shape is associated with masculinity, I would argue that the object of the protagonist's desire is not the lighthouse itself, but rather the light on top of it, while the phallicity of the titular structure reflects the protective role of its walls—and Wake's position as its guardian. Indeed, the older man openly claims the lantern as his spouse; during one of their dinners, he tells Howard that he is "damn-well wedded to this here light, and she's been a finer, truer, quieter wife than any alive-blooded woman" (*The Lighthouse* 33:04–33:14). Howard's obsession with the light and his attempts to get close to it eventually lead to the implosion of this order. First, he decides to oppose Wake, even explicitly telling him that the older man is not his father; then we observe a temporary reversal of roles, as Howard defeats the older man in a fight and puts him on a leash, forcing him to crawl like a dog. He eventually kills his supervisor, who in his final words exclaims that the light belongs to him. Whether or not ascending to the lantern room and looking into the light returned the wholeness to the young lighthouse keeper remains unclear; his expression quickly turns from ecstatic to terrified. Then again, perhaps such would be the experience of regaining what we lose with the formation of our sense of self. The main character's struggle with his own identity is further complicated by the fact that "Ephraim Winslow" is not his real name, but rather the identity of a man he murdered. The fact that he shares his real name, Thomas, with the other man only raises further questions. Some audience members have put forward the idea that they are, metaphorically, two sides of the same person. In this way, one could see them as an example

[3] Lacan identifies the figure of the father as the personification of the law. When a child realizes that they are a separate entity from their mother, the father begins to keep them at a distance, regulating the child's Oedipal desire and prohibiting them from regaining their wholeness (Felluga 71–72, 182).

of spatial fission, a single character "multiplied into one or more new facets, each standing for another aspect of the self" (Carroll 46), a projection of such an unwanted, repressed aspect onto an imaginary figure. This would tie into the theme of guilt connected to the crime committed by Thomas/Ephraim when he murdered his foreman. Perhaps the older lighthouse keeper's constant assessment of his subordinate's performance and behaviour symbolically represents how one part of Howard's personality is judging another throughout the film. No matter who Wake may be—a god, an imaginary father figure or an ordinary lighthouse keeper—he is undoubtedly there to judge Howard's actions and, in that way, exert control over him. The moment when the younger man reads Wake's diary and realizes that he has been judged negatively is the moment when he finally breaks down and kills his supervisor. Though Howard is seemingly free from the consequences of the death of Winslow, his inability to cope with the weight of his conscience still leads to his eventual downfall. While the two men remain isolated from the wider society, its laws nevertheless remain deeply ingrained in Howard's morality.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ISOLATION

The impact of cultural conditioning on our morality and the dangers of transgressing that framework are particularly significant in *The Lighthouse*. Joseph Conrad's short story, "An Outpost of Progress" (1896), provides an excellent context for the film, the narrative of which bears a remarkable resemblance to Conrad's text. As in Eggers's sophomore feature, in "An Outpost of Progress" we follow the plight of two men who are deployed to tend to the titular building and condemned to each other's company in a place far from civilization. When their transport home gets delayed and their supplies are running low, the pair begins to dwell on their wrongdoings, and over time they start to become increasingly irritated, until finally a seemingly minor argument causes them to confront each other and results in the death of one of the men. The murderer loses his mind and eventually dies himself. Conrad and Eggers both focus on a specific location and explore how this confined setting influences the characters and shapes their experiences. Both the lighthouse from Eggers's film and the outpost from Conrad's story could be seen as examples of the Foucauldian heterotopia, a place which is "literally 'outside' of the dominant social space," yet despite being "distant from it" serves as a representation of the "aspects of the dominant culture" (Rutledge and Tally 7–8), in this case Western civilization. Michel Foucault stresses heterotopia's capability "of juxtaposing in a single real place

several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible" (25). The protagonists reach the place in which the stories are set as the vanguard of that progress mentioned ironically in the title of Conrad's short story: the two lighthouse keepers from *The Lighthouse*, tasked with keeping watch over the light that shows other people the way through the darkness from one outpost of civilization to another; Kayerts and Carlier, sent to oversee the ivory trade on behalf of a trading company. These two outposts are as distant from civilization as they can be, and yet they represent it, just like they represent those hundreds of similar places, some of which actually exist and some of which function only as concepts. This may be why in neither of these stories do we see the locations specified in terms of geography; the setting of *The Lighthouse* is somewhere in New England just as the setting of "An Outpost of Progress" is somewhere in Congo. We are given no names because these two places are supposed to be a representation of numerous similar locations. They serve as archetypes in which the authors' perceptions of these places and the people who inhabit them are condensed with commentary on the societies from which they were born and the anxieties and fears of these cultures. "What horrifies is that which lies outside cultural categories" (Carroll 35) or, speaking more broadly, outside the reach of what is known to us. The opposition between civilization and nature (or wilderness) is deeply ingrained in our culture. Throughout history, we invariably come across an idea that monsters come from places that are not known to humans, like Grendel, who descended on the mead-hall of Heorot from his murky lair in the marshlands. Getting too close to the border puts one at risk of confronting the monsters that may live outside of it or, an even worse fate, face the possibility of becoming a monster themselves (Cohen 12).

There is an obvious effort in the way in which Eggers and Conrad convey this feeling of dread that underlines the characters' sojourn in the unknown. The "sense of danger which one half suspects to be imaginary" (Conrad 129) never quite leaves Kayerts and Carlier, who remain willingly unaware of everything that extends beyond the very edge of the outpost. The narrator describes them as two "blind men in a large room" (133). The fact that they remain oblivious to their surroundings throughout the months they spend in Africa reflects their general attitude to everything that finds itself outside of the border of the civilization that is so precious to them. Regardless of their fear of wilderness, they are unwilling to learn anything about it or fully admit their lack of competence; they are content with leaving everything in the hands of Makola, a local man who works for their trading company. Similarly, Howard finds himself stranded on an island surrounded by the ocean, the realm of the Other by its very nature—almost boundless and traditionally a place from which monsters

came (Carroll 34)—yet remains dismissive of his more experienced partner's cautionary tales. It would seem illogical, as their approach makes them far more vulnerable to the dangers that constantly lurk in their minds, but their concerns are mitigated to some extent by the belief that civilization will protect them from the Other. This notion proves to be mistaken. When the characters are removed from the space in which they were formed and "placed in an unfamiliar territory" that exerts "its own subtle influence upon them," they find themselves "unable to adapt or modify their character to fit this heterotopic space" (Rutledge and Tally 8); their belief in civilization is what eventually destroys them. The contact with "primitive nature" is said to fill Kayerts's and Carlier's hearts with "sudden and profound trouble" (Conrad 129) in the same way the characters in *The Lighthouse* were troubled by their belief in the threat of the supernatural. Transgressing the border puts them at risk of becoming a monster themselves (Cohen 12), which is precisely what happens in the end. Being exposed to the unknown serves as a catalyst for discovering in one's nature both the capacity for evil and the willingness to accept it in the name of convenience.

When the protagonists of "An Outpost of Progress" discover that Makola sold their servants into slavery, they are initially outraged, yet remain passive, not willing to confront the overseer. The vision of profits and their own complacency proves enough to appease their conscience; they are unfit for this moral struggle, having nothing to rely on besides the inhibiting mechanism of the culture that they have left behind. The image of society in "An Outpost of Progress" and *The Lighthouse* reveals its dual nature—it both fosters and enslaves us. Everyone who is a part of it remains under the constant supervision not only of its rulers, but also of everyone with whom they share this society, "from neighbours and family members up to the police or the state apparatus itself" (Rutledge and Tally 11). And while the written and unwritten laws ensure they perform their tasks adequately, the irony of the situation is that society is the only place in which these characters truly feel "comfortable and secure" (11) as they seem unable to take care of their fates once the grip that society has on them is loosened—their reliance on civilization "fosters a dangerous dependence" (Fraser 158). Without "the sanctions of society," these men are "ineffectual in meeting the tests of new experience that require moral . . . judgment" (Black 133). They also inevitably become more susceptible to justifying their wrongdoings. In *The Lighthouse*, Howard excuses leaving Ephraim Winslow to die. In his mind, it was an accident rather than something that he did himself, just like the slave trade was Makola's doing and not Kayerts's and Carlier's idea. Both the former lumberjack and the protagonists of "An Outpost of Progress" are of course equally guilty because they allowed these

things to happen, but they are willing to pretend otherwise, as it soothes their sanity. Their transgressions have all happened away from the punitive apparatus of society, with no witnesses—or anyone who was willing or able to punish them—around. However, even though they may ignore their guilty consciences, the fear associated with them will always return. A man may destroy the doubt within himself, but he cannot destroy fear: "subtle, indestructible, and terrible, that pervades his being; that tinges his thoughts; that lurks in his heart" (Conrad 155). Once they step away from the laws of their civilization—"something that worked for their safety"—they begin to feel empty; the one thing that "kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts" is now gone and "hopelessness and savagery" (Conrad 156) begin to encroach on them. In the finale of the two stories, the characters reproach each other's misdeeds, both real and fictionalized, and then take each other's lives in the violence that ensues. After spending several months away from civilization, they "lose their ability to function or even survive once outside the machine" (Rutledge and Tally 11). Edward W. Said writes that this dependence on "the safety of their surroundings" lays them open to "a terrifying invasion by the unknown" (98); the mechanisms of "social camouflage in which they have placed their unexamined faith" (99) prove to be their undoing.

One could, of course, conclude from the example of Howard, Kayerts and Carlier that the inclination to moral decay is presented in these texts as something unique to people who are shown in a bad light from the very beginning. The protagonist of *The Lighthouse* is responsible for another man's death, while the two characters from "An Outpost of Progress" are referred to as "two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals" (Conrad 128); the director of the Great Trading Company goes even further and describes them to the company's servant as "two imbeciles" (127). Despite that, I would argue that these men are not necessarily evil from the onset of the story, but are, in a way, like children themselves, "awakened to the terrible exigencies of individual responsibility" (Black 134). In *The Lighthouse*, Wake says that drinking "keeps them sailors happy, keeps 'em agreeable, keeps 'em calm." Howard responds by concluding that it makes them "stupid." Indeed, society could be compared to alcohol in terms of the impact that it has on people—often pleasant and soothing, yet addictive and potentially harmful to some. These characters all act just like people who are addicted would when forced to stop drinking; at first, they are subsisting on the remnants of the thing to which they are addicted, be it alcohol or civilization with its rules, and then, once sober, they break down, unable to cope with their situation. Society both nurtures and imprisons those who are a part of it, while also providing them with a false sense of security that implodes once they have to tend for themselves away from civilization.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this article, I would like to return to the claim that *The Lighthouse* is a horror film. The importance of classifying it as such—and my decision to do so—does not mean that one could not explore similar themes in a text of a vastly different generic identity. Indeed, the example of "An Outpost of Progress" provides me with an example of a text that does just that yet is neither a film nor a horror. Importantly, however, the genre provides the director with a set of tools that are particularly helpful in bringing to the screen the considerations of human nature, the interest in which Eggers has declared in the interview quoted in opening paragraph of the article. If we once again turn to Carroll's definition discussed earlier in the essay, we will notice that horror is, in its essence, a genre that customarily tackles the question of taboos and cultural categories. It both offers us an insight into how they shape our perception of reality and speculates on what may happen once something (i.e. a supernatural entity of some kind, in this case a horror monster) subverts these categories and facilitates the implosion of the order that has hitherto governed the lives of the characters.

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