The Collected Monster

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Abstract

This UK-centric paper explores Freud's theories of groups and the influence that they have had on contemporary horror fiction, using the British riots of the summer of 2011 as working examples. Initially drawing on *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, I explore the presentation of characters who, when faced with an external threat, form groups whose members abandon their individual ideals in favour of the group ego, as a means of survival. In the perusal of these group formations and dissolutions, this paper also draws on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and on *Civilization and Its Discontents*. The paper argues, furthermore, that while the group's formation seems at first to have been the decision of its individual members, in fact this formation is the work of the external threat, and paradoxically it is the group that creates the threat. The paper also looks at leadership formation and destruction.

Nowadays in the west, in the absence of public executions, freak shows, or the exhibition of beheaded traitors (with their hair combed nicely and their faces washed for easier audience recognition, as a warning), it is perhaps to the world of crime that we might turn for a clear example of Freud's theories on group psychology in action. More specifically, in recent years in the United Kingdom, we might turn to the phenomenon of the riot. In the summer of 2011, England saw a series of city riots that re-confirmed much of what Freud taught us in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, and was all the more surprising for its intensity and faux-sporadic nature. Although this violence might not have been on the same scale as what the United States has witnessed (from 9/11 to the race-driven violence in Missouri, New York City and most recently Maryland), nor conducted with terrorism as its engine, as with ISIS,

Boko Haram and Charlie Hebdo on the international scene, the UK riots were nonetheless shocking. What happened? Aside from the customary pollutants, what was in the English urban air during those weeks? That technology was used, both to coordinate and choreograph events (using mobile phones, networking sites, Twitter), and to stay one step ahead of the police, is now established; but how did the riots grip the public's imagination so powerfully, to such an extent that among the rioters were practitioners of professions such as teaching?

As an Englishman, I have long since become used to the violent behaviour of my countrymen. I have witnessed, via the television, mob aggression sparked (say) by an unsuccessful football match result, especially abroad; I have witnessed racist scraps, student protests, political skirmishes. This felt different. It was the inclusivity of the recent riots that made the United Kingdom (and Europe) sit up and think: it was not so much every man for himself, as: every man join the hive mind. The rioters were not of one race, one class, or one political party; nor were they of one age group, one gender, or one ideological opinion. In fact, one of the defining features of this particular string of riots was its lack of defining features. Come one, come all, was the unspoken battle cry; and England rallied to the call as if it was what it had been waiting for, all of its life. The city streets did not know what hit them.

Riots

The British riot, as I have suggested, is nothing new; but it is at least uncommon. As a result of the summer of 2011, opinions on the subject of rioting itself have been altered, however temporarily. This is because, for the vast majority of people in England, home is (was?) a safe place to live, and outbursts of such violence had been shocking, newsworthy, but rare – largely the work of homo urbanis of a lower social order. This can no longer be the case. Suddenly, in the space of days, this view had to be challenged and qualified: London had 'erupted', and other cities followed suit: other cities wanted a piece of the action.

"A group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence," Freud tells us in *Group Psychology*, "it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it. It thinks in images, which call one another up by association… The feelings of a group are always very simple and very exaggerated. So that a group knows neither doubt nor uncertainty" (Freud, 1921, p.78). If we take Freud at his word on this point (and nothing among the news coverage would have seemed to contradict him), then we might view the violent group mind as something of a paradox. It is undeniably violent in order to achieve its group-goals, but we might also argue that its basic simplicity of mission is also self-protective. The crowd threatens before it has a chance to be threatened… even if there is no counterweighted force levelled against it. As Freud continues: "It respects force and can only be slightly influenced by kindness, which it regards merely as a form of weakness. What it demands of its heroes is strength, or

even violence. It wants to be ruled and oppressed and to fear its masters" (ibid). Or as Self (2011a) would have it: 'The dominant trait of the crowd is to reduce its myriad individuals to a single, dysfunctional persona. The crowd is stupider than the averaging of its component minds.' Parenthetically we might add that the groups followed (unconsciously, of course) some of Freud's reasoning in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), especially with reference to not loving one's neighbour in the group, or even trusting him!

In the comparatively sleepy village where I live, where the most exciting matter to have come our way in months was the sabre-rattling cries against a council that had reneged on its promise to reduce the traffic speed limit, a sense of melancholy overcompensation was abroad. It had been a long time since I'd heard someone say earnestly that he would happily hang the rioting perpetrators himself. We, the spectators to the brutality, had become a group of brutes ourselves: bullies-by-proxy. Not only were we disgusted by what we saw, we kept ironic faith with Freud by establishing a counter-attack of opinion (if not action). By swaddling ourselves in the same public opinion (hang 'em high!), we longed not for more violence, but paradoxically for Freud's reduction of excitation (Freud, 1920). In other words, unconsciously we sought the 'sleepy village' and would use any amount of force to protect it.

"A large body of empirical research exploring emotional responses to crime in Europe, North America and elsewhere suggests that substantial proportions of the public worry about victimization," write Gray et al. (2008). There is nothing phobic about being afraid of violence, and at first glimpse our worry over being hurt by a mob seems perfectly reasonable: we acknowledge the somewhat Kafkaesque sense of something happening to us – or being about to happen to us – that we did nothing to inspire but which we cannot avoid. Not only were we 'enjoying' our own projection – making ourselves unattractive enough to be attacked, so that we would be attacked; also feeling unworthy enough to be attacked, in order to be more defiant in our attitude to our attackers – but we had also become Freud's 'Criminals From a Sense of Guilt' (Freud, 1916): guilty before we'd thrown the first metaphorical stone. As Freud puts it in *Civilization*: "to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt" (p.134) is a major thrust of his work, including his work on groups. Even if we follow Gray's assumption (ibid.) that a 'worry about crime' is often best seen as a diffuse anxiety about risk rather than any pattern of everyday concerns over personal safety,' we are guilty enough to assume a threat from outside to be no more than a manifestation of our own fear of being victimized.

In other words, we both want it and do not want it. We are both prepared and not ready. For this reason alone we are like the characters in contemporary horror fiction that deals with a (comparable but supernatural) threat from outside the group. And if we ask ourselves why such fiction appeals, and if we

fail to answer honestly – that the collected monster of our unsatisfied group-id misses the public executions, the freak shows, the exhibitions of beheaded traitors – then perhaps a secondary answer will follow. It is this. With its aggravated sense of pitched battle, its two groups diametrically opposed (one physically causing damage, one psychically willing destruction on the first), for a brief few weeks in August 2011, England felt less like home than it felt like living inside a horror novel itself. It was too near; and perhaps the marauding hordes of rioters had missed the scenes of public humiliation of days gone by as well. They certainly did their best to recreate those scenes in London, Manchester, Birmingham, and other places. The execution days are over, and the violence of its recent substitute activities was too close. Perhaps a reading of horror fiction is as satisfying an act of sublimation that the vast majority of people are prepared to undertake.

Horror Fiction

Arguably, Freud's theories lend themselves better to horror ('dark') fiction than to that of any other genre. After all, what fictional genre is better suited to dealing with the transformation of emotional information, ontological insecurity, and a loss of identity than horror fiction (to name but a few characteristics)? The writers following Freud who might agree with the psychoanalysis/horror synergy are surely legion. To quote two: "The object of terror, being in unconscious fantasy dead objects, cannot even be fled from with success," writes Meltzer (1968, p.399). For Fairbairnians, or followers of the object relations movement, there is "the assumption that it is not the pursuit of gratification that is the basic underlying motivation in human experience but the pursuit of contact," writes Mitchell (1993, p.46).

Granted, both of these quotes have been taken out of context, but there is something tempting about their inclusion when we are considering the formation of groups in a horror setting. We need an object of terror... and we need the human contact that might eventually snuff it out. When faced with an external threat, characters in horror fiction often form groups whose members abandon their individual ideals in favour of the group ego, as a means of survival. Throughout the narrative, some of these characters will be used as scapegoats for the sake of the story (perhaps they will refuse to join the group, or they will have their own ideas about how to survive, or they will be expelled from the group), and subsequently they are punished by the external threat... and by the group itself.

Stephen King

Stephen King is one of the most successful writers of all time, his output so astonishing that it will only be possible to glance at a tiny fraction of his work.

It (1986) – a giant novel with a tiny name, weighing in at more than 1000 pages and with a Freudian-sounding supernatural protagonist whose fondness for predacity knows no bounds – follows the members of *The Losers Club*: seven children who are terrorized by the eponymous inter-dimensional life-form that kills by exploiting the fears and phobias of its victims in order to disguise itself. Phonetically, of course, 'It' is not far from 'Id' and within the novel, It is the id running wild, untamed or even slowed down by any punitive superego. It is pure evil. It kills children. One of its guises is a dancing clown called Pennywise, but it can also appear as a bird, a pterandon, a werewolf (depending on one's own nightmare). So how can seven children fight such a power (first as children and then as adults)? Certainly there are sacrifices along the way: rather than be part of the group, one survivor kills himself in the bath; there are numerous murders. But assimilation into the group is as the only halfway acceptable solution: sacrifices are presented as a strengthening of the group, up to the optimal point at which the group disintegrates and the surviving members are forced to re-acknowledge their own individual egos and awake from the group mentality. This can only happen if It is dead.

'*Children of the Corn*' (1978) is a short story in which a couple decide to drive to California in an effort to save their marriage. They stop in rural Nebraska, where they accidentally run over a boy and where they discover a cult that worships a demonic version of Jesus called 'He Who Walks Behind the Rows'. Animistically this figure inhabits the cornfields that surround the town. The group – the cult – is united in its cause to protect their deity, and this includes protecting him from outsiders like the bickering couple. Of course, the group formation and the group intra-dynamics here are different from that in It: at the very least it is pathologically-based, the result of a prodigious brainwashing. But it is interesting to note how the rules of group bonding – including what Foulkes referred to as the 'matrix' (Foulkes, 1964, see below) – are upheld. The group protects itself from the outside threat: a normal couple to us, going through marital problems; but to them a direct danger that must be destroyed.

At the behest of *He Who Walks Behind the Rows*, the sacrifices are literal: anyone reaching the age of eighteen must commit suicide in the cornfields. There is even a mutinous teenager, who despises the deity and longs to set fire to the fields; however, because He can view the motives inside human hearts, she is too scared to do so. She might be the only one with an independent ego, but it will do her no good against the group ego. Therefore, following *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (with reference to the awareness of death and to the efforts of the psychic apparatus to minimize excitation to a zero quantity), the girl's attitude, and the message of the story itself, also follows what Freud argues in '*On Transience*': that all seemingly-endurable things must move towards their ends. Beauty must die. It is also worth noting that while the group's formation seems at first to have been the decision of its individual members, in fact this formation is the work of the external threat (the punitive

superego, herein represented by two innocent spouses); and paradoxically it is the group that creates the threat. Whereas in It, the threat (Pennywise) is an application of the group's overdeveloped id, allowed to roam wild, in '*Children of the Corn*' the external threat would be nothing of the kind to the children. Bad luck alone pointed them to Nebraska.

The Stand (1978) is a novel with the scope and sweep of It. The world is in the grip of a manufactured biological weapon (a superflu), which has escaped, spread, and which is wiping out civilization (and its discontents). 99.4% of the world's human population is dead. If an unstoppable virus is not enough, the survivors, in their groups, must face the threat of other groups. As the matriarch of one of these, a 108-year-old religious woman draws people together via the power of dreams; she stands for the forces of Good, and hopes to re-establish a democratic society. An opposing group is led by Randall Flagg, who stands for the forces of Evil and counts among his number a schizophrenic serial arsonist, a murderer, a violent pervert, a nymphomaniac, and even a character called the Rat Man (presumably a reference for the Freud fans in the King audience!). This novel shows, among many other matters, the fierce territoriality and commitment that group formation will engender. Foulkes (1965) describes a 'network of all individual mental processes, the psychological medium in which they meet, communicate and interact' as the matrix. And what is the matrix, if not a recontextualization and development of Freud's theory of abandonment of the ego's goals to the group's ideals? And when two opposing matrices collide, blood will have blood.

Both '*Jerusalem's Lot*' (1978) and *Salem's Lot* (1975) involve groups of scared people defending themselves against vampires. '*The Mist*' (1985) sees a group of neighbours trapped in a small-town supermarket by a range of bizarre monsters that have arrived with the unnatural mist – monsters whose unifying factor to one another is that they wish to kill anyone who ventures out into the open. (Inevitably, some characters do try to break away from the group; equally inevitably, giving up the 'privilege' of group inclusion is a punishable act, and the characters are destroyed, by fangs, by tentacles...) In '*Night Surf*' (1978), the apocalypse has been and gone: the survivors are survivors of a disease named A6, banded together by dint of the fact that they have previously survived an earlier strain named A2. However, it soon becomes clear that some members of the group have lied about surviving A2: they had not contracted it in the first place, and therefore they are not immune to anything. And finally, *Under the Dome* (2009) is arguably closer to some of J.G. Ballard's work (discussed below) than to the King works referenced up to this point. When the Dome comes down over the small town, the threat is no longer external: it is locked inside, sharing the same limited air. The aliens who drop the dome are never really explained (and do not need to be).

In all of the above, King explores leadership formation and (to a certain extent) destruction. He invites us to look at the magic inside a group – the magic that is generated – and to challenge the notion that it would all fall apart

in an instant if the belief level of an individual were to falter. What we see in King's portrayal of group working are examples of melancholia, regret, envy and guilt. Above all, guilt. And either explicitly or implicitly, we as readers are invited to surmise, after *Totem and Taboo* (1913), that a leader might even be the external threat himself. What might the killing of the leader imply for the rest of the group?

J.G Ballard and Clive Barker

If the work of Stephen King that I've looked at has been primarily concerned with attack from outside, the work of J.G. Ballard that I would like to look at is characterized by the self-enclosed group. "In a culture in which every consensual sexual act and narcotised state is, in effect, permitted," writes Self (2011b), "Ballard would argue that violence becomes the only remaining form of stimulation." In fact, it is one of Ballard's hallmarks or imprimaturs.

A few examples

High Rise (1975) concerns a luxury forty-storey apartment block in London – "a small vertical city …(which has) an impressive range of services" (p.9) – that even includes shops and a school. It houses two thousand tenants, "a virtually homogeneous collection of well-to-do professional people" (p.10), who stop leaving the block at all, after a while. They do not go to work. That 'virtually homogenous' is important, for what we are seeing is a Freudian group-mind in development. The residents have protected themselves against a threat – the world outside – that has no obvious face, voice, or even a reason to threaten. So, in the absence of a palpable threat, the residents create one, among themselves. Cocktail parties lead to attacks on other storeys; the residents are high on a power that has no more than its own internal logic, but which is sufficient to instigate society's regression – into people ruled by the laws of the jungle and in which 'violence [has] clearly become a valuable form of social cement' (p.92).

Running Wild (1988) introduces a clever spin on the theme. In a fictional high-security community, the entire adult population is murdered and the children are supposed to be kidnapped. But these children are not 'ordinary' children (if such a concept is ever possible: Freud himself would have disputed it!): these are children for whom "scarcely a minute of their lives had not been carefully planned" (p.32). What has happened? In essence, the children have hypnotized themselves into conducting the massacre of their own parents, and have run away to hide. One group mind (the adults) was professional, practical, rich; the other group mind (the children) was stifled, bored, and a victim of "the unlimited tolerance and understanding that had erased all freedom and all trace of emotion" (pp.82–83).

"[T]here's no need for personal morality," Ballard writes in *Super-Cannes* (2000: 254–5). And he has a point, at least as far as his fiction goes: a personal

morality is an outdated, worthless commodity; in certain circumstances it might be dangerous – it could get you killed. Being part of the larger body is the most important matter for Ballard. Thus, in *Super-Cannes and Cocaine Nights* (1996), we see communities whose lives have been improved by engagement with, or designing, violent behaviour. Via a reliance on group violence – by emphasizing the creativity of cruelty – the group arms itself against the kind of apathy that would result if too many people enjoyed one another's presence and became homogenous. Indeed, in the later novel there is even a psychiatrist character who prescribes 'small doses of insanity' to counteract "internal stress, the obsession with the invisible intruder in the fortress…" (p.257).

However, if we wish to read a visionary story that would seem to riff on Freud's *Group Psychology* in a more fantastical manner, we should probably turn to Clive Barker, and *'In the Hills, the Cities'* (1984). Two homosexual men are driving in the Yugoslavian countryside, miles from anywhere, on a vacation that neither of them is enjoying. They become aware of a story, a myth: here in the wilderness, entire communities ritualistically and habitually fight a battle against one another at set times. Or is it simply a story, a myth? Self (2011a) is unambiguous on the subject of the urban myth, and with his customary panache, he sums up the matter deftly: "We're all familiar with the phenomenon of the urban myth, which, despite spawning sodden stacks of toilet books in the past few decades, still continues to culture itself using the minds of the credulous as a substrate." But what the two lovers hear is even more insidious, arguably, than the urban myth: it is the natural myth, the myth of nature. If Freud's *'On Transience'* (1915) would have us believe that all beauty moves towards its end and dies, then Barker's view is that all beauty is shoved towards its end and dies violently.

For the story that the lovers roam into is all too brutally factual: in the hills there are cities, and the ritual sees every person in each village – hundreds and thousands of people – join together physically in a Foulkesian matrix made real, using ropes and a system of pulleys of remarkable complexity. And they build themselves into the shape of a man! The entire community's residents climb up onto one another's shoulders, hundreds and hundreds of metres high, and they turn themselves into one vast, lumbering, near-catatonic shape. Not only does each person strip himself or herself of his or her own identity: he or she becomes able to see only through the eyes of the city, with one thought on its matrixed/connected mind: to destroy the other city in hand-to-hand combat.

Freud's Gang?

Compared with his theories that involve intimate transferential contact (and conflict) between two people (analyst and analysand, parent and child), Freud's groundbreaking work on the subject of groups and group psychology has been regarded as of lesser importance. And perhaps this is all to the good.

If something has been forgotten, it will eventually re-emerge: the theories will be rediscovered, and pored over anew.

Foulkes (1964) writes: "The matrix is the hypothetical web of communication and relationship in a given group. It is the common, shared ground, which ultimately determines the meaning and significance of all events and upon which all communications, verbal and nonverbal, rest." Whether we refer to the 'matrix', to 'transpersonal networks' or to 'group dynamics', what we are surely dealing with is a modernization of Freud's work. We might say that the large group's task is to engineer and take a psychic journey, from an integrated, whole person with a role, to a somewhat regressed position (with no obvious role), to a group role involving both a role and a voice, and then into the ossification of creative faculties that we might know as full group membership. This is one of the ways that mobs are formed. The rioters who burned cities in 2011 were Freudian rioters!

Apart from generating a prodigious amount of tut-tutting and column inches, the riots of 2011 also served to unite a good deal of British people in their hatred of English yob thuggery, which was something of an easy target. The irony missed was that we, the spectators, were turned into groups of vigilantes ourselves. Why? Because it was easy to feel hatred for the men, women and children who were breaking into shops and stealing stereos. Easy to wish to punish. And easy to feel envious that we were not there ourselves, part of the al fresco theatre.

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