



RETRO-REVIEW ESSAY

WE DO NOT CONTROL THE NARRATIVE: A RETRO-REVIEW OF JOHN CARPENTER'S FILM *IN THE MOUTH OF MADNESS* (1994)

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In the Mouth of Madness, released in 1994, is one of those films which has been mostly forgotten by all but the most dedicated of cult-horror fans and film-buffs. Even though I considered myself a horror film fanatic and have spent years following the films of iconic horror director John Carpenter, I didn't until about a year or two ago even know that this film existed as part of Carpenter's corpus of work. There isn't even a physical release of the film on home media.

Upon its release, the film, like so many other of Carpenter's films, fizzled at the box office. But unlike so many other of Carpenter's films – especially *The Thing* (1982) and *They Live* (1988) – *In the Mouth of Madness* has not been picked up and retroactively appreciated critically as an important and unique work of horror cinema from a director now readily appreciated as a master of his craft. The film remains criminally under appreciated and explored. This is part of the reason why I have chosen to retro-review this film – to bring awareness of it to new audiences, as well as investigate the sense in which the narrative, can prompt reflection on how our ways of seeing the world are based on fragile and ephemeral

creations, that reality is just a product of discourse as opposed to being a tangible, comprehensible thing. In a sense, it reflects the way in which horror fiction can be potentially therapeutic, in that it can awaken new ways of seeing the world; but it also reflects the way in which the narrative of what is real is constructed through mass media.

The narrative, written by Michael De Luca, follows arrogant and egotistical insurance investigator John Trent, played with excellent sardonic vileness by the infectiously charismatic Sam Neill, as he is brought raving to Dr Saperstein's asylum. Here he is examined by the therapist, Dr Wrenn (David Warner), where Trent tells the tale of what brought him to the asylum. Trent was a top-notch insurance investigator and is shown taking pleasure in exposing fraudulence through his superior powers of reason. The job has made him cynical about the human race. Naturally, then, Trent suspects a hoax when he is hired by Arcane Publishing to track down the missing horror author, Sutter Cane (Jurgen Prochnow) and the manuscript to Cane's latest work: *In the Mouth of Madness*.

Cane’s work is a phenomenon, and has attracted legions of cult-like fans, but his work has the tendency to send readers insane and to inspire violence. His latest book promises to be even more controversial – indeed, the manuscript prompted even Cane’s agent to go on an axe-killing rampage. Alongside Cane’s editor, Linda Styles (Julie Carmen), Trent delves into the work of Cane in order to find clues as to the author’s whereabouts. What he discovers, however, is that the reality he was so confident in is not as real as it seems. To make a long story short (spoilers), Trent discovers that Cane is some sort of god – and his fiction, essentially, dictates reality itself. He is the author of the world, and Trent is the central character in his narrative.

The film’s central theme is the idea that our sense of reality and perception of things in the world may be shattered by media, but also that it is media that controls the overriding narrative of reality. As soon as Trent dives into the fiction of Sutter Cane, the editing of the film becomes choppy, much like the visual pacing of a music video. Things flash in and out of the frame, and the camera moves in such a way that evokes a kind of attention deficit. Choppy editing is unusual for Carpenter, who is most famous for his minimalistic style. Through steady-cam, his camera moves slowly, presenting the audience with long tracking shots that feel like they are taking us on a deep-dive into the diegetic world of the film – like a tour of the town of Haddonfield, or Outpost 31. Such movement creates almost unbearable suspense, as we know that hidden amongst the *mise-en-scene* are creatures and forces of unspeakable evil and horror, like the pale shape, Michael Myers, or the unfathomable shapeshifting Thing.

In a sense, Carpenter’s camera dissects the scene in careful detail, and yet, paradoxically, obscures the horrible reality of the world – until it is too late. This is not the case in *In the Mouth of Madness*, where Carpenter indulges in quick cuts and flashing images – quick shots of hideous monsters and periodic jump scares litter his film. This stylistic shift reflects the state of Trent’s perception. According to Blyth (2018, p. 32), ‘The rapid edits, and atypical skewed camera angles are symptomatic of Trent’s increasingly fractured psyche’.

Trent’s perception of the world becomes increasingly fractured as he begins to dive into the work of Sutter Cane. Indeed, the film is edited like a dream sequence as we watch Trent read Cane’s novels; it is from this point that the true horrors begin. Trent grows ever more tired as a result of his reading – so much so that he is forced to rub his eyes as a tired reader often does, without realising that his fingers have ink on them. As such, his actions leave behind inky blots beneath his eyes reflecting the sense in which our ways of seeing may be contaminated by what we read. As we begin to see, Trent’s self-assured perception of the world becomes increasingly blurred and fractured, because Cane’s literature has literally changed his ways of seeing: Cane has contaminated the way in which Trent perceives the world.

As is said at one point in the film, Cane has a power over your eyes. Some readers are seen to have their eyes bleed as they read Cane’s work; the axeman-agent near the beginning of the film has Gemini-irises, suggesting how our perception of the world is split and fractured by Cane’s work. Readers of Cane’s work see the world anew – and this we discover through the ever-sceptical and arrogant Trent. We experience with him what it is like to have your rational conceptions and ways of seeing the world shattered by the revelations of the things we read or watch.

It is in this that the film raises questions about the somewhat therapeutic nature of media – especially horror media. Proponents of therapy argue that therapeutic methods awaken new ways of seeing in the client/patient, while critics accuse it of inducing the client/patient into seeing things the way that the therapist wants them to. Either way, there is agreement that therapy can induce new ways of seeing – allowing the client/patient to see the world anew, and accordingly alter their relationship to the world.

This is what has happened to Trent as well as Cane’s legions of rabid fans in *In the Mouth of Madness*. Through Cane’s visionary work, they see the world for what it is: a set of constructed and habitual ways of seeing that are built upon an artifice of reality. And this artifice is fragile and ephemeral. As said, *In the Mouth of Madness* is a tribute to the pulp horror fiction of American

author H.P. Lovecraft (the title of the film is derived from the title of the novella, *At the Mountains of Madness*). Lovecraft’s fiction opened up a shared literary world in which humanity is confronted with the understanding that the Earth was once ruled by a race of cosmic-dimensional entities, the Old Ones, and that unfathomable godlike monsters like the great Cthulhu lay in slumber around the world. These entities are so indescribable, so awesome, that contact with them – or even mere knowledge of them – is enough to send people into eternal madness.

As Lovecraft wrote: ‘The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its content. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should go far’ (Lovecraft, 1999, p. 139). In Lovecraft, the rational world, with its social constructions and sources of meaning and value, is ephemeral and fragile; it is ready to be undone. As Blyth (2018, p. 35) argued, Lovecraft ‘positioned humans as having no more significance than insects or even bacteria... under constant threat of extermination’. This is Lovecraft’s Cosmicism – a philosophy of insignificance and vulnerability against the cosmos.

‘Reality is not what it used to be!’, observes one character in *In the Mouth of Madness*. Ultimately, the core message of Carpenter’s film is that our minds have little to no control over what is real – what is reality. In one scene, Trent knocks on a table and declares ‘This is reality!’. As we know, Trent is so assured in his rational capacities that he is utterly convinced that the unexplainable, horrific events which he is experiencing are the product of a big hoax organised by effects people and actors. For him, his rational superiority is all he needs to navigate meaning and reality in the world. But, of course, Trent’s mind is insignificant – it does not decide what is real. It is Cane’s mind that does that; after all, Trent is but a character in *his* wider story. Indeed, it is the fiction authors who have a greater control over what is real in this world. Through their control of the world that they write or direct, they ultimately decide what the laws of that reality are.

Fandoms are attracted to such literature as a form of scripture from which they derive sources of meaning and value. In the real world, however, no one really controls reality. Sure, we have laws and moral systems and such, but realistically these are mere ways of organising a world which is fundamentally chaotic and meaningless – absurd. We are deluded if we think somehow that our minds have the power to decide the chaotic and infinite laws and secrets of the universe.

Trent is, in the film, the most deluded man on the planet – and it is because of his delusions that he is in need of the therapy that Cane offers. In one scene, Trent finds himself in a Catholic confession booth with Cane. In a way, confession is something those-so-inclined do and go to in order to receive a kind of therapy; a revelation of truth, an awakening into a new way of seeing. He is being induced out of his delusions of reality via a pretty weird form of literary therapy delivered by Cane’s fiction.

Cane is offering to Trent a therapeutic awakening.

Sutter Cane: Do you want to know the problem with... religion, in general? It’s never known how to convey the anatomy of horror. Religion seeks discipline through fear... yet doesn’t understand the true nature of creation. No one’s ever believed it enough to make it real. The same cannot be said of my work.

Reality is not something which we decide. Reality, as we know it, is a created narrative. As Linda says, ‘A reality is just what we tell each other it is’. Trent’s resistance to this is characteristic of his arrogant self-assurance in his own ways of seeing – which reflects the delusion that we are masters of the reality we are thrown into. In the film’s most iconic scene, a rip appears in the fabric of reality – a rip that resembles the torn page of a book. Trent approaches this rip – Linda narrates his actions from Cane’s manuscript:

Linda: [Trent] stood at the edge of the rip, stared into the illimitable gulf of the unknown, the Stygian world yawning blackly beyond. Trent’s eyes refused to close. He did not shriek but the hideous unholy abominations shrieked for him.

In this ‘Gulf of the Unknown’, Trent sees the disgusting array of creatures (the ‘Old Ones’)

which defy rationalisation or comprehension. The shock of what he sees, followed by his mad flight from the ‘wall of monsters’, displays that all he can do is run from the things that do not make sense. Trent flees, because what he sees is something which he *does not want to exist*, a thing he does not want to experience because he can no longer rationalise it; his flight is an attempt to negate it *because* it horrifies him. As Blyth (2018, p. 105) has said, ‘the horrors [of the film] stem from a kind of existential dread... in the notion that our otherwise solid understanding of reality and stable notions of existence... are all just insubstantial collective delusions’. Trent, arrogant and self-confident as he is, consistently decries the abnormal as hoaxes – but it is at this point where his rational structures fail him; he cannot fathom the irrational army of *things* that have been unleashed on to the world. Trent knows that his rational conception of the world is no longer tenable – only madness is the answer to this profound vulnerability.

It is fitting, then, that Dr Wrenn does not believe Trent’s story, when we return to the therapy in the asylum that frames Trent’s narrative (or is it Cane’s?). Despite the fact that the world is going to utter hell outside, Wrenn refuses to believe what Trent is saying – it doesn’t accord with Wrenn’s rationally constructed idea of reality. Indeed, Trent is sent to the asylum precisely because his prophecies are deemed to be delusions. The last thing the institutional power structures of the contemporary Western world want to hear is that its fundamental ways of seeing and living are built upon a fragile artifice that draws the line between ignorance and madness; as is often the case, intellectual subversives are censured, or put away where they can’t harm the sleeping ignorance of the wider masses. We see this today in the utter denial about the realities of climate change; and those working to raise awareness about our immanent destruction, such as Extinction Rebellion, are labelled as ‘extremists’. Better to profit in ignorance than commit to a radical change in our ways of seeing. In a reference to climate change, Trent is fairly nihilistic about our chances for survival in such a world: ‘We fucked up the air, the water, we fucked up each other. Why don’t we just finish the job by flushing our brains down the toilet?’

In the Mouth of Madness shows that horror texts can be subversive and oppositional. They can help induce new ways of seeing – in a sense, functioning as a form of therapy, in that they can awaken us from entrenched perspectives and interpretations of reality. As in *They Live* (1988), Carpenter’s previous exposé of American capitalism, we live in a world full of constructed meaning. We are told what to think, what to believe, what is proper, what is acceptable, what we should buy, how we should act, etc. But this is ‘*not reality*’, as Trent cries in the film; this is what we have been led to take as our reality by the power structures that dominate our lives. This is not some off-topic, leftist rant, but rather it is characterisation of the subversive and oppositional nature of Carpenter’s work – in which he in therapeutic fashion awakens the audience to new ways of seeing. Carpenter is probably best described as a left-libertarian, with his films often dealing with mass conspiracies or cover-ups that obscure the fundamental meaninglessness of the constructed ways of seeing created by mass institutions. For instance, his 1987 film *Prince of Darkness* reveals religion as a conspiratorial lie designed to hide the ultimate truth that the Devil exists within subatomic particles, that evil is present in everything at a subatomic basis; *They Live* exposes the lies of mass media and consumerism in Reagan-era neo-liberalism; *Halloween* (1978) blows apart the idea that middle-class white suburbia is a safe haven.

In another sense, *In the Mouth of Madness* shows how mass media is in itself a means by which reality is constructed. Over the opening credits, the covers of Cane’s novels are rolled off of a factory conveyor belt. The industrial systems of production facilitate the mass distribution of a constructed reality. Indeed, the cult that forms around Cane resembles the way in which people gravitate towards ‘alternative facts’ or sources of meaning from the established norm – and how increased media platforms perpetuate these ‘facts’. For Blyth (2018, p. 30), ‘Carpenter seems to suggest that the unquestioning, never ending consumption and blind faith in mass industry will be the death of us all’. Through the capitalist modes of production, Cane is able to contaminate the eyes of his readers across the globe and construct, godlike, his new world. And for those who cannot read, well, as

Trent says, ‘there’s a movie’. Mass media is key to the enslavement of our perceptions – and even subversive, oppositional horror media can be appropriated by the engines of mass culture and used to decide what reality is.

The film ends on a bleak note. The world has been overrun with monsters, so we are told through scattered radio broadcasts, and the end times seem to have come. Now is the age of monsters. Trent, having left the deserted asylum, happens upon a theatre which is showing the film adaptation of Cane’s new book, *In the Mouth of Madness*, directed by John Carpenter. We discover, with Trent, that the film is the very film that we are currently watching. As he watches, Trent laughs a laugh that borders upon a scream of terror. According to Blyth (2018, p. 87), ‘[in *In the Mouth of Madness*] reality is not an absolute that can be reliably perceived’; Trent’s laughter at the sight of his life being played back to him is a ‘realisation that he has no control and that everything up until now has meant nothing’. Perhaps this is a reflection of the therapeutic power of horror fiction: it reveals to us the absurdity of our lives, awakening us to the fact that we are not in control of the narratives of reality. All we can do is laugh – or scream.

In sum, then, John Carpenter’s *In the Mouth of Madness* is an excellent film with an intelligent and unpredictable narrative, coupled with excellent acting (especially from Neill and Prochnow), all framed in a rich Gothic *mise-en-scene* that is imbued with underlying terror through the direction and cinematography. It is also a valuable film for its investigation into how narratives about reality are fictive constructions that are enabled by

the mass production of media content and the media platform given to spinners of alternative narratives. Indeed, the film appears to prefigure many of the issues that we have faced with the elections of Trump and Johnson, as well as Brexit.

Reality isn’t what it used to be.

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About the contributor

Daniel Tilsley is a doctoral research student at the University of East Anglia, conducting an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Film Studies and Philosophy. His work concentrates on the relationship between 1950s horror films and contemporary American existentialist philosophy. He is interested in the intellectual history of American horror films, alongside the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.