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The Uncanny Narrated

Functions of Narrative Strategies in Different Types
of Uncanny Representations
in Stephen King's Novels *It* and *Firestarter*

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Topic

> The pleasure of the (horror) text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you
> – and loving it; an exchange mediated by adrenalin (Brophy, 1986: 5).

In 2003, when Stephen King was honored by the National Book Awards with a life-time achievement award: Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, there was uproar in the literary community, with literary critic Harold Bloom denouncing the choice:

> The decision to give the National Book Foundation's annual award for distinguished contribution to Stephen King is extraordinary, another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life. I've described King in the past as a writer of penny dreadfuls, but perhaps even that is too kind. He shares nothing with Edgar Allan Poe. What he is, is an immensely inadequate writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, book-by-book basis (Bloom, 2003: <http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers>).

Evidently, Stephen King knows perfectly well that his horror novels are often referred to as "pulp" or "scrap" by the elite readership, to say nothing of academics developing research in the field of literary theory and cultural studies. In his novel *It*, he depicts a situation in which Bill Denbrough, who is one of the central characters of the novel and who is destined to become a famous writer as far as the plot is concerned, writes a horror story, called *The Dark*, "... a tale about a small boy who discovers a monster in the cellar of his house" (*It*: 133). The little boy faces it, battles it, and finally kills it. The story is sharply criticized and condemned by his writing courses instructor:

> "The story comes back from the instructor with an F slashed into the title page. Two words are scrawled beneath, in capital letters. PULP, screams one. SCRAP, screams the other" (*It*: 134).

Yet when Bill Denbrough sends *The Dark* to the fiction editor of *White Tie*, the latter buys it for two hundred dollars.

> "The assistant editor adds a short note which calls it 'the best damned horror story since Ray Bradbury's "The Jar"'. He adds, 'Too bad only about seventy people coast to coast will read it!'" (*It*: 134)

This paradoxical situation, described in the novel, is true to life in that it emphasizes on the one hand the disregard of popular (off-mainstream) literature which is so characteristic of academic circles, and on the other hand, the attraction of this literature for a broad readership. Thus, for example, in *The Modern Weird Tale (2001)*, Joshi describes King's bestsellers as much inferior to the works of other less famous post-World War II horror writers, such as Thomas Ligotti, Shirley Jackson, Ramsey Campbell, T.E.D. Klein and Robert Aickman. In general, he considers that most of King's

works and characters are neither well-constructed nor believable (ibid.). Of course, such a hot denunciation of most of King's works may be justifiable and true in many respects, but apparently it does not reduce the popularity of the author, since King is undoubtedly the most popular and best-selling of all the influential modern horror writers, such as Clive Barker, Peter Straub, Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite, Tanith Lee, Ramsey Campbell, Thomas Ligotti, and Dean Koontz, for example. Besides, according to statistic data, he is also the most financially successful horror writer in history.

The main attraction of King's horror tales for the broad readership lies in that they "open you a world of seeping, gurgling, grasping fear" (Hodder, 1987: 1), and descending into this world makes you feel "like taking a death-defying carnival ride: it tenses your muscles, quickens your heart and jangles your nerves" (Brophy, 1986: 6). You go willingly on this exciting ride of excessive adrenaline secretion and full of "amoral delight" (ibid.: 6); you want to be manipulated and forced into the construction of horror and then be terrorized by it. In other words, the main reason that King's works have become so popular consists primarily in their ability to elicit the desired feeling of fear in his readers, no matter whether they are familiar with the influential horror genre texts and patterns or not.

Though the contemporary reader is still a willing target of terrorization, it is not an easy task to force him/her into the construction of horror or into mental unrest that can persist after closing the book. It is, in fact, a very ambitious goal, for the contemporary reader (with a few rare exceptions) is far from being susceptible: The contemporary reader has already read quite a number of horror stories, has seen many horror films and knows what is to be expected from the genre in general. It is therefore next to impossible to impress him/her on the level of the plot or of a purely descriptive representation of the horrible: Even the adolescent reader, who hasn't read much, is sure to have experienced the "adrenalin delights" of the modern horror film in all its individual forms; he/she has already seen a great many monsters, aliens, demons, ghosts, gruesome scenes of "body-horror" and of shocking violence[1]. The contemporary reader with a few rare exceptions knows that made-up monsters never bite in reality and that the arch-ancient monster, feeding on Derry's people in King's *It*, is as cheap a thrill as any other non-existing being in any other horror movie or story. The potentially dangerous pyrokinetic little Charlie McGee and her father, a good-hearted brain dominator, in King's *Firestarter* are relatively harmless wild talents in comparison with Darryl Revok in David Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981) and the vindictive young woman in Shusuke Kaneko's *Kurosufaia* (*Pyrokinesis*, 2000). Yet both *It* and *Firestarter* remain bestsellers all over the world, which means that the horror-satiated contemporary reader still finds them excitingly terrifying.

In fact, readers of *It* and *Firestarter* understand that, like the character in *It*, Bill Denbrough, mentioned above, King doesn't need any innovative original plot to scare the reader, for his power lies in narrating horror. He imposes horror on the reader both

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[1]   See more on the contemporary horror film in Brophy, 1986.

through the content and by wrapping the content into an adequate narrative form (i.e. into a narrative form best designed for the achievement of definite aesthetic goals). Thus the "King of Horror" can represent an everyday life fictional situation by using such sophisticated narrative means that the represented situation will be perceived by the reader as highly uncanny. In most cases, in the representations of such fictional situations, King manages to convey the reflector's feeling of the uncanny (i.e. a species of fear occurring when the repressed emerges to the surface[2]) in such a contaminating and compelling manner that the reader is forced into its construction, no matter how absurd he/she holds the represented situation or the turn of the plot.

Thus, for example, one can laugh at the absurdity of a little boy's fear of a monster lurking in the cellar and hungry for boymeat, but one can't help being contaminated with the overwhelming panic fear George Denbrough feels on his way to the bottom of the cellar, when one reads the corresponding scene in *It* (see III. 2.1). The absurdity of the represented situation loses all importance, since the scene is centered on the representation of the boy's fear, which has no definite face but possesses a number of frightening qualities. The fear is represented in its statics and dynamics as immediately experienced by George Denbrough; the fear is represented in such a way that it should be conducted to the reader. This scene is absurd as far as the content is concerned, but it is nevertheless one of the most powerful and crucial ones in the novel due to the narratologically sophisticated representation of the uncanny, which "grabs the reader and doesn't let go" (Hodder, 1987: 1).

Thus, the narratological sophistication of the representations of the uncanny and of the feeling of the uncanny in the bestselling horror novels *It* and *Firestarter* accounts for the fact that the contemporary horror-satiated reader still finds them excitingly terrifying. In other words, the narratological sophistication of the novels contributes considerably to their success with a broad readership. King's art of narrating horror in terms of narrative strategies used in different types of representations of *the uncanny* in his horror novels *It* and *Firestarter* as well as the functions of these strategies constitute the topic of this study. Its research object is the interplay of the content and textual modes accounting for the intended uncanny effect of representations. Put differently, the work focuses on how horror in all its forms, shades and hues is narrated and by exactly what narratives means.

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[2] *The uncanny* ('das Unheimliche') is defined by Freud as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is secretly familiar (heimlich-heimisch), which has undergone repression and then returned from it" (Freud, 1958: 124). According to Freud *the uncanny* "is undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror … it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general … When one experiences the familiar in unfamiliar and dangerous ways, the uncanny is present" (*ibid*.: 124). Rosemary Jackson observes that 'das Unheimliche' "functions to discover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight. It uncovers what is hidden and by doing so, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar" (See more in II.1.)

Among the principal reasons for choosing the above-mentioned novels was the evident difference between them as far as their plots are concerned. King's novel *It* is centered on a categorically contradictory monster possessing the supernatural ability of taking the shape of one's deepest dread. *It* therefore represents a whole gallery of prototypical monsters reminiscent of the 20th century horror films, such as *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *The Giant Claw*, *Attack of the Giant Leeches*, *Earth vs. The Spider*, *The Mummy*, *The Curse of the Werewolf*, *The Living Dead*, *Jaws*, *The Crawling Eye (The Trollenberg Terror)*, etc. Unlike *It*, King's novel *Firestarter* doesn't represent any monsters or supernatural villains at all. Well-constructed and characterized by a psychoanalytic bent of its representations, the novel *Firestarter* is centered on two positive characters possessing supernatural powers, which become the source of the uncanny. Despite this evident contentual difference between these novels (that can be also interpreted as the difference between a prototypical and an atypical 20th century horror novels), their representations of the uncanny can be subdivided into four clear-cut types and the representations of each type possess unquestionable similarities both in their content and narrative patterns. This can serve as a proof of the following central thesis: All uncanny representations in these completely different novels can be subdivided into certain types characterized by a common content core and a more or less common set of narrative strategies performing certain semantic and pragmatic functions.

The other principal reason for choosing these particular works for analysis consists in the fact that both novels contain a number of everyday life fictional situations, which are sometimes absurd, but which nevertheless produce an uncanny effect due to their narratological sophistication. These representations could perfectly satisfy my aspiration to demonstrate the decisive role of narrative strategies in producing the intended uncanny effect. Besides, *It* and *Firestarter* turned out to be rewarding primary texts, because they both contain representations of *the uncanny*, which vary much in strategies of narration: Representations of *the uncanny* as perceived, cognized or experienced by the direct participants of the events or even victims; *the omniscient authorial narrator's* references to *the uncanny* to come further in the plot; representations of *the uncanny* as experienced by characters and observed by somebody else; the representation of explicitly contrafactual uncanny phenomena or situations constructed by the characters; representations of uncanny characters and their evil doings, containing *the authorial narrator's* ideological position, etc.

The uniqueness of this work consists in the attempt to develop and apply methods of narratology for the analysis of *horrality*, which involves the construction, deployment and manipulation of horror – in all its various guises – as a textual mode. The research is a narratological analysis of *horrality* applied to popular fiction oriented towards a broad readership. The study is aimed at demonstrating that King's horror novels, known under the label of "off-mainstream literature", are, from the narratological view-point, as complicated, multi-faceted, sophisticated and worthy of being