

SUPERNATURAL SCHOPENHAUER

A CRITIQUE OF PARANORMAL REASON

Vincent Le

ABSTRACT: Schopenhauer is known for developing a critical philosophy that sees space, time and causality as phenomenal appearances masking an eternally indivisible will at the telltale heart of all things. He is also known for granting art a privileged place in his philosophical system as the means of summoning the will lurking behind the world of representation. What is much more esoterically known is that Schopenhauer conferred an equal, if not even greater importance, on paranormal phenomena insofar as he believed them to betray something otherworldly haunting the outer edges of all possible experience. I thus propose to elucidate Schopenhauer's transcendental deduction of the existence of the supernatural by aligning it with the will in itself as it breaks with our representational forms of space, time and causality. This will naturally seem absurd to modern, scientifically-minded readers, and we shall see that there are indeed inconsistencies in Schopenhauer's supernatural beliefs that keep the paranormal phenomena he describes beholden to the very representational forms they purportedly defy. I nonetheless want to *defend* Schopenhauer's account of the supernatural, albeit not for its metaphysical pretensions, but for inadvertently proffering a transcendental aesthetics that would use art, and particularly works of horror, as an esoteric means of conjuring that which is occulted from the world of appearances. In particular, I look at Ari Aster's 2018 supernatural horror film *Hereditary* as a case study of how horror can paradoxically capture through our means of communication the very breakdown of all communication. Not only is Schopenhauer's transcendental philosophy then already a horror story, but horror stories provide their own transcendental critiques in confronting us with monstrous abominations and mind-bending realities capable of ravaging our souls along with everything we hold dear.

KEYWORDS: Schopenhauer; Hereditary; Ari Aster; Supernatural; Paranormal; Occult; Horror film; Transcendental Philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Schopenhauer is known for developing a critical philosophy that sees space, time and causality as phenomenal appearances masking an eternally indivisible will at

the tell-tale heart of all things. He is also known for granting art a privileged place in his philosophical system as the means of summoning the will lurking behind the world of representation. What is much more esoterically known is that Schopenhauer conferred an equal, if not even greater importance, on paranormal phenomena insofar as he believed them to betray something otherworldly haunting the outer edges of all possible experience. I thus propose to elucidate Schopenhauer's transcendental deduction of the existence of the supernatural by aligning it with the will in itself as it breaks with our representational forms of space, time and causality. This will naturally seem absurd to modern, scientifically-minded readers, and we shall see that there are indeed inconsistencies in Schopenhauer's supernatural beliefs that keep the paranormal phenomena he describes beholden to the very representational forms they purportedly defy. I nonetheless want to *defend* Schopenhauer's account of the supernatural, albeit not for its metaphysical pretensions, but for inadvertently proffering a transcendental aesthetics that would use art, and particularly works of horror, as an esoteric means of conjuring that which is occulted from the world of appearances. In particular, I look at Ari Aster's 2018 supernatural horror film *Hereditary* as a case study of how horror can paradoxically capture through our means of communication the very breakdown of all communication. Not only is Schopenhauer's transcendental philosophy then already a horror story, but horror stories provide their own transcendental critiques in confronting us with monstrous abominations and mind-bending realities capable of ravaging our souls along with everything we hold dear.

I

As Schopenhauer explains in the appendix, his 1818 masterwork *The World as Will and Representation* sets off from the island of reason first charted when that fearless explorer Kant discovered the untraversable chasm lying between the way things phenomenally appear to us and the way things actually are in themselves independently of any relation to us: '*Kant's greatest merit is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself*, based on the proof that between things and us there always stands the *intellect*, and that on this account they cannot be known

according to what they may be in themselves.’¹ Closely tracking Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* like an adventurer in search of the magical yet elusive philosopher’s stone, Schopenhauer opens the first book of his magnum opus by declaring that ‘the world is my representation’ in the sense that the supposedly external world is actually mediated and determined by the pure forms of space and time which differentiate our experience into a plurality of sensible objects.² We then come to think and know the objects that appear to us through the categories of the understanding, all of which Schopenhauer reduces to a single fundamental category of causality or principle of sufficient reason that subsumes particular objects of experience under general concepts as their *raison d’être*. Schopenhauer takes particular umbrage here with dogmatic empiricists like Locke who imagine that the material world really exists outside the purely ideal forms of space and time. But Schopenhauer saves his sharpest invectives for ‘the notorious sophists of the post-Kantian period’ like Fichte and Hegel whose heads are so big that they seriously believe sensible objects are a secondary byproduct wholly derived from the concepts of reason.³ For Schopenhauer as for Kant, both the world and ourselves, object and subject, sensibility and the understanding, mutually presuppose each other to constitute any knowledge we may garner without either one taking precedence over the other: ‘We started neither from the object nor from the subject, but from the *representation*, which contains and presupposes them both; for the division into object and subject is the first, universal, and essential form of the representation.’⁴ Schopenhauer is even more strictly Kantian than Kant as he goes on to reproach his former master for mistakenly believing that he could deduce the things in themselves as the cause of appearances when causality is a category of the understanding that only legitimately applies within the bounds of possible experience. In a sense, then, transcendental philosophy proves astrology to be true: The world really does revolve around ourselves.

In the second book, Schopenhauer insists that the things in themselves must be radically different from all representation, completely breaking down both our sensible perception and abstract knowledge: ‘This something about which we are enquiring must be by its whole nature completely and fundamentally different from the representation;

¹ Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation Volume 1*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, New York, Dover Publications, 2016, pp. 417-8.

² Schopenhauer, *World 1*, p. 3.

³ Schopenhauer, *World 1*, p. xxi.

⁴ Schopenhauer, *World 1*, p. 25.

and so the forms and laws of the representation must be wholly foreign to it'.⁵ The thing in itself is basically akin to John Carpenter's *The Thing* such as it is never directly shown, only ever creeping up on the humans it hunts through the distorted appearance of their murdered friends. Much as the Thing lurks behind the familiar faces of its prey, waiting for the right time to decisively strike, so is even our own body unknown to us as we only ever experience it as a spatio-temporal, and hence purely phenomenal representation. At the same time, Schopenhauer notices with all the excitement of Dr. Frankenstein as he stumbles upon new life without any idea of how abominable it will be, along with our sensible intuition and conceptual understanding, we also have a feeling of *will* as the inner motive of our body's actions. Now, this will cannot be seen, heard, touched, smelt or tasted by any of our senses. It is thus immune to the individuating effects of space and time. Nor can this will be conceived as the cause of our body's actions. Whereas causes act externally on the things they affect and produce, the will is one and the same thing as our body, its immanent driving motor:

The act of will and the action of the body are not two different states objectively known, connected by the bond of causality; they do not stand in the relation of cause and effect, but are one and the same thing, though given in two entirely different ways, first quite directly, and then in perception for the understanding.⁶

Since the will is neither conceptually grasped nor directly perceived, it can only amount to an 'immediate feeling' of what our body is like *in itself* when space, time and causality are subtracted from it:

It is not, like all these, the reference of an abstract representation to another representation, or to the necessary form of intuitive or of abstract representing, but it is the reference of a judgment to the relation that a representation of perception, namely the body, has to that which is not a representation at all, but is *toto genere* different therefrom, namely will.⁷

Having hunted it down with whatever the intellectual equivalent of a flamethrower is in hand, finally shedding some light on the Thing as the cryptic choreographer of our body's movements and the everyday dance of all phenomena, Schopenhauer stands before nothing less than an esoteric and non-conceptual feeling of will in nature itself.

Our wayward Kantian spells out the implications of this will abstracted from

⁵ Schopenhauer, *World 1*, p. 99.

⁶ Schopenhauer, *World 1*, p. 100.

⁷ Schopenhauer, *World 1*, p. 102.

all representation in terms of both sensibility and the understanding. On the one hand, since the will is not subject to space and time, it cannot also be subject to the individuation which those forms generate. There can therefore only be *one* indivisible will in itself: ‘The will is one not as a concept is one, for a concept originates only through abstraction from plurality; but it is one as that which lies outside time and space, outside the *principium individuationis*, that is to say, outside the possibility of plurality’.⁸ We have gone from deducing the will as the noumenal wellspring of our body’s actions to the even more daring insight that it is one and the same puppet master pulling all of our strings. Schopenhauer is not just talking about humans, but animals, plants and even matter’s basic building blocks. At the lowest grade of phenomena, for instance, the force of gravity appears to almost ‘will’ things towards it like a cosmic Don Juan, and magnetic forces repel and attract objects as if nature itself were playing hot n cold. On the next grade up, plants respond to their surroundings as if they were feeling pleasure and pain, such as when they seem to stretch towards the sunlight in a desperate gymnastics of self-preservation and growth. Animals also appear to chase after goals in the guise of their instincts as when a spider weaves its silk or a bird fetches sticks without either of them having any idea of the cobweb or the nest they are in the process of creating. Although both animals, plants and even brute matter appear to conduct themselves in a purposeful fashion, none of them are motivated by any conscious reflection on the telos to which their behavior patterns tend. Nature, it would seem, is teeming with *idiot savants*. In Schopenhauer’s view, we can only account for how individual phenomena can labor towards certain end states without having any reflexive knowledge of what they are doing by positing an inner will as their self-propelling force, a will which is blind and irrational in the sense that it does not depend on any intellect to determine its ends: ‘In the actions of such animals the will is obviously at work as in the rest of their activities, but is in blind activity, which is accompanied, indeed, by knowledge, but not guided by it’.⁹ At times, Schopenhauer refers to the will’s phenomenal manifestation as ‘causes’ at the scale of physics, ‘stimuli’ in relation to plants and animals, and ‘motives’ when it comes to humans. He will even grant each grade

⁸ Schopenhauer, *World 1*, p. 113.

⁹ Schopenhauer, *World 1*, p. 114.

the status of a quasi-Platonic 'Idea' inasmuch as they are, when looked at from the caligarian angle he has stumbled upon, different 'objectifications' of the exact same will expressing itself through all individuated phenomena. The noumenon, as it were, is an unabashed, no-good, card-carrying commie.

Schopenhauer also considers the preconceptual will in terms of its abstraction from the principle of sufficient reason. In the sensible world, it is clearly the case that identifiable causes motivate our actions such as when we are incited to fight or flee in the face of a dangerous predator, be it a tiger leaping out of the jungle or an unpleasant truth springing forth from a scientific experiment. Since causality is a purely phenomenal category, however, the particular causes of our actions cannot also be the motive for the preconceptual will itself. We cannot in fact say that the will in itself wants *anything* as its particular *raison d'être*, since causality does not legitimately apply beyond the bounds of possible experience. It follows that the will in itself can only be a pure and unconditioned will, a free and 'endless striving' in the 'absence of all aim, of all limits'.¹⁰

These acts of the will always have a ground or reason outside themselves in motives. Yet these motives never determine more than what I will at *this* time, in *this* place, and in *these* circumstances, not *that* I will in general, or *what* I will in general, in other words, the maxim characterizing the whole of my willing. [...] This will itself, on the other hand, lies outside the province of the law of motivation; only the phenomenon of the will at each point of time is determined by this law. [...] But if I subtract from any character, and then ask why in general I will this and not that, no answer is possible, because only the *appearance* or *phenomenon* of the will is subject to the principle of sufficient reason, not the will itself, which in this respect may be called *groundless*.¹¹

While we can always find sufficient reason for our individual acts of will situated as they are in the phenomenal realm, the will in itself is without reason or rhyme, a senseless 'striving without aim or end'.¹² Although nature's indeterminate will is irreducible to any particular cause in space and time, it can help us account for why all individual beings ceaselessly desire on end without ever arriving at a satisfaction that would bring their striving to a standstill. If we ever ceased striving with the attainment of a particular end, we could rightfully

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, *World I*, p. 164.

¹¹ Schopenhauer, *World I*, p. 106.

¹² Schopenhauer, *World I*, p. 321.

point to this as the final destination to which all our fates were inexorably hurling. Every time our desires are satisfied, however, as when we quench our thirst or consummate a crush's mysterious glances and gestures with a warmly received first kiss, a thirst always strikes us anew sooner or later. For Schopenhauer, nothing better demonstrates that every individual's desires are merely the means by which a more basic drive deceives us into pursuing its blind impulse than the impossibility of ever achieving a lasting happiness. The point of all our lowly wants and needs and lofty intentions and ideals is not to actually be attained; the point is simply to kickstart us into desiring and thereby affirming the transcendental will-to-will.

This goal to be attained, taken as the motive force to explain that movement (the constant activities of all men), is entirely inadequate and far too weak. For what are a brief postponement of death, a small alleviation of need and want, a deferment of pain, a momentary satisfaction of desire, with such a frequent victory of all those evils and the certain triumph of death what are all these, considered as causes of movement of a world of men who are innumerable and needlessly renew themselves? [...] This clockwork is the *will-to-live*, an untiring and irrational impulse, in other words something about which the external world gets no explanation and account or any other sufficient reason or ground.¹³

As Schopenhauer laments, even if we were to realize all our dreams, we would soon succumb to an unbearable boredom, desperately hoping for a hindrance to our happiness so that we had something to overcome, something to strive for that could give back purpose and meaning to our useless lives. Utopia is not all that different from the fate of the clones in *Black Mirror* when they are punished for disobeying their original selves by having time fast forwarded for them so that they experience hundreds of years in a matter of seconds with nothing to do in empty holding cells. In each case, the clones come out the other side desperate to be enslaved, to be put to work and given something to do—provided they are not driven completely catatonic or insane. It is ultimately because the will does not want *this* or *that* particular thing, doesn't want to embrace *this* or *that* particular crush, because it wants nothing but *itself* in a closed loop of infernal desire, that the ends of reason are asked for and given in vain. When all is said and done, our

¹³ Schopenhauer, Arthur, *Manuscript Remains Volume 3: Berlin Manuscripts (1818-1830)*, ed. Arthur Hübscher, trans. E. F. J. Payne, Oxford, Berg, 1985, pp. 579-80.

most beautiful dreams are just another species-being that natural selection can't wait to kill. A single kiss is the beginning of an addiction, and only the first one comes free.

Already at midnight in *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer has voyaged beyond the island of reason into a stormier force of nature far out in uncharted and kraken-ridden waters. This newly discovered law of the sea is irreducible to the ends of reason as its cause, since it marks the complete breakdown of rational causality into a senseless babble befitting a once brilliant Lovecraftian protagonist driven mad by a weird tale's traumatic and unspeakable end. Behind the world as representation, as rational, as the gentleman Dr. Jekyll, lies the world as will, as monstrous, as the drug fiend monsieur Hyde.

II

To quell our everlasting unrest, Schopenhauer suggests that we must somehow free ourselves from the chains of impossible phantasms alluringly presented to us through space, time and causality, becoming what he calls a 'pure subject of knowing'. Asking how we might achieve such a serene and will-less state, Schopenhauer provides two suggestions: Aesthetic beauty and ascetic love. We will have reason to return to Schopenhauer's aesthetic path to becoming a pure subject of knowing in this essay's next section. For now, however, I want to focus on a third avenue Schopenhauer raises in a later, book-length 1851 piece as forgotten as a highly classified X-file entitled 'Essay on Spirit Seeing and Everything Connected Therewith'. It is here that Schopenhauer argues the hypnosis involved in animal magnetism amongst other occult phenomena, even more than art or ethics, 'is the most significant and pregnant of all the discoveries that have ever been made, although for the time being it propounds rather than solves riddles it is really practical metaphysics, as magic was defined by Bacon'.¹⁴ Based on his idealization of space, time and causality that I have presently outlined, Schopenhauer claims to have discovered 'an *idealistic* explanation' of spirit apparitions and other supernatural occurrences, which he opposes to the '*spiritualist*' account that depends on the kind of dogmatic and empirical principles

¹⁴ Schopenhauer, Arthur, 'Essay on Spirit Seeing and Everything Connected Therewith', in *Parerga and Paralipomena Volume 1*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 268.

which were the ‘subject of Kant’s critiques.’¹⁵

Our true believer opens his musings on the supernatural by asking whether we can have a sensible perception of anything without an object in space and time having caused it. As a possible candidate for an objectless impression, Schopenhauer identifies dreams where the mind’s imaginative play of sensible forms runs wild without any actual physical body in the external world acting upon us to cause such affects. This would account for why dreams often ignore the physical laws of spatial extension and temporal succession as, for example, when people suddenly reappear alongside us in dreams after they have been dead and buried in waking life. Although the dream content is forged from the same sort of sensible materials as our everyday experience, they are not directly caused by them. Nor do they typically conform to the laws of linear causation as bizarre events often proceed from the most incongruous of antecedents as if the dreaming brain had been hijacked by malevolent surrealists wielding sewing machines and umbrellas. Since reason is at rest and our senses cut off from the external world when we sleep, spatio-temporal objects simply cannot be the immediate cause of the dreamwork.

Now with the origin of dreams, either when we are falling or have already fallen asleep, the brain, that sole seat and organ of all representations or mental pictures, is cut off from the external excitation through the senses as well as from the internal through ideas. And so we are left with no other assumption than that the brain receives some purely physiological excitation from within that organism.¹⁶

Although our dreams are typically dismissed as illusory and forgotten as unimportant because they vanish upon awakening, Schopenhauer goes in the opposite direction to insist that ‘only what we dream is true and real’ in the sense that dreams do not stem from either the spatio-temporal forms of intuition or the causal categories of the understanding, both of which are pure epiphenomena without any substantial reality in themselves.¹⁷ That is just to say that dreams can only be direct and immediate perceptions of the one thing that is immune to the world of representation. The will in itself. The Thing. This is particularly clear in the case of somnambulist sleepwalkers who seem to know exactly where they

¹⁵ Schopenhauer, ‘Spirit Seeing’, p. 229.

¹⁶ Schopenhauer, ‘Spirit Seeing’, p. 234.

¹⁷ Schopenhauer, ‘Spirit Seeing’, p. 239.

are going as they walk around their house and what they are doing as they play with objects even though their reason and senses are fast asleep. According to Schopenhauer, the sleepwalker is only able to move without being guided by their concepts of reason or sensible perception because the noumenal will is moving them like trembling hands on a Ouija board.

Having identified dreams as a direct and immediate perception of the noumenal will, Schopenhauer goes on to investigate more strictly paranormal phenomena like the apparition of dead people, prophetic dreams and telekinesis. As the normally cold and clinical philosopher acknowledges, encounters with the supernatural are typically discredited on empirical grounds that such happenings contradict the physical laws of space, time and linear causality, such as when objects appear to move without anyone physically acting upon them or people appear to us after they have been buried six feet under:

The positive incredulity with which every thinking man first learns of the facts of clairvoyance on the one hand and of magic, *vulgo* magnetic, influence on the other, and which is only tardily yielding to our own experience or to hundreds of cases of trustworthy evidence, is due to one and the same reason, to the fact that both of them, clairvoyance with its knowledge *in distans* and magic with its action *in distans*, runs counter to the laws of space, time and causality which are known to us *a priori* and in their complex determine the course of events in possible experience.¹⁸

When we remember that space, time and causality are merely epiphenomenal idealizations of a radically different noumenal reality, however, occult occurrences that appear to break with the laws of representation are suddenly stripped of their illusory appearance. On the contrary, they become even *more* real than the material world studied by natural science precisely because they are not subject to the forms of intuition and the principle of sufficient reason. On Schopenhauer's account, paranormal phenomena are indeed perceptions, albeit perceptions that rely neither on our sense organs or our rational faculties, but a 'dream-organ' or 'second sight' capable of directly intuiting a liminal entity prowling the border between representation and the thing in itself unchained from all dissimulation.

The *natural*, in contrast to the *supernatural*, means the appearance of a thing in accordance with the connection and continuity of experience in general, such

¹⁸ Schopenhauer, 'Spirit Seeing', p. 300.

connection conforming to a law. But as experience is mere phenomenon, in other words as its laws are conditioned by the form of the representation in which it manifests itself, that is to say through the intellect to which it is given, so the supernatural, in other words that which nevertheless ensues contrary to those laws, is the expression of the thing-in-itself as such, and this opposes all laws and breaks into the continuity of experience. The contrasting of a natural with a supernatural already expresses the obscure knowledge that experience with its conformity to laws is mere phenomenon behind which there lurks a thing-in-itself which at any moment could abolish the laws of the phenomenon.¹⁹

Quite simply, *paranormal phenomena* = *noumena*. By rupturing the world of representation, the supernatural marks ‘a confirmation of the Kantian doctrine of the ideality of space, time and causality’, and by conjuring forces beyond our control and understanding, ‘magic is also a confirmation of my doctrine of the sole reality of the *will* as the kernel of all things.’²⁰ As far as Schopenhauer is concerned, there is more truth in Aleister Crowley’s mystical numerology for decrypting his demonic pantheon than there are in Einstein’s field equations for the entire geometry of space and time.

Having deduced the supernatural in occult alliance with the thing in itself, Schopenhauer turns to considering the eerie way that the noumenal will appears in the guise of different paranormal phenomena, haunting the ideal forms of representation with their own annihilation. He gives the example of prophetic dreams in which we first dream of events that only transpire after the fact. Such dreams seem to run counter to our temporal and causal forms of linear succession as we come to know something before it has been brought into being by some antecedent in the present. In reality, however, the flow of the future out of the present is merely a phenomenal ordering of our experience around the principle of sufficient reason. Nor is reality actually individuated into the discrete objects that we believe to be acting on each other in space and time. Prophetic visions thus suddenly seem possible by channeling the indivisible and eternal will over which linear time and causal rationality hold no sway:

The ideality of time also includes the vindication of the *art of soothsaying* and *divination*, at any rate as regards their possibility. For time is not a determination of the thing in itself, and so for this a *before* and an *after* are without any meaning, and

¹⁹ Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains* 3, p. 201-2.

²⁰ Schopenhauer, ‘Spirit Seeing’, pp. 300-1.

an event can be known just as well *before* it has happened as after. Therefore the only question is whether knowledge can in any way be freed from the condition of time.²¹

Schopenhauer gives another example of the apparition of dead people. The disavowal of ghosts, specters and demonic presences typically stems from the belief that death marks the absolute negation of individuals who cannot therefore reappear without contradicting time's irreversible arrow. For Schopenhauer, however, death is only the negation of our individual sense of self as we fall back into the pre-individuated will beyond such trivial occurrences as the self. It therefore stands to reason that we could very well see dead people insofar as that would only subvert the ephemeral laws of representation and not the undying will in itself.

The *a priori* rejection of the possibility of an actual apparition of the dead could rest only on the conviction that through death a human being becomes absolutely nothing. For as long as such a conviction is absent, it is impossible to see why one being, in some way still existing, should not also manifest itself somehow and be capable of acting on them, although this other exists in a different state.²²

Finally, Schopenhauer considers the ability for animal magnetizers and hypnotists to influence and control people's minds at a distance without directly acting upon their bodies, barred as they are from all contact in a hypnotic state of artificially-induced stupor. Hypnosis, like sleepwalking, is nonetheless possible because the individuated extension of bodies in space is but a phenomenal representation of what is really one indivisible will uniting us all. Since we are all connected through one and the same noumenal will, the hypnotist is able to puppeteer others at what is only an illusory distance.

The will as thing-in-itself flies outside the *principium individuationis* (time and space), whereby individuals are *separated*; and so the limits that result from that principle do not exist for the will. Now so far as our insight can reach when we step into this region, we can thus explain the possibility of a *direct* influence of individuals on one another, irrespective of their proximity or remoteness in space. [...] Since the will of one man is not impeded by any limits of individuation and thus acts on the will of another directly and *in distans*, it has, therefore, operated on the organism of the

²¹ Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains* 3, p. 647.

²² Schopenhauer, 'Spirit Seeing', pp. 293-4.

other man which is only his will itself intuitively perceived in space.²³

What seeing dead people, visions of the future and hypnotizing others at a distance all evince is that the supernatural marks nothing less than the breakdown of the ideal forms of space, time and causality. Far from discrediting the supernatural, however, this breakdown actually confers it a greater philosophical import than even natural science as the sixth sense of an otherworldly reality.

Today, it will of course seem as ridiculous as a magician at a children's birthday party to demote natural science to an inquiry into the appearance of things whilst elevating the occult to the direct intuition of absolute reality. Modern science seems perfectly capable of incessantly surprising our self-assured frameworks and pre-established paradigms, thereby undermining our dogmatic pretensions to exhaust all reality within our greedy conceptual clutches. In any case, Schopenhauer's transcendental proof of the existence of the supernatural seems as inconsistent as the plot of a B-grade horror film to the extent that the paranormal experiences he relies on are still subject to the laws of representation. How exactly does the will manifest in itself in the guise of spirit apparitions when they typically assume the individuated anatomies of our deceased loved ones who have existed at one time and place? Couldn't prophetic dreams bias the dreamer into fulfilling the very actions in the dream that realize their vision, thereby raising the possibility that the dream itself is the cause of the future happening? Aren't hypnotists only able to influence people at a distance by talking to them, with the words telling them they've been hypnotized being the actual cause of their acquiescence to the hypnotizer's will? In light of such doubts, it cannot be said with any certainty that Schopenhauer's examples of paranormal phenomena are beyond the bounds of all possible experience. Something truly unconstrained by the chains of space, time and causality would be practically ineffable. Having stumbled upon it, we would have to abruptly end this essay here and fade to black...

III

Though Schopenhauer's account of the supernatural cannot be legitimated on philosophical grounds, I nonetheless want to defend it for unwittingly providing

²³ Schopenhauer, 'Spirit Seeing', p. 303.

a compelling *transcendental aesthetics* that would appeal to art to stage, by means of space, time and concepts, the paradoxical breakdown of those very representational forms. It was precisely art's ability to dramatize the noumenal will's haunting of the gothic fortress of reason that inspired Schopenhauer to grant art a privileged role in his philosophical system. According to the aesthetic vision presented in the third book of the *The World as Will and Representation*, the great artist's ingenious gesture is to pluck particular objects of experience out of the context of everyday life in which they serve our ego, elevating them in an aesthetic dimension so that we come to consider them from a different vantage point unsullied by their interest to our individual purposes and ends. As a concrete example, Schopenhauer looks to Dutch still life paintings in which succulent banquets of meats and fruits are presented in such a way that does not arouse our appetite as real meats and fruits would. Situated as they are in the aesthetic sphere, the subjects of still life assume an altogether different interest, be it for their formal shapes, colors and textures, or their symbolic meanings and ethereal allegories. In this way, art breaks with our individual ego to commune with a higher reality indifferent to our parochial concerns.

Genius is the capacity to remain in a state of pure perception, to lose oneself in perception to remove from the service of the will the knowledge which originally existed only for this service. In other words, genius is the ability to leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims, and consequently to discard entirely our own personality for a time, in order to remain pure knowing subject, the clear eye of the world.²⁴

The artistic genius is not all that different from a madman who doesn't understand what effects ought to rationally follow from the given causes or the purposes for which the objects of everyday life are ordinarily used.

It is rather curious that Schopenhauer's notion of aesthetic beauty could just as easily bleed into the affect of *abject horror* such as it is exhibited in *The Thing*, *Black Mirror* and other works which stage a violent confrontation with monstrous entities beyond the bounds of our parochial comprehension, inhuman realms which can only be experienced negatively on pain of great loss, madness and even death. Whether it's in a state of disinterested contemplation or debilitating fear, the aesthetic spectator is characterized by their indifference to the function

²⁴ Schopenhauer, *World I*, pp. 185-6.

that the artwork may serve for their individual will, thereby becoming a pure subject of knowing. What I ultimately want to suggest is that Schopenhauer's writings on paranormal phenomena that are so often the subject matter for works of horror provide no less a transcendental aesthetics than his explicit meditations on art. It is particularly artworks of the *grand guignol* variety that are able to critique dogmatic metaphysics' anthropomorphic misrecognition of our own concepts of reason for the things in themselves by confronting us with inhuman entities and impersonal forces beyond any possible understanding. Just as Schopenhauer's critical philosophy places all idols before the hammer until even God is dead, so does horror delve ever deeper into the unknown even as our conceptual coordinates break down along the way, exposing our megalomaniacal pretensions to directly know what reality is like as utterly parochial and finite.

It is important to distinguish here works of *supernatural* horror from works of horror *tout court*. There are of course many works of horror that initially confront us with some unexplained phenomenon or terrifying mystery only to explain away the horror in naturalistic terms, such as how many ghost stories ultimately reveal the demonic presences haunting the protagonists to be fellow humans trying to deceive them for their own individual purposes or merely figments of the protagonists' increasingly psychotic imagination. As per the dogmatic empiricists who have no time for the supernatural, these works of horror betray the belief that everything can ultimately be explained by bodies interacting with each other in space and time. On the other hand, supernatural horror proper refuses to piece together the shattered remnants of our representational forms that such unexplained phenomena reap upon us. It conversely exposes our spatio-temporal sensibility and causal rationality to have only an illusory grasp on a reality that is shown to be teeming with otherworldly entities, which can only be glimpsed as a paralyzed scream at best and a catatonic silence at worse. By representing something that is paradoxically beyond all representation, supernatural horror dramatizes Schopenhauer's own transcendental critique of metaphysics' anthropomorphization of the abominable thing in itself.

To concretely elucidate this aesthetics of transcendental horror, let's consider Ari Aster's 2018 debut film *Hereditary* as a recent example of supernatural horror

that perfectly decimates our delusions of grandeur as it drags us kicking and screaming to the outer reaches of possible experience.²⁵ The film tells the story of Annie, a miniatures artist living with her husband Steve, their sixteen-year-old son Peter and their eccentric and reserved thirteen-year-old daughter Charlie. After the passing of Annie's mysterious and estranged mother, strange occurrences start to transpire when her mother's grave is desecrated and Annie thinks she sees her apparition. Though the ghost of Annie's deceased mother is a case of the supernatural *par excellence*, at this stage, Annie and her family dismiss the apparition as impossible in much the same way as the empiricists against whom Schopenhauer writes dismisses the supernatural on the grounds that it contradicts nature's ironclad laws. At a support group for the bereaved, however, we soon learn that Annie's side of the family all suffered from severe mental illness, including the kind of madness that Schopenhauer finds in those possessing a particularly acute second sight enabling them to commune with the noumenal will.

After Annie forces Peter to take Charlie to a party with him, Charlie eats a piece of cake containing nuts that she is allergic to and quickly falls into anaphylactic shock. Rushing her to the hospital, Peter swerves the car to avoid a dead deer just as Charlie pops her head out of the window for air, decapitating her on a telephone pole. As the family grieves Charlie's gruesome death, Peter is plagued by his sister's demonic presence around the house, a presence that we are still led to believe for now might all just be in his head. Meanwhile, Annie befriends a woman named Joan from her support group who teaches Annie how to perform a séance that Joan uses to communicate with her own deceased son. Against all reason, Annie is amazed when Joan's invisible son appears to move through the room like a gust of wind and navigate a glass on a table to answer Joan's questions without anyone actually touching the glass. Convincing her family to perform their own séance, a terrified Peter and Steve witness objects moving around the room without being directly touched, as well as Charlie possess Annie, speaking through her as a demonic vessel. We are once more presented here with paranormal phenomena that appear to contradict the laws

²⁵ *Hereditary*, directed by Ari Aster, New York, A24, 2018.

of temporal succession as Charlie returns from the dead, spatial extension as Charlie and Annie fuse into one and the same will and causal logic as objects race about the room without any clear catalyst for what could have moved them.

At one point, Annie tells Joan she used to sleepwalk, recounting one particularly traumatic night where she woke up surprised to find herself, Peter and Charlie covered in paint thinner and a lit match in her hand. As per Schopenhauer's account of sleepwalking, Annie is able to move about her house, pour paint thinner on herself and her children and light a match even though her brain is cut off from the external world because her strings are being pulled by another cosmic puppeteer, the noumenal will in itself. This will must be all the more powerful than Annie's own fragile sense of self given that it even compels her to go against her maternal impulses and basic instinct for self-preservation in attempting to commit the murder-suicide of herself and her children. Whatever demonic will was possessing Annie wanted nothing less than to negate her entire phenomenal experience, a negation that marks precisely the occult noumenon's invasion of the representational realm.

Suspecting that Charlie's spirit has become malevolent, Annie attempts to throw Charlie's sketchbook into the fireplace only for her sleeve to burn along with the book until she puts it out. Annie seeks out Joan for advice only to notice that Joan's doormat resembles her mother's own craftwork. Searching through her mother's possessions, Annie stumbles upon a photo of her mother with Joan along with a book about a demon named Paimon who wishes to inhabit the body of a male host. Back at home, Annie begs Steve to burn Charlie's sketchbook so she can sacrifice herself to stop the horror, but Steve, ever the dogmatic empiricist, believes Annie has become completely insane. When an exasperated Annie throws the book into the fireplace herself, Steve bursts into flames instead. The way that throwing the book into the fire burns Annie's sleeve and then torches the film's last empiricist to a crisp only further evinces a radically different reality to our own in which the most curious effects can follow from entirely unexpected antecedents.

Meanwhile at school, Peter is surprised to see his own mirror reflection smile at him before smashing his head open on his desk as if he were being possessed by an alien force. After being sent home, Peter finds his father's burnt body and Annie completely possessed, climbing the walls and gliding across the ceiling like

an astronaut in outer space, totally breaking the laws of gravity. Peter is chased into the attic where he finds Annie impossibly levitating and hacking at her own head with a piano wire against her basic instinct for self-preservation. Leaping out the attic window, Peter falls to the ground as a light possessing Annie leaves her body to enter his. Upon awakening, Peter follows his mother's levitating corpse into Charlie's treehouse where Joan is waiting to explain that he has been possessed by Paimon after the demon was liberated from the body of his female hosts Charlie and then Annie. The film fades to black as Joan and other satanic coven members bow before him in the treehouse that resembles one of Annie's miniatures which, throughout the film, haunt us with the traumatic suspicion that we are nothing but insignificant playthings whose strings are being pulled by a larger cosmic force beyond our control in a game whose rules we simply do not understand. By situating such gruesome scenes of violence and death in the aesthetically disinterested space of a film, director Aster further incites his spectators to look upon the horror unfolding with an indifference as cold as the cosmos itself.

We have seen that Schopenhauer believes paranormal phenomena like ghosts, fortune telling and mind control to confirm the existence of an eternally self-same will that pays no attention to space, time and causality. We have also seen that Schopenhauer's supernatural beliefs cannot ultimately be sustained to the extent that they remain beholden to the very representational forms he claims they obliterate. As the example of *Hereditary* evinces, it is nonetheless the case that Schopenhauer's writings on the paranormal provides the basis for a transcendental aesthetics which gives pride of place to supernatural horror for its dramatization of a monstrous realm devoid of everything human. What Schopenhauer's transcendental philosophy and supernatural horror fiction have in common is that they both attempt to express through space, time and concepts the negation of space, time and all conceptuality as such. Of course, if every great work of supernatural horror can just as well work as a transcendental critique of dogmatic metaphysics, it is only because modern critical philosophy is already the ultimate real-world horror story.

eltnecniv@gmail.com