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### Fallacies on Film

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# FALLACIES ON FILM

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*Abstract:*

This paper explores the question of how films may be used to enhance the teaching of fallacies. Theoretical questions about the nature of fallacies will be addressed along with pedagogical issues. The paper is structured around a case study—an examination of various arguments from ignorance as articulated by fictional characters in the 1964 Hammer horror production of *The Gorgon*.

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One evening during the summer of 1910, most likely on the second night of the full moon, an unmarried, pregnant young woman by the name of Sasha Kass was murdered in that region of the forest of Vandorf which borders on the castle Borski. This was the seventh unsolved murder in the German village of Vandorf in five years. Bruno Heitz, the young woman's fiancé, was found dead hanging from a tree within hours of the discovery of Sasha's body. Having apparently committed suicide, Bruno was considered by most of the villagers to be the prime murder suspect.

These are the facts as they are established in the opening scenes of the 1964 Hammer horror production of *The Gorgon*—a horror film whose narrative is propelled by the question "Who is responsible for the Vandorf murders?", and which unremittingly explores the dynamics of proof, inference, and confirmation, and the logic of (predominantly nonmonotonic) evidentiary relations.

For example, still early on in the narrative, Professor Jules Heitz, Bruno's father, in the course of attempting to clear his son's good name, utters the following remarkable logical observation: "I believe in the existence of everything which the human brain is unable to disprove."

Heitz's comment seems ridiculous; bordering on lunacy, some might say. One wonders how Heitz could hope to succeed in resolving a longstanding murder mystery when he seems incapable of spotting such a logical howler emanating from his own lips. This impression is only reinforced, for certain audience members, possibly those trained in a certain Anglo-Saxon, analytical logical tradition, once they recall Professor Heitz's institutional affiliation—Doctor of Literature at Berlin University!

That having been said, I am ashamed to admit, however, that I once referred in print (though thankfully only in a footnote) to Heitz's statement as one of my favourite examples, within the horror genre, of that species of patently bad reasoning, of fallacies writ large, which so characteristically drives horror plots, and which raises the question of how any reasonably intelligent person might become engaged by such insipid dialogue and laughably absurd proof procedures. I am ashamed to admit this because I now realize that my interpretation of Heitz's remark is uncharitable at best. Heitz, it turns out, is no fool. At worst, it helps to perpetuate that annoying, commonplace practice of illustrating informal fallacies with glaringly silly one-liners which are so violently wrenched out of context that it becomes difficult to believe either that anyone could be stupid enough so as to

actually commit an informal fallacy, or that the study of fallacies might have any bearing on one's own life, one's own cognitive deliberations, or one's personal relationships with others. Informal logic texts, as everyone knows, are full of this sort of thing. In the long run, the use of examples of this sort tends to trivialize the study and teaching of informal fallacies, leading some even to wonder what the scholarly investigation of informal fallacies could possibly consist in.

My purpose in writing this paper is to attempt to clear this blemish from my moral record by paying appropriate homage to Professor Heitz—a fictional character though he may be—and, more generally, to explore how films may be used to good purpose in the instruction of informal fallacies.

As compared to prose texts, films have three obvious virtues which result in distinct pedagogical advantages in the classroom. First, and most importantly, films provide a full, rich, and immediate dialogical context for the analysis of argument. Anything in a film, at any level of presentation—whether it involves dialogue, character development, sound, music, cinematography, lighting, costumes, set design, iconography, special effects, generic conventions—is fair game to be considered, and demonstrated to be relevant to the interpretation of an argumentative exchange. We all know from film theory how creative, imaginative, and sophisticated this process of interpretation can be. And careful dialogical analyses of this nature, precisely because they do appeal to the context of utterance, tend to produce interpretations of argumentative exchanges which grant them some sense and some plausibility, at least from the speaker's own subjective perspective.

Second, because film functions, and therefore engages the viewer on so many different levels, an argumentative analysis couched within the context of a film is more likely to fully engage a student's entire being, and allow her to integrate her visceral, emotional, moral, and possibly spiritual responses to the argumentative context, along with her cognitive appraisal of it. Film is vivid, absorbing and alive. These two factors combined, I believe, appropriately lead students away from a stark, binary, formulaic approach to the study of fallacies (where, if an argument X is deemed to fit pattern P, then it is seen as an instance of fallacy F, and so judged to be entirely erroneous) to a more mature and more nuanced understanding of fallacies as argumentative moves which, like life itself, are full of grey areas, ambiguities, and reasonable temptations—where fallacies are rarely entirely censurable, and most often have something to be said for them in their favour. In this way, I suspect, students are more likely to recognize fallacies in their own speech and their own lives, and are more likely to respond to the fallacious inferences of others in a charitable and judicious manner.

Third, for a contemporary youthful audience, film is familiar, accessible, and "encouraging." Sadly, traditional texts have none of these properties for many of our students. However, for even the most gifted and literate students in our classes, film is an effective vehicle for creating emotional bonds, along with a level of trust and openness within the classroom. Film provides "a terrific way to jump-start classroom friendships, encourage discussion, and ... to provoke students into discovering insights and opinions they didn't even know they had. Film is encouraging. Students have grown up immersed in movies; they know them deeply, are generally unintimidated by them, and so are more likely to be adventurous, to take intellectual chances with them. That's stuff you can build an education on" (Chritl Reges, "Film and Fulfilment: Why I Show So Many Movies in my Composition Classroom!", *SPSCVA Review* 5 (1996) 33).

So much by way of promissory notes. I now want to return to Professor Heitz's comment in *The Gorgon* and ask a simple question: Did Heitz commit a fallacy and, if so, which one? My purpose in what follows is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of this film or of any particular fallacy, but merely to suggest what is possible, and to encourage others to explore the enormous potential inherent in the filmic analysis of argumentative

discourse.

"I believe in the existence of everything which the human brain is unable to disprove." Now, taken in isolation, this certainly has every appearance of being a classic, incontrovertible example of the fallacy of negative proof, otherwise known as the fallacy of arguing from ignorance. It is not implausible to argue that this statement has an inferential structure, and that Heitz is claiming that in some sense his belief in the existence of certain entities is justifiably based upon, or receives evidential support from the fact that the human brain is unable to disprove their existence.

Of course, it simply does not follow, merely from the fact that the human brain is unable to disprove the existence of, say, ghosts and evil spirits, that these entities exist, or that belief in their existence is at all justified. The one claim, on its own, is hardly even relevant to the other. The lack of evidence for some negative existential claim, or the inability to prove such a claim, usually establishes nothing beyond mere probative failure—the failure or inability, that is, to establish anything. And probative failure, or negative proof cannot responsibly be used as a substitute for the hard investigative work that must be done, in properly supporting an existential claim, of garnering substantial evidence or proof which positively supports that claim. Heitz, it appears, is either sloppy, lazy, or deeply confused.

The form of the argument is bad enough. It only makes matters worse that Heitz is apparently willing to generalize this argument in a way that commits him to a belief in the existence of absolutely everything which humanity is unable to disprove. It is not difficult to see that Heitz's beliefs must be, not only confused, but rampantly inconsistent; descriptive of a world opulent enough to make a Meinongian jungle appear positively barren/austere.

What this hasty analysis overlooks, of course, is that Heitz's inference rests on a certain knowledge base as well, and is not uttered from a perspective of complete ignorance. In fact, the film as a whole exploits virtually every available opportunity to highlight how each major character's epistemic standpoint represents a singular admixture of knowledge and ignorance. In each case, this has profound effects on the character's security and well-being, as well as the soundness of their inferential judgments. Occasionally they are ignorant of their ignorance, not knowing that they don't know; sometimes they do know that they don't know; and periodically they even know that they don't know why they don't know (Karla Hoffmann being the best example of this). This general theme of the fusion of epistemic oppositions is further underscored by a parallel thematic exploration of an aesthetic counterpart. The film's physically most attractive character is also its physically most hideous. And at one point, Dr. Namaroff, the chief pathologist and psychiatrist at the Vandorf Medical Institution, remarks, upon removing the brain of a deranged mental patient: "It's not a pretty sight. ... It never ceases to amaze me why the most noble work of God—the human brain—is the most revolting to the human eye." Nothing in *The Gorgon* stands alone. Ambivalence triumphs, as each character trait and plot development is made manifest through some operation of logical opposition. The human brain, simultaneously an object of beauty and repulsion, the seat of both rationality and madness, also makes a claim to reveal, through its limitations—its ignorance—the legitimate scope of human knowledge. "I believe in the existence of everything which the human brain is unable to disprove."

Heitz's principal epistemic shortcoming as we have seen, and one which he shares with every major character throughout most of the film, is that he does not know who is responsible for the Vandorf murders. He is convinced, however, that his son is not a murderer. It is contestable whether he has really solid, good evidence for this claim. What is clear, however, is that Heitz is not (characteristically at least) an impetuous or rash

individual. Heitz initially appears in the film during the inquest into his son's and Sasha's deaths. He is articulate, circumspect, restrained, and respectful of the court proceedings. He speaks at the inquest only when he is entitled to, and consistently with care and precision. He clearly comes across as a dignified character, somewhat reserved, generally cautious in his judgments, and most certainly in control of his passions; in this case, his grief over his son's death, and his outrage over the nature of the inquest, which he describes as "a witch hunt."

This allegation is not entirely without foundation. Although Heitz does, in a sense, argue from ignorance, he also knows a great deal. Of course, he knows his son well. He is also a Doctor of Literature at the University of Berlin, and describes himself more generally as "a student of human nature." Upon arriving in Vandorf, he read the local newspapers and learned of the unsolved Vandorf murders. No one, including the police, however, was willing to discuss this matter with him. And absolutely no mention of these murders was made throughout the inquest. Heitz accordingly comes to the conclusion that his son is being used as a scapegoat to cover up some horrible secret, and he openly challenges the inquest on this point; referring to "the conspiracy of silence" surrounding the whole affair, and calling into question the "obviously circumstantial, prejudiced and contrived" nature of the evidence brought against Bruno. Convinced that everything presented at the inquest has been "generated by fear," Heitz is able to very impressively predict, to the letter, the coroner's finding that Sasha was murdered by Bruno, who then took his own life. By the conclusion of the inquest scene, Heitz has established himself as a capable, articulate and discerning gentleman, with a quite formidable intellect, who is willing and able to challenge the authority figures prevailing within Vandorf.

While Heitz does indeed have some reason to be suspicious of the goings-on within Vandorf, it is also worth noting that his own evidence in this regard is also circumstantial at best. First, the murder-suicide hypothesis has considerable independent plausibility (something Heitz seems virtually incapable of appreciating). Second, Heitz is simply not in a position, despite his suspicions, to credibly call into question any of the specific evidence presented at the inquest. Finally, the fact that Vandorf is a police state—something we learn later in the film but of which Heitz is by now assuredly aware—would explain the uncooperative behaviour of the police, and the silence and aloofness of the local folk towards a stranger.

The serious possibility remains, then, that Heitz's normally sound judgment is, on this occasion, clouded by grief. Both the coroner and Dr. Namaroff, at various points, condescendingly dismiss Heitz's queries and protestations as the natural prejudices of a bereaved parent. At the conclusion of the inquest, then, Heitz is in a position to pose a minor challenge at best to the coroner's findings. Heitz is an intelligent irritant, with little upon which to build a solid case. He poses a real danger to the status quo and the conventional wisdom prevailing within Vandorf only to the extent that he remains (over?) confidently wedded to his conjectures, and determined to act to prove them right.

This danger begins to materialize in the very next scene when, more or less immediately following the inquest, Heitz pays a visit to Namaroff's quarters. In the ensuing dialogue Heitz raises, for the first time from his perspective, the possibility of a supernatural explanation of the Vandorf murders. The exchange transcribed below begins with Namaroff's explanation of why Bruno's apparent "normality" does not clear him of the crime.

Namaroff: Given a certain set of circumstances, I believe almost everybody is capable of murder. Naturally, you [Heitz] are prejudiced.

Heitz: I have been in Vandorf exactly two days. I have asked questions and received evasions. I have called at police headquarters and been refused admittance.

Everywhere I go I find a conspiracy of silence.

Namaroff: I'm sure you exaggerate.

Heitz: Oh, no. There's an explanation somewhere. It lies in the past. Some horrible occurrence which has been suppressed. To the people of Vandorf, this thing, whatever it is, is real. But something they cannot mention, because they dare not. They want to believe that it doesn't exist, because the very admission of its existence only increases their fear. That's why my son was branded a murderer. He at least was human, tangible. Doctor, I need your help.

Namaroff: I can add nothing to what I said in court.

Heitz: Let me ask you one more question. Have you ever heard of Megera?

Namaroff: Megera?

Heitz: She was one of three sisters. They were known as Gorgons. Two of them were slain. According to the legend, the third, Megera, fled to these parts. It's said that when mortals looked upon her face, they were turned to stone.

Namaroff: That legend is 2,000 years old.

Heitz: So I believe. [So, I believe.]

Namaroff: We are men of science. I don't believe in ghosts or evil spirits, and I don't think you do either.

Heitz: That's one of the most unscientific remarks I have ever heard. I believe in the existence of everything which the human brain is unable to disprove.

Namaroff: Or prove. [Or prove?]

Heitz: That is why I am remaining in Vandorf. At least I intend to prove that my son was not a murderer.

This exchange establishes a number of facts which bear crucially upon our logical appraisal of Heitz's judgment. First, if there was ever any doubt on this point, Heitz is a man of science—even Namaroff recognizes this—and as such is committed to the methodological principle that there must be a genuine scientific explanation for what's going on in Vandorf. Second, Heitz now reveals that he has an explanation at hand; namely, that the spirit of Megera has taken on human form. Heitz is understandably attracted to this hypothesis since it explains everything he is after; his son's innocence, the identity of the murderer, the fear of the villagers, and the conspiracy of silence. Third, the Megera hypothesis is not logically inconceivable. The human brain, that is, is unable to disprove her existence. It would be scientifically irresponsible, and disrespectful of the spirit of scientific inquiry, to grant credence to something we know cannot be.

A fourth crucial point needs to be made to fully understand this dialogical exchange, though it only emerges somewhat later in the film. On his deathbed, Heitz writes a letter to his other son, Paul, in which he describes the Megera legend and also quotes a statement from the writings of Herbert Spencer to the effect that "every legend and every myth known to mankind is not entirely without its authentic foundation."

The Megera hypothesis, of course, faces a major obstacle when it comes to establishing its scientific credibility. From the point of view of conventional science, it has an astronomically low probability of being true. Megera is an (evil) spirit, an entity which conventional science has no proof of, and no use for—though, again, without being able entirely to disprove the existence of such beings. When Namaroff expresses incredulity over the Megera hypothesis with his remark that "That legend is over 2,000 years old," he is both demarcating science from myth, and ridiculing the narratives and preconceptions of a distant, unprogressive, pre-scientific age.

Heitz's tantalizingly ambiguous response "So I believe" can be read either as little more than a conversation filler reaffirming, what is certainly common knowledge amongst men of science, that the legend of the Gorgon sisters does indeed date back 2,000 years. Or, as I prefer, it can be read, in light of Spencer's remark, as a subargument of its own "So, I believe;" where "so" functions as a conclusion indicator, and we take Heitz to be claiming that he believes in the Megera legend in part precisely because it is a legend of truly mythic proportions, with the power to sustain (and re-tell) itself over 2,000 years of human history.

Pulling these various pieces together, we can now see that Heitz's remark about the human brain, far from being a disgraceful fallacy, can in fact be viewed as a statement of utter and complete scientific orthodoxy. From Heitz's perspective: 1. His overriding concern in remaining in Vandorf is to prove his son's innocence—something of which he is absolutely convinced. 2. As a man of science, Heitz is committed to proving Bruno's innocence in a scientifically respectable manner. That is, he is looking for a genuine scientific explanation. 3. There is a hypothesis at hand, the Megera legend, which has genuine explanatory power; establishing, amongst other things, Bruno's innocence. 4. There is no other available hypothesis which proves Bruno's innocence. 5. Although the Megera hypothesis has an astronomically low antecedent probability in terms of conventional scientific claims about the nature of reality, 6. Megera is not impossible, i.e. science cannot disprove her existence, and 7. There is independent support for her existence in the fact that the Megera legend has persisted for over 2,000 years.

In his conversation with Namaroff, then, Heitz most likely sees himself as a stalwart supporter of the true liberal spirit of scientific inquiry, being willing to courageously adopt unconventional beliefs (just as he challenges the status quo within Vandorf), provided those beliefs receive independent empirical support and possess genuine explanatory power, far in excess of all available competing hypotheses. Heitz will stay the course and follow the trail of evidence wherever it may lead, upholding the truth even if that truth should clash with convention and human prejudice (of either a scientific, social, or political nature); so long, of course, that no one—no human brain, no fellow scientist—is able to prove him wrong.

Sherlock Holmes once observed, in a similar spirit, that "when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Heitz and Holmes each may perhaps be faulted for the slightly hyperbolic character of their utterances. What they say is not what they mean. However, if we choose to interpret their remarks uncharitably, quite literally, and entirely out of context, and then find their insights wanting—that is less their problem than our loss, less a reflection of their logical ineptitude than of our hermeneutical inadequacies. Heitz, who is no fool, has committed no simple-minded fallacy of negative proof.

This, of course, is not to say that Heitz's reasoning is altogether impeccable. Far from it. Very serious questions can, and must be raised about the cogency of my reconstruction of Heitz's argument. I have already questioned whether Heitz's more or less dogmatic confidence in Bruno's innocence, and his suspicions of a conspiracy of silence are justified. It is also legitimate to wonder whether Heitz hasn't wildly exaggerated the significance of Spencer's remark, and inflated the degree to which the longevity of a myth provides evidentiary support of its veracity; never mind that even if there is some "authentic foundation" to the Megera legend, it does not necessarily reside in the actual existence of evil spirits capable of transmigration. Heitz also seems less than fully sensitive to the fact that, as far as he is in a position to know, the existence of Megera is actually fully compatible with Bruno's guilt. Megera may exist, but Bruno may have murdered Sasha nonetheless. The explanatory power of the Megera hypothesis is less sweeping than Heitz takes it to be, and less supportive of Heitz's personal convictions than he supposes. Finally, Heitz never takes seriously what is presumably the more reasonable option, given the paucity of compelling available hypotheses, of simply suspending judgment on the existence of Megera. Given the extremely low probability of her existence, outright belief in Megera on merely circumstantial

evidence seems somewhat hasty, to put it mildly. Unlike a number of other characters, to this point in the film Heitz has had no direct contact of either Megera's hideous countenance or concrete evidence of a gorgonized body. And of course a suspension of judgment does not preclude treating Megera as an interesting working hypothesis, worth testing, and worth the investment of energy exploring ways of confirming or disconfirming her existence. Suspending judgement does not mean giving up on the process of inquiry, or losing faith in his son.

I have no desire, then, to disguise Heitz's logical failings. In fact, they are crucial to a coherent reading of the film in its entirety. Heitz's logical counterpart in the film is Namaroff. Whereas Heitz believes in Megera too readily, Namaroff consistently refuses to form beliefs on many matters, including Megera's identity, when all the evidence which would more than justify belief is (in some cases literally!) staring him in the face. Each of Heitz and Namaroff are interesting case studies in human psychology. In each case, the epistemic strategies of these two characters are grounded in their desires. Heitz wants desperately to believe in Megera, and so does, although he manages to couch this belief within a framework of scientific respectability. Namaroff wants desperately (though probably without fully realizing it) not to believe in Megera, and so he adopts an ultra-conservative policy of belief revision. The logical shortcomings of both Heitz and Namaroff are intriguingly intertwined with the prevailing motifs and ideological messages of the horror genre. Significantly, each character fails in the quintessentially generic quest to destroy Megera, and in fact each is finally petrified by her gaze. Namaroff's and Heitz's inability to cognitively grasp the situation results in their own annihilation, and the continuing reign of the beast. In addition, it is not insignificant that the critical judgment of both Heitz and Namaroff is blinded by (misplaced or exaggerated) love—filial love in one case, romantic love in the other. The Gorgon demonstrated how a monstrous presence can sully the intellect of even the sharpest minds, as it manipulates and perverts even the purest and most noble forms of human affection.

So, yes, it is imperative to recognize that Heitz, like Namaroff, is logically imperfect. But these imperfections result from normal, even laudable human tendencies, and they represent natural and ubiquitous temptations to which we all may succumb. Heitz's logical errors are not silly or superficial. They are mistakes of the entire human person. Fallacies must be understood holistically as a reflection of the troubled, tortured, and ambivalent nature of the human condition. Each of us partakes of this condition, and if the horror genre teaches us to recognize the alien—the enemy—within, informal logic, when properly taught, should sensitize each of us to our own logical vulnerabilities, and to appreciate the rich repertoire of fallacies that live, thrive, and lurk within.

Let me say in conclusion that I have not attempted here to give a complete analysis of negative proof in *The Gorgon*. I have said little to justify my interpretation of Namaroff. Far more significantly, however, I have made no mention of a third elderly male authority figure in the film, professor Meister of the University of Leipzig, who, as his name suggests, is the unparalleled master of logical reasoning in this film and who represents the Hegelian synthesis of the logical oppositions and extravagances portrayed by Namaroff and Heitz. The film has a wonderful tripartite subtext and Meister, quite remarkably, engages in no less than two further dialogues which explicitly revisit the topic of negative proof. However, the analysis of those dialogues will have to wait, I'm afraid, for another occasion when we have more time to discuss what transpires in *The Gorgon* after the first 17 minutes of film!

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