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Nightmare Alley

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Nightmare Alley

Abstract

This is a film review of *Nightmare Alley* (2021), directed by Guillermo del Toro.

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In an interview discussing the inspiration for his 2021 film *Nightmare Alley*, director Guillermo del Toro credits Carl Jung's insight that when the unconscious is neglected, it re-emerges outside of the individual as a kind-of destiny.¹ Based on William Lindsay Grisham's 1936 book of the same title which was adapted in 1947 as a film noir, del Toro's *Nightmare Alley* interrogates the question of whether we are made victims by an inescapable fate or if our choices are dictated in part by unconscious wishes that will stop at nothing to gain a hearing.

The film opens with a scene of its protagonist, Stanton Carlisle (Bradley Cooper), dragging the corpse of his dead father under the floorboards of a house that he then sets on fire. The return of the repressed, disguised as destiny, comes to haunt Stanton as this scene is revisited in his dreams and reveries. Escaping his former life, Stanton arrives at a travelling carnival where he is drawn to a geek show: a grotesque performance in which a wild-looking man chases a live chicken for an entranced audience, culminating in his biting off and swallowing the bird's head. Stanton secures work at the carnival and is tasked with helping the geek's handler, Clem Hoatley (Willem Dafoe), recapture the geek who has escaped captivity.

Discovering the deranged man in a funhouse, the geek is revealed to be psychologically shattered and terrorized by his tragic predicament. Hoatley explains to Stanton that the geek is usually someone with a history of addiction who can be found in a "nightmare alley." He is then lured in by the promise of a "temporary job," drugged over time with opium-laced liquor, and made dependent on his handler with no means of escape. The geek is only kept alive for entertainment, as shown when Hoatley and Stanton abandon him at a hospital after he develops a fever.

The carnival is both a sanctuary and a prison to those deemed socially undesirable where employment can be secured no matter one's past, even if it means becoming trapped for spectacle.

Stanton climbs the ranks of the carnival by assisting a husband-and-wife clairvoyance act, Pete (David Strathairn) and Madam Zeena (Toni Collette). They teach Stanton the difference between a sleight of hand that employs tricks for the purpose of entertainment versus a “spook show” which relies on deception and manipulation. When he is caught attempting to steal Pete’s notebook of tricks, Stanton is warned against “shut eye,” that is, when a mentalist believes in the lie of his or her own abilities. The deception of claiming to have a spiritual power that one does not actually have not only harms “God-fearing people” but, Eli explains, invites a more serious form of punishment by a God that is always watching. Here, an important theme of the film is introduced: no one can outrun God.

Shortly after this incident, Pete, who already suffers from a drinking problem, dies from apparent alcohol poisoning. When the carnival is raided, based on a tip that Hoatley is running an illegal geek show, Stanton distracts the police chief with a show of his “second sight.” Having earned the goodwill of the community, Stanton boasts about his talent for reading people and is consequently rewarded with Pete’s book of tricks by Madam Zeena. Eager to start his own two-person clairvoyance act with the young and beautiful carnival performer, Miss Molly (Rooney Mara), the couple leave the carnival behind for a new life in the big city.

In the same interview cited above, del Toro suggests that the all-seeing God of the film is represented by one of Hoatley’s most cherished oddities from his cabinet of curiosities: a baby with a third eye, named Enoch, that is preserved in a jar of formaldehyde after having killed his mother in childbirth and then dying shortly thereafter.² Whether this backstory is concocted or not, Enoch comes to be associated with an aura of malice and tragedy and, I argue, symbolizes the occult-workings of fate and moral punishment. The eye motif appears throughout the film but is most significantly repurposed by Stanton: two years after leaving the carnival, we see him wearing

a blindfold depicting a third eye in his performances, representing his second sight. Up to this point, he and Molly have run a successful clairvoyance act that relies on verbal cues. However, they are caught off guard by a psychologist who identifies the trick and renders Stanton “blind” by withholding Molly’s signals. Stanton tears off his blindfold and resorts to a spook show, pretending to make contact with a spirit connected to an audience member before fainting from the effort. To Molly’s horror, this performance captures the attention of an affluent judge who employs Stanton as a medium with the hope of channeling his son who died in the First World War.

The second half of the film follows Stanton as he teams up with the psychologist who called his bluff, Dr. Lilith Ritter (Cate Blanchette). Granting him access to her clients’ psychotherapy recordings in exchange for him telling her the truth, Stanton’s past is revealed to be one marked by abuse, alcoholism, and a violent relationship with a father who dominated his son with the fear of God. Throughout the film, these dynamics are acted out in a series of triangular relationships in which Stanton’s father-substitutes tend to meet violent ends. The ruse escalates when Stanton is approached by Dr. Ritter’s most disturbed client, Ezra Grindle (Richard Jenkins), resulting in the protagonist’s tragic undoing and an astonishing ending that brings the film full circle.

The God presented in this film is one that is unable to provide consolation for those seeking greater meaning and magic in the world. *Nightmare Alley* is particularly valuable for thinking critically about the power of belief, pageantry, and the need for enchantment in the context of American spiritualism on the brink of the Second World War. The dehumanized “beast” of the geek show and the false promise of redemption offered by the spook show represent two forms of entertainment that use domination to beguile their audience. As with all of del Toro’s films, monsters abound in *Nightmare Alley*, but they are the damaged and the “all too human”: Hoatley

conceals his cruelty behind the unnatural performance of the geek; Stanton's spook-show relies on the emotional and financial defrauding of the bereaved; and Grindle is revealed to be a sadist hoping to buy spiritual atonement for crimes that have gone unpunished.

Stanton's struggle with sobriety, his evangelism, and the hint of a previously suppressed midwestern accent arguably channel the ghost of his murdered father, but contrary to what his shut-eye has led him to believe, he is not a true medium. Rather, he is haunted by a past that is in danger of being repeated through a series of choices that form a restless cycle of guilt and punishment. Stanton is ultimately deserving of our sympathy, but his humanity is only able to come to light when he is finally confronted with the monsters contained within.

¹ Guillermo del Toro. "1,290. Guillermo del Toro." Interview by Marc Maron. *WTF with Marc Maron Podcast*. December 23, 2021. Audio, 1:11:30. <https://omny.fm/shows/wtf-with-marc-maron-podcast/guillermo-del-toro>.

² Ibid, 52:15.