

GOTHIC NATURE



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Muscles and Spells: Violent Transcendence in AMC's *The Terror*

(USA: AMC, 2018)

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Given the evident glee with which prestige television shows now kill characters large and small, it is disappointing that it has taken so long for a show to take violence as a serious subject in its own right. Much more than a plot device, violence dictates the terms of communication between individuals, as well as between individuals and their world. AMC's *The Terror*, based upon Dan Simmons' 2007 novel of the same name, uses the true story of the HMS *Terror* and *Erebus*, two British exploratory vessels that were lost forever in 1845 while searching for the Northwest Passage, to imagine violence as more than a contest between winners and losers, heroes and villains. It considers it, instead, as a way of being in the world. In this story, violence whittles away all human excess and asks whether the relationship between humans and nature will remain a death struggle from which either may or should emerge or survive.

The 'terror' of the title is something of a pun, referring both to the ill-fated ship and to a state of dark transcendentalist experience, not the ecstasy of anthropocentric self-recognition in nature, but the ecstasy of submission to nature. Emerson could look out at his New England forests and imagine a continent to the west bearing his own divine likeness. By contrast, this landscape is so dry and white as to reflect nothing human but the bone. *The Terror* thus approaches the whiteness of the land with same ambivalence with which Melville considered the whiteness of the whale: as the visible aspect of nature's invisible spirit, with which we might achieve contact only in moments in which nature's enormity consumes the human mind.

This, then, is a form of cosmic horror as well, in which the human mind recoils as it discovers that it is part of a larger natural reality that it does not understand. There is something larger out there, something that seems more monstrous the more it reveals the limits of our claims to sacred interpretive command. The desperate survivors of the *Terror* and *Erebus* look out at the Arctic and wonder whether God is present there. As far as they can tell, no, God is not. But something surely is.

Nature holds its secrets like a haunted mansion, while humans blunder through. The very presence of the stranded crew is disruptive. And so, humanity and nature enter into their tense negotiations over whether humanity can break through for its own ends, whether nature will obliterate humanity, whether both will destroy the other, or whether there is some other form of balance. Even so, *The Terror* never forgets that this violent conflict also produces and is itself a form of wonder. By the end of the first episode, in fact, the survivors find themselves literally in nature's crushing grip. Later they will be assaulted by hail stones the size of baseballs, blinded by fog as thick as smoke and even forced to hang, weightless and small, in the black depths of the arctic sea. The crew wants to dominate this land, and we want to see them try, but, in a way, we also want to see them fail. We want their smallness to reveal the largeness of the cosmos. Perhaps they do too.

The show makes fine use of the garish white light of the Arctic, to render even the worst things alien, strange, and beautiful. Men drown, starve, waste away, find themselves the victims of something living out there on the ice. Their deaths are ugly. So too is the desiccated frozen desert in which they take place. Indeed, the landscapes of the show are unlike any Arctic with which viewers are likely familiar. Sea ice bobs in alluring circles and the frozen pack hardens into marble. Land, when it appears, is a rocky shore as desolate and vast as the moon. It is all too big to take in and too claustrophobic to offer comfort. By contrast, brief flashes of cinematic impressionism draw us into interior spaces of the human mind that are no less alluring or mute. In all cases, the violence is sublime. Brutality offers fleeting glimpses into an invisible world beyond our assessments of good and evil, life and death.

In the first moments of *The Terror*, a Netsilik man refers to what he calls 'Tuunbaq', the thing 'always coming', the thing 'made of muscles and spells'. The survivors, whose spells become clearer as their muscles recede from their starving or violently-rent bodies, the world itself, which appears to contain both its material element and its supernatural inherence, and the creature that seems to work as nature's violently interventionist agent are all such things, all bound together through the sublime moment of death, in which body and soul, the world outside and the world within, cannot deny one another. This kind of dark transcendentalism maintains the Emersonian view of contact between humanity and nature, but offers universal death in lieu of universal life. Neither humanity nor nature are evil in their violent works. Instead, violence, even death, is the link between the muscles and the spells.

None of this is to say that the show ignores the genre possibilities inherent to the plot. The *Terror* and *Erebus* quickly transform into haunted houses. The weaknesses of the human psyche inevitably appear. Gore attends. However, even these genre elements serve not only to comment upon the show's transcendentalist themes, but also to make valuable contributions to transcendentalist discourse. The sublime relationship of humanity to nature, in this show at least, is not one of comfortable assurances, but of incomprehensible portents. Why wouldn't these sailors imagine creatures that they cannot control as monstrous? Why wouldn't they imagine modes of inquiry that go beyond maps and sextants as shamanism? The survivors have a place in the natural order, but they are owed no answers.

Late in the show, a character asks whether it is possible that we are not the heroes of this story. Shortly thereafter, the creature that has stalked the crew from the start, so wondrous as to be horrible, confronts its own brutal end. What conclusion can a show like this one offer, when it asserts violence not as victory but as mute balance? If violence is our way of being in the world, then what are we and the world to do with one another? In the final outcome, can there ever be forgiveness on either side? *The Terror* knows that that lack of resolution, itself a cycle of unending violent struggle for meaning, is all the balance that there will ever be.

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