The Politics of Horror

Edited by
Damien K. Picariello

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PREFACE

"Begin," says Stephen King, "by assuming that the tale of horror, no matter how primitive, is allegorical by its very nature; that it is symbolic. Assume that it is talking to us, like a patient on a psychoanalyst's couch, about one thing while it means another."[1]

In other words, horror is always about more than what it's about.

This is so, King suggests, because the things that terrify us also, in some sense, reveal us. Horror shows us who we are—by showing us what we're scared of—in a powerful, foundational way. In this sense, King suggests that we think of horror as "lifting a trapdoor in the civilized forebrain and throwing a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath."[2]

If we're fishing for insights about politics, this subterranean river might be worth exploring.

Politics, like horror, is about who we are. It's about big questions like the nature of justice and how we ought to live together, and it's also about narrower, more particular questions, like: "How can I get people to vote for me?"

Come to think of it, throwing raw meat to hungry alligators sounds a little bit like running for office, doesn't it?

In this collection, *The Politics of Horror*, you'll find 20 chapters that explore the connections between horror and politics in a wide variety of ways. In composing these chapters, we've tried to write in a way that's both broadly accessible and intellectually rigorous, and we've tried to spark conversations—about horror and about politics—that our readers will find engaging.

What we want is for you, dear reader, to turn at random to a chapter in this volume, start reading, and say: "Hey, I never thought of that before!"

If that happens—*when* that happens—we'll know that we've done our job.

*   *   *

The Politics of Horror is organized into several sections. The chapters grouped together in each section have something in common with each other: sometimes a common theme—witches or the apocalypse or nature—and sometimes a common medium—comics or television or games. This mode of organization is meant to make our volume easier for you, the reader, to navigate. You're welcome to start at the beginning and go straight through, or to skip to a section that looks particularly interesting to you. Don't worry: the other sections will be waiting for you when you're ready.

Our first section, **Petrifying Politics**, explores some of the connections between horror and contemporary American political life. In "The American Nightmare: Graveyard Voters, Demon Sheep, Devil Women, and Lizard People," Christina M. Knopf shows us how horror imagery has come to play a prominent role in both depictions of American politics and American political discourse and campaigning. In "Horror, Crisis, and Control: Tales of Facing Evils," John S. Nelson brings out the commonalities between horror narratives and "crisis theory," which theorizes the impending collapse of social and political order. In Meghan Purvis's "We're Witches and We're Hunting You: Matriarchy and Misogyny in *Conjure Wife*," we find insights for contemporary politics in mid-twentieth-century depictions of marriage and witchcraft.

The two chapters in our next section, **Apocalypse and After**, examine depictions of societal collapse and rebuilding. In "The Democratic Impulse in Post-Apocalyptic Films," Christie L. Maloyed and J. Kelton Williams show us how films like *Land of the Dead* and *WALL-E* point us toward thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville; in "Through a Glass Darkly: The Dimensionality and Inadequacy of Political Fear in Stephen King's *The Stand*," Jordon B. Barkalow and Jennifer A. Mogg discuss the uses and abuses of fear within the post-apocalyptic political communities in King's novel.

Our third section features two chapters that deal with what we call **Ghoulish Games**. In "The Monsters Among Us: Realism and Constructivism

in *Vampire: The Masquerade*," James D. Fielder discusses what horror-themed live action roleplaying can teach us about international relations. In "Anxiety in Suburbia: The Politics of Gaming in *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom*," Michelle Salerno brings out the political implications of a play with a disturbing video game at its heart.

Our next two sections each focus on a particular medium. In **Terrifying Television**, Lynn Kozak discusses a horror TV series with a contemporary political charge in "*The Exorcist* and a New Kind of American Television Horror" and Carol Westcamp illuminates the unexpected commonalities between horror and reality television in "Reality TV as Horror: Psychological Terror and Physical Torture." In **Creepy Comics,** Lara Saguisag shows us how Philippine horror comics provide a window into the politics of the Philippines in "Zombie Komiks in a Cacique Democracy: *Patay Kung Patay*'s Undead Revolution" and Zack Kruse explores depictions of colonialism in twentieth-century American horror comics in "'Just as You Will Do to One Another!': Colonialism That Consumes Itself in Warren Publications' *Creepy*." Daniel V. Goff rounds out this section with "Witches in the South: Past, Present, and in Comics," in which he discusses the power dynamics at play in depictions of witchcraft in comic books.

We're just past the halfway point of our volume, now, and our section is a long one: **Nightmarish Nature** features four chapters, each of which focuses, in one way or another, on the terrors of the natural world. In "'Bring Him the Blood of the Outlanders!': *Children of the Corn* as Farm Crisis Horror," Kathleen P. Hunt connects the 1984 horror film to a crisis in American farming, while Emma Frances Bloomfield mines Darren Aronofsky's 2017 film *mother!* for insights in "*mother!* and the Horror of Environmental Abuse." The two chapters that conclude this section also focus on movies: In "Let the Bodies (of Water) Hit the Floor: Development and Exploitation in John Boorman's *Deliverance*," Salvatore J. Russo and Chelsea Renee Ratcliff show us how Boorman's film challenges the tropes of the "eco-horror" genre, and in "The Mayor of Shark City": Political Power in *Jaws*, Leslie Stratyner discusses the politics of Amity Island in Spielberg's film.

Our next section, **Return of the Repressed**, begins by returning to Spielberg. In "Fear of Founding from Plato to *Poltergeist*," Damien K. Picariello discusses the terror lurking beneath the surface of the perfect community in the Spielberg-penned 1982 film. In this section's other chapter, "Post-Racial Lies and Fear of the Historical-Political Boomerang in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground*

Railroad," Cammie M. Sublette shows us how Peele's film and Whitehead's novel challenge the notion of a "post-racial" United States.

Our final section, **Cradle to the Grave**, begins with Eamon Byers's discussion of motherhood in Irish horror film in "'The Mother Who Eats Her Own': The Politics of Motherhood in Irish Horror." The last chapter in our volume is "Frankenstein's Dream and the Politics of Death" by Jeff J.S. Black, in which we examine Shelley's novel in the context of contemporary—for Shelley and for us—discussions of human mortality.

Sumter, SC, USA   Damien K. Picariello

Notes

1. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkley Books, 1981), 31.
2. King, 177. Or "One might say," with Robin Wood, "that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror" ("An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in Barry Keith Grant, Ed., *Robin Wood on the American Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews* [Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2018] 79).

Acknowledgments

Contents

Notes on Contributors

Jordon B. Barkalow is Associate Professor of Political Science at Bridgewater State University, where he also serves as a co-coordinator of the program in philosophy, politics, and economics (PPE). Specializing in American political thought, he also has research interests in the areas of early modern political thinking, politics and literature, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Jeff J. S. Black teaches at St. John's College in Annapolis and Santa Fe. He was Distinguished Visiting Professor of Political Science at the United States Air Force Academy during 2018–2019 and Residential Fellow in Civil-Military Relations at the United States Naval Academy's Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership during 2015–2016.

Emma Frances Bloomfield (PhD, University of Southern California) is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She primarily researches the rhetoric of science, environmental communication, and scientific controversies, particularly when science intersects with identities and ideologies, such as religion, politics, and economics.

Eamon Byers completed his PhD at Queen's University Belfast in 2014. His thesis explored the interaction between medievalism and folk music in English culture from the eighteenth century to the present day. Also in 2014, he co-organized "A Fiend in the Furrows: Perspectives on 'Folk Horror' in Literature, Film & Music," the first conference dedicated to the academic study of folk horror. He teaches English at

Marymount International School London and continues to research and publish on folk culture, medievalism, and Irish studies.

James D. Fielder is Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Colorado State University and retired as a US Air Force Lieutenant Colonel and Associate Professor at the US Air Force Academy. He researches interpersonal trust and emergent political processes through cyber-based interaction, and through tabletop and live-action gaming as natural experiments. He has over two decades of experience designing, executing, and assessing professional wargames, from small-group tabletop games to multi-day exercises engaging 5000+ participants.

Daniel V. Goff is a student in Salve Regina's Humanities PhD program and studies the moral and ethical implications of human enhancement and interpretations of transhumanist and posthuman philosophies.

Kathleen P. Hunt is Assistant Professor of Environmental Communication at SUNY New Paltz. Her research engages the intersection of environmental advocacy and agrifood political economy, critiquing social structures that engender inequality and facilitating sustainable food systems.

Christina M. Knopf is Assistant Professor in Communication and Media Studies at SUNY Cortland. She holds a PhD in sociology and communication from the University at Albany (2005). Her studies of politics at the intersection of horror and science-fiction can be found in the pages of *The Mignolaverse: Critical Essays on Hellboy and the Comics Art of Mike Mignola* (2019), *Politics in Gotham: The Batman Universe and Political Thought* (Palgrave, 2019), *The Laughing Dead: The Comedy-Horror Film from* Bride of Frankenstein *to* Zombieland (2016), *Horrors of War: The Undead on the Battlefield* (2015), *Monstrous Women in Comics* (2020), and at *In Media Res*.

Lynn Kozak is an associate professor at McGill University, working primarily on ancient Greek epic and contemporary North American television.

Zack Kruse is a scholar of comics, American literature, and film. He is the author of Mysterious Travelers: Steve Ditko and the Search for New Liberal Identity, and he has been published in Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, INKS: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society, and Studies in Comics. He has previously served as managing editor for The Journal of Popular Culture and is currently the panel coordinator for the Michigan State University Comics Forum. He is also a comic book

convention organizer and an occasional comics writer; his comic strip *Mystery Solved!* appeared in Skeptical Inquirer Magazine.

Christie L. Maloyed is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She earned her PhD in political science from Texas A&M University. Her research focuses on religion and politics, civic education, and film, TV, and literature.

Jennifer A. Mogg is an instructor in the Philosophy department at Bridgewater State University where she teaches courses on The Ethics of Harry Potter, Justice in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and Politics and Fear in the Hunger Games. She has published on the role of friendship in Harry Potter and on John Adams.

John S. Nelson teaches political theory and communication at the University of Iowa. He has written *Video Rhetorics* (1997), *Tropes of Politics* (1998), *Popular Cinema as Political Theory* (2013), *Politics in Popular Movies* (2015), plus *Cowboy Politics* (2018). And he has edited three books on political theory and epistemology; *Poroi*, an ejournal on rhetoric in culture, inquiry, and politics; as well as book series on *New Practices of Inquiry* and *Rhetoric of the Human Sciences.*

Damien K. Picariello is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of South Carolina Sumter. He teaches courses on American politics, film and politics, and political theory. His written work focuses on literature, film, and politics, as well as ancient, modern, and American political thought. After completing this chapter, he won't watch *Poltergeist* again for a very, very long time.

Meghan Purvis received an MA and PhD from the University of East Anglia, and an MFA from North Carolina State University. Her translation of *Beowulf* was published in 2013 and won the 2011 Times Stephen Spender Prize for literary translation. Her poetry has appeared, among other places, in *Magma*, *The Rialto*, and *The Interpreter's House*; her scholarly work has included pieces on "Theater of Blood," the relationship between translation and creativity, and feminist narratives in "The Bletchley Circle."

Chelsea Renee Ratcliff is a freelance model and artist based out of Southern California, regularly working at the Palos Verdes Art Center. Portraits and sculptures of her have been featured in Peninsula Magazine, Ricco/Maresca Art Gallery, and Torrance Art Museum. Staging her own

lighting, her use of light has been directly inspired by Mario Bava. This is her first foray into publishing, and she is presently working on a book on religion and horror cinema.

Salvatore J. Russo (Tulane University, BA; Fordham University School of Law JD; University of Mississippi, MA, PhD) is Associate Professor of Political Science and Constitutional Law at California State University, Dominguez Hills. His research focuses on influences on political behavior, including legal institutions, mass media, and religion. He also researches Southern politics. Some of his recent work can be seen in a forthcoming edition of *Political Research Quarterly*, and in the 2019 book *Politics in Gotham*, edited by Damien K. Picariello.

Lara Saguisag is Associate Professor of Children's and Young Adult Literature at the City University of New York-College of Staten Island. Her book *Incorrigibles and Innocents: Constructing Childhood and Citizenship in Progressive Era Comics* (2018) received the Ray and Pat Browne Award for Best Single Work by One or More Author from the Popular Culture Association as well as the Charles Hatfield Book Prize from the Comics Studies Society. *Incorrigibles and Innocents* was also nominated for an Eisner Award for Best Scholarly/Academic Work.

Michelle Salerno teaches in the English Department at St. Francis School in Louisville, Kentucky, and serves as the drama director. She holds a PhD in theatre from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with graduate minors in gender and women's studies and European Union studies. Michelle has taught a variety of courses in the humanities at several institutions and works frequently as director, playwright, and dramaturg. Her most recent publications include entries on the film *Rosewood* and the actor Paul Robeson for *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Film*.

Leslie Stratyner received her PhD in English from Louisiana State University, where her dissertation was on the Anglo-Saxon warrior band. Her research interests range from oral tradition to mass culture. She lives in Columbus, Mississippi, with her husband John and her daughter Isadora.

Cammie M. Sublette is Professor of English and department head of English, Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Arkansas—Fort Smith. Sublette has authored or co-authored a number of publications, including

articles in *Studies in Popular Culture* and *Teaching College Literature*. She has chapters in the collections *Movies in the Age of Obama: The Era of Post-Racial and Neo-Racist Cinema* and *Horror Comes Home: Essays on Hauntings, Possessions, and Other Domestic Terrors in Cinema*. Sublette is the co-editor of the food studies collection *Devouring Cultures: Perspectives on Food, Power, and Identity from the Zombie Apocalypse to Downton Abbey*, published in 2016.

Carol Westcamp earned her PhD in English in 2013. Currently, she is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith where she has been teaching for 20 years. She teaches composition classes as well as literature classes. Her research interests include American literature, environmental studies, cultural studies, and reality television. Specifically, she is interested in how reality television portrays the contestants and how those portrayals impact and affect viewers.

J. Kelton Williams is an education program specialist, for the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, division of citizenship education and training. He earned his PhD in Education – Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University. His research focuses on the history of civic education in America as well as the design of contemporary citizenship education.

List of Figures

Petrifying Politics

The American Nightmare: Graveyard Voters, Demon Sheep, Devil Women, and Lizard People

Christina M. Knopf

The tagline for George Romero's 1978 thriller *Dawn of the Dead* proclaimed, "When there's no more room in HELL the dead will walk the EARTH." With zombie voters,[1] zombie claims,[2] zombie ideas,[3] zombie economics,[4] zombie websites,[5] zombie PACs,[6] zombie partisanship,[7] zombie campaign ads,[8] counter-zombie military strategy,[9] and zombie plague preparedness kits,[10] it appears that we are in a political dawn.

In the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election, multiple news organizations boasted headlines about voters choosing the "lesser of two evils" and media outlets from Al Jazeera to *Self Magazine* discussed the influence and impact of fear in the election. According to Keith Weber et al., voters, in fact, *were* motivated by a fear, specifically a fear of death, with Terror Management Theory suggesting a link between mortality salience and a preference for more ideologically conservative candidates.[11] David Altheide observed the "pervasive use of fear is part of the social construction of reality in the modern age," what Barry Glassner calls "the

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culture of fear" and Hisham Ramadan and Jeff Shantz label "social phobias."[12] The articulated anxieties of contemporary society are related to such issues as terror, cultural decay, and invasion, with the fearsome themes of poverty, contagion, and violent disorder. The horror genre, which likewise rejects rationality and recognizes violence, instability, and futility as constituent features of daily life, has long used ghosts, goblins, and ghouls to give form to these same fears.[13] Most horror may be said to be political. Political scientist and rhetorician John S. Nelson demonstrated how horror films face the political evils of daily life.[14] In his "monster theory," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen demonstrates that cultures may be read and understood from the monsters they create.[15] Sociologist Avery Gordon echoes this idea by defining a haunting as "one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known" when "repressed or unresolved social violence" demands justice.[16]

Symbols of the uncanny, from the biblically apocalyptic to the cinematically campy, have increasingly manifested in political discourse, from the communication of campaigns to the dramas of democracy. This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed. In 2000, Glenn W. Richardson, Jr. revealed the uses of popular culture forms in political advertising, including the audiovisual evocation of horror movies and the production sensibilities of thrillers.[17] Ulrich Beck, in 2002, defined "zombie categories" of political institutions that live on despite no longer being effective.[18] In 2004, Joshua Gunn examined the rise of demonic imagery in popular culture and the rhetoric of exorcism and demonology in the political discourse of George W. Bush,[19] and William D. Casebeer attempted to clarify the rhetoric of evil in international relations.[20] In 2007, Michael William Pfau made a case for the necessity of fear appeals in civic deliberation, noting that the start of the twenty-first century had seen a peak in their intensity.[21] Henry A. Giroux, in 2010, discussed the aptness of death-dealing zombies as a metaphor for American politics.[22] The next year, Daniel W. Drezner first explained how zombies illuminate theories of international politics.[23] In 2014, Jason J. Morrissette discussed the production of danger and the zombie metaphor in discourse surrounding global terrorism.[24] Insa Koch, in 2017, observed the phenomenon of zombie democracy, or the popular withdrawal from politics.[25]

Much of this work points to how undead metaphors help the public to make sense of a political discourse that calls out hidden evils to prey on primal fears.[26] But in recent years, our monsters have become emboldened. They are no longer content lurking in the shadows of allusion; they

are taking shape and name. We now have an explicit blending of the Gothic and the government, of politics and poltergeists, and of campaigns and carnage. A public discourse that not only equates politicians with monsters, but that also encompasses considerations of the campaign challenges that would be faced by the likes of King Kong (opposition from "birthers") and the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man (unclear Naval service records),[27] has given life to a rhetoric of monstrosity and exposed the decaying landscape of American public discourse. This chapter, therefore, comes at the intersection of horror and politics from a different angle; instead of considering how political messages are embedded within the symbols and tropes of horror stories, it will examine how the symbols and tropes of horror stories are employed in political messages.

It's Alive! Again

Within theories about zombie democracies, zombie economics, and zombie international relations, it is not just analysts and academics using monsters to make sense of the political landscape. Political cartoonists do it, too. Indeed, because election day usually falls within a week of Halloween, classic ghosts and ghoulies are regular stand-ins for politicians and issues in campaigns. A Google Images search for "Halloween political cartoons" or "monster political cartoons" yields numerous examples. As one cartoon by Matt Bors proclaims, "Did you know Halloween is a national holiday for editorial cartoonists? It's true! Every year we issue the same cartoon – only with new labels." Featuring an image of trick-or-treaters dressed as a ghost, a witch, and Jason Voorhees from the *Friday the 13th* franchise, frightening a homeowner, Bors invites readers to complete the cartoon for themselves by writing "the scary problems of the day on the kiddies."[28] Indeed, the monsters of Halloween, whether depicted as actual creatures or as costumes, annually symbolize political problems. Frankenstein's monster is often used to represent a looming problem created by the current government or a specific individual; his oversized grotesque form, no longer under the control of his creator, can be found labeled with such things as "deficit," "Benghazi," "super PACS," and "hate." Similarly, ghosts mark the things that plague or haunt politicians, institutions, or places (such as the White House) marked by the concerns of "jobs," "polls," "wars," "debt," "ISIS," and "Ebola." (Ghosts reappear in December's political cartoons, as well, through variations on Charles Dickens's spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet-to-Come.) A vampire

embodies Obamacare. Skeletons represent new voters, offering commentary on the fraudulent "graveyard vote" of registering dead people. Zombies suggest assorted economic woes. Trolls indicate greed. Spiders represent dishonesty. The figure of Death with its scythe appears in the midst of healthcare debates.

The same monstrous metaphors are found in horror movies, but without the benefits of labels to make their symbolism and subtext clear. For example, vampires have represented fears of authority, sexuality, and biological infection. Zombies have expressed racial tensions, nuclear anxieties, fears of pandemics, and suburban alienation. Extraterrestrials have embodied Cold War doubts, distrust of science or government, and fears about invasion and colonization.[29] Monsters and ghosts of all incarnations frequently represent the feared, mistrusted, or misunderstood Outsider and the marginalized Other. The monstrous is a way to conceptualize that which society finds shocking or exotic, especially that which may upset the status quo.[30] For this reason, politicians also engage the monstrous in their rhetoric, casting political opponents and social adversaries as monsters; as Thomas Hobbes suggested in *Leviathan*, government, and the public's obedience to it, is justified by the dangers from which it protects its people.[31]

They're Coming to Get You, Citizens

Political advertising has long used images and sounds designed to unsettle and even terrify viewers. From the infamous "Daisy Girl" ad of 1964 and distorted photographs of an angry and arrogant Hubert Humphrey in 1968, to 1984's threat of a (Russian) "Bear in the Woods" and the menacing "Revolving Door" and "Willie Horton" prison ads preying on anxieties of race and crime in 1988, the history of political video advertising is a history of fear appeals. *The New York Times* described the "scary ads" of the 2004 presidential election, the first to follow the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as taking the "campaign to a grim new level." A George W. Bush ad used the ominous sound effect of a ticking clock to remind voters that "weakness invites those who would do us harm," while a John Kerry ad used footage of a firing machine gun and an exploding car to caution that "Americans are being kidnapped, held hostage – even beheaded." Other ads used footage of masked terrorists, mutilated bodies, and spies to frighten viewers.[32]

By 2006, the scare tactics took on elements of the supernatural. Republican Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue's campaign released a

ten-minute ad that cast his opponent as a monster rat terrorizing the streets of Atlanta, like Godzilla stomping on Tokyo. Four years later, the same creative mind behind the monster rat garnered international attention with a campaign ad for US Senate conservative candidate from California, Carly Fiorina, that featured what some called "the *absolute most terrifying* second of video on YouTube."[33] The spot, which became known simply as "the demon sheep ad," opened on a flock of grazing sheep. A voice-over indicated that the sheep were, essentially, the voters of California who had been led astray by the fiscal irresponsibility of Fiorina's opponent. Storm clouds gathered, lightning struck. Quick intercuts of images of pigs and sheep gave way to another view of the flock being infiltrated by a man in a red-eyed sheep costume scaring the other sheep away. The ad quickly inspired one of Fiorina's opponents in the GOP primary to create a web page for the "Society for the Eradication of Demon Sheep From Our Political Discourse."[34]

CBS News speculated that a 2006 New Zealand comedy-horror film called *Black Sheep* may have been the inspiration behind the demon sheep ad.[35] If so, it certainly was not the only political spot to borrow from the horror movie genre. Another 2010 ad, sponsored by an offshoot of the Karl Rove–founded conservative group American Crossroads, that attacked Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer, used a musical score reminiscent of the simplistic but dissonant theme from *Halloween*, emphasizing the deadliness in Boxer's alleged cuts to Medicare.[36] The scary music trend continued and, in 2012, Boston University communications professor Tobe Berkovitz observed of the year's campaign commercials—which included the post-apocalyptic "Obamaville" from Rick Santorum, and the zombie-themed "Night of the Living Pelosi" from John Dennis—that the music background, especially for attack ads, is just like music in a horror movie;[37] it is designed to evoke visceral responses and to "scare the hell out of people."[38]

The Power of the Party Compels You

Four years later, in the "election about fear" of 2016,[39] political monsters crawled off the screen—like the girl in the horror movie *The Ring*—to find their way into speeches, interviews, and, eventually, actions. During a February 2016 interview, Donald Trump controversially argued that his opponent Hillary Clinton was "evil."[40] Later that year while speaking at an August rally in Pennsylvania, Trump criticized Sen. Bernie Sanders for

endorsing Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy by claiming, "He made a deal with the devil. She's the devil."[41] Historically, demonic personifications have allowed people to characterize and specify otherwise indescribable evil, permitting them to give name to the causes of their suffering.[42] Politically, a rhetoric of demonology then allows a politician to purge, or exorcise, that demon.[43] Thus, Trump's accusation of Clinton as the Devil dovetailed with his endorsement of his supporters' demands to "lock her up."[44] The notion that Trump supporters, in particular, were victims of monstrous evil was perpetuated via social media when a photo of a bloodied blond-haired woman circulated as evidence of the violence being endured at Trump rallies at the hands of "Liberals." The image of a supposedly beaten Trump supporter was shared more than 30,000 times on Facebook before it was finally identified as a behind-the-scenes photo of actress Samara Weaving on the set of the horror television series *Ash vs. Evil Dead*.[45]

In truth, perceiving enemies as monsters is no longer just a rhetorical strategy. A 2017 *Chicago Tribune* column reported that 41 million Americans believed that Barack Obama was the antichrist, a beastly embodiment of evil.[46] A mere 12 million Americans, by contrast, were convinced that the US government is run by reptilians, or lizard people from another planet.[47] And yet, of that tiny 4% of the population, one of those people armed himself and prepared to do battle with the lizard people at an intersection in Parkland, Washington, in 2017 because, he claimed, President Trump told him to do so.[48] Lest this case be dismissed as the fancies of an isolated individual, recall the 1996 presidential primaries in which Republican Pat Buchanan incited his supporters to a political frenzy, resulting in them attending rallies as "peasants with pitchforks" to breach the Establishment, like angry villagers storming Dracula's castle.[49] The possibility that Senator Ted Cruz might be either the Zodiac Killer, a conspiracy believed by 38% of Floridians despite not being born until two years after the Killer claimed his first victims, or a space alien prompted creation of the satirical website TedCruzForHumanPresident.com.[50] Indeed, there is also money to be made in political monstrosities.

Explicitly political horror fictions have proliferated in recent decades, from the speculative gothic history of *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* to the dystopic atrocities of *The Purge: Election Year*. A 2015 six-issue comic book series entitled *Citizen Jack* from Image Comics even presciently reflected the devilish 2016 election of fear, with a demon-sponsored candidate who won the White House despite being a womanizer and a

murderer. From 2012 to 2016, Heroes in Action Toys released a series of Presidential Monsters action figures which merged "an undeniable American love of monsters, vampires, werewolves, zombies, aliens and all other things that go bump in the night with the supercharged popularity of U.S. Presidents and political figures." The results included figures such as Kennedy qua "The Phantom of the White House," Nixon qua "Monster from the Watergate Lagoon," Reagan qua "The Ronmy," and Obama qua "Baracula."[51] Some commercial monstrosities are more partisan in the motivations. The 2012 publication *The Repuglicans*, for example, made horror-inspired wisecracks about 61 public figures that artist Pete Von Sholly and writer Steve Tatham identified as individuals who espouse "conservative ideology to serve his or her own personal agenda without concern for the greater public good."[52] The result was a series of images and commentary presenting mostly Republicans as monstrous abominations: Senator Orrin Hatch as a green-skinned, yellow-eyed insectile-alien because "he chirps like he's part of a chorus of locusts about to descend upon us like the plague" and Rush Limbaugh as a red-version of Pinhead from the movie *Hellraiser* because to listen to him "is more painful than a face full of needles."[53]

You're Going to Need a Bigger Vote

All this symbolic and rhetorical monstrosity may have more impact than simply adding to the entertainment value of American politics. Just as postmodern horror movies present a challenge to rationality, compelling a confrontation with the irrational,[54] political monstrosities celebrate what *The Economist* called in 2016 "the death of reason"—the implausibility of proposed policies and replacement of trust and compromise with hyperbole and fear.[55]

The monstrous and unnatural are symbols of ambiguity.[56] Horror narratives complicate the relationship between senses and knowledge:[57] Ghosts put human sight and hearing into crisis, manifesting their presence without generating normal sensual experiences.[58] Zombies constitute "a mass phenomenon that paralyzes the structures of society by robbing more and more of its citizens of the power of conscious choice or thought."[59] The uncanny in any form is in itself an effort to categorize the chaotic, but because the monstrous is ineffable, such efforts are futile. In horror stories, who survive are the ones who accept and embrace the irrationality of the situation and the illogical impulses of their own primal

instincts, while rejecting authority structures.[60] As Edward J. Ingebretsen has noted, monster-making is a distinct part of the American political fantasy used to justify otherwise unacceptable behavior, as witnessed during the Salem Witch Trials, the Red Scare, the War on Terror, and so on.[61] But fear is the antithesis to democracy; it impedes freedom.[62] And though fear can spark action, uneasiness spurring industry, it also alleviates responsibility. By raising politicians to supernatural, and therefore superhuman, status they become unstoppable. Ordinary citizens cannot hope to prevail, at least not in the long run, against evils that will not die—a phenomenon that, in turn, may make people feel that they also have no obligation to the political nightmare they—we—have created.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 2

Horror, Crisis, and Control: Tales of Facing Evils

John S. Nelson

A crisis is a turning point, ending something altogether or changing it decisively. Thus a crisis theory explains how something is becoming too troubled to continue as before. In politics, almost anything can encounter crisis: individuals or institutions, cultures or countries, ecologies or economies, alliances or antagonisms. Hence many theories of politics feature crisis, portraying ours as times of terrible troubles, with evils and dislocations rampant.

These days, crisis theory spans diverse politics.[1] Well known is work by the Frankfurt Marxists; but they have ample company in Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Martin Heidegger, Carl Jung, Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Michel Foucault, Robert Pirsig, and Wendell Berry.[2] Crisis theory evokes corrupt classes, ecological collapses, civilizational clashes, dysfunctional democracies, dystopian societies, chronic wars, false idols, unjust economies, lost virtues, degraded values, destructive technologies, illegitimate regimes, and worse. So concealed or encompassing are the threats that we fail to address them.

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Popular horror joins crisis theory in facing realities gone radically wrong. The signs can be spectacular or subtle. The stakes can be ultimate: often souls, even worlds. The challenge is to face and defeat evils, and through horror, we learn to spot evils soon and skillfully. Accordingly horror shares themes with crisis theory: common categories make little sense of current events, powers-that-be shield awful troubles, and our responses need radical revision. But the differences count. Crisis theory makes arguments; horror tells stories.[3] Crisis theory addresses intellectuals; horror reaches citizens. Crisis theory can show rationalism unable to comprehend emerging troubles but still appeals to it; horror also invokes emotion and imagination.[4] Crisis theory faces daytime fears; horror also tackles nighttime terrors. Crisis theory features officials and elites; horror also engages popular cultures. Crisis theory abstracts to explanatory patterns; horror also concretizes to actionable particulars. Crisis theory decenters business-as-usual to show civilizations; horror also personalizes crisis through symbols.

Here I explain how Stephen King and Peter Straub are especially good at this. Their horror augments philosophical concepts with provocative symbols that speak to us as ordinary people. Focusing on their early works, I argue that King and Straub do crisis theory by other, often better means. Their stories face ours as times of terrible troubles, yet with figures more engaging and practical. (Because their works have various editions, I invoke them by titles alone; and I leave aside the resulting movies.)

HORRORS

What *are* horrors, and how can they configure fictions? King defines *horror* as *fear*, but not the concern for punishments to redirect rational decisions. Instead it's the *Fear and Trembling* of sinners facing *The Sickness unto Death*, so better synonyms are *dread* and *terror*.[5] Julia Kristeva explains that the Holocaust debased victims beneath objects of compassion or even comprehension by executioners, as terrorism victims become *abject* through *The Powers of Horror*, which eradicate respect and trust required for community, morality, even meaning.[6]

King also says that horror tries at times to gross out people, inducing revulsion to make people feel awful. This presumes something like Aristotelian catharsis: purging ill feelings by providing their aesthetic kindred. Yet feeling awful overlaps feeling awe-full, as when we hail heroes or worship divinities. To feel awful is to sense our immorality and mortality. It enlarges ill-ness by overflowing civilized boundaries between sickness (feeling ill) and evil (ill feeling).

Horror evokes the *sublime*, taking beauty versus ugliness or good versus evil to extremes, then transcending them in glimpses. What's horrifying attracts *and* repels. It paralyzes our limbs, thickens our tongues, and constricts our vocal chords to scream. It raises the hair on our necks. If we neither face nor flee it, we become its abject victims. It consumes and subsumes us—as ghosts and vampires reproduce. By overwhelming categories and defenses, horror spurs utter vulnerability: incomprehensible or even unrecognizable in daylight worlds of fathomable fears. Yet who is cast lower or made more abject by daylight, adult fears than children?

Children

Søren Kierkegaard treated dread as a property of innocence, especially of children not knowing goods versus evils. Knowing less, children are more open to experience. "If we observe children, we find this dread more definitely indicated as a seeking after adventure, a thirst for the prodigious, the mysterious."[7] Offering vicarious and symbolic adventures with horrors and marvels of myth, fairy tales teach children to face dread, differentiate evils from goods, and develop adult responsibilities. Similarly horror stories face adult dreads, recognize goods versus evils, and complement sophistication with responsibility for more than ourselves.

Children know that adult worlds exist but not in detail: only in desire and dread, not in reality. Innocent of adult responsibilities, children must grow into realities that inform senses of goods and evils, guilt and forgiveness. Along the way, children *glimpse* adult realities, with sensibilities vague but potent. The resulting dread and suspense are the main ethos of horror.

Adults continue to glimpse what they can't face fully. Further mysteries remain beyond horizons of realities we know, no matter how large our learning. When events imply unknowns, we feel out-of-control. Like children, we want *and* dread what we don't yet know. We enact the biblical paradox of choosing through evil to become choosers who can seek good. We enact the Socratic paradox of learning through ignorance to become learners who can seek knowledge.

Foolish adults try to spare children most unsettling glimpses. Some political horrors come from trying this for adults too. Yet our conditions include dread, while attempts to deny it typically compound it. Adults should become good at glimpsing what we might not know but have reason to dread. "So horror stories make us children," writes King. "And

children are able to feel things adults can't, because of all the experience we've had."[8] Good horror explores what we might dread, bad horror merely exploits it, but human apprehension of evils depends on it.

Many horror works include innocents as key characters, and often they are children (including adolescents). This holds for King and Straub. Childhood openness and vulnerability are among their recurrent themes. Child abuse is prominent among the evils that they find in our society. As sympathetic characters, their horror children are heroes and heroines in notably adult adventure stories. King became known for *Carrie* White as a high-school innocent, Mark Petrie in *'Salem's Lot*, Danny Torrance in *The Shining*, Charlie McGee in *Firestarter*, Tad Trenton in *Cujo*, Dennis Guilder and Leigh Cabot in *Christine*, plus the intrepid children in *It*. Among Straub's heroic children are Peter Barnes in *Ghost Story*, Tom Flanagan in *Shadowland*, and Tabby Smithfield in *Floating Dragon*. Together King and Straub feature Travelin' Jack Sawyer in *The Talisman* and *Black House*.

When events commence, these heroic children are seldom good so much as innocent and undeveloped. When they die or triumph innocent, they remain unworldly creatures of goods too pure for usual politics. Even when they do harm or spread horror, they almost always represent the kind of divine violence in scourging corruption that Hannah Arendt attributed to Jesus and Melville's Billy Budd. Their transcendence of established standards is apocalyptic, violating even worthy people and practices.

Something similar holds for demonic children. More in pot-boiling tales of grostesquerie and terror than sublime stories of dread, those children embody evils. They combine physiques of innocence with knowing eyes and Satanic tongues that spur unspeakable revulsion. As travesties of reproduction, they can be crude horrors of generational conflict; but they are seldom less effective for that: consider *Rosemary's Baby* by Ira Levin, *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty, "Children of the Corn" by King, and the *Damien* movies. The evils evoked by rotten children are apocalyptic and radical: somehow transcending conception but still accessible to perception and symbolism. They evoke the "radical evil" ascribed to totalitarian terrors, nuclear war, and genocide.

Whether radically good or evil, horror children typically evoke apocalypse and crisis. More ordinary heroism and menace by children appear in their growth toward adult awareness and responsibility. This is a familiar quest of fantasy, including the dark fantasy that is horror, for the children

are us. Children matured are the anticipated (needed and dreaded) maturation of our communities. Like heroic children in science fiction, horror children confront (and occasion) terror through wild talents of super-intelligence, enhanced senses, magic, prevision, pyrokenesis, telekinesis, telepathy, teleportation, and the like. These powers mark our departure from previous paths of biology, society, or polity. They mark crises of empathy, communication, or community we know from events large and small; yet they also mark better communion and common sense.

Children who don't mature in horror evoke disorders that characterize our civilization. In *The Stand* by King, Harold Lauder learns to hide selfish desires behind self-deprecating smiles to epitomize potential evils of civility. He is sophisticated and helpful in public, perverse in private, and corrupt in crisis. In Straub's *Shadowland*, Tom matures at great cost into mastery of magic; but Del Nightingale stays too much an apprentice to fly on his own, Marcus Reilly hustles toward suicide, and Steven (Skeleton) Ridpath turns lack of love and excess of discipline into a desire for destruction. In King's *Christine*, Arnie Cunningham misunderstands the sources and kinds of respect, "growing" from a bullied, resentful adolescent to a bitter, cynical old man. King, Straub, and company show such travesties of maturation as a looming crisis in our civilization.

Connections to children are sometimes cited as evidence that horror encourages us to *escape* from adult realities and responsibilities. The aggressive reply of J. R. R. Tolkien is apt: those who most dread escape are jailers. Another complaint is that horror's graphic depictions of evil and violence cultivate poor taste and judgment while stoking prurient interests. Worse, its siren songs for base emotions use vivid images and events to lure the least suspecting among us. This repeats the charge against Socrates: horror *corrupts youth* by revealing the sordid underside of society. For Western Civilization, nothing is worse than seducing youth into evil experiences. The charge is that horror promotes violence and other perversities.

Images

Corrupting youth is my nominee for archetypal horror scene. King's candidate is "the dead rising to walk." His favorite contribution is an episode from *The Shining* that also performs his horror archetype of the Bad Place. The haunted Overlook Hotel stands isolated by winter in the Rockies. Enlivened only by an increasingly crazed caretaker, his resourceful wife,

and their telepathic son, the Overlook wants young Danny among its living dead, to tap his psychic powers. Danny wanders into a forbidden room to discover a ghostly beauty reenacting the bath before her murder. Lured to the tub, the child is horrified to see her transform into a mutilated corpse stalking him as he runs for the door and fumbles with the lock. She is *the dead rising to walk* then throttle *the child*: incarnating three archetypes at once.

King's reply to the charge that horror corrupts youth is that it functions more like a Welsh sin-eater: devouring our evils to cleanse us. Yes, it's possible to overindulge; but horror is more the reporter than the perpetrator. It shows corruptions already rife in our lives, and it insists that we re-cognize them as evils and crises rather than momentary differences or distant troubles. It *resists* evils far more than it propagates them.

All this acknowledges the significance of children for social and political horror. When we dread like children in trying to face responsibilities beyond knowing, and when we glimpse like children in forming futures beyond dreaming, we sense troubles in the old ways and terrors in the new. Then horror offers more than a break from tedium and better than an escape from reality. Instead it confronts persistent evils and apocalyptic possibilities that mark our times.

The overwhelming images of horror help with this. Visualization can be more crucial to horror stories than horror films, with their special visual effects. Techniques vary, but both rely on *facing* evils, often through overwhelming images. Writing to gross-out or terrify constructs images to overwhelm critical distances and rational defenses. They overpower adult intellection to revive childhood imagination. We need both capacities to re-cognize realities.

FACES

For politics, the key purpose of overwhelming images is to put humanly apprehensible faces on threats. There are four separable senses and steps of facing. First, we turn our faces toward menaces we might want to ignore. Second, we re-cognize these menaces by configuring them into comprehensible faces. Third, we put on ourselves the faces we need for doing what we should with the menaces. Fourth, we address the menaces face-to-face, one human to another.[9]

The first moment of facing is the realist step of facing hard facts. The challenge is not to turn away from awful realities, but to see them for what

they are and how they affect us. Only then can we pay them close and constructive attention. Horrors often threaten us so much that we need real courage to turn toward them. Or horrors fool us so fully that we need keen acumen to discern them. We also need a (momentarily) safe place for facing them, for we need time to overcome our dread and collect ourselves for action. If we couldn't view the Gorgon's head by reflection, in a polished shield, sheer terror might freeze us to stone. If we couldn't hide behind a musty curtain, the vampire might see, smell, and victimize us before we can tame our horror and seek help or ready weapons. This first facing involves cunning and skill as well as courage. It can require huge efforts to see well and safely. Moreover we're facing not just the facts but also their meanings: their implications for danger and action.

Psychological horror often involves facing facts about ourselves or others. The challenge is to overcome psychic defenses that keep awful facts from full awareness. A good example is King's "Strawberry Spring," where the narrator gradually discovers that he's a psychotic killer. Yet this first facing is even more prominent in political horror. For me, King's work here is rivaled only by Straub's. Public reactions in the early years of the Nixon and Trump scandals suggest that many Americans resist recognizing that their president might do many, major evils. King faces this reality in *The Dead Zone*, while Straub novels face horrors of the Vietnam War.

How can we equip people to face hard facts? The second moment of facing practices the persuasive strategy of *personalization*. As dark fantasy, horror invites personal involvement in sympathetic characters, so it puts human faces on impersonal or otherwise incomprehensible threats. Horror often embodies evils of economics or politics in monsters or other characters with humanized faces. This reinforces the complaint that fantasy anthropomorphizes—thereby distorting realities actually oblivious to human concerns. Yet personalization translates strange phenomena into arguably our most accessible language—of configurations for human faces.

Facing gives us signs we discern skillfully, because faces are orientations to us: our needs and interests. Faces of objects are their aspects presented specifically to us: for example, clock faces. Menace or unfamiliarity deprives many horrors of clear recognition as objects. That's Kristeva's point: What's horrifying can be too abject or awful to coalesce into objects, so facing terrible troubles can require reorganizing our perceptions. Horror makes them humanly comprehensible by transforming diffuse but dangerous glimpses into discernible objects. In itself, this warrants talk of facing,

and that horrormeisters often do it by endowing horrifying phenomena with human visages and personalities doubles the warrant.

ARCHETYPES

We can call the second step facing because, when we regard things as facing us, we can recognize them as objects of current concern. Cognitionists trace how we perceive and recollect human faces in distinct brain areas that recognize faces with startling accuracy and consistency. As arrangements of shapes, faces present numerous, complicated patterns. So their recognition entails intricate processing of staggering information, yet we do this rapidly. Horror likewise helps us recognize diffuse, complicated, threatening figures by giving them the humanized faces of *horror archetypes*.

Some horror faces technology troubles by presenting machines possessed by evil demons. "The Mangler" by King indicts work on the assembly line by imagining the machine for ironing and folding clothes becomes possessed by a humanly apprehensible hostility to the workers who manipulate it—and see it leering at them. King's "Trucks" animates road vehicles against us humans to show our dependence on them, while his own movie version of *Maximum Overdrive* gives them demonic faces for grills. And *Christine* uses a vain and violent car to personify adolescent selfishness in American society.

The third moment of facing gives faces to us readers. Providing sympathetic characters who draw us into the action, it gives us identities for vicarious experience. Such facing can get horror into trouble with any critics who forget that distinct genres validate different standards and strategies of characterization. To hold horror to characterization for historical novels would be disastrous, for they need psychological details that work against this third dynamic of facing. As Barney Cohen writes, "the great horrographers, King and Straub included (for they are the contemporary Poes and Lovecrafts), have known that too much particularizing of the character hampers the reader's identification with the character's horror."[10]

Generic horror is highly mythic; so it characterizes with *archetypes* more than individual psychologies. Carl Jung created this contraction of *archaic types*, contending that archetypes are the biological basis of collective memory in humans.[11] But we may leave that aside to join many scholars in treating archetypes as widely recurring figures of myth that elicit strong emotional responses. One mythic archetype studied by Jung is the Shadow,

his name for evocations of evil within ourselves, and Straub's horror returns insistently to the early superhero with that name.

King argues that there are three key archetypes in horror: the Thing, the Vampire, and the Werewolf.[12] The Thing evokes "the menacing unknown," as with the nameless monster created by Dr. Frankenstein. Some horrifying Things remain mysterious and metaphysical (rather than political) in orientation. But even they exploit structures as much political as personal: witness what's beyond the *Pet Sematary*. More common are archetypal monsters from technology and science. "The Mist" by King is another nameless menace made archetypal: the accidental self-destruction of a civilization letting its technology run wild.

Like Dracula, the Vampire embodies "the evils without." King and Straub join many in contributing vampires who personalize pathologies of American society. *'Salem's Lot* suggests how predatory Americans can be, and Straub's *Floating Dragon* studies suburban catastrophes.

The Werewolf is a changeling who enacts "the evil within," as in the transformation of Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde. (In Jungian terms, Mr. Hyde is the Shadow.) Arnie in *Christine* pays clever homage to this character. King's *Cycle of the Werewolf* attacks personal hypocrisy as well as small-town complacency. Nonetheless in *The Talisman* and *Black House*, King and Straub make werewolves more sympathetic figures for losing child-hood virtues.

Clean classifications are not always possible. *Thinner*, first published by King as Richard Bachman, is a fable about domination by white males in Western Civilization. To curse the unjust, it offers a Vampire personified in an Old Gypsy. But it's also a drama about horrors of responsibility that personifies a Werewolf as a Hollow, Shrinking Man who consumes himself from inside. One brisk plot intertwines the two.

Generic horror uses all three archetypes for crises latent and patent in politics, and as King admits, there are additional archetypes. Indeed recent horror often turns social stereotypes and theoretical ideal-types into mythic archetypes. As bad political places, dystopias frame many archetypes of political horror: the Bureaucrat, the Mass (or the Crowd), the Elite, the Totalitarian Leader, the Totalized System, the Rebel, the Terrorist, the Bystander, and others. Horror by King develops political archetypes such as the Lone Assassin (*The Dead Zone* and *11/22/63*), the Mass Murderer ("Apt Pupil"), "The Survivor," and the Disaster (*Danse Macabre*).

Inventions

Another three politically potent archetypes arise in King's work: the Special Child, the Old Shaman, and the New Female. To revive childhood capacities of perception, imagination and adventure, recent horror invents permutations of the Jungian archetype of the Child. But this Child is Special: gifted (advantaged *and* cursed) with wild talents to end the old and initiate the new. These vex the Special Child, and sometimes evils prove too much to surmount: society destroys Carrie and refuses her prophecy. But usually the Special Child survives: witness Danny in *The Shining*, Charlie in *Firestarter*, Tom in *Shadowland*, and Travelin' Jack in *The Talisman*. In science fiction, the Special Child often heralds a new age. Horror is more directed to personal maturation, family life, and friends.

The Old Shaman and the New Female reverse or undo stereotypes now damaging and outdated. But they surpass intellectual litanies about overcoming past prejudices to restructure emotions and imaginations. They liberate from oppressive stereotypes, making new horizons.

The New Female reworks Jungian archetypes of the Anima and the Animus: respectively the repressed female features of males and the repressed male features of females. Sometimes the aim is a postwestern archetype of Self for males *and* females. More often, the project is a new archetype of Femininity, differing from redone Masculinity but also from Western patterns of Womanhood. Carrie and Charlie are hints, but two early standouts are Ophelia Todd ("Mrs. Todd's Shortcut" by King) and Anna Mostyn (*Ghost Story* by Straub). King later generates a series of mythic forms for the New Female: *Dolores Claiborne*, *Gerald's Game*, *Rose Madder*, *Sleeping Beauties* (with Owen King), and *The Outsider*.

For the Old Shaman, horror fuses the Shaman and the Wise Old Man with cultural images of the Medicine Man and African Caretakers. The Old Shaman, too, faces low status and special talents, yet is informed non-Western traditions as well as painful experiences. The Shaman's wisdom is a need and goal of the Special Child, whose apocalyptic powers lack protection and direction without it. The Child needs advice and talismans to survive dangerous adventures on paths to maturity and responsibility. Supported by the Old Shaman and the New Female, the Special Child becomes hope for the future.

Of course, some critics see these as malign stereotypes, but generic horror wants them complex and mythic. In *The Shining*, the black cook Hallorann, too, telepathic; and he comes cross-country to save Danny

Torrance from his father and the haunted hotel. King's *Insomnia* and *Doctor Sleep* update this. Like Moses to the Promised Land, Abagail Freemantle leads the few decent survivors of a man-made plague to *The Stand* where they face their evils. Speedy Parker teaches Travelin' Jack Sawyer of alternate worlds and their intertwined perils, tells him of the Talisman to heal maternal and social cancers, and aids Jack repeatedly. In *Shadowland*, Bud Copeland is a mature magician more than a black butler, and he helps Tom surmount the horrendous assault by malevolent magician Coleman Collins.

One measure of the political intelligence of these inventions is their sophistication about misplaced trust. In *Shadowland*, Del mistakes Collins for the true Shaman—and pays dearly for it. In *Firestarter*, Rainbird, a Native American Indian of extraordinary ability and perversity, is a false Shaman. He dupes Charlie into trusting him, so that only Charlie's wildly talented father can save her. *The Dead Zone* ties misplaced trust to perverse leadership, and it takes John Smith's wild talent to prevent demented populist Greg Stillman from starting nuclear war. In politics as in personal life, unverifiable trust is necessary and perilous.

The interdependence of these inventions exemplifies the fourth moment of facing, when we interact face-to-face. Facing ourselves personally, socially, and politically through generic horror, we learn how our goods remain incomplete and interdependent with evils. In facing other creatures and situations as human, we learn the complexities of adulthood, without the cynicism or insecurity that keeps us from distinguishing goods and evils. In facing ourselves and others as human, we discover the archetypal complications of human individuality. Defeating Coleman, Tom learns his potential for evils, overcomes it, yet finds reasons to *visit* the Shadowland of magic. Facing horrors teaches the human capacity to create evils, but it also revives the human capacity to recognize and dispel them.

Evils

Horror often climaxes when heroes turn to face evils identified earlier. Such saviors seldom try to end all evil. Nor do they psychologize it into madness, sociologize it into perspective, or politicize it into interest. Instead they try to remoralize their lives, by creating commonalities of judgment that arise from recognizing rights and wrongs. Science fiction seeks greater horizons to perspectivize truths and contextualize morals.[13]

Horror defends fundamental standards while working to recover and enlarge capacities to recognize evils.

A knock against horror is that it can become a perverse moralism, and this *is* a danger. Without overwhelming images and archetypes, horror can lapse into melodrama and stereotypes. It can settle for the minor thrills or major gross-outs of titillation, exploitation, and violence. Sophistication about evils must save it. Yes, the genre often treats evils as things in and unto themselves—as substantive rather than as privations or absences á la Christianity. Inventing powerful nuances in horror figures helps it stay sophisticated in diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription for evils. King's Castle Rock books and *The Green Mile* are good examples.

Myths as symbolic stories, not melodramas, are the mainstays of popular horror. Then the archetypes, images, and stories of horror can help us face emerging or long-standing evils. When elusive or enormous, evils are hard to face. Then crisis theory converges with horror.

CRISES?

The principal themes of crisis theory and horror fiction are the same: common categories make little sense of current events, established institutions shield worse troubles than they attack, present patterns of responsibility need radical revision. Now "everything's evil and good, black and white, all mixed up."[14] Crisis theories descry moral emptiness in our societies, even when not they are not totalitarian or otherwise overtly corrupt. They share King's sense that "There are *holes* in the middle of things … Right in the damn *middle* of things."[15] They display the same incipient paranoia as horror stories, and they even turn to myths to face our troubles. Although starting with government and public policy, they become accusations against the cultures that shape our political institutions. Thus they engage the same domains of everyday life that horror fiction finds degenerate and ripe for terror.

A striking example of the convergence of crisis theory and horror fiction is Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*. One character is a horror writer who turns out to be writing a version of the book's events, but with different names. In this book within the book, the writer's name is Saul Malkin, invoking Saul Bellow as a favorite novelist of Hannah Arendt, one of the great crisis theorists. The name for the Changeling, the New Female who once was Anna Mostyn in the main text, is Rachel Varney, evoking Arendt's study of *Rahel Varnhagen*.

Varnhagen ran a literary salon. She epitomizes the struggle of an oppressed female for personal identity and social reality in degenerating conditions. The literary society might provide "a public space of appearance" for action and for memory through telling stories, yet it declines into a social arena of deception and degradation. Likewise in *Ghost Story*, Straub provides the Chowder Society as a gathering of influential males who tell each other the tales that solidify their sense of morality and leadership. The Chowder Society is drawn to Anna Mostyn, but fails to recognize her either as a full member or as the chameleon evil that she embodies: the radical amorality of one with no true face because she cannot appear before peers in public. Varnhagen lacks full membership in her literary public and leadership in her larger community, so she tries to deceive her way to success. Attempting to assimilate to gentile appearances, she must "struggle against the facts, above all against the fact of having been born a Jew." This "very rapidly became a struggle against herself."[16] Thus she turned *from* facing ourselves and others.

"Omnipotent as opinion and mendacity are, they have, however, a limit beyond which alteration cannot go; one cannot change one's face; neither thought nor liberty, neither lies nor nausea nor disgust can lift one out of one's own skin."[17] For Arendt, this involved personal responsibility, not plastic surgery. She spotlighted troubles of soft, incipient totalitarianism in mass societies. She urged instead that we face each other in storied spaces for public speech and action. In fact, this is what she meant by "politics." Varnhagen shows the subversion of vital politics by mere society, where horrors of despair and violence become all too familiar. Anna Mostyn shows the same. The settings and events of *'Salem's Lot* encourage related readings.[18]

Often we disparage crisis theories and horror stories with ridicule rather than argument. We dismiss horror stories as melodramatic entertainments for popular audiences, and we discount crisis theories as hysterical abstractions by impractical intellectuals. Yet crisis theories help explain the political importance of horror stories, and the popular appeal of horror fiction highlights the potential power of crisis theory. Any political theory that shows troubles deep and difficult to recognize implies that they can surface in the kinds of dread faced by horror fiction. Many tales of horror surpass the melodrama of virtue triumphant and order restored. Strong stories of horror inform the alarm and sophistication about our situations that crisis theories pursue.[19]

People who laugh away even questions of crisis will dismiss this argument as viciously circular. But how do they *explain* (rather than scorn) our keen and continuing taste for horror fiction? Do we read it widely and well? Does it face the sources and responses for our everyday troubles? If the taste for horror is acquired, American civilization becomes all the exercise we need to develop into eager readers. With Billy Halleck, a decent but self-indulgent lawyer who learns how our political culture grows ever *Thinner*, shall we take a piece of the horrific Gypsy Pie of personal responsibility?

Notes

1. Conservatives include Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (New York: Random House, 1973); Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). Existentialists include Glenn Tinder, *The Crisis of Political Imagination* (New York: Scribner, 1964); Robert Jay Lifton, *History and Human Survival* (New York: Random House, 1970); Norman O. Brown, *Closing Time* (New York: Random House, 1973). Greens include Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989); Jared Diamond, *Collapse* (New York: Viking, 2005); Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Liberals include Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992); Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 2003); Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead* (New York: Random House, 2004). Democrats include Robert L. Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York: Norton, 1974); Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). Postmoderns include Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
2. See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1947); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).
3. See Michael Calvin McGee and John S. Nelson, "Narrative Reason in Public Argument," *Journal of Communication*, 35, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 139–55.

4. See John S. Nelson, *Politics in Popular Movies* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2015), 56–68.
5. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941); Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944); Nelson, *Politics in Popular Movies*, 105–72.
6. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
7. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 38.
8. Stephen King in Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, eds., *Bare Bones* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 139.
9. See Barbara J. Hill and John S. Nelson, "Facing the Holocaust," in Robert Hobbs and Fredrick Woodard, eds., *Human Rights/Human Wrongs* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 189–209.
10. Barney Cohen, "The Shockmeisters," *Esquire* (November 1984): 231.
11. See Carl G. Jung, *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Viking, 1971).
12. See Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkley, 1981), 51–81.
13. Mark Rose, *Alien Encounters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 24–49.
14. King and Straub, *The Talisman*, p. 529.
15. King, "Mrs. Todd's Shortcut," p. 196.
16. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 13.
17. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 13.
18. See King, *'Salem's Lot*, especially pp. 340–42.
19. Even short-term cycles of interest in horror appear to support the connection to facing evil. See King, *Danse Macabre*, p. 28: "Horror movies and horror novels have always been popular but every ten or twenty years they seem to enjoy a cycle of increased popularity and visibility. These periods almost always seem to coincide with periods of fairly serious economic or political strain, and the books and films seem to reflect those free-floating anxieties … which accompany such serious but not mortal dislocations. They have done less well in periods when the American people have been faced with outright examples of horror in their own lives." As crisis theorists typically contend, the difficulty of facing troubles is greatest when they lurk in the background. Then our need is most urgent for writing that con-fronts and faces troubles. When troubles reach the foreground, they can more readily assume some humanly accessible face, and in any case, they can more readily consume completely the attention previously available for reading indirectly about them in books of horror.

We're Witches and We're Hunting You: Matriarchy and Misogyny in *Conjure Wife*

Meghan Purvis

Whether you believe in or fear the supernatural, the years after the 2016 presidential election have inarguably become a new Season of the Witch. Singer Lana Del Rey posts a picture to her Instagram account about joining in a mass ritual to hex Donald Trump; conservative pundits only pause their "lock her up" chants long enough to anoint Hillary Clinton the "Wicked Witch of the Left"; protesters birth a new iteration of the 1960s countercultural group W.I.T.C.H. and begin appearing at demonstrations in pointed hats, their faces masked.[1] Just as legislative efforts seem more and more focused on punishing or defending female sexuality, modern images of women seem similarly locked around questioning or defending the idea of women being present in politics at all. American political rhetoric circles with increasing frequency around the idea of white conservative men battling feminine, femin*ist* witches.

Trump's campaign promise to "Make American Great Again" implicitly references the middle of the twentieth century, when America was the dominant world superpower. It also evokes cultural mythologies of that time: coal was mined and cars were driven without a second thought to the environmental cost; men were the unquestioned heads of their

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households; the world and its rules were *simple*. Of course, that version of America never truly existed, but the public narrative of it did: a story where white, straight men shepherded the country into a new golden age. Challenges to that narrative were expressed in a metaphorical battle of the sexes where straightforward, rational men struggled against shadowy women exploiting secret knowledge. Sometimes this was played for laughs (a certain nose-wiggling witch from 1960s television may come to mind); but where those conflicts remained serious, where these struggles threatened to break out into open warfare, is where we can unearth hidden knowledge of our own.

This chapter will examine Fritz Leiber's novel *Conjure Wife* and its first two cinematic adaptations, "Weird Woman" and "Night of the Eagle," tracing how witchcraft in these stories reflects a broader concern with female agency and power. Leiber's vision of witchcraft and the two movie versions inspired by it illustrate different iterations of how women operate in a profoundly patriarchal world and the ways men can choose to acknowledge or suppress those strategies. When this knowledge is respected and utilized, men and women can forge a more honest relationship that benefits them both. When it is ignored or repressed, it fosters distrust and dishonesty that further splinters them. Lieber's midcentury witches give us a framework for evaluating current political rhetoric, as well as promises and warnings for what will happen if we fail to heed their examples.

Conjure Wife

Conjure Wife was first published as a magazine story in 1943 before being expanded into one of an anthology of stories about witchcraft (1952's *Witches Three*), and finally published as a standalone novel in 1953. The story focuses on Norman Saylor, a promising sociology professor at an American university, and his wife Tansy. While snooping through Tansy's things, Norman finds bottles of graveyard dirt, herbs, and other voodoo paraphernalia—which Norman is uniquely situated to recognize as such, since his work focuses on debunking superstition and beliefs in otherworldly powers.

When he confronts Tansy, she confesses that she has been performing rites to protect Norman and ensure his professional success; incensed, Norman demands she destroy her charms and supplies. Almost immediately afterward various disasters ensue: an ex-student begins threatening Norman, a current one accuses him of sexual assault, and a promotion he

seemed certain to receive slips out of his hands. Other threats are more explicitly supernatural: A concrete dragon on the roof of the university is in a different position each time he sees it, and he cannot keep his thoughts from returning again and again to presentiments of death and danger.

Tansy disappears, leaving a series of notes behind that claim she has taken on a curse meant for Norman that has proved too powerful for her to control, and only the performance of a certain spell will keep her from committing suicide. Norman attempts the rite, but is a minute too late: Tansy's body returns saying that her soul has been torn from her body and trapped by another witch. Norman again follows Tansy's instructions to reunite her with her soul, and in the course of doing so discovers that Tansy is far from unique: In fact, *all* women are witches, piecing together their spells from passed-on knowledge and experimentation. Norman applies a mathematical approach to this kind of spellcraft, and successfully works out a formula to return Tansy's soul to her body. This reveals the woman behind it all: Flora Carr, an elderly administrator at the college, who both despises and covets Tansy's youthful body and sexual relationship with Norman.

Throughout the story, relations between men and women are characterized by opacity, albeit a decidedly one-sided version. Norman repeatedly muses over the fact that his wife, who he has spent his life with, is in many ways a mystery to him: "It was almost impossible to take at one gulp the realization that in the mind of this trim modern creature he had known in completest intimacy, there was a whole great area he had never dreamed of."[2]

And more than Tansy, in order for Norman to understand his own wife, he must also come to grips with the fact that he has fundamentally misjudged every woman he has ever known. While he, and presumably most of the other men in the novel, have been moving through their lives convinced they are the masters of their fates, the women around them have been invisibly steering their every effort. Tansy points this out when she confronts Norman about his ignorance: "Oh, so you think that everything you've won in life was just the result of your own unaided abilities? You don't recognize the luck in it?"[3]

Divorced from its supernatural context, this sounds like a man being presented with his privilege: his assumption that the way the world works for him is the way it works for everyone. Tansy, someone more familiar with the inequality in the world, is fully cognizant of both the extra help he has received and the dangers that wait for anyone outside this additional sphere of protection. In fact, an example of Norman's profound

failure to understand his wife opens the novel, when he decides on a whim to go through Tansy's belongings and ends up discovering her magical supplies:

> Norman Saylor was not the sort of man to go prying into his wife's dressing room. That was partly the reason why he did it. He was sure that nothing could touch the security of the relationship between him and Tansy.[4]

Norman isn't trying to invade his wife's privacy or discover damaging things about her. He hardly seems to think about her as a person at all—her existence has been a talisman he uses at will to bolster his own mood. Since Tansy isn't physically present to please him, Norman extends his interest to her things, as if Tansy herself is another decorative item he can pick up or put down as needed. He truly begins to look at her only when he is confronted with a facet of her personhood he isn't expecting.

The key to Norman and Tansy's salvation is that Norman pushes past his initial dismissiveness to value Tansy's knowledge, using it and eventually integrating it into his own actions. We as readers see Norman progress from an unnerved man using his experience as a blunt object with which to steer his wife, to a lost and terrified figure out of his depth in a world with new rules and new dangers—and beyond that still, to a husband combining his skills with his wife's to save them both. When Norman first works magic, he does so by blindly following Tansy's directions, with no conception of what is actually happening until the spell begins to work:

> [I]n one instant of diabolic, paralysing insight, he knew that *this* was sorcery. No mere puttering about with ridiculous medieval implements, no effortless sleight of hand, but a straining, back-breaking struggle to keep control of *forces summoned*, of which the objects he manipulated were only the symbols.[5]

Once he and Tansy (or, rather, he and the shell of Tansy's mind) are reunited after this show of magic's power, he makes an effort to learn both the spells she uses and, more importantly, the theory behind how she creates and refines her rites. Once the two of them have begun working together, he is able to use his own background to fashion a spell to retrieve her soul, transforming (or, perhaps more accurately, translating) Tansy's knowledge into a series of less powerful equations that he can innocently ask a fellow faculty member to simplify to a single equation without having

to explain any details.[6] At this point, he and his wife are working toward a single goal and using their combined skills to reach it.

At the climax of the story, we also see that while Norman may have been a clueless husband in the past, he was not a wholly inattentive one. Flora Carr's soul is in Tansy's body, and Norman notices a small detail which serves as his first hint that things are not as they seem: "Tansy had put on a white wool dress, one which he had always liked very much, but which she had not worn for some time. He remembered she had told him that it had shrunk and become too small for her."[7]

His knowledge is of his wife's body and sexual attractiveness, but also about her preferences. Norman has come a long way in the previous pages, but this detail reminds us that even at his most rigid, there was still a fundamental care and regard for Tansy; this love has shepherded him through his journey. A few pages later, as Flora tries to convince him that he must shoot the old woman coming into their home (her own body, which Tansy's soul is trapped in), he saves himself from tragedy through a mannerism of Tansy's that he sees Flora—or rather, Flora's body—display, telling his wife afterward that:

> It was the way you hurried up the walk – it didn't sound like Mrs Carr. And partly something about the way you held yourself. But mainly it was that headshake you gave – that quick, triple headshake. I couldn't fail to recognize it. After that, I realized all the other things.[8]

Norman always cared for his wife, but without making a genuine effort to understand her. With this new knowledge shared between them, information that he previously absorbed without attention has a new value, much like the mundane items that can be repurposed as components of magic spells. Norman is living in a very different world than the one he started out in, but is one much more real—and one where he and his wife can truly be partners.

WEIRD WOMAN

The 1944 film *Weird Woman*, unfortunately, simplifies Leiber's tale to a more straightforward narrative of catfighting over a man who, to be frank, hardly seems worth the bother. In this version of the story Tansy is renamed Paula, and Norman Reed is an old friend of her father. He discovers her orphaned and living with local tribespeople in the South Seas;

in fact, he comes across her at a pagan ritual with drums and frenzied dancing in full flow while Paula wiggles innocently alongside. Despite the teaching we see him doing later on, this iteration of Norman is more rugged explorer than cardiganed academic—appearing onscreen first in an actual pith helmet, tromping through the jungle—while Paula is a babe in the woods rescued from savage (and, it scarcely needs to be said, ethnic) peril. Throughout the film Paula is referred to, by Norman and others, as a "child," "silly," and "doll-faced"; the actress portraying Paula is visibly significantly younger than the actor playing Norman.[9] While some of this may be choices of casting—Norman is played by Lon Chaney Jr., past his prime but still a box office draw—the result is to present Norman as a much stronger voice of authority, and Tansy as a weak naïf clinging to superstitions she learned from her nanny.

Not all of this talk of childishness, though, comes purely from either Paula's age or her lack of experience. It is also prompted by her emotions, and in this she joins the ranks of Norman's other paramours. Paula meets the university community at a gathering held by Ilona Carr, the villain of the piece who immediately takes a disliking to her. This iteration of Mrs—or in this case, Miss—Carr has more of a case for being unfriendly, though: She was romantically involved with Norman before he embarked on his research trip and is humiliated when he appears at the welcome home party she is hosting in front of all their friends with a pretty young wife in tow. When Ilona tries to explain her hurt to Norman, he reacts by telling her to "[B]e sensible … there's no use being childish about it."[10] Similarly, he responds to his female student's crush on him by dismissing her as "neurotic."[11] In the world of the film emotion is constantly playing a zero-sum game with intelligence; to exhibit one is to be incapable of the other. And unsurprisingly, it is the alpha male of the picture who decides what counts as irrational emotion and what does not.

This lack of respect for female knowledge or experience extends through the rest of the story. After Paula destroys all her magic paraphernalia (including a necklace she has a sentimental attachment to, which explodes into sparks when it's burned—a phenomenon Norman remains incurious about), a professor in Norman's department shoots himself, while the professor's wife Evelyn blames Paula for his suicide. Norman has to deal with student accusations of impropriety, and Paula is terrorized by mysterious phone calls which play a death prayer from the South Seas. It takes Norman confronting Paula and Evelyn to discover the figure behind things: Ilona, who has used gossip to cause a suicide and blame Paula for

it, incite students into accusing and attacking Norman, and generally wreak feminine havoc across the school. Norman then turns Evelyn into a weapon for his own ends, using a false voodoo spell supposedly put on "a woman who lied" to terrify Ilona into confessing.[12] Ilona is obligingly killed while attempting to flee, falling from a trellis and strangling in a manner that echoes the string around the voodoo doll that was used against her. But even this hint of the supernatural is undercut when Evelyn observes that Ilona died "Just like the dream I told her. Only there wasn't a dream, just a fantastic story."[13]

In this version of the story, Paula is still forced to destroy her magical items, but they never seem terribly powerful to begin with—the final item to be destroyed is not a protection charm in Norman's watch fob, but a necklace given to Paula by her nursemaid. It clearly has emotional power, but any supernatural properties are limited to mild pyrotechnics. The magic in these battles is much more explicitly coincidental, and the tricks used to force Ilona to confess are just that: tricks. The final scene of the film plays this for laughs, having Norman chastise his bride once again, then pausing to knock wood at the same time she does, at which point they chuckle knowingly at each other. When Paula believes in superstition, she is irrational; when Norman does it's a charming jest to close the story.

The story of *Weird Woman* is fundamentally about the silencing of women. They hide things from men that must be brought out into the light to be dismissed and disposed of. The first shot of Paula is her literally hiding from a male pedestrian as she sneaks back to her marital home. Paula grew up in a different culture, and as we see in the scene where she meets her future husband, she is a respected and valued member of that society. Norman responds to her status by taking her into a hostile culture, where her attempts to retain links to her home—flowers worn in her hair, a cherished necklace from a loved one—are bizarre habits to be reined in and stamped out. By the time Norman works out that Paula actually is being menaced, she has long since been reduced to wailing ineffectively and periodically fainting. By the resolution of the story, she has been revived as a cheerful helpmeet agreeing with her husband that "All the magic that you or anyone else needs is a generous heart and a steady mind."[14] If this version of Norman's wife had a soul to lose, it was surely gone long before the chuckles that end the film.

Burn, Witch, Burn!

The second cinematic adaptation of *Conjure Wife* involves a title almost too on-the-nose for the focus of this chapter: the 1962 British film *Night of the Eagle*, which was renamed in its American release *Burn, Witch, Burn!*

Broad outlines of the story, particularly at the beginning of the film, mirror *Conjure Wife* closely: Norman is back in his more strictly academic form, and he and Tansy are presented as age-appropriate peers well past their newlywed days. As the film progresses, though, small divergences from the novel begin to take on more significance. To start with, the antagonist has again been tweaked: The villain is again Flora Carr, a middle-aged (as opposed to elderly in the novel) university secretary and wife to one of Norman's colleagues. However, her focus isn't on Norman as a sexual being, or even completely on Norman as a professional rival of her husband's, though this does play a part in her scheming. But alongside that more material goal, she simply seems to loathe Norman and Tansy, and her final aim is to drive them out of her orbit entirely.

A larger alteration sees the magic in the narrative more tightly focused on Norman. Early on when he demands that Tansy destroy her magical supplies, the final item to go into the flames is from his wife's locket. And this time it is not Tansy's photograph that accidentally slips into the flame (as in the novel), but Norman's; Tansy reacts with more overt horror to the destruction of his photograph than she did the charm itself, saying in a horrified voice "Not your picture, Norman. Norman, not your *picture*."[15]

Her reaction puts an extra symbolic weight on the idea of *his* image burning, which is echoed in the changes to magical agency further on in the plot. In this film, when Tansy takes a curse meant for Norman onto herself, she fully intends this action to lead to her death. However, Norman anticipates her movements, chasing her to the cottage he has guessed she will visit, and then performing the spell to save his wife *of his own accord*. This scene emphasizes his internal struggle, showing repeated closeups of his anguished face before he sets out the candles and photograph he has brought with him to the graveyard where he performs his magic, and given his academic interests it is certainly plausible that Norman would know specific rites. But nevertheless, this capitulation turns witchery from something that only women know to something that only women *choose* to do.

This interest in a deliberate refusal to connect extends to the Taylors's marriage (changed from the novel's Saylor) and how they operate within

it. Their relationship is markedly more hostile than the paternal lectures of "Weird Woman" or the tearful exchanges in *Conjure Wife*; this Norman and Tansy throw furious barbs at one another in arguments punctuated with tense silences. After Norman has discovered Tansy's magical supplies, he lays them out on a table and waits for her to return to the house and discover them. She initially attempts to brush them off as simple superstitions, but the following exchange makes it obvious that both of them, at this point, know what's going on:

TANSY: What do you want?
NORMAN: The truth.
TANSY: All right, I was trying to use conjure magic, trying to work spells, trying to change the future, isn't that what you *really* want to hear, Norman?[16]

Transferring this dialogue to the page leaves out the hostility in their tones, and the way Tansy first turns her back to Norman before whirling and spitting her confession at him. Moments later, she responds to his continued demands for an explanation with "Isn't it obvious? I'm a witch."[17] Tansy has been keeping the peace in their marriage by hiding an enormous part of herself from Norman—earlier in the film, we see her sense that something is wrong and frantically hunt through the house for an evil charm that has been planted there, only calming herself with visible effort to insist to Norman that she's merely looking for a misplaced shopping list. Norman's reaction to his discovery reveals that on some level, Tansy has merely been going through the motions of deception in order to fit into the expected image of a wife—and similarly, Norman has been going through the motions of feeling deceived.

Flora's comeuppance at the end of the film echoes this dogged blindness. After a spell has been turned back on her, she desperately clings to a poker face when her husband appears unexpectedly in her office. As they begin to leave the building, he becomes distracted by ensuring a door is properly closed, while behind him Flora is crushed by an enormous stone eagle that she had previously bewitched to attack Norman. Neither Flora's husband nor the audience even sees her die; Lindsay Carr is so focused on his self-assigned task that he is only alerted by Flora's scream as the statue crashes down. One suspects that had she died just a little more quietly, he could have made it all the way home before realizing he was unaccompanied.

Norman and Tansy survive, but their respective survivals happen alone. At the college, Norman confronts Flora, where she taunts him by constructing a house of cards and explaining that it represents Tansy, locked inside their marital home. She lights it on fire, and when he attempts to leave—to rescue his wife, though he won't admit it to Flora—Flora sics the transformed stone eagle on him. By the time Norman has escaped the bird and rushed back to his house, it is engulfed in flames. Norman makes one ineffectual charge at his home, restrained by a fire crew and surrounded by onlookers, before hearing Tansy's shout—she has somehow escaped and the two reunite in an embrace. One cannot help noticing, though, that while each appears relieved the other is alive, they had to fight for their lives separately. Much like their isolated interests in magic, Norman and Tansy share knowledge and experiences but are unable to convert that commonality into any kind of connection.

Conclusion

Conjure Wife and its cinematic iterations use witchcraft as a metaphor for female empowerment, and the ways each version of Norman respond offer potential masculine reactions to the notion of gender equality. *Weird Woman* is manifestly a crushing reinforcement of the extant sexist and racist status quo. *Night of the Eagle/Burn, Witch, Burn!* illustrates an uneasy detente, but one that is able to hold only through deliberate dishonesty on both sides. Lieber's book is the only story that offers a path of true growth; given that it is the only narrative that allows for significant internal reflection by Norman (a fact not unrelated to its narrative medium, in contrast to the two films' visuals), this suggests that modern feminist strategies should focus not on the power of witchcraft, but on the weakness of a culture without it.

Metaphorically speaking, of course. Of *course*.

Notes

1. Kristen Sollee, Wicket Witches of the Left: A Brief History. https://bust.com/feminism/18396-political-witches.html, accessed 26 August 2019.
2. Fritz Lieber, *Conjure Wife* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 17.
3. Fritz Lieber, *Conjure Wife* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 22.

4. Fritz Lieber, *Conjure Wife* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 5.
5. Fritz Lieber, *Conjure Wife* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 119.
6. Fritz Lieber, *Conjure Wife* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 153.
7. Fritz Lieber, *Conjure Wife* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 173.
8. Fritz Lieber, *Conjure Wife* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 183.
9. *Weird Woman*, directed by Reginald Le Borg (1944; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2006), DVD.
10. *Weird Woman*, directed by Reginald Le Borg (1944; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2006), DVD.
11. *Weird Woman*, directed by Reginald Le Borg (1944; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2006), DVD.
12. *Weird Woman*, directed by Reginald Le Borg (1944; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2006), DVD.
13. *Weird Woman*, directed by Reginald Le Borg (1944; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2006), DVD.
14. *Weird Woman*, directed by Reginald Le Borg (1944; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2006), DVD.
15. *Burn, Witch, Burn!*, directed by Sidney Hayers (1962; New York, NY: Kino Lorber, 2015), DVD.
16. *Burn, Witch, Burn!*, directed by Sidney Hayers (1962; New York, NY: Kino Lorber, 2015), DVD.
17. *Burn, Witch, Burn!*, directed by Sidney Hayers (1962; New York, NY: Kino Lorber, 2015), DVD.

Apocalypse and After

The Democratic Impulse in Post-Apocalyptic Films

Christie L. Maloyed and J. Kelton Williams

The twenty-first century is a good time to be in the business of the end times. From the fear of a pending, international, Y2K computer crash that kicked off the new millennium to the media sensations surrounding various natural and economic upheavals (e.g. Snowpocalypse; Debtpocalypse; Jobpocalypse) we remain a world deeply invested—emotionally and financially—in the apocalypse. Apocalyptic stories are not simply for the peculiar taste of an odd subset of consumers—as they include the Oprah book-club pick and subsequent film *The Road*, the Christian *Left Behind* series, major motion pictures like *2012*, and several bestselling young-adult series including *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner*.[1] Even *Disney* is in the business of the apocalypse, as its animated flick *WALL-E* warns of environmental collapse due to the over-consumptive habits of the earth's population.[2]

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Unlike previous decades, these films are not driven by fears of nuclear holocaust; rather, they are rooted in social, environmental, and political concerns. The surge in these films has been attributed to a plethora of causes: religious conflicts and a crisis of the traditional family; loss of control over democratic politics by the average citizen; and criticism of the George W. Bush administration's War on Terror and the rise of neoliberal globalization.[3] Each of these concerns has played a part in contributing to the general social and political anxiety about the ability of government to protect its citizens and the ability of citizens to hold their government accountable. How should humanity respond to this litany of anxieties? The answer provided by these films is that individuals must take more responsibility for their own lives and government if humanity is to survive.

Post-apocalyptic films offer a rich environment for considering the foundations of human nature, effective models of political leadership, and visions of how individuals choose to govern themselves. This chapter argues that the proliferation of post-apocalyptic films following 9/11 do not necessarily offer new visions of society in government; rather, they harken back to the democratic ideals of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though many of these stories carry a violent tenor, they do not encourage the audience to view the world as a war of all against all. In fact, these films typically reject Thomas Hobbes's classic vision of the state of nature, where without a strong sovereign to control their most primal impulses everyone is expected to pursue self-defense at all costs.[4] Rather, in these films the characters who are most likely to survive and flourish are those who draw from humble backgrounds, rally together to help protect their community, and reject the previous era's tendencies toward selfish and rapacious actions.

The political commentary offered in these films is both reflective and prescriptive. They offer insight into the American psyche, echoing a well-established and theoretically sophisticated tradition that simultaneously celebrates the individual and community. These films also offer a strong warning that contemporary society suffers from widespread apathy and over-reliance on governmental bureaucracy and corporations; if this trend continues, the audience is led to believe, the consequences will be dire.

Though there are some post-apocalyptic stories where the catastrophic event is so immense that human existence on earth will be permanently destroyed—these include films such as *On the Beach*, *The Road*, and *Testament*—most leave open the possibility of long-term survival.[5] The post-apocalyptic genre of literature and film is a distinct subset of

apocalyptic writing that focuses on the question, "what happens next?" Derived from the Greek *apokalupsis*, the term "apocalypse" refers to a revelation or unveiling of a truth, or of a new order. The most frequent lesson offered by these films is not that life will be made better by imagining a wholly new world, but, rather, by reclaiming the political traditions of a golden era of the Western world, that of the self-reliant individual living in a participatory democracy.

The individualist ethos presented in these films harken back to the form of democratic government praised by thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville and Henry David Thoreau, which emphasizes citizen participation and egalitarianism. Individualism is not equivalent to selfishness; rather, those who survive understand the importance of working toward their community's security rather than solely pursing their own selfish desires.[6] In the following sections, the themes of egalitarianism, stewardship, and leadership are explored in recent post-apocalyptic films to illustrate the ways in which selfishness is rejected in favor community survival.

The Apocalypse and Egalitarianism

One point that distinguishes post-apocalyptic stories is the democratic nature of catastrophe. Those who survive, at least initially, usually constitute a random sample from the general population, as apocalyptic events tend not to discriminate based on social class. If anything, the wealthy, having been protected in their gated communities, are much less likely to possess the skills necessary to survive outside the structures of society. Characters of average means and often average ability must rise to the challenge of bringing what is left of humanity back to order.

The sub-genre of post-apocalyptic films that most directly expresses an egalitarian sentiment is the zombie apocalypse. Made famous by director George Romero, zombie flicks are known not just for gruesome violence and slapstick humor, but also for their biting social criticism. The most self-aware of all post-apocalypse films feature monsters that are desperately unaware. Zombies act as mindless savages attacking their victims without regard for their age, gender, class, or importance. But zombies are rarely the true villains of the story. As Kim Paffenroth has argued in her study of zombie films, "Many of the human characters are more petty, predatory, and selfish than any zombie could be, for their intellect does not undo or diminish such bad characteristics, it only enables the humans to act on such urges with greater cunning, subtlety, and effectiveness."[7] Humans,

plagued by their insatiable, selfish appetites, are finally consumed, both literally and figuratively, by their own greed.

Whereas previous zombie flicks showed that humans could be monsters too, Romero's 2005 film *Land of the Dead* takes the genre one step further making the audience actually root for the zombies.[8] Set some years after the outbreak, survivors have gathered in Pittsburg, where they are protected by two rivers and an immense electrified fence. Economic divisions remain with a large lower-class existing in slums at the literal base of the city while Mr. Kaufman, the city boss, and his fellow elites occupy a hilltop high-rise apartment complex called Fiddler's Green complete with high-end shopping. Some of the residents are employed by Mr. Kaufman to go outside the city on supply runs for items that are hard to produce such as medicine and alcohol. Class differences run deep in this film. Cholo, one of the lowly supply crew, is fired for merely expressing his desire to retire in Fiddler's Green. Outside the city, trouble also brews as some zombies show signs of memory and intelligence, coordinate a successful attack against the city, and make meals out of the inhabitants of Fiddler's Green.

Though a campy post-apocalyptic horror flick on the surface, the film anticipates the refrain of "the 1% vs. the 99%" as it comments on the growing economic inequality facing Americans. In Romero's view, the wealthy citizens are dealt justice at the hands of the zombie hoards while the poorest residents mostly escape being devoured. Mr. Kaufman uses his employees with little regard for their work or the risks they take. By contrast, Cholo's desire to work hard and retire in a nice home is the essence of the American dream. That his dream is shot down by the financial elite who deem him unfit to join their ranks makes the destruction of Fiddler's Green particularly gratifying.

In this case, the aftermath of the apocalypse leads to a perpetuation of the previous hierarchical power structures. Only when the poorest folks, that is, the zombies, organize is that corrupted system overthrown. The remaining survivors tellingly flee for Canada and choose not to retaliate against the zombies, realizing that they too are only seeking a place of their own to live. The moral of the story isn't a new vision of society; rather, it is an effort to reclaim the American dream.

STEWARDSHIP AND CONSUMERISM

The problems with society are not always cast on a financial elite; often, common people are indicted for their role in bringing about the cataclysm. Frequently intertwined are themes of an apathetic public, over-reliance on the expertise of the government or corporations, and exploitation of the environment. The greed and overconsumption of modern life is vividly painted in Zack Snyder's 2004 remake of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*.[9] Fleeing hordes of zombies, a band of survivors seek refuge in a mall—that American symbol of consumerism. The survivors quickly overcome their fear of impending death with the comfort of being able to shop, free of charge, and with the soothing sounds of elevator music playing across the mall speakers. Snyder's social critique is overdone and unapologetic; these characters have no idea how to survive on their own. Without their soy mocha lattes and HDTVs, they are helpless against the harsh realities that wait for them outside. This is not an indictment of community, as the group is only able to survive by relying on one another, but rather of the complete reliance on the commercial society at large to indulge their every need, want, and whim.

Moreover, the film depicts an ineffective and inept government response. The myth of American independence is destroyed as government agencies from the Centers for Disease Control to the US military are overrun, mostly due to their arrogance. Those who follow the government's directives to make their way to rescue stations are completely overrun by the mindless hordes. Only those few characters who are willing to rally together in small communities and defend themselves are able to survive.

Even more pronounced concerns about over-reliance on corporations appear in Disney's first foray into the post-apocalyptic genre. A solitary waste-compacting robot branded WALL-E (Waste Allocation Load Lifter—Earth Class) combs Earth's long-abandoned landscape sorting the mountains of garbage that cover the planet. In the 700 years since the corporation Buy 'n' Large (BnL) evacuated the human population on starships and left behind robots to clean the planet, WALL-E has gained sentience. He has amassed a sizeable collection of abandoned human trinkets including items such as a rubber duck, a Rubik's Cube, and a tape of *Hello Dolly* that he watches repeatedly. WALL-E is romantically smitten when a ship lands and releases a floating robot called EVE. He tries to impress her with his collection and shows off a young seedling he recently

discovered. Unbeknownst to him, EVE's mission is to seek signs of vegetation on Earth, and when she sees the seedling, she take it, powers down, and waits to be picked up for return to space.

Though on its surface, WALL-E is a sentimental romance about two robots falling in love, it also offers a critique of consumer capitalism and rampant corporatism. The film places blame on individuals for their insatiable appetite for disposable things. Likewise, BnL is treated as the epitome of the reckless and irresponsible corporation interested only in its own profits at the literal expense of the planet. The film warns the audience of impending disaster if our consumption habits aren't modified, but as Christopher Todd Anderson has argued, the film expresses deep nostalgia for manufactured goods that is at tension with the environmental lesson. What makes WALL-E so relatable despite being a robot, as Anderson puts it, is his "ability to experience an emotional – nostalgic – attachment to consumer goods" (277).This suggests that the aim of the film is not to reject consumerism entirely, but rather to moderate it. Post-apocalyptic movies often use extreme situations to make appeals to just this sort of moderation. They depict the extremes to which people sometimes carry their approach to life as being detrimental to societal and individual survival. At the individual level a degree of self-interestedness and self-reliance can be an asset in survival. Total selfishness, however, always leads to death at the hands of greed, nature, disease, zombies, or some other cataclysm.

When WALL-E encounters the descendants of the original emigrants sent into space by BnL, the audience finds them morbidly obese, spending their days in floating lounge chairs watching TV and eating super-sized meals. The film spears mega-corporation BnL for its exploitative business practices but also individuals for their failure to resist or question the power of the company. Without an attachment to the manufacturing process, individuals consume without thought to the cost of production or waste removal. The introduction of WALL-E and the seedling sends a shock to system, and after a battle between WALL-E and the ship's computer system, the ship's captain and passengers awaken to the reality of their situation. They decide to return to Earth and begin the process of rebuilding the planet.

One common conclusion among these films is that while selfishness may have been the signature feature of life before the apocalypse, it cannot remain if civilization is going to continue to survive. But the world that is longed for isn't one devoid of consumerism or manufacturing, as WALL-E's nostalgia for human items makes clear. Instead, these films argue for

individuals who hold government and corporations accountable and are also accountable for their own consumption habits.

Democratic Leadership

There are many ways to survive in the apocalypse, but the consistent message running throughout the genre is that humanity can only be saved and society can only be rebuilt through democratic leadership. For the truly democratic leader in the apocalyptic world, leadership is accepted reluctantly, not taken by force. No movie goes to greater lengths to drive this point home than Mike Judge's *Idiocracy*.[10] In this lighthearted cult favorite, the apocalypse also comes at the hands of human choice through a process of Darwinian natural selection gone terribly wrong. With ever more well-educated and affluent couples choosing to live their lives childfree, those who go forth and multiply pass on inferior genes. As this trend continues over numerous generations, the average IQ of the human population falls from 100 in 2005 to 40 by 2505. The film's protagonist, Joe Bauer, is an unlikely hero. As a classic Generation X slacker, he tries to fly under the radar and do as little as possible. Rather than living in his parents' basement, however, he exists in the basement of Uncle Sam's military. As a soldier in the Army he is chosen as a test subject for a human hibernation experiment that is supposed to have him wake up in one year, but the experiment does not go according to plan and he wakes up 500 years later. He is selected for the experiment precisely because he is average, as is evidenced by the slides flashing on the screen graphing his IQ, heart rate, blood pressure, and overall health as perfectly average. Described by his employer as "the most average person in our entire armed forces," he represents the ultimate "average Joe." Yet 500 years later he is the smartest person on the planet and must attempt to rescue humanity from its own stupidity.

Even in *Idiocracy* in which Joe is a genius by the standards of the future, his democratic appeal to contemporary ideals is key in his ability to lead. When informed at the start of the film that he has been reassigned by his superior office, Joe protests that his current assignment is perfect, "No one bothers me. I can't screw up. If I could just stay here another 8 years I get my pension. I'm all set." After his initial pleas to his superior officer fall on deaf ears, Joe responds, "Why me? Every time Metzer says lead, follow, or get out of the way, I get out of the way." This general reluctance among the heroes in post-apocalyptic films to accept the challenge of

stepping into a leadership role among their new compatriots is precisely what makes them well suited to the task. Because they do not want power, or more particularly responsibility, they are the best candidates for taking on a leadership role. Joe's initial interest is solely devoted to returning to contemporary times by finding a time machine. Only after abandoning his selfish interests and embracing a more communal ethos is Joe able to save humanity and himself. He commits to solving the problems of the drought and dustbowl that had been created when the people of 2505 were convinced to water their crops with Brawndo—a sports drink—by the company's slogan: "It's got what plants crave."

Other post-apocalyptic films rely on the "average Joe" theme without making the point so explicitly. Clive Owen's character Theo in *Children of Men* is a former activist-turned-office worker who must protect the first pregnant woman in 18 years from oppressive police forces.[11] The hero in Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead*, Michael, lists "worked in a stationary store, drove a snow plow, and fixed copiers" among his occupations. Fellow survivor Steve, who is highly unlikable, arrogant, and wealthy, mocks Michael's unremarkable life: "God, it's such a shame that this whole 'end of the world' thing is holding you back!" In the zombie comedies (zombedies?) *Zombieland* and *Shaun of the Dead*, both main characters lived mundane and uneventful lives prior to the zombie outbreak.[12] Columbus, from *Zombieland*, spent most of his time at home playing computer games and drinking Mountain Dew Code Red, while Shaun, from *Shaun of the Dead*, worked a dead end job at an electronics store before bellying up to the same corner bar every night.

On one level building up the reluctant everyman as the hero could simply be understood as a mechanism of storytelling and cinema. But these themes also represent an attachment to democratic principles and are core values in the tradition of American leadership. Dating back to Washington's refusal to march his troops into Philadelphia and name himself king after the American Revolution, and his later reluctance in serving as president, the ideal American leader does not seek power. Rather power is thrust upon him and assumed out of necessity. The hero of these films seeks consensus from the group when possible but develops the ability to make hard decisions when necessary. The landscape of the post-apocalyptic world provides an ideal setting to explore the nuances of human nature, association, and leadership. Many films are driven by competing depictions of how humans can survive in the new, harsher, more violent environment. On one side, the villain establishes an autocratic regime that

maintains order through fear and violence. The justification for such measures is that despotic means are necessary to maintain order and survival. This proves to be shortsighted because the focus on survival comes at the cost of rebuilding. Rebuilding can be achieved only through democratic leadership that seeks to maintain a sense of humanity while fostering both community and self-reliance.

The End

It is easy to watch a post-apocalyptic film and recognize narratives about the evils of materialism and humanity's insatiable appetite to live, consume, and destroy. Movies that leave the audience with a hope for the survival of the human race and a better tomorrow clearly draw from the idea that even in the darkest hour, humanity's potential exceeds its flaws. The more interesting questions raised by post-apocalyptic films, however, consider the specific traits that allow humans to survive catastrophe, and why these characteristics are so valued.

Though previous generations of disaster films painted the American government as the ultimate savior, the 2000s have seen a turn to more post-apocalyptic films that question the ability of current power structures to survive cataclysmic events. These films are critical of modern politics, economics, and culture, but they do not reject the American tradition altogether. Rather they embrace several tropes that were prominent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that became the foundation for American democratic ideals. Echoing political thinkers like Tocqueville, these films draw a sharp distinction between selfish behaviors and self-interest, rightly understood. Selfishness may provide temporary benefits, but it undercuts communal ties, which are the key to survival. In short the post-apocalyptic genre affirms the values of the American tradition that carried the nation into the twentieth century, but they question the lust for wealth and greed that has driven individuals to become consumers rather than producers, and the impulse to pursue an economic and technological empire at a break-neck pace.

These films are post-apocalyptic, not necessarily post-modern. Although the catastrophe tears down power structures, these films do not seek to reimagine society entirely. Rather, they function to some degree as jeremiads, looking back toward a culture of individualism whereby society shared a sense of communal obligation but also a spirit of self-reliance. Citizen apathy was as much the enemy as outright despotism. Following the

political thought of Thoreau, individuals must cultivate a practice of attention and stewardship in order to protect both nature and the community. These films call for a return to a more engaged citizenry that actively questions both political and corporate power and eschews treating selfishness as a virtue. Watching post-apocalyptic films as popular expressions of American political thought and not simply as action or horror movies veiled with social commentary can offer insight into the continuity of the American ethos.

NOTES

1. *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat (2009, Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD; *Left Behind*, directed by Vic Sarin (2014, Los Angeles, CA: Freestyle Releasing, 2015), DVD; *2012*, directed by Roland Emmerich (2009, Culver City, Columbia Pictures, 2010), DVD; *Hunger Games*, directed by Gary Ross (2012, Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2012), DVD; *Divergent*, directed by Neil Burger (2014, Santa Monica, CA: Summit Entertainment, 2014), DVD; *Maze Runner*, directed by James Dashner (2014, Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2014), DVD.

2. *WALL-E*, directed by Andrew Stanton (2008, Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

3. For causes on the surge in post-apocalyptic films, see Kim Moana Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 2007); John M. Stroup and Glenn W. Shuck, *Escape into the Future: Cultural Pessimism and Its Religious Dimension in Contemporary American Popular Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007); Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Films and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

4. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994).

5. *On the Beach*, directed by Stanley Kramer (1959, Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2005), DVD; *Testament*, directed by Lynne Littman (1983, Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Video, 2004), DVD.

6. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1992); Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, eds. J.P. Mayer and Max Lerner, and trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1996).

7. Kim Paffenroth, *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006).

8. *Land of the Dead*, directed by George Romero (2005, Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2005), DVD.

9. *Dawn of the Dead*, directed by George Romero (1978, Troy, Michigan: Anchor Bay Entertainment, Inc., 2004), DVD; *Dawn of the Dead*, directed by Zack Snyder (2004, Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

10. *Idiocracy*, directed by Mike Judge (2006, Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

11. *Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón (2006, Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

12. *Zombieland*, directed by Ruben Fleischer (2009, Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home, 2010), DVD; *Shaun of the Dead*, directed by Edgar Wright (2004, Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

Through a Glass Darkly: The Dimensionality and Inadequacy of Political Fear in Stephen King's *The Stand*

Jennifer A. Mogg and Jordon B. Barkalow

Stephen King's *The Stand*, originally published in 1978 with an unabridged edition published in 1990, is a post-apocalyptic horror/fantasy novel that details the effects and aftermath of an accidental release of a US military–created virus known as Project Blue. Unable to control the spread of the virus throughout the United States, the military subsequently releases Project Blue in the Soviet Union and China. Thus, the super flu (aka Captain Trips) results in a worldwide pandemic that wipes out over 99% of the world's population in just under three weeks. Those that remain, the immune, are haunted by dreams of a kind old African-American woman, known as Mother Abbigail and/or a dark faceless man with many names, including "the Walking Dude" and Randall Flagg. Eventually, two separate and very different societies coalesce around each. Those who are

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drawn to Mother Abbigail create a democratic "Free Zone" in Boulder, Colorado. In the novel, citizens of the Free Zone represent that which is good and are said by Mother Abbigail to be following the will of God. Those who respond to Flagg settle in to his authoritarian regime in Las Vegas. Flagg and his subjects represent varying degrees of evil. The remainder of the novel chronicles the rising tension between the two societies as well as the internal struggles of each, which culminates in an ultimate standoff between good and evil.

The Stand is an ideal text to look at in considering the connections between horror, fear, and politics. According to Corey Robin's *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, private fear is an artifact of individual psychologies and experiences that have little impact beyond ourselves.[1] In contrast, political fear consists of a people's felt apprehension of some harm to their collective well-being or the intimidation wielded over men and women by governments or groups. This chapter assesses Robin's account of political fear through an analysis of *The Stand*. According to Robin, the first dimension of political fear is external and is characterized by the capacity of leaders to define what is or ought to be the chief object of fear.[2] This dimension of political fear almost always preys on some real political threat, but political leaders have considerable leeway in determining which threat to emphasize and how to respond. The second dimension of political fear is internal and has its origin in the "social, political, and economic hierarchies that divide a people."[3] Both dimensions justify increases in political power. The external dimension provides power by uniting a people whereas the internal dimension uses the above-mentioned hierarchies for purposes of "internal intimidation," where the use or threat of sanctions ensures "that one group returns or augments its power at the expense of another."[4] Rejecting the idea that political fear is an inherent aspect of human life, Robin ultimately concludes that "fear is not, and cannot be, a foundation of moral and political argument."[5] Modern liberal thought offers an alternative, founding politics and morality on the principles of freedom and equality, thus allowing for the realization of its promise of a life characterized by peace.

The first section of the chapter focuses on the role political fear plays in Flagg's Las Vegas while the second section considers political fear in Mother Abbigail's Free Zone. The analysis presented here confirms Robin's distinction between the two dimensions of political fear while at the same time suggesting a limitation of his analysis. King's presentation of political fear as a constituent element of both the "primitive dictatorship" in Las Vegas and the "enlightened, democratic community" of the

Free Zone suggests that political fear is more than a tool employed by political elites for the purpose of gaining political power.[6] Rather, King suggests that political fear is natural to the human experience, reinforced by his treatment of religion in *The Stand*, addressed in the third section below. Ultimately, although political fear can be and often is abused, it cannot be dispensed with due to human nature and the limits of humankind's understanding.

Political Fear in *The Stand:* Las Vegas

King's presentation of Flagg and his community in Las Vegas demonstrates a fundamental problem associated with a reliance on the external dimension of political fear—the domestic political gains are not simply the result of an external object to fear, but must also be maintained by fear. Thus, once even a legitimate threat is removed, it must be replaced by another threat and then another one after that. Unwilling or unable to address the root problem or concern, the external dimension of political fear plays an important role in all political communities. However, like Robin, King suggests that a reliance on political fear creates a non-sustainable foundation for society.

By locating the threat outside of society, external political fear allows the leader to use the threat to unify domestic politics and aggrandize power. In *The Stand*, the best example of the external dimension of political fear is Randall Flagg's community in Las Vegas. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the society and politics created by Flagg in Las Vegas are entirely founded on political fear. As the embodiment of evil, Flagg is afraid of Mother Abbigail who is the embodiment of good.[7] It is this fear that animates Flagg's objective of destroying the Free Zone and its inhabitants.[8] As leader, Flagg uses his position to convince his followers that they are in an "us versus them" scenario. This is best expressed when a handful of his followers confront Dayna, a Free Zone spy. Jenny, who had befriended Dayna as they worked together the streetlamp maintenance crew, expresses her hope that the Las Vegas settlement is successful in decimating the Free Zone and its residents, saying: "It's us or your people; that's what *he* says. And I believe him."[9] In response, Dayna identifies the reason for this belief: "But you don't believe him; you're just scared gutless of him."[10] This response highlights Flagg's reliance on political fear as the source of his power and suggests that the external dimension of political fear has important domestic political consequences.

Simply stated, Flagg has all the power and uses terror to maintain and augment this power. As such, Flagg closely resembles the lone despot of Robin's account of Montesquieu whose terror arises from the despot's love of lawless violence.[11] Flagg's terror is an expression of his distorted psyche, lust for destruction, and penchant for cruelty. Described as the "purest evil left in this world," Flagg's authority relies entirely on his ability to instill fear.[12] However, rather than capitalizing on the established external political fear to sow divisions in society that would allow him to further augment his power, he primarily uses it to terrorize the inhabitants of Las Vegas. Thus, King affirms the idea that the use of terror cannot serve any useful or intelligible political purpose, as its exclusive function is to allow the despot (Flagg) to fulfill his every desire.[13]

This terror is felt more acutely by those closest to Flagg, particularly Lloyd Henreid, Flagg's "right-hand man." Flagg relies on him to attend to the day-to-day operations of life in Las Vegas; however, Lloyd's feelings of terror make it impossible for him to communicate openly with Flagg. As a result, when Lloyd has pressing information regarding the presence of another Free Zone spy (Tom Cullen) in Las Vegas, he is intimidated into postponing sharing this crucial information.[14] Flagg's failure to recognize the limits of terrorizing his followers delays any attempt to capture the spy, ultimately allowing Tom to escape and, in an unexpected turn of events, rather than intimidating the residents of Las Vegas into submission, there is a steady exodus of those who have lost confidence in Flagg.[15] In response, Flagg goes all in, reasoning that all that is needed is "the sight of their [the two captured spies, Larry and Ralph] heads up on spikes in front of the MGM Grand's fountain."[16] While such a response had proven successful before, Flagg is blind to the temporary nature of this foundation. After another character's earlier crucifixion, the crowd lingered not because they agreed with Flagg's brutality, but because they were afraid of being identified as the first person to leave.[17] Flagg does not understand that pure fear is not a secure foundation for politics, a point King makes explicit with Mother Abbigail's assertion that Flagg is unable to create anything as he can only "unshape or destroy."[18]

That Flagg's inability to create is a consequence of his distorted psyche and reliance on political fear is also evident in his response to Mother Abbigail's decision at the end of Book II to send four members of the Free Zone to Las Vegas and confront Flagg. The journey culminates with two of the four, Larry and Ralph, being sentenced to be drawn and quartered immediately.[19] In response to this mockery of justice, Larry says the

charges against them are bogus, pointing out that they did not come to Las Vegas in stealth or under the cover of darkness, but rather willingly turned themselves over to Flagg's men.[20] For Flagg this is irrelevant as he needs their presence to cover the unraveling political situation in Las Vegas. He attempts to blame the destruction of the airplanes at Indian Springs on these two when in reality, the loss of the planes was a consequence of Flagg's poor decision making.[21] Specifically, Flagg had given Trashcan Man, an arsonist with an intuitive grasp of machinery, unfettered access to all the weapons on and around the military base, in spite of being unable to track him via his third eye.[22] Unfortunately for Flagg, this ruse fails, as before he can complete the execution of Larry and Ralph, Las Vegas is destroyed by a nuclear bomb Trashcan Man brings into the city as an offering.[23] Thus, what ultimately undermines Flagg's designs to destroy the Free Zone are his own limitations and poor judgment, neither of which can be covered up by the use of terror or the external dimension of fear.

Political Fear in *The Stand*: The Free Zone

Using the social, political, and economic hierarchies found in society, the internal dimension of fear also seeks to secure and augment power through the division of society. King's account of the origin of government in the Free Zone and its development point to the presence of the internal dimension of political fear in the peaceful, democratic community, suggesting it is a constituent aspect of the human condition and, as such, one of many factors that inform political and moral reasoning. The need for government in the Free Zone is not simply the consequence of their need for organization in Boulder. Rather, the decision to head down the path of political organization is a response to political inequality—whether that be in the hands of a passionate but uninformed majority or a potential dictator in the form of Mother Abbigail.

To begin with, political organization is deemed necessary to develop a means to hold the people of the Free Zone in check. Consequently, they must "re-create America" by means fair or foul.[24] The initial step in this process, to propose a form of government modeled on the New England township, would seem to require that elections be fair and open.[25] This however is not the case. The ad hoc committee (made up of Stu, Fran, Glen, Nick, Ralph, Larry, and Sue) is initially selected as a temporary committee to establish a process by which the inhabitants of the Free Zone will

elect their political leaders. Ultimately they decide that they themselves must also be selected as the first Free Zone Representatives.[26] In order to pull off this "leadership coup," the committee decides to rush the vote in order to prevent members of the Free Zone from realizing that they can nominate whoever they want for these positions, including those who, in the ad hoc committee's view, may not best serve the interests of the community.[27] The desire to rush things is inconsistent with the notion of public deliberation and suggests that the ad hoc committee is afraid of the political power of the many. As a result, the ad hoc committee conspires to consolidate power in their own hands. Larry's response to the serving on the ad hoc committee offers evidence of this. When Stu recruits him to serve, Larry is quick to note that it seemed the temporary committee did not intend to be all that temporary.[28] Larry also expresses reservations about the clandestine nature of some of the committee's actions. While Stu is able to assuage Larry's reservations about secrecy by justifying secrecy as a necessary measure given the potential of "war" with Flagg, Stu and Larry tacitly agree that the power grab is necessary to avoid another incident of "pure human fuckery."[29]

Fear of turning power over to the many is not the only political concern, or perhaps even the primary political concern, of the committee. They must also address Mother Abbigail's presence in the community.[30] Glen is concerned that the Free Zone will make Mother Abbigail a dictator. The inhabitants of the Free Zone are tired, scared, have no idea what will happen to them, and Mother Abbigail is the only thing they have in common.[31] Moreover, Glen is also worried that she might use her power and influence to direct the focus of the community solely on Flagg thereby neglecting what he believes to be imperative to the Free Zone (removal of the dead, restoration of power before winter, etc.). In short, the committee fears that, under the direction of Mother Abbigail, the Free Zone will become too other-directed, and eventually degenerate into a theocracy.[32] However, they recognize the necessity of using people's love for Mother Abbigail to bolster their own legitimacy.[33] The committee, anticipating the potential power imbalance that Mother Abbigail might be able to exert, seeks to check her influence through a system of government where there is no absolute power on either side.[34] Thus, not only does King employ Mother Abbigail to illustrate how inequalities in political power remain a constant to the human condition, he also illustrates how previous responses to these imbalances (checks and balances in this case) remain the preferred means of dealing with the consequences of the inequalities.

It is worth noting that Glen's concerns regarding Mother Abbigail are well founded. With regard to the external threat posed by Flagg, the position of the Free Zone Committee is one of wait and see. Mother Abbigail questions this policy when she tells the political leaders of the Free Zone that they need to get their focus right. She says:

> Electric lights aren't the answer, Stu Redman. CB radio ain't it either, Ralph Brentner. Sociology won't end it, Glen Bateman. And you doing penance for a life that's long since a closed book wont' stop it either, Larry Underwood … You propose nothing in the sight of God.[35]

Unfortunately, Glen's focus on survival and preparing for the upcoming winter to the exclusion of facing the external dimension of fear has devastating consequences on the Free Zone. Harold and Nadine, Free Zone residents who both have a grudge against specific members of the Free Zone Committee and a supernatural connection with Flagg, are guided by Flagg and inspired by revenge to make, plant, and detonate a bomb that kills seven people including two members of the permanent Committee: Nick Andros and Sue Stern.[36] At the town meeting following the attack, the response of the community becomes a concern for law and order in the Free Zone.

The town's response to the bombing is "heavy, hard, and nearly savage."[37] Stu's efforts to adhere to the meeting's agenda are met with hostility as one young woman tells him to "Fuck your agenda!" and that they should talk about Flagg as it is "long overdue."[38] Whereas previous discussions of Flagg were held in private and off the record, the bombing thrusts the external dimension of fear to the political front-and-center. The effect this has on the Free Zone causes Stu, who in addition to being on the Free Zone Committee also serves as the town Marshal, to observe: "These are the good guys? They don't give a shit about Nick and Sue and Chad and the rest. They're like a lynch mob, and all they care about is catching Harold and Nadine and hanging them … like a charm against the dark man."[39] Sensing the potential danger of this change, Stu must remind the inhabitants of the Free Zone that if, for some reason, Harold and Nadine return to the Free Zone, they are to be brought directly to him.[40] This suggests that, while focusing almost exclusively on external fear as a means of control can be detrimental, as seen in Vegas, it is equally hazardous to the maintenance of a peaceful society to ignore it. King's presentation of political fear as a constituent element of both Las Vegas and the Free Zone

suggests that political fear is more than a tool employed by political elites for the purpose of gaining political power. Rather, King suggests that political fear is natural to the human experience and this conclusion is reinforced by his treatment of religion in *The Stand*.

RELIGION AND *THE STAND*

King tells his reader that Christianity is central to *The Stand* from the outset. In the *Preface*, he refers to the book as a "long tale of dark Christianity."[41] It is possible to assess King's understanding of the relationship between religion and political fear by looking at some of the explicit references to religion provided in the text. Of these references, King provides two to the Book of Job, a narrative history that holds up Job as a model of perseverance and faithfulness.[42] In particular, the story of Job highlights the limits of human understanding and the dangers of pride.[43]

As with Job, who is unknowingly caught in the contest between God and Satan, it is possible to view the survivors of the plague as two sides of the chess game between God and Satan.[44] On the one side are the followers of Flagg who, in addition to being weak and lonely, have left God out of their hearts.[45] Those gathered in Las Vegas turn against God and succumb to the temptations offered by Flagg. On the other side are the followers of Mother Abbigail who, like Job, endure great suffering at the hands of Flagg/Satan, but maintain their faith. This is not to say that they are perfect examples. While Job remains steadfast in his faith, Mother Abbigail has "cursed Him" in her heart and succumbs to pride.[46] King's use of pride highlights a key lesson of the Book of Job: the height of pride is to think that one is capable of knowing everything; including what happens on a divine plane. Guilty of this, God rebukes Job's friends who, despite their sound theology and insight into Job's situation, are unable to understand the nature of Job's suffering.[47] Mother Abbigail points to the problems of pride in the two passages from the Bible she leaves on the back of her note letting the Free Zone know that she has left the community, Proverbs 11:1–3 and 21:28–3.[48] The former argues that pride undermines the humbleness that serves as the source of wisdom while the latter contends that a prideful or obstinate person will never have wisdom or understanding.

The primary implication of this for King's understanding of political fear is the conclusion that liberalism is guilty of pride. While political fear is in tension with Enlightenment values, it cannot be controlled or

eradicated. Rather it must be accepted as an aspect of the natural order from which our politics, morals, and society emanate.[49] King demonstrates the pride inherent in liberalism through the conversion of Glen. From the moment Glen is introduced, King uses the sociologist to offer rational, Enlightenment explanations (e.g. reason and science) for what will happen to humanity, the nature of mankind, the necessity of society for mankind, and the nature of government.[50] It is not until he is sent to Las Vegas to deal with Flagg that Glen accepts faith and the limits of his own understanding. To his fellow travelers, Glen admits that "After fifty years of confirmed agnosticism, it seems to be my fate to follow an old black woman's God into the jaws of death. If that's my fate, then that's my fate. End of story."[51] Consequently, Glen is able to face Flagg and his impending death with courage because he has given himself over to the Lord. Glen leaves a testament to his faith when, echoing the words of Mother Abbigail, he writes on the wall of his cell: "I am not the potter, not the potter's wheel, but the potter's clay; is not the value of the shape attained as depended on the intrinsic worth of the clay as upon the wheel and the Master's skill."[52]

Glen's conversion is aided by the journey from Boulder to Las Vegas, which, at the direction of Mother Abbigail, requires them to walk, taking nothing but the clothes on their backs—no weapons, no camping equipment, no food.[53] Like pilgrimages of old, this serves as a means to purge themselves of attachment to material things, to diminish ego, and to empty their vessel, all of which allows them to accept the limitations of their own understanding.[54] When it comes to the ways of God, Larry points out, "We see through a glass darkly. It's a pretty dark glass to me, all right."[55] Like Glen, Larry emerges from the experience willing to accept whatever outcome, trusting that there is more at work than he understands. Although he does not know how, Larry believes that events are unfolding as God wills, and feels certain that his end will somehow bring about the end of Las Vegas, a belief that ultimately proves to be true.[56] As the examples of Glen and Larry demonstrate, it is only by recognizing the limits of one's knowledge and accepting the reality of political fear that appropriate or courageous action in the face of fear becomes possible.

Conclusion

This chapter uses the examples of Flagg's Las Vegas and Mother Abbigail's Free Zone to argue for the naturalness of political fear. Rather than a tool to be exploited for purposes of political power, political fear is an inherent aspect of life that informs and shapes political reasoning. That political fear is an aspect of the natural order is demonstrated by King's use of guns throughout *The Stand*. Specifically, guns are used to make a point about the relationship between political fear and political power. Beginning with his account of the government's reaction to the plague and ending with changes to the Free Zone, King uses the presence of guns to illustrate the fear induced between the asymmetry in power between those with guns (government) and those without guns (Stu and the people). The presence of guns is also prominent in Las Vegas. Upon their arrival in the West, Ralph observes that the people manning the road block do not look any different from them, to which Glen points out that there is a fundamental difference—those men are carrying guns, something not seen in the Free Zone.[57] However Stu, unable to complete the trip to Las Vegas due to injury, returns to the Free Zone to find significant changes. The new Marshall has petitioned the new Committee to allow him to arm his deputies.[58] King's evaluation of this transformation is offered by Stu who provides the following reflection on the request to arm the deputies of the Free Zone:

> What happens after you give guns to the deputies? he asked himself. What's the logical progression? … You give them bigger guns. And police cars. And when you discover the Free Zone community down in Chile or maybe up in Canada… maybe you send out search parties because after all—*that stuff [weapons from the pre-plague world] is lying around, just waiting to be picked up*.[59]

Stu's response summarizes a number of points King makes regarding the nature of political fear: that there is a logical progression or escalation to political fear and how a community responds; that all of this is a consequence of political organization; and that this is a struggle that cannot be resolved as the default response, political organization, actually exacerbates the problem. Ultimately, King's point is that political fear exists and that this is a fact of life. The best one can hope for is a temporary resolution as changes in political fear, whether external or internal in nature, will

always be used to justify alterations to the status quo and start the cycle over again. Following the ancient and Christian writers, King views political fear as an ally of our political and moral beliefs. When we forget this, we lose the ability to reason properly.

NOTES

1. Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.
2. Robin, *Fear*, 16.
3. Robin, *Fear*, 18.
4. Robin, *Fear*, 18.
5. Robin, *Fear*, 251.
6. King, *The Stand* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 344.
7. King, *The Stand*, 980; see also 1079.
8. King, *The Stand*, 953–54 and 983.
9. King, *The Stand*, 954.
10. King, *The Stand*, 954.
11. Robin, *Fear*, 29.
12. King, *The Stand*, 514.
13. See *Robin*, Fear, 64.
14. King, *The Stand*, 1007.
15. King, *The Stand*, 1029.
16. King, *The Stand*, 1036.
17. King, *The Stand*, 625.
18. King, *The Stand*, 653.
19. King, *The Stand*, 1079.
20. King, *The Stand*, 1080.
21. King, *The Stand*, 1079.
22. King, *The Stand*, 290, 294–95, and 982.
23. King, *The Stand*, 1085.
24. King, *The Stand*, 647.
25. King, *The Stand*, 648.
26. King, *The Stand*, 648.
27. King, *The Stand*, 668 and 648.
28. King, *The Stand*, 701.
29. King, *The Stand*, 702.
30. King, *The Stand*, 648.
31. King, *The Stand*, 648–49.
32. King, *The Stand*, 649–50.
33. King, *The Stand*, 649 and 707.

34. King, *The Stand*, 649.

35. King, *The Stand*, 917.

36. King, *The Stand*, 872 and 895–96.

37. King, *The Stand*, 905.

38. King, *The Stand*, 905.

39. King, *The Stand*, 906.

40. King, *The Stand*, 906–07.

41. King, *The Stand*, xii.

42. King, *The Stand*, 513 and 629. On Job as a model of perseverance and faithfulness, see James 5:11. All references to the Bible are to John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible, Large Print Edition* (Nashville: Word Bibles, 1997).

43. See Job 38:1–42:17.

44. Job 1:6–2:10. King, *The Stand*, 707.

45. King, *The Stand*, 514.

46. King, *The Stand*, 522 and 720.

47. Job 42:7.

48. King, *The Stand*, 760.

49. Robin, *Fear*, 10.

50. King, *The Stand*, 343–48, 386, 557, and 647–48.

51. King, *The Stand*, 1037–38.

52. King, *The Stand*, 917 and 1069.

53. King, *The Stand*, 919

54. King, *The Stand*, 1045–46.

55. I Corinthians 13:12. King, *The Stand*, 1044–45.

56. King, *The Stand*, 1074 and 1085.

57. King, *The Stand*, 1064.

58. King, *The Stand*, 1148.

59. King, *The Stand*, 1148.

Ghoulish Games

The Monsters Among Us: Realism and Constructivism in *Vampire: The Masquerade*

James D. Fielder

INTRODUCTION

White Wolf Publishing released *Vampire: The Masquerade* in 1991, the first game in their Storyteller rules system and World of Darkness horror roleplaying game setting. *Vampire: The Masquerade* is one of the world's most popular roleplaying games and was updated in 2018 with the fifth edition ruleset. Played in both tabletop and live-action roleplay (LARP) forms, *Vampire: The Masquerade*—also stylized as VtM—encourages players to explore ghastly supernatural powers with no limits on personal morality. White Wolf also positions VtM as an "effective metaphor" for political gaming.[1] If power drives international politics, then *Vampire: The Masquerade* is a premier experiential space for exploring emergent power dynamics, as vampires literally thirst for power over mortals and their own kind. What do the politics of horror mean when players embody the horrors themselves and when characters create supernatural polities spanning both in-game and real-world distances? To address these questions, I

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analyze emergent power and norm dynamics within *Vampire: The Masquerade* through Realism and Constructivism, two major theories of international relations, using a bricolage of lore review, player interviews, and live game observations. Analysis suggests that VtM both mimics and magnifies theoretical power and norm dynamics, particularly when played as live-action roleplay and living campaigns.

Roleplaying Games and Liminality

I applied a roleplaying game to analyze the politics of horror since roleplaying games function as natural experiments for assessing human decision making.[2] Roleplaying games (RPGs) are the structured creation and performance of narrative and characters in fictional worlds; with players performing character actions and defining their own goals with great narrative agency; with the setting designed around a fictional theme and managed by human or computer referee; and rules of varying complexity for character progression, task completion, and combat resolution.[3] RPGs also typically cast players as heroic characters who significantly influence the game world's story outcomes through their own abilities, and further encourage players to immerse themselves in their characters and practice alternative moralities and perspectives in a safe gaming environment.[4] Moreover, players may spend years immersed in shared game worlds and associated political structures, fundamentally altering the game world as their characters increase in power.

In VtM, players build their characters using a combination of abilities, skills, and disciplines, with high-level characters wielding god-like supernatural powers that upend the meaning of power in state-centric political analysis. Characters can be any gender and ethnicity, and players are encouraged to roleplay depraved characters that challenge their own morality.[5] It is through these vast powers and predatory behaviors that *Vampire: The Masquerade* transforms key tenets of Realism and Constructivism into monstrous revisions.

The concept of liminality makes RPGs theoretically interesting natural experiments for examining emergent political behavior, alternatively referred to as the *liminal state*, *the magic circle*, or *presence*. Drawn from literature on ritual, rites of passage, and gameplay, liminality occurs when participants cross the threshold from the real-world into a ritualized space, inside which the ritual becomes reality and events outside the ritualized space no longer exist.[6] Ritual performances inside the magical circle

emotionally and cognitively remain with participants long after they return from the liminal state. RPG players remember major in-game events for decades afterward and behaviors learned in-game can influence the player's real-life social interactions. This affords researchers the opportunity to observe sociopolitical interactions that are on the one hand fictionalized, but on the other hand real in the minds of the players.

Realism and Power, Constructivism and Norms

International relations theory is the study of systemic (or global) political interactions, primarily between states.[7] The three major theories of international relations are Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, respectively the study of power, cooperation, and norms that drive global politics. Other major theories in broad brush strokes include Feminism, Marxism, and The English School, which explain international power respectively though gendered power dynamics, social class disparities, and the history of ideas.[8]

States are the predominant actors of international relations since states are sovereign, holding recognized legal rights to defend borders, negotiate contracts, wage wars, and otherwise govern without interference from other states, let alone other political actors. However, different theories place different weight on the state: for example, Realism argues that only states have the capacity to amass, project, and sustain power. In contrast, Liberalism recognizes cooperative, economic, and socially powerful non-state actors and institutions such as the United Nations, The Red Cross, Google, and the Catholic Church.[9]

I chose Realism and Constructivism for my analytic lenses since I assessed their respective power and normative keystones offered the most immediate explanatory benefits for articulating VtM's supernatural violence. Although I briefly touch on Liberalism later in this chapter—Realism's primary theoretical counterpoint—I did not directly apply Liberalism during my analysis since VtM's core game mechanics rest on Realist conflict rather than Liberal cooperation.

In brief, Realism posits that states are the primary arbiters of power in an anarchic international system, as only states can truly amass, project, and sustain violent force.[10] Realism also finds little reason for states to trust other states, given that no higher authority (anarchy) governs their behavior.[11] States therefore live in perpetual self-help, in which they must constantly amass power against rival states.[12] Realism further measures power

through the global distribution of material capabilities such as natural resources, human capital, economic might, and military capability.

In contrast, Constructivism argues that actors behave toward political objects and other actors based on how they define and extract meaning from those objects and actors.[13] In other words, all political concepts are human made. In Constructivism, the fear of Realism's anarchic self-help model exists entirely inside human social definitions of anarchy and systemic social acceptance of those definitions. Constructivism further argues that norms change over time and that fear between aggressive states will evaporate if those states adopt cooperative norms.[14] While Constructivism recognizes resource capabilities, the paradigm also suggests power exists within social relationships, behavior, and reciprocity.[15] If states demonstrate consistent patterns of playing nice, then other states will likely follow.

What do real world power and norms mean, though, within a world of undeath, where vampires struggle for power among themselves while simultaneously hiding from the living? Whereas Realism measures power through the state, individual vampires wield supernatural powers rivalling that of states, let alone mundane resources gathered over centuries of undead existence. Whereas Constructivism measures power through normative networks, vampires create new templates while honoring long-standing traditional behaviors that vary little over time. I next turn to VtM's fifth edition rules to understand power and normative structures inside the World of Darkness.

Vampire: The Masquerade

VtM puts players into constant struggle between humanity and monstrosity, with vampires forever slaves to their primal supernatural need to drink the blood of the living.[16] VtM's lore spans dozens of editions, supplements, websites, player narratives, and video games, making my subsequent description a bare summary of the full canon. For my literature review I focused specifically on the most recent fifth edition rules, although the games and players I observed used rule variants from across the entire canon.

Unlike the state-centric approach of Realism, power in VtM originates with individual vampires who gain power through generational lineage to the biblical Caine, the first vampire cursed by God for killing Abel. To put a vampire's intrinsic power in perspective, a small Second Inquisition kill team can likely defeat a young, fourteenth-generation vampire. In

contrast, the 13 sleeping Antediluvians—the oldest, third-generation vampires who survived the biblical flood—will consume thousands of fellow vampires and entire mortal populations when awakened. "When the Ravnos [vampire clan] Antediluvian awoke, the combined strength of some of the most powerful supernaturals, the full force of a typhoon, and a nuclear weapon were not enough to kill him. It took three satellites, focusing the light of the sun, to finally kill him. After a week of fighting."[17] Elder vampire powers mimic those of the states, with the strongest elders doing what they can and the weak, youngest fourteenth-generation vampires suffering what they must, let alone the mortals who suffer their predations. However, an individual vampire's ability to wield and project power is in some ways checked and other ways magnified by larger actors.

Four major actors control power in VtM: the Camarilla, the Sabbat, the Anarch Movement, and the Second Inquisition. First, the Camarilla is the oldest, most organized, and closest VtM has to an international government and comes close to preventing anarchy.[18] Founded after the Catholic Church's First Inquisition in the fifteenth century and subsequent killing of thousands of vampires, the Camarilla was designed to hide Caine's children from humanity through the masquerade while at the same time used as a tool to consolidate elder power. The Camarilla's largest power rival is the Sabbat, vampires who argue that they should break the masquerade and enslave humanity. Third, the Anarch Movement is a loosely organized collective weary of the Camarilla's strict social protocols and elder-controlled hierarchy. As of VtM's fifth edition lore, Anarch leaders are increasingly seizing domains (defined below) and installing their own local governments. In addition to supernatural might, all three vampire groups also pursue material power through manipulating the affairs of mortal structures: raising empires, controlling financial markets, and supporting movements such as the enlightenment and capitalism to hide their affairs from mortal eyes.[19] Despite their supernatural powers, however, The Kindred's greatest threat is a mortal organization: The Second Inquisition, a global alliance between The Catholic Church and secular state powers secretly fighting the vampire threat. For example, in 2008 The Second Inquisition destroyed Clan Tremere's prime chantry (stronghold) in Vienna in one of the Inquisition's most collaterally destructive operations—and duly covered the attack by blaming Islamic extremists.[20] In VtM lore, mortal powers are as similarly lethal and immoral as the vampires they hunt.

The four major actors resemble Liberal institutions rather than sovereign states; however, I assess the four actors perform as proxies for Realist states. If anarchy means no power above, then there is no structure governing the Camarilla, Sabbat, and Anarchs (let alone unaligned vampires). Unlike Liberal institutions such as the United Nations designed to encourage cooperation and mitigate conflict, vampire institutions are designed to either preserve existing power hierarchies (Camarilla) or to claim greater power in the Realist sense (Sabbat and Anarch). Further, the Second Inquisition also mimics a state in that it has sovereign capacity to unleash and sustain force outside of Liberal legal structures. VtM's lore suggests, then, that all four actors behave like states as measured by Realism: anarchy, distrust, self-help, sovereignty, and control of material capabilities.

If inherent personal gifts and aggregate institutional powers define vampire power, then their normative behavior is governed by the six core traditions and clan structures that dictate social interactions, mores, restrictions, and behavioral templates.[21] Starting with the core traditions, *the masquerade* is arguably the primary social force governing vampire behavior. Despite their powers, vampires must disguise themselves from humanity in order to survive mortal depredations—particularly in the age of The Second Inquisition's advanced military technologies. Violating the masquerade is considered so grievous that those vampires who break it are subject to the blood hunt, described below. Second is *the domain*, territory controlled by a Prince or other leader with power doled out to vassals similarly to a medieval fiefdom. Per the fifth edition rules, three to five vampires require a population of 10,000 humans—and the more violent the city, the better for hiding their dietary needs.[22] The third and fourth traditions—*the progeny* and *the accounting*—detail rules governing a sire creating a childe (a new vampire), and that both the sire and childe are responsible for the childe's behavior. The progeny tradition is also useful for building alliances and reciprocity networks across generations, albeit "reciprocity" in the VtM sense demands careful social navigation, with potentially violent ends for vampires who evade power and normative structures. Fifth is *hospitality*, or that vampires must honor the domains they visit and present themselves to the domain leader, who will place the visitor under their protection if they present themselves well (or destroy them if the presentation goes poorly). The final core tradition is *Lex Talionis*—the blood hunt—when a vampire commits a crime so great a price is placed on their head. The core traditions blend Realism and Constructivism in that they present a microcosm of Realist-style power

structures with personal protocols governing behavior depending on social context.

Next, most vampires belong to one of 13 clans descending from the 13 Antediluvians, although only seven are documented thoroughly in VtM's fifth edition.[23] The deformed Nostferatu who skulk in ruins and sewers; the aristocratic Ventrue who actively pursue international political power; the social activists of Clan Brujah; the mentally unhinged but intellectually gifted Malkavians; the artistic and creative Toreador; the beast-like Gangrel; and the sorcerous Tremere. There are also the clanless Caitiff and the Thin-Blooded, the young and weak 14th generation. From a design perspective, clans maintain gameplay balance by offering players various strengths and weaknesses against other clans. However, clans are also *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s cultural language, with each clan comprised of a basket of personality traits, styles of dress, patterns of speech, aesthetic tastes, and other archetype behaviors to which players largely subscribe. This combination of clan powers and social norms fosters provocative political dynamics between players.

Denver by Night

For the Good of the City[24]: Lancaster, Prince of Denver

To further examine Realist power and Constructivist norms in VtM's game world, I observed approximately ninety players in two different live action games, then interviewed ten players in depth at a Denver-area gaming convention. I respectively asked players how they interpreted power and norms as respective proxies for Realism and Constructivism, both as players and as their characters. Real names are replaced in most cases with character names to respect player privacy, with a few exceptions.[25]

The first players I observed liminally transformed an American Legion Hall into The Temple Club, the Camarilla Prince of Denver's stronghold disguised as a dance club. This game was a significant production, involving approximately eighty players and a dozen Storytellers coordinating events. Per the local Chronicle, the Camarilla had recently seized Denver from Anarchs hunted for murdering Camarilla leaders in Colorado Springs. Although the Ventrue Prince Lancaster and his court filled the vacuum, power dynamics were very much in flux and subject to challenge. Most of the players knew each other and had played VtM for years. However, this

was only Denver by Night's second month of play, with the chronicle, characters, and overall political structure being entirely new to everyone.

I intended to simply observe, but the lead Storyteller encouraged me to play as a first-level Brujah street thug. As a first-level character I learned through experiential trial and error the importance of status, power, reputation, and relationships in the game. The game (fittingly) ended at midnight with an extraordinary display of elder power, with an Anarch traitor dragged before the Prince of Denver and summarily executed by silver bullet. This was the liminal state at its most electrifying: participating in a ritualized space, surrounded by players thoroughly immersed in character, and witnessing power displayed.[26] Crossing the magic circle as the researcher shaped this into a personal sensory experience difficult to articulate using traditional research methods.[27]

Returning to the core theoretical lenses, player Cory suggested that *Vampire: The Masquerade* leans toward realism in that successful play requires seizing resources and navigating rival power structures. At the same time, Cory noted that different clans embody normative templates and players typically behave according to the clan's behavioral expectations (albeit with deviations to individualize characters and enhance gameplay conflict).[28] For example, player Amadia said that Ventrue players rigorously follow their clan identities and are willing to give up power if their reputation is at stake. Amadia, a Malkavian, sticks closely to the clan's normative mental illness template, to include roleplaying physical quirks, speech, and costuming.[29]

Front Range Sabbat

I Drove All the Way to California to Get Eaten[30]: Denis Abrate, Storyteller

The second game I observed was considerably smaller, with eight participants gathering at a player's home. This group has met since 2011 and has consisted mostly of the same players. This lends the game narrative consistency over time; but, per one of the players (Josef), long-term player stability risks reducing in-game political conflict (several players also participated in Denver by Night, but noted this event was unrelated and did not influence the other game's narrative). This group is a Sabbat domain that controls Boulder, Colorado, largely through manipulation of local media and police. The evening's scenario involved players

collaborating to uncover recent and unsanctioned "Zeus juice" dealing (a blood magic drug) and investigating Anarch murders not perpetrated by the group. By the end of the game the players determined that Followers of Set were the likely culprits, a clan that traces their vampiric lineage to the Egyptian snake god Set rather than Caine.

Andrew suggested that most players leave their real life outside the game, but once inside the game they embody their characters wants, desires, and powers. Huizinga refers to this symbolic correspondence, or that participants "become the animal" they represent during rituals.[31] Both Denis and Andrew noted that LARP attracts players who revel in character immersion; in contrast, tabletop players tend to prefer the physicality of dice, maps, and rules (although the social aspect remains).[32] As an aside, Denis added he once drove from Colorado to a game in California where his character was immediately killed upon arrival, suggesting that political spatiality exists both in-game and across real distances in VtM depending on how the game is played.

Spatiality in both games was an unexpected but theoretically delightful surprise. Denver by Night and Front Range Sabbat are living games, or games where the outcomes of local play sessions are sent to regional and national coordinators, who then update the game narrative across every participating location. Moreover, characters and reputations carry across geographic boundaries in living games, meaning a low-level character can rise from local domain anonymity to great heights of power and fundamentally alter the game across actual geographic distances. Indeed, committed players will physically travel great distances in pursuit of a living game's narrative. This spatiality adds a layer of liminal political geography nonexistent in purely localized RPGs.

GhengisCon 42

I Like Playing Zealots Because Zealots Create Conflict[33]: Adam Lake, Player

In between both games I interviewed VtM players at GhengisCon, a Denver-area (Aurora) gaming convention. Again, I defined Realism and Constructivism to each interviewee, with focus on power and norms, and asked the interviewees to describe their interpretations of power and norms both within and outside of the game. As a low-powered Caitiff Anarch, Sreda values egalitarianism and democratic ideals, and is willing to

"rock the boat" and challenge in-game power structures.[34] Sreda is passionate about fostering political conflict in the game, which drives the narrative and associated thrill of play. Sreda also noted how the new Denver by Night game presented an exciting blank canvas for players to create new power structures, interpersonal dynamics, and the overall group's culture. Next, Adam Lake played Raphael, a Caitiff revolutionary willing to take risks against more-powerful players. He vehemently stuck to his character's values and was subsequently killed for his beliefs (falsely accused of assassinating the Prince of Montreal on Facebook, which triggered a blood hunt). Raphael amassed considerable personal power, with fellow players willing to travel to different physical game locations to defend his character. Adam added, "[players] can get far in the game if they are willing to do violence."[35]

Amadia, a powerful sixth-generation Malkavian elder, reiterated that domains are sovereign and have different cultures, with the city's real size influencing both the number of players and collective player behavior. For example, she noted that Denver's new, rough and tumble political dynamics encouraged spectacularly dramatic conflict, whereas the smaller, more established player base in Colorado Springs was significantly more cooperative.[36] Players Frances and Simon St. John also supported Amadia's observation. This aligns with data suggesting that RPG groups develop systems of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs particular to that group.[37] Simon St. John, a ninth-generation Ventrue elder, embraces unhindered and ruthless power projection, which presents a dramatic contrast in norms. Outside of the game, Simon is a liberal, pacifist, and social justice supporter, but, in character, Simon is willing to use violence to achieve objectives, which sometimes uncomfortably violates his real-life values.[38]

Frances, a seventh-generation Malkavian Elder, hates the Tremere and allies with the Toreador. Frances uses physical signaling to project power (dress, speech, and bearing), applying the trappings of power to stare down lesser characters.[39] Frances, Simon, and Hope Renae also suggest that people play VtM to experience intense interpersonal drama and to experience fun from conflict and the sense of being in danger at all times.[40] Hope Renae of Clan Tremere defines power as the ability to pull strings and back unilateral words with actions, but also values in-game cooperation as a means to gain resources. Hope Renae also notes that common normative behaviors in-game include "the wallflower who just watches the game, the combat junkie who loves to get into fights, [and] the political

nut who loves the influence and political game."[41] Josef Adamczyk, a Tremere, defined power as the capacity or ability to influence or direct the actions of others or events.[42] Josef observed the normative difficulty players have in roleplaying evil, which aligns with literature arguing that players are generally unwilling to play as evil characters in games with moral decision systems[43]: "there is so much effort put into wanting to be the misunderstood good guy, the tragic hero placed into bad circumstances, the truly good but does bad things and doesn't understand why they don't always get good in return … I want to be the bad guy, and with that acceptance, I know that people will get their feelings hurt."

Discussion

What does *Vampire: The Masquerade* tell us about the politics of horror, or even ourselves? Slightly turning an opening quote, VtM is a fucked-up place: lore review, game observation, and player interviews suggest that not only are Realism and Constructivism useful for examining norms and power inside the game space, but the game also magnifies each paradigm's most disturbing aspects. Power is measured on a supernatural scale and norms are characterized by predation rather than cooperation. The world of VtM represents Realism's pursuit of power writ large and Constructivism's normative behaviors at their most depraved. Moreover, VtM players actively enjoy crossing through the liminal state to roleplay these politics of power, politics of deviance, and ultimately the politics of horror.

But does immersion in such doom and gloom only represent the worst politics has to offer? While the *game* represents a monstrous political world, the *play* creates an environment in which participants can safely explore alternative identities and political ideas. Characters also must interact and cooperate to achieve game objectives, which, in turn, strengthens bonds between the players. Returning to liminality, players learn real-life power and normative behaviors through practice in the game world, even if the experiences are horrific in nature. To wit, both Frances and Simon St. John noted that social dynamics experienced in-game positively influenced their real-life social interactions. Although I asked interviewees to describe power and norms both as characters and as players, for brevity I largely focused on character viewpoints in this chapter. The influence of RPG participation on real-life political activity (and vice versa) is a question I am interested in pursuing further.

Moreover, for future research the Liberal, Feminist, and Marxist paradigms would be equally as fruitful in examining emergent political phenomena inside VtM, let alone other RPG systems: to wit, what does Liberalism have to say about supernatural institutions or cooperative behaviors? Using Feminism to explore gendered player and character power in a supernatural setting? Can we apply Marxism to assess how players navigate in-character social class status? Or, applying the English School to tease out VtM's societal dynamics? Moreover, the combination of game rules and liminality suggests that roleplaying games are useful experiments for examining political phenomena. RPG rules can be applied or modified to control gameplay experiments, while liminality creates conditions for observable emergent political processes among players. Finally, although localized RPGs are rich in observer/participant data, living games offer researchers the opportunity to build fun in and assess RPG-based experiments across distributed populations—and perhaps experience liminality as a player themselves. For now, though, lock your doors, as I cannot guarantee your safety in a World of Darkness.

NOTES

1. Ibid., 344.
2. Gary Allan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 54; Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab, *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Philip Sabin, *Simulating War: Studying Conflict through Simulation Games* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014): 5, 17.
3. Andrew Bryer and Francesco Crocco, *Introduction*, in *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*, eds. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2016): 8; Sean Patrick Fannon, *The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer's Bible* (Jacksonville: Obsidian Studios, 1999): 21; Wizards of the Coast, *Players Handbook: Dungeons & Dragons* (Renton, 2014); José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding,

"Definitions of 'Role-Playing Games,'" in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, eds. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018): 46.

4. Jonathan M. Bradley, "'Do you want to be Dr. Frankenstein or Edna Pontellier?': How Getting into Character Enhances Literary Studies," in *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*, eds. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2016): 124; Cover, *Narrative*, 55, 124; Francesco Crocco, "The RPG Classroom: Re-Purposing Game Mechanics for the Gamification of Education," in *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*, eds. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2016): 278; Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2010): 58; Antero Garcia, "Teacher as Dungeon Master: Connected Learning, Democratic Classrooms, and Rolling for Initiative," in *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*, eds. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2016); Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016): 2; Andreas Lieberoth and Jonas Trier-Knudsen, "Psychological Effects of Fantasy Games on Their Players: A Discourse-Based Look at Evidence," in *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*, eds. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2016): 56; Timothy Morton, "The Worlds of Dungeons and Dragons," in *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy*, eds. Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (Chicago: Open Court Pub, 2012): 151; Bonnie A. Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010): 103; Waskul, Role-Playing Game, 31; Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 76.

5. Vampire, 40, 42, 139.

6. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10, 14; Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, 7; Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 77, 101; Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982): 24.

7. David A. Lake, "The State of International Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, eds. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 41, 45, 55.

8. For a brief introduction see Jonathan Cristol, "International Relations Theory." *Oxford Bibliographies*, 27 September 2017. Available at https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0039.xml#obo-9780199743292-0039-div1-0010 (accessed 23 September 2019).

9. Arthur A. Stein, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, eds. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 204–205.

10. Lake, "The State of International Relations," 41, 45, 55

11. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001): 30–31, 35; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167; Alexander Wendt. "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Great Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 407–408.

12. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 32; Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy* 110 (1998): 31; Wendt, *Constructing*, 72.

13. Wendt, *Anarchy*, 396–397; Ruggie, *Cooperation*, 856.

14. Jack Snyder, "One World, Rival Theories," *Foreign Policy* no. 145 (2004): 60.

15. Wendt, *Constructing*, 73; Wendt, *Anarchy*, 397.

16. Vampire, 236, 343.

17. Rob Purdy, interviewed by James D. Fielder, Personal Interview, Denver, CO, 30 May 2019.

18. Vampire, 37.

19. Ibid., 48, 344.

20. Ibid., VtM 39, 56.

21. Ibid., 51–52.

22. Ibid., 325.

23. Ibid., VtM 65–110.

24. Denver by Night, Denver Colorado, 9 February 2019.

25. Several interviewees asked to be identified by real names.

26. In a moment of breaking-the-fourth-wall levity, after being shot, the condemned Anarch turned to the crowd and shouted, "if you think I'm going to make a dramatic fall in a dress and heels, you're out of your damned minds!"

27. For a visual example, I recommend watching *World of Darkness: The Documentary* (TriCoast Entertainment: 2018). Trailer available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UMf8SgSH5A (last accessed 1 September 2019).

28. Cory Williamsen, interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, *Denver by Night*, Denver, CO, 9 February 2019.

29. "Amadia," interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, GenghisCon 42, Denver, CO, 23 February 2019.

30. Denis Abrate, interviewed by James D. Fielder, Front Range Sabbat, Denver, CO, 1 March 2019.

31. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 25; Turner, *Ritual*, 40.
32. Andrew Kempf and Denis Abrate, interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, Front Range Sabbat, 1 March 2019.
33. Adam Lake, interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, GhengisCon 42, Denver, CO, 23 February 2019.
34. "Sreda," interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, GhengisCon 42, Denver, CO, 23 February 2019.
35. Lake, GhengisCon, 23 February 19.
36. Amadia, GenghisCon, 23 February 19.
37. Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 136.
38. Simon St. John, interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, GhengisCon 42, Denver, CO, 23 February 2019.
39. "Frances," interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, GhengisCon 42, Denver, CO, 23 February 2019.
40. Frances, Simon, Hope Renae, GenghisCon, 23 February.
41. Hope Renae, interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, GhengisCon 42, Denver, CO, 23 February 2019.
42. Josef, interviewed by James D. Fielder, personal interview, Denver by Night, Denver, CO, 9 February 2019.
43. Amanda Lange, "'You're Just Gonna be Nice': How Players Engage with Moral Choice Systems," *Journal of Games Criticism* 1, no. 1 (2014); para 1.

Anxiety in Suburbia: The Politics of Gaming in *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom*

Michelle Salerno

The hummer peels away from his mangled body, no one knows exactly what happened to Snickers the cat. It doesn't look like Snicker was hit by a car—it's much worse. Dad assumes that his son is just sad about losing the cat: "Everything dies," he says. His son, terrified by the event, remains silent—something else happened. How can he explain all the sick things he and his friends did to Snickers? They played a video game, that's all. Now, Snickers is really dead and police sirens are filling the neighborhood. This moment from Jennifer Haley's 2008 play *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* (*Neighborhood*) is one example of the uncomfortable merging of reality and fantasy that yanks audiences fearlessly through the looking glass of the horror video game at the center of her play. In an age of political anxiety about the role of digital technology, *Neighborhood* forces its audience to feel deeply uneasy about its integration in our lives.

Based in the real world of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), Haley centers the popularity of gaming culture in her play, using it as a foundation for horror in suburbia. Through her work, Haley has built her reputation as a profound theatrical voice known for merging contemporary digital culture, tropes and images from the

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horror genre, and social critique to create unnerving explorations of how technology reveals our flawed humanity. She's less interested in the machines turning against us than what our responses to technology communicate about ourselves and our fears. When *Neighborhood* was first produced at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre (Louisville, KY) in 2008, Haley's use of horror set her apart. Marc Masterson, the former Artistic Director of Actors Theatre, noted that the play stood out from the highly selective pool because it was "scary" and "you don't read a lot of plays that are frightening."[1] Since that production, *Neighborhood* has been extremely popular, including on many university campuses and a 2015 New York premiere directed by Hollywood powerhouse director Joel Schumacher at the Flea Theatre.

Like so many horror creators, Haley's invested in far more than the jump scare, the gore, or the shock. She wants us to think about the source of our fear. In her 2015 *American Theatre* interview on *Neighborhood*, Haley discusses the "frame" of the game to analyze "the contemporary family" living in the "underbelly of the suburbs."[2] Her examination of the family leads to a broader political criticism: advancements in technology exacerbate disconnection, apathy, and estrangement. Haley amplifies her critique through utilizing gaming as the scaffolding of the play itself, manipulating her audience through the ambiguity of what's real and what's in the game world. In this chapter, I focus on a broad reading of the play that stresses Haley's adept merging of classic horror symbols and tropes with gaming culture through distorting the bounds of reality and reflecting the growing political anxiety of the merging between the digital and the real.

Dead Inside: Zombies as Parent Avatars

Haley's play focuses on an upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood where teenagers have recently begun playing a video game, "Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom." The goal of the game is simple: players hunt in a digital neighborhood collecting useful items, avoiding the Neighborhood Association, and killing zombies until they make it to the Last Chapter, defeat the zombies in the Final House, and escape the neighborhood for good. The neighborhood within the game looks identical to the neighborhood of the real-life teenage players through the use of satellite technology and, in a gruesome twist, the parent zombies look identical to the players' real parents through the use of facial recognition technology, far

more prevalent in our everyday lives now than when the play was first performed in 2008. Little do players know that the game has a mind of its own, quickly violent digital fantasies start to appear in the real world. The play slowly builds toward a violent climax, but ultimately leaves its reading open, allowing the audience to decide the digital from the real on their own.

Utilizing one of the classic horror figures, the zombie, Haley links her work with the long tradition of the undead as avatar for societal anxiety. This is why the particular use of the enemy of the game as zombified parents is deliciously conceived. Popular cultural history of the zombie image has multiple strains, but they culminate in George A. Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* and, as in Romero's film, Haley also crafts her zombies as ordinary Americans. Zombies have a history of functioning as vehicles of political allegory—for example, racial tensions or fear of communism—depicting a group rising of the undead to enact slow, brainless killing offers a rife narrative tool for signifying unspoken fears.

The constructing of parental figures as zombies reveals the emblematic teen feeling of parents as conformingly oppressive, lacking respect for their children's individuality. In scenes of desperate longing, both parents and teens try to establish real emotional connection, but something gets in the way: a word taken the wrong way, a hurt feeling, too many years of angst and anger. Parents, as DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince reminded us in 1988, just don't understand. Zombies function as a horde, a swarm of outstretched arms and gnashing teeth mindlessly collaborating in the goal to re-create themselves. This hybridity between parent and zombie is amplified by the use of facial recognition technology in the game; players aren't just killing any parents or parental figures—they are killing an identical representation of their own parents. MMORPGs are already critiqued for their level of violence, but Haley doubles down here, almost playing with gaming critics with this malevolent twist. Politically, and psychologically, the symbolism is clear—the younger generation becomes themselves through the destruction of the old world, symbolized by their murdering of their parents.

As the game starts to have violent results in the real world—remember the managed and abused body of Snickers the cat—some teens stop playing the game, begging parents take action to stop the impending crisis. Instead of finding highly functioning authority figures, the teens discover that their parents are inept, dead inside from the numbing loneliness of their lives. Parents, desperate to save their children, are either unwilling or

incapable of taking action. The fantastical zombie parents of the game are a deadly force, but the real parents are lifeless and zombified.

In scene 3, "the living room," Kaitlyn—who abruptly stopped playing the game—begs Vicki (Tyler's mom) to search her son's room and investigate the game. Vicki interrupts her plea, "no/he needs the right/to his own/privacy/and we give him/everything/he needs." Kaitlyn doesn't divulge what she saw Tyler do in the game, but it's enough to petrify her. Vicki, despite the clear warning from Kaitlyn, chooses to look away. Her use of the phrase "everything/he needs" highlights that Vicki believes, or hopes, that the love of family and the providing of needs and possessions will eventually guide him back to her. Significantly, Vicki's whole conversation with Kaitlyn was a hunt for information: She even offers her a glass of wine in an effort to coax knowledge out of her, because she is deeply concerned about her son's gaming habit. However, when Kaitlyn suggests Tyler has troubling things in his room, it becomes clear that Vicki can't face the reality of her son needing her parental authority. Certainly, navigating teen privacy with adult concern is a pivotal element of parenting, but the implication here is that Vicki uses the concept of privacy to avoid acting on behalf of her son. Vicki knows something is wrong, Kaitlyn validates the fear she had before the conversation began, but the more the concern grows the less she can face it. This parental apathy becomes part of the play's mounting suspense—the audience hopes that the adults will face the growing violence, but they keep turning away.

The representation of parents as zombies connects the play to the history of zombies as anxiety-ridden symbols of group think and conformity. Within the world of the game, teens kill zombies in order to move toward escaping the neighborhood, positioned as freedom, crafting a symbolic manifestation of the desire to overcome the authority of parents and create independent lives. Throughout the text, Haley brilliantly repurposes the horror cliché of the "call coming from inside the house" through her conceit that teenage players are working together to hunt and kill (representations of) their parents from within their own homes. In blurring the lines between the real and the digital world, Haley exploits the symbolic fantasy and manipulates her audience into the horrific uneasiness that groups of teenagers might be working together to kill their parents and enjoying it. The homogeneity of the suburbs manifests itself physically by its monster equivalent—hordes of undead lookalikes grunting toward no greater goal than contagious numbness.

The Horror Within: The Façade of the Suburbs

The location of the suburbs, the real-world site for this play, and the game within it, immediately conjures images of identical houses close together on quaint landscaped streets as children play on their bikes in peace away from the city. The idea that this idealistic space harbors a rot within is so prevalent now that's its now banal, an idea perhaps best illustrated by the iconic opening shot from David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) as the camera takes the viewer from white picket fences to the seething underbelly of the grass in mere seconds. The Neighborhood Association (NA), in the game world, supports the zombie parents, connecting all the adults in the community as enemies to the teen players. In real life, these organizations tend to maintain suburban community standards, often times creating a norming effect across neighborhoods, dictating the look of homes and the behavior of neighbors. This organization of community adults eradicates conformity in order to construct the uniform and perfect façade of the suburbs. In positioning the NA as the protective force of the zombie enemy, the illusion of the flawlessness of the suburbs is dispensed with and quickly destroyed, its rubble the perfect foundation for Haley's piercing horror narrative.

The first scene of the play, "the kitchen," demonstrates how the banality of suburbs is quickly revealed as a façade, an idyllic performance harboring a darker force. Trevor comes over to Makaela house to play the game; they both go to the same high school but are mostly social acquaintances. In Makaela's family kitchen, the conversation shifts wildly through privileged suburban teenage concerns—who's doing and selling drugs, chocolate milk or grape juice, getting a new hummer after the old one was totaled—until they land on playing "Neighborhood 3." Makaela knows her brother is hiding the game in his room, and Trevor responds: "I'm dying to play Neighborhood 3." These teenagers demonstrate their cultural savviness of the horror genre, echoing the self-referential knowledge of the teens in films like *Scream* (1996). Makaela immediately responds, "that sounds like something/out of a horror movie/like you're about to play this videogame/and you think it's just a game/but actually it's real." She proclaims that she has no intention of playing the "creepy" game with Trevor. Makaela reveals the violently seductive nature of the zombie-killing game, describing watching her brother "beat the shit/out of those things" and "spend a little too much time with them/after they're dead," including that she's seen her brother and his friends sexually mutilate the

"girl zombies" in the game. Hiding in charming suburban homes, groups of teenage boys enact brutal predatory fantasies, terrifying the only girl present with their expressions of sexual violence, revealing the darkness within the suburbs.

Multiple scenes present the parents of teenage protagonists as fragile and broken, concealing equally upsetting experiences from each other despite their close proximity as neighbors. Parents are routinely powerless over their teenagers. Steve and Leslie bond over their alarm at the behavior of their game-playing mutual teenagers, yet their comradery quickly turns to revelations of their private unhappiness. Steve's wife has left the family, and Leslie is in the midst of planning an intervention for her alcoholic husband. They discuss taking their kids' computers away, only to agree that they will just go over to each other's houses to play the addictive game. A few scenes later, Barbara, desperately searching for her son, talks to her neighbor Tobias while he mows the lawn; long the community outsider since the suspicious death of his daughters, their interaction is stilted and ominous. Through either his penchant for violence or his recluse status, Tobias discerns the coming violence and implies that Barbara use hedge clippers to murder her son before it's too late. Haley capitalizes on the prevalent image of the deterioration and decay in suburbs through the use of the game as exacerbating the normal distancing and rejection between parents and teenagers. The site of the suburbs allows Haley to set her play and her game within the heart of the iconic American ideal, as digital and real violence merge, the more anxious her characters and her audience become.

Digital Culture on Stage

Haley integrates central elements from the immersive culture of MMORPGs throughout her text to provide the foundation for her horror game and its violent consequences. In real life, these games provide individual enjoyment and a communal experience through the ability to communicate with other users. Players create an avatar, a digital figure that represents themselves or the version of themselves they want to perform in the game. Through these avatars, players can interact socially through a combination of chatting through text, speaking through (generally) headset microphones, and collaborating or competing with other players. MMORPGs have also provided a rich field for scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of game studies. Games such as *Final Fantasy* and *World of*

Warcraft, both of which now boast multiple versions in their series, attract millions of online subscribers who immerse themselves in these digital worlds as the character they create. For an understanding of their scope, *World of Warcraft*, still regarded as the most widespread version of this kind of game, was awarded the 2009 Guinness World Record for most popular MMORPGs for having ten million online subscribers.[3]

This level of popularity has engendered concern for the centrality of gaming in lives of players, including the mental health effects of playing, the depictions or consequence of digital violence, and the potential for gaming addiction. Considering the multiple factors at play, scholarship is unlikely to prove that playing video games, even to an excessive degree, is the cause of health problems, but it certainly could contribute or exacerbate already present issues. Haley's play does not rely on intimate knowledge of gaming, but there are references to the use of avatars, the use of gaming jargon, and the plot relies on the ability of teens to communicate with each other while they play the game. The virtual world they create in the game becomes more real for the teens than the real world of the suburbs their parents exist in. This is precisely where Haley sees the horror potential in the popularity of replicating and manipulating digital culture on stage.

Blurring the Digital and the Real

Neighborhood is most impressive in the ways in which it anchors its symbols (zombies and the suburbs) within a horror narrative that merges the gaming culture of MMORPGs and innovative dramatic structure, blurring the lines between the digital and the real. Haley integrates several complex elements to create the pervasive feeling of anxiety in her audience: setting, character, use of walkthroughs in her dramatic structure, and the manipulation of language. These components function seamlessly to present disoriented characters, increasingly concerned about encroaching violence from the digital world, to an audience that is itself unsure precisely if they are watching reality or a game world.

Haley creates this ambiguity in her audience from the beginning through the establishing details of setting and character descriptions. The setting for the narrative, described as "right now in the virtual reality of a video game or suburbia," establishes that the audience will vacillate in their understanding of where the text takes place, a purposeful maneuver to create discomfort and distortion. Much of the time the setting is

muddled since the game world looks identical to the real world—the audience, and sometimes the characters, don't know if they are within the world of the game or the real world of the play.

Haley's character descriptions also muddle reality through their presentation as gaming avatars of family positions rather than realistic theatrical characters. There are four character types (mother, father, son, and daughter) that correspond to the traditional heterosexual family unit, the prototypical residents of the suburban American family. In using types, Haley defines her characters first by their generational and gendered position in the family. The use of archetypes also impedes a sense of emotional attachment to characters, allowing the audience to see the type unit over individual characters. In this way, Haley separates these types from any sense of shared experience—they are always playing on their own isolated from communal experiences.

This choice reveals another integration of gaming culture, akin to using avatars in game play. Generally, a MMORPG player can select to play as a type of character or create an avatar based in the personalized modification of an already established type. Haley intensifies this connection to gaming by providing two casting options: one by type and one by individual character. The cast can be four actors, each playing multiples of the same type, or expanded to 15, an actor for each separately named character. Even if a larger cast is used, the play, as written, does not allow for a mixing of types—for example, daughter types will never interact with other daughter types because that character was written to be played by one actor. Haley opts to reject the use of realism-based traditional theatrical characters, with specific background information provided; instead, she embraces the gaming world's use of archetype.

Haley's culminating achievement of the blurring of the digital world and the theatrical world is her architectural use of "walkthroughs" that precede the traditional dramatic scenes, sharing a scene number and location. In gaming terminology, walkthroughs are visual or text guides that help players navigate game play by providing advice and experience in winning the game. They offer instructions or hints for game players to navigate the game with greater ease, an omnipotent voice that guides the quest of the game. Haley builds walkthroughs into the play as short instructional monologues that seem to guide the players of the game through each level. Although walkthroughs are meant to provide clarity to game plays in the real world, Haley uses them in a more traditional horror genre sense, building and increasing suspense as each one teases

information about the violence in the game without giving away too much detail. Walkthroughs reference players collecting domestic weapons (hammers, barbeque forks, and hedge clippers), an unexplained pool of blood, the brutalization of a cat (Snickers), a reference to a player's Ruthless Rating (a life force in the game that raises with each violent act committed), and an eerie welcome mat that morphs "Welcome" into the words "Help me."

The walkthroughs provide intrigue, a window into the players view of the game world, but the connection between them and the dramatic scenes are purposely obscured. Walkthroughs provide a fundamental element to the play; the game is built into the narrative structure introducing each traditionally dramatic scene. The easy presumption would be the walkthroughs are the players' view of the game and the scenes are the real world of the suburb; however, the lines between those worlds is consistently blurred. For example, one walkthrough urges the breaking of a garden gnome that conceals needed information for the game; frighteningly the following scene begins with a broken garden gnome. Another walkthrough mentions defeating a sentient, demonic Baracuda (the leading automatic pool cleaning machine) following a scene where a teen is asked to use one to clean his family pool.

The enmeshing of these components allows for some freedom in directorial vision over a production of the play. Haley does not specify how the walkthroughs should be performed on stage, leaving it up to productions to decide how they will depict them and connect them to the narrative. Several productions have used voiceovers or projection while others use a game player who speaks the lines directly to the audience. Regardless of how they are executed, viewers of the play are brought in as players of the game through this device. The integration of walkthroughs as an aspect of the dramatic plot positions the audience in dual roles: theatrical observers and implicit game player. This use of duality, observer and player, echoes game playing while also deepening the obvious theatricality already implicit in a live theatre event: the actor as avatar for the character and the audience as avatar for the characters on stage.

In positioning the audience as the players, Haley is forcing the audience to assume the role of a game player and see the world through their eyes while also observing the action as viewers. The writing of the walkthroughs supports this reading since they are entirely imperative commands directed at the audience: "exit the house," "do not enter this closet unless you picked up the Weed Wacker in Chapter Four," or "take this path to a

wooden gate use your Hammer to smash the lock enter the back yard and proceed to the pool." Written in this way, Haley uses walkthroughs to break the fourth wall, the imaginary boundary between the performers and the audience, through their direct address to the audience. Yet, they are followed by traditional dramatic scenes that maintain the conceit of theatre realism. Haley supports her ambiguous setting and the blurring of fantasy and reality in the game through manipulation of her audience and the dramatic form of the work. On a dramatic level, linking the walkthrough to the following traditional realistic scene, Haley guides her audience through the nebulous passages of the disorienting play, never quite sure what's real or what's the game.

The language throughout the majority of *Neighborhood* is jarring and perplexing, shared by all the characters (and in the walkthroughs) until the final two scenes, creating a definitive split within the construction of the play. This stilted syntax and diction could be best described as a transcript of a conversation with Siri, Apple's digital assistant, or how teenagers sound if you read their text messages as dialogue. The majority of the language in the play is devoid of capitalization, distinct sentence construction or punctuation, frequently uses ellipses to demonstrate thinking or time passing, and re-creates the stiff language of texts through one word or short responses. Haley visually represents this language through the use of a column with extremely short line lengths making even longer monologues seem disjointed.

The first eight scenes of the play share a common visual and language construction. Each is preceded by walkthroughs, with the scene and the walkthrough sharing a title and a scene number, and they have the same informal text-style that replicates language in digital spaces. While the ninth and tenth scenes, presented without walkthroughs, present visually as traditional realistic theatre scenes with longer paragraphs and more conversation dialogue. The movement of the final two scenes away from digitized language and into the real seems to signal that they definitively occur in a real-world setting, a teenage boy's bedroom as he plays the game. This scene presents the play's culminating horror climax, gory and disturbing manifestation of the consequences of not being able to discern the real from the fake.

As the play progresses, the violence of the game bleeds out into the real world, leading to the play's ambiguous matricidal climax. In scene nine, "the final house," the audience sees teenage Blake playing the game as his mom tries urgently to get his attention. She is able to finally get through

to him and they have one silent moment of reciprocal kindness. However, Blake has been in the game too long; he can't turn off his belief that his mother, Joy, is the enemy. As she reaches out to hug him, Blake brutally murders his mother with a claw hammer, thinking he's killing her digital zombie version. The stage directions indicate that blood should spurt and cover the stage. It's a shocking and gruesome moment of violence in a play that has mentioned brutality but not visually depicted it. The play seems to embrace teenage rage and nihilism depicting the presumably inevitable result of warped, soulless technology infiltrating contemporary life. However, Haley has one final ambiguous surprise in store for her audience.

The final scene, "the bedroom," has only one word: "Mom?" as Blake, in an empty room, pushes himself away from his computer horrified by what he's done. The audience is immediately whisked away from the frenetic viciousness of the previous scene to something uncanny in its ordinariness. What does Blake's question mean? Did he kill his mom in the real world or in the game world? If he killed her in the real world, where is her body and the blood that covered the room? In the final moment of the text, the audience is left ultimately unsure if the gory act actually occurred, as the blood and horror of the scene before immediately disappear before the last scene.

The dramatic shift in language in these last two scenes—from the digital to the real—seemed to provide ample evidence that they existed in the real world; yet, it seems likely from the content of the scenes that this may not be the case. I see this as a pivotal and compelling final moment of ambiguity for the audience. Haley provides the climactic moment of violence, the resolution of the murderous dread that has engulfed the play, only to once again cause her audience to question the veracity of the moment. It's a final manipulation of her audience that takes the previous question: "What's real and what's the game?" and morphs it into "Wait, was any of it supposed to be real?" In this reading, Blake's pushing away from the computer in the final scene is an indication that the murder of his mother was simply, albeit gruesomely, the resolution of the game's ultimate goal, to kill the zombie-parent and escape "the final house." He's frightened by his actions in the game and, after winning, searches for his mom due to his inability to tell the digital world from the real world.

In this narrative, with its uneasy marriage between the real and the digital, I don't see it as comforting that Blake, perhaps, didn't murder his mother. Instead, I offer that Haley's purposeful use of realistic language in

these final scenes points her audience to an even more disturbing revelation: The game world can masquerade as the real world, but also, and more importantly, the real world can conceal the game world. The play's terrifying conclusion reflects the increasing political anxiety that the invasion of digital culture is not just enviable but shockingly imperceptible.

Almost a decade before the release of the wildly popular mobile game "Pokémon Go" in 2016, Jennifer Haley had already envisioned a horror play that relied on augmented reality, an advanced technology that is now fairly quotation. The incorporation of this advanced technology into MMORPGs is now the most popular technological trend, providing an interactive experience for participants where their real-world surroundings are enhanced by digital information creating a seamlessly hybrid environment. Players' avatars travel in the real world as the game uses satellite technology to map the surroundings into the game. The coming ubiquity of augmented reality and the prevalence of facial recognition—from the growing affordability of home virtual reality machines to its integration in smart phone technology—make Haley's narrative more prescient now than ever before. The innovation of *Neighborhood*'s narrative is the way in which Haley uses the horror game (with its use of zombies and the rotten suburban dream) to manipulate her audience into feeling and facing the disorienting political anxiety of the increasing indiscernibility of the digital and the real, the false from the true.

Notes

1. Tran., Diep. "In the Uncanny Valley with Jennifer Haley" *American Theatre* November 17, 2015. https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/11/17/in-the-uncanny-valley-with-jennifer-haley/
2. Ibid.
3. Glenday, Craig. 2009. Craig Glenday (ed.). *Guinness World Records 2009*. Random House, Inc. 241.

Terrifying Television

The Exorcist and a New Kind of American Television Horror

Lynn Kozak

In the fall of 2016, the week Donald Trump was elected, a FOX television show with a familiar title was quietly breaking all the rules and expectations of both its genre and its source material. *The Exorcist* was putting its progressive politics front and center and arguing for a new kind of American horror, one where diverse heroes were quite literally fighting evil and defeating demons, demons that took advantage of personal traumas within the context of America's vast inequalities. The show took the familiar horror tropes that the original *Exorcist* had introduced—the possessed white girl, the damaged and lonely priests—and what they might represent—a possible conservative backlash to both feminine and queer intimacy and

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sexuality—and turned them on their heads, making way for a worldview where diversity and chosen families were the bulwarks against true evil.

The press caught onto this phenomenon at the time. Not only did critics like the show—*Vox* called it "terrific,"[1] *Gizmodo*, "the best horror show on TV,"[2] *Den of Geek* "the best horror reboot since *Hannibal*"[3]—but they understood that it was changing popular conceptions of American horror. *Mashable* claimed that the show was "rewriting all the rules of horror,"[4] while *SlashFilm* said that the *Exorcist* was "changing television horror for the better"[5] and *The Daily Beast* saw the show as "breaking ground for diversity in horror."[6] It's just a shame not many people watched: after two seasons of low ratings, *The Exorcist* was canceled.[7]

ORIGINS

The original 1973 film *The Exorcist*, directed by William Friedkin and written by William Peter Blatty after his own best-selling novel, also broke horror film expectations, becoming a blockbuster that garnered diverse audiences: it remains the ninth highest grossing film in the United States, finally only surpassed within the horror genre by 2017's *It*. But as popular among audiences as the film was, the press found it disturbing in its gory excesses, while scholars found it stifling in its conservative politics.

The Exorcist tells the story of the possessed 12-year-old Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair), as her mother, internationally famous actress Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn), enlists the help of two priests—one an exorcist, Father Lankaster Merrin (Max Von Sydow), the other a psychiatrist, Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller)—to rid her of the demon. While the girl and her mother ultimately escape the demon's grasp, the fight takes the lives of both priests. The film might best be known for some of its most shocking images: Regan projectile vomiting, Regan's head spinning completely around, Regan violently stabbing her crotch with a crucifix, Father Karras's leap out of Regan's bedroom window to his death. Film scholars saw this story as a rebuke to threats against the patriarchal family, from the MacNeils' family arrangement (Regan's father is absent, Chris might be having an affair with her director, Burke Dennings), to Regan's burgeoning curiosity about sex, to the fraternity and celibacy of priests. For them, *The Exorcist* represents a conservative response to the gay and women's liberation movements of its day.[8] The film even explicitly expresses its conservatism, when Chris MacNeil, starring in a film (within the film), chastises a group of protestors at a university: "Hey c'mon we're all concerned with human rights for god's sake, but the kids who wanna get an

education have a right too!… If you wanna effect any change you'll have to do it within the system."

Despite these conservative shadings, *The Exorcist* presents a complicated political picture. After all, it's the combined efforts of Regan's tenacious, single, wealthy mother and a long-suffering and willfully impoverished priest that save her, not the institution of the church. The film presents both conservative and progressive possibilities: perhaps Chris's single mothering and Regan's burgeoning sexuality invite the demon in, but the restoration of the family that the horror provides is a return to Chris's and Regan's thriving familial arrangement. And if the MacNeils are an American ideal as signified by their wealth and their whiteness, Father Karras's otherness and his self-sacrifices, including his poverty, his cultural assimilation and his guilt for not caring better for his heavily accented, Greek immigrant mother, also emerge as ideals. *The Exorcist* can stand as a searing criticism of the wealthy, independent working single mom, or as a gesture toward the enduring positive consequences of alliances between those of different backgrounds outside of traditional structures.

New Beginnings

From the first episode of FOX's *The Exorcist*, it's clear that Jeremy Slater, the show-runner, leans toward the latter reading. While Father Merrin and Father Karras shared only a couple of scenes together in the film, FOX's pilot centers its two priestly leads as the show's protagonists, with tweaks to their characters that change the politics that the duo might signify.

On the surface, the television show mirrors the film's priestly pair of an older European priest, experienced in exorcism (Father Merrin), with a younger, Greek-American priest who is just learning about the practice for the first time (Father Karras), putting together exorcist Marcus Keane (English actor Ben Daniels), with Chicago priest Tómas Ortega (Mexican actor Alfonso Herrera). But subtle differences here create sharp political messages. While Karras was an assimilated son of a Greek woman, Tómas is the Mexican, and Mexican-sounding, son of a Chicago family: his sister and her son are Chicago-born and raised and he himself was born in Chicago, as he *must* explicitly state ("Let My Children Come Unto Thee"). This changes the standard American immigration narrative of inevitable and desirable assimilation, just as much as it raises new questions about who is an American. On a production level, the casting of a Mexican actor, Alfonso Herrera, in a lead protagonist role, is actually unprecedented in American prime-time network television.

More, if the film "seeks to maintain the heteronormative status quo by repressing the specter of homosexuality invoked by priestly fraternization,"[9] the television sequel answers with Marcus Keane being bisexual, and by embracing the relationship between its leads. When Tómas catches Marcus in his apartment, having broken in, Marcus jokes, "we're out of eggs" and then says that Tómas "gets his knickers in a twist because (Marcus) didn't bring (Tómas) flowers." ("Lupus in Fabula") Many scenes demonstrate their intimacy: Marcus helps Tómas with his priest's collar ("A Moveable Feast"); the two drink together ("The Griefbearers"; "One For Sorrow"); Tómas tends Marcus's wound ("One For Sorrow"). While introducing Tómas's love interest Jessica (played by Indian actress Mouzam Makkar) quashes a notion of a sexual relationship between Tómas and Marcus, Marcus's sexuality and their allowed intimacy invites, rather than eschews, queer readings.

While the show focuses on Marcus and Tómas, two other figures from the church feature heavily in the show's narrative arc: Father Bennet (played by black English actor Kurt Egyiawan) and Mouse (Indian-Burmese English actor Zuleikha Robinson). This makes the show's main evil-fighting cast entirely non-American and primarily non-white: Marcus and Tómas even joke about "our flag-waving friends" to refer to Americans ("The Moveable Feast"). This kind of casting is unprecedented in an American network drama, and unusual in American horror as a genre.

Season One: The Rance Family, Chicago

In the first season, this diversity of *The Exorcist*'s exorcists balances out the more traditional casting of the family interrupted. Bigger names Geena Davis and Alan Ruck play Angela and Henry, the parents of two young daughters, college-aged Kat (Brianne Howey) and teenage Casey (Hannah Kasulka), to make up the Rance family. Once again mirroring the film, this first season family is, as with the MacNeils, white and wealthy—over the course of the season we learn that Angela actually *is* Regan MacNeil, and Chris MacNeil also appears (Sharon Gless), quite literally maintaining continuity with the possessed family's portrayal. But the Rances also present some interesting deviations from that expected paradigm of the American normative family. Henry, the father, has a cognitive disability stemming from a head injury; Kat, the elder daughter, is depressed after losing her girlfriend: both of these facts will later become fodder for the demon.

Kat's depression and the fact of the Rance family having two young daughters allow the show to pull a bait and switch, initially suggesting that

it's Kat who is possessed before revealing that it's actually Casey. But the show also demonstrates an ambivalence around queerness in its first season. By using the death of Kat's love interest as her character's prime motivator, the show engages the familiar "bury your gays" television trope.[10] Worse, when a flashback shows her girlfriend Julia's death in a car accident, the scene literally erases the young woman, never showing us her full face ("Let 'Em In"). Only demon-possessed Casey ever brings up Kat's sexuality and her relationship with Julia, telling her that Julia died only because of Kat's "lesbo curiosity" ("The Griefbearers"). The demon also calls out Marcus's sexuality, telling him that it "didn't think that girls were your flavor" ("My Most Grievous Fault"). As with Kat, the season doesn't otherwise discuss Marcus's sexuality, though one notable scene has Marcus locking eyes with a man at a bar ("The Griefbearers"). Blatty's novel, too, has a homophobic demon, where the possessed Regan hurls "homosexual" as an insult at Father Karras.[11] But the show's first season leaves us wondering: If the demon is the homophobe why aren't the rest of these characters open about their sexualities? Luckily, the second season makes up for this ambivalence.

While the show's first season is coy about its sexual politics, it's more open about its class and racial politics, though the show paradoxically falls into patterns it tries to critique. Alongside its standard possession of Casey—young, rich, and white—the season also shows a crew of demon-possessed people murder and dismember nine people, all black, on Chicago's south side ("Lupus in Fabula"). As Marcus scouts out the scene, two young black men talk about their community's antagonistic relationship to the police, and suggest that only a white man could be responsible for the murders, as grisly as they are ("Let 'Em In"). The show then marginalizes these murders, while following the progression of Casey's possession.

A few episodes later ("Star of the Morning"), the possessed Casey goes missing, having escaped from an ambulance and killed its drivers. A press conference is immediately held to help find her, and many black community members show up to protest, outraged that a single missing white girl gets more attention than nine brutally murdered and mutilated members of their own community. The scene draws attention to the reality of crime and victimhood in America, and in Chicago specifically: when a black woman in the crowd yells, "We're Chicago too!" you can feel the pain of exclusion. Chicago has long suffered from terrible segregation and racist policies that see gross disinvestment in communities of color. More than half of Chicago's murder victims are black, but these victims hardly appear in news coverage.[12] The grisly details of *The Exorcist*'s black murdered

victims, ignored by the city at large, have an eerie corollary in real-world Chicago: only in the spring of 2019 did the Chicago Police Department finally open an investigation into a possible serial killer in Chicago, investigating the deaths of over 50 strangled or smothered mostly black women since 2001.[13]

Criticizing a missing young white woman receiving far more coverage and city investment than multiple black murder victims simultaneously reveals the season's and its audience's complicity in this same dynamic. After all, the show still focuses on the sufferings of a well-off white family and marginalizes its black victims. When Casey escaped from the ambulance, she killed the two drivers: one of the drivers' black wife and son confront Casey's family at their home ("Father of Lies"), telling Angela his name, James Harris. Despite this confrontation, the only consequence Casey ever faces is her own guilt, which Kat quickly dismisses ("162"). Echoing the "say her name" campaign of Black Lives Matters activists, Casey reminds Kat that her victims "had names," but none of the Rances ever say them.

Chicago's problems of poverty and violence also play into the season-long arc of a demonic plot deep within the Catholic church. When Marcus first visits the Regos, allies to Father Bennet, they tell him that Chicago's conditions are ripe for demonic influence: "The homicide rate here just goes up, up, up … Consolidate poverty, and you create these cultures of violence." Father Tómas's church often sits as a stand-in for Chicago's poorer west and south sides (which become interchangeable), as Marcus says: "St. Anthony's of Lawndale—a bit rough around the edges, your parish" ("Lupus in Fabula"). The third episode sees a church committee planning an upcoming papal visit, but one committee member says that they should honor the pope's desire to visit "the city's depleted regions." This leads Father Tómas, who "takes the Red Line south to reach his parish," to argue that there's "nothing depleted about (his) parish" ("Let 'Em In"). Tómas complains that the pope's itinerary has "his Holiness on the south side for less than two hours and on the Gold Coast for a day and a half." Later episodes reiterate this kind of inequity, as the Diocese decides to shut down St. Anthony's and promote Father Tómas to Saint Bridget's, a wealthier parish ("162"). This disinvestment echoes real political decisions in Chicago, like closing nearly 200 public schools in the last 20 years, with less than 1% of the students affected by those closings being white.[14] As Father Tómas makes preparations for the move to St. Bridget's, he demands that a bus bring parishioners from St. Anthony's to services at his

new church: "St. Bridget's can afford it. I think it's going to be a good thing for them to share a pew with the people from a different tax bracket" ("162"). In some ways, the show proposes this in its own make-up: the wealthy, white Rances already share the pews of St. Anthony's with its poorer parishioners. But again, those other parishioners are relegated to the narrative's sidelines, even as Tómas advocates for them.

The first season also adds gendered complications to its otherwise generically conventional narrative of the young possessed girl whom priests—men—must save. Geena Davis, founder of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, boasted that the show's writers' room was half women and that the first season had two episodes directed by women.[15] Feminism creeps into its possession narrative in "Let 'Em In," when Bennet advises Marcus to seek out an order of nuns, headed by Mother Bernadette (Deanna Dunagan). Marcus watches the nuns perform an exorcism, but it's unlike any exorcism he or we have seen: praying to the Holy Mother Mary, Mother Bernadette tells the demon that he is forgiven, that he is loved. Mother Bernadette explains to Marcus: "I suppose you could call ours a more feminine approach…where you coerce and compel, we use compassion, forgiveness, and patience." That night, Marcus joins the exorcism, beginning with the shout of "Give way to God!" only to take the nun's advice, and beat the demon by telling it that it is redeemed, it is forgiven, it is loved.

This feminism follows through to the season's end. Angela Rance, revealed as Regan MacNeil, replaces the film's Father Karras and takes the demon into herself to save her daughter. In the season finale ("Three Rooms"), Angela fights the demon inside her mind. As she stabs the demon over and over again, he screams at her: "You have no right. You're just a damned woman!" And while Angela defeats the demon internally, Father Tómas defeats the demon externally, using the same technique that Mother Bernadette taught to Marcus, telling the demon it is forgiven, it is redeemed, it is loved.

With the demon defeated, both directly and indirectly through feminine power, the show leaves us with some of its inherent political paradoxes hanging. While Tómas decides to become an exorcist under Marcus's tutelage, the Rance family leaves Chicago, hardly unscathed but ultimately, as Angela says, "safe," to close out the season. The season's final scene opens on autumn leaves overhead, a limping Kat and Casey giggling as they walk past a large house with a big porch, where Angela sits in a wheel chair, joined by Henry as they watch the girls walk off into the woods.

This "safe" place, far from the rest of the season's Chicago streets, doubles down on the Rance family's privilege and whiteness. While the season touches on Chicago's racial and class divides as a man-made evil that the devil feeds upon, it offers no answers, only escape.

Season Two: Nachburn Island, Washington, and the Kim Foster Family

If season one tried to use Chicago's diversity as a counterpoint to the whiteness of its central family and the traditional possession narrative, season two changes tack, isolating its family but finding diversity there, instead. Moving the action from Chicago to Washington's remote Nachburn Island, *The Exorcist*'s second season centers around "relatively woke" Andy Kim (John Cho) and his foster children—queer Verity (Brianna Hildebrand), Shelby, black and born drug-addicted (Alex Barima), autistic Truck (Cyrus Arnold), blind Caleb (Hunter Dillon), and agoraphobic Grace (Amélie Eve)—who are under review by the Department of Child Services social worker Rose (Li Jun Li) and still reeling from the suicide of Andy's wife Nikki (Alicia Witt). The season opens with Tómas and Marcus first exorcising a woman named Cindy (Zibby Allen), and then investigating a young girl named Harper (Beatrice Kitsos): their paths cross with Andy's family as the season unfolds. While the first season offered the ambiguity of two daughters in the family as possible possession victims, Andy's family, with its five very different kids, offers even more options. But in the end, the season surprises by showing Andy himself to be possessed, significantly changing the power dynamics of what we expect in the exorcist narrative.

With the family removed from almost any social contexts except those that brought them together in the first place, the season allows for a much more psychological exploration of what family is, with a focus on chosen families, and how families respond to trauma. This thematic focus reveals a politics of a different sort than the first season, but one that is no less progressive, and one that feels, appropriately to the timing of its airing, more directly responsive to the Trump era.

Andy carefully constructs his foster family through love, acceptance, and constant positive reinforcement. Throughout the series, Andy calls all the children *his* children, and reiterates their family-ness over and over again. When Harper comes to join the family mid-season, Andy sits all the

children down and explains to them that "good families only get bigger" ("One For Sorrow"). Andy's family represents a safe space away from the biological families that caused these children harm, from Verity's parents who sent her to a violent gay conversion camp, to Caleb's and Truck's families who rejected them because of their disabilities, to Shelby's mom who almost killed him through her drug addiction, and finally to Harper, whose mother poisoned her so that would seem as though she was demon-possessed. These children came to Andy's and Nikki's family one after another in a slow familial expansion that could accommodate all newcomers, no matter their past trauma. This in itself feels like a radical proposition in an era where the American president dehumanizes and criminalizes those fleeing violence and seeking asylum.

All of these familial traumas play on Marcus's own background, first mentioned in season one ("Lupus In Fabula"), as Marcus saw his father kill his mother during a drunken fight, and then he killed his father, to end up in group homes for the next several years until finally being sold to the church at age 12. Much of the season's arc feels as though Marcus, too, must deal with his past family trauma to find a new safe space: the possibility is hinted at in his romantic connection to a fish and wildlife agent on the island, Peter Osbourne (Christopher Cousins), who suggests that Marcus retire, so that they can just take the truck and see where they land ("A Heaven of Hell"). The two men connect over their past traumas ("There But For the Grace of God, Go I")—Peter's time serving in Kosovo, Marcus's family violence and exorcisms—and their relationship is clearly a balm against those traumas, one that Marcus is repeatedly grateful to Peter for. Again, in a time with LGBTQ rights under attack by America's own administration, including the barring of trans people serving in the military, this depiction of a queer veteran and a queer ex-priest finding romance feels radical. In fact, their first kiss garnered homophobic backlash both in the press and on social media, prompting show-runner Jeremy Slater to respond, "If a homophobe can't watch the show anymore because one of the characters is gay, then I'm glad something good has come out of it."[16]

At the same time, Marcus's and Tómas's relationship continues to change and grow, and it, too, is described in familial terms. Throughout the season, the demons refer to them as "the old grey lion" (Marcus) and "the young cub" (Tómas), implying a parental relationship between the two of them. But they themselves desire a fraternal relationship: When the demon tricks Tómas later in the season, it does so by playing on this desire,

disguising itself as Marcus and calling Tómas "brother." And in their final scene together in the season, Tómas mirrors this, calling Marcus "hermano" ("Unworthy"). Marcus's ex-communication and both of their statuses throughout the season, on the run from the corrupted church, move the familial relationship between them beyond "priestly fraternization" to one that, like Andy's family, feels profoundly chosen.

In the season finale ("Unworthy"), both of these familial relationships win out over evil, but not without loss. Andy decides to sacrifice himself so that the demon will not kill any other families: Tómas tries to take his place, but Marcus kills Andy, fulfilling Andy's wish while admitting that he wasn't willing to lose Tómas. Marcus's murdering of Andy sends him off on his own, with Tómas and Mouse moving on together to fight the corruption in the church, but the season's final scene suggests that Marcus will re-join Tómas after hearing a message from god. And while Andy dies, his family lives on, with Verity defiantly proclaiming that "It doesn't matter where they send us. We're still a family." In the end, Rose takes all the children in, reconfiguring the happy chosen family that the season first introduced, using repeated dialogue from the season's first episode to reiterate their restoration.

Fear Lessons

For a horror show that depicts the gory and gruesome acts of willful agents of evil, *The Exorcist* feels optimistic. Its first season bravely, though not altogether successfully, grapples with the racial and class politics that afflict Chicago, while flipping the traditional exorcism script in giving more space and agency to women and queer characters. Its second season expands on these first steps, while also becoming more personal, focusing on the strengths of chosen families. *The Exorcist* radically reframes the fight of good vs. evil for a twenty-first-century America, and starkly contrasts with contemporary presidential policies. While Trump threatens a woman's right to bodily autonomy, *The Exorcist* shows us in its first season a woman succeeding in regaining control of her body, and in its second season that if women are vulnerable, so are men: no one is free until we are all free. While Trump insists on separating families that have been through great trauma, *The Exorcist* insists that they can only survive those traumas together, and sees the ultimate good in the chosen family reunited. While Trump relies on nativist and white nationalist rhetoric, seemingly calling neo-Nazis "fine people" while insisting that we "make America great

again,"[17] *The Exorcist* shows us heroes of many nations, many colors, many abilities, many sexualities, in its fight against evil. *The Exorcist* describes a demon as "a parasite, feeding off your pain and anger," as a "miserable little piss-ant schoolyard bully that makes you feel weak and small," who "lies" and "twists your perception" ("Help Me"). And *The Exorcist* insists that you can fight a demon, and that you can win, and that "you don't have to do it alone" ("Help Me").

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Reality TV as Horror: Psychological Terror and Physical Torture

Carol Westcamp

Although rarely thought of in terms of the horror genre, reality television is indeed a form of horror. Contestants of many competition shows such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor* must endure psychological terror and often physically harrowing conditions just for a chance at the cash prize. The contestants are isolated from the outside world and thrust into a deeply competitive and controlled atmosphere in which they must compete against one another in hopes of winning the game and thus the monetary award. The contestants are exploited for entertainment purposes and for higher rankings of the television shows. Even in *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, in which the contestants are not competing for a cash prizes but rather for love, the men and women are put through such emotional turmoil that three of the former contestants committed suicide after the show aired.

Despite such startling statistics, viewers continue to watch reality television. Audiences love to watch everyday people in miserable situations. Perhaps this is because the desires and emotions the viewers experience while watching reality TV mimic some of the same reactions viewers have

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when watching horror films. In fact, when analyzed more closely, it is apparent that the reality television genre has many similarities to the horror genre. Even the motives behind such psychological terror and physical torture are obvious: all is fair in the name of entertainment and gaining higher rankings.

OVERVIEW OF REALITY TELEVISION

In the summer of 2000, reality television became a household name as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* made their way onto the scene on major network television channels in the United States. Just two short years later major franchises like *The Bachelor* and *American Idol* premiered, and reality television exploded. Although television programs that document unscripted real-life situations and star unknown individuals have been around since the 1940s with shows such as *Queen for a Day* and *Candid Camera*, reality television as we know it today did not gain popularity until the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Once reality television became popular, more and more reality shows came onto the scene and the variety of programs were classified into sub-genres: documentary, legal, dating, lifestyle, travel, transformation, makeover, and competition. One of the most popular sub-genres of reality television is the competition-style program, often called reality-competition. In reality-competition shows, the contestants are filmed as they compete to win a prize, whether it be money or a marriage proposal. These participants often live together in a confined and isolated environment and are gradually eliminated until one winner remains. And it is in these competition-style reality television shows that we find the most psychological terror and physical torture as contestants compete in harrowing challenges to try to stay in the game one more week in hopes of winning the final prize.

When reality television first aired, viewers often believed that what they were seeing on the television screen was reality or a fairly accurate version of reality, especially with the introduction of *Big Brother*, which touted 24-hour access to the house of contestants, seven days a week. Viewers could see what was happening in the house and could watch the contestants at all times, and thus viewers believed they could see a true representation of the contestants and the events in the house. Instead of the show being filmed months prior to it being aired, like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*

allowed audiences to tune in via their computers to live feeds at any time of the day or night. Therefore, many viewers felt this show was much more authentic than others.

However, today, viewers understand that reality television shows (even *Big Brother*) do not accurately reflect reality. Most viewers recognize the scripted nature of many of these reality television shows. The contestants are placed in artificial or exaggerated situations which in no way resemble the average American's everyday life. The shows are edited to show what the producers want shown, and contestants are often coached on how to act or what to say. Thus viewers realize that authenticity is no longer present. Additionally, savvy audience members today also acknowledge the unrealistic expectations television shows like *The Bachelor* put on modern men and women. Yet, we continue to watch.

Problems with Reality TV

Although audiences realize the reality shows are inauthentic and problematic in their treatment of contestants, we still love to watch them. Certainly there are problems with reality television, especially in the treatment of the contestants. These participants face psychological terror and physical torture.

Viewers and contestants expect such terror inflicted on contestants in shows such as *Fear Factor*. *Fear Factor* is a reality television show which originally aired in the United States from 2001 to 2006 on NBC. The premise of the show is to pit contestants against one another in dares or stunts, with the winner of the competition winning the grand prize (usually $50,000). Even the narration at the opening of each episode states:

> Imagine a world where your greatest fears become reality. Welcome to *Fear Factor*. Each show, six contestants from around the country battle each other in three extreme stunts. These stunts are designed to challenge the contestants both physically and mentally. If the contestant is too afraid to complete a stunt, they're eliminated. If they fail a stunt, they're eliminated. But if they succeed, they will be one step closer to the grand prize, $50,000.

The premise of the show is based on terrifying or humiliating the contestants: Contestants are required to walk down a runway completely naked, or lie in a pit of scorpions or snakes, or hang from the cargo net under a helicopter as it flies over the ocean. No matter the contestant's

fear: being naked in front of people, heights, or even bugs, the show promises to expose the contestants to such fear. And the audience loves it.

Although viewers might expect such terror and humiliation in shows like *Fear Factor*, viewers do not expect it in shows such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother,* or especially the *Bachelor*. Yet participants do face horrifying and humiliating incidents throughout the filming process.

HUMILIATION IN REALITY TV

Humiliation seems to be an integral part of reality television, especially in shows like *Fear Factor*. Viewers tune in to be shocked or grossed out, and contestants expect some form of humiliation to appear in the competitions. However, contestants are humiliated in many other reality television series in deeper and more troubling ways. One example is *American Idol*, a competition-style reality television program in which aspiring singers compete in singing competitions to win a guaranteed recording contract and a cash prize. The show employs a panel of judges who critique the contestants' performances. Audiences often tune in to the initial auditions just to watch the judges harshly critique and humiliate the contestants.

Another reality show which humiliates its contestants is dating show such as *The Bachelor*. Even the premise of the show contains implicit humiliation: Thousands of women are desperate enough to find a husband that they agree to fight other women for the chance to have more time with him; they weep over this man (who is in actuality a stranger to them) just to avoid the shame of being single and female.[1] Moreover, *The Bachelor* uses manipulative editing to portray the female contestants as pathetic, desperate, and even stupid. Once the women leave the show, that stigma follows them. Often they are further humiliated on social media and their every move scrutinized.

Big Brother is known for humiliating contestants as well. Often, if the participants are the first to drop out of a competition or the first to lose the competition, they are given a punishment. The punishment is most often some form of humiliation. Slightly overweight contestants might be forced to run laps in the backyard every time the announcement to do so is made—which might be while they are in the middle of eating, or showering, or sleeping. Some contestants are made to wear outrageous costumes for a week or two; contestants may be handcuffed or tied together for the week, and thus must stay tied together while they shower or even use the toilet. Blatant humiliation of contestants is an integral part of the

Big Brother experience. Even contestants who do not lose a competition and thus be saddled with a punishment are often humiliated via the competitions. Sometimes the houseguests must dress in ballerina costumes (yes, even the men) and spin around a dozen times before attempting to roll a ball in a hole or other such challenge.

Aside from humiliating contestants, reality television begins by isolating the contestants from all family and friends.

Isolation and Seclusion

One convention of many competition-style reality television shows is the seclusion of the contestants. Most competition-style reality television shows begin by sequestering the contestants prior to filming, removing their cell phones and personal belongings and keeping them isolated in hotel rooms, away from each other and the general public. Contestants often spend days to weeks locked in a hotel room, only being allowed to leave with an escort.

And once filming begins, the contestants are still isolated from the outside world. Whether this is contestants being sequestered in the *Big Brother* house with no contact with the outside world or the contestants on *Survivor* being dropped on a deserted island with no food (except minimal rations of rice and beans), no shelter, let alone cell phones or any form of communication with the outside world. Even in the *Bachelor* and *Bachelorette*, the contestants may be afforded the luxury of beds and hot tubs and unlimited alcohol, but they are still secluded from the outside world with minimal contact with their families. They spend the majority of their time with other women who are dating the same man they are hoping to marry. When contestants are isolated from their friends and family, it does damage to their psyche.

Sleep Deprivation

Aside from isolation, contestants must endure other forms of torture. According to a 2009 *New York Times* article, a broad range of techniques are routinely used on reality television contestants, including isolation, sleep deprivation, taunting, food deprivation, and pushing of alcohol consumption.[2]

Many competition-style reality television shows keep the contestants sleep deprived. Understandably, contestants on *Survivor* are sleep deprived.

They are living on a deserted island in a minimal shelter they built themselves, so sleep is difficult. However, on shows such as *Big Brother*, in which the house guests are stuck inside a house for three months, viewers might expect the contestants to be able to sleep as much as they want. This is not the case. The contestants are not allowed to sleep during the day when the lights are on in the house, and they are not allowed to nap at all. Producers blare music in the morning to awaken the contestants and call out house guests who start napping during the day or fall asleep before the designated time at night. Typically in every season, one or more competitions are designed to keep the contestants awake at night. For instance, clues might be blared over the loudspeaker at random hours throughout the night to keep the contestants awake; the participants need to have mental clarity to remember the clues and win the competition the next day, but the competition is designed to set them up to struggle due to sleep deprivation. Additionally, contestants often have to endure punishments for being the first loser of a competition, and the punishments often involve being woken up throughout the next to perform their punishment tasks (whether that be running laps in the backyard, reading Shakespeare to the housemates, or making pancakes).

Physical Torture

One main element of the competition-style shows is the actual competitions which the participants participate in and via which slowly eliminate the contests. Actually, the process is usually the reverse—the contestants compete to win the competition and the winner is safe from elimination for that week. In television shows such as *Amazing Race*, *Big Brother*, and *Survivor*, contestants endure often very physically challenging obstacle courses just to win the chance to stay another week. In *Survivor*, many of the competitions are physical endurance challenges. Often the players stand on a small block of wood or balance beam and keep on hand on a totem pole or hold a ball or other object over their heads; the player who is able to balance the longest in 100-degree temperatures with no food or water wins the competition. In one challenge, the tribes gathered at the top of a very tall cliff at their remote location, one at a time players leapt off into the water below, swam downstream, and raced across the beach. Often the tribes or individual contestants participate in a challenge where the players must dive off of a platform in the ocean to retrieve shells, rocks, keys to treasure chests, or other such items from the floor of the ocean.

One challenge that appears regularly on the show requires individual players to wrap themselves around a tall pole and cling on for as long as they can until gravity and exhaustion bring them to the ground.

In many seasons of *Survivor* contestants succumb to heat and exhaustion. For example, in one episode of *Survivor: Kaōh Rōng* (Beauty vs. Brawn vs. Brain), the contestants competed in a particularly difficult challenge in which they dug up bags of puzzle pieces from the sand. Additionally, the conditions were particularly brutal, moist, and hot when the Survivors began the challenge, with temperatures above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The teams dug in the sand in the sweltering sun for a long time, that after the challenge was over, one player from each team collapsed. Debbie Wanner of the Brains tribe and Cydney Gillon of the Brawns tribe had heat exhaustion but did recover and were able to remain in the game. However, Caleb Reynolds had pushed his body past its limit. After the challenge, he collapsed on the ground and could not maintain consciousness. The medic was called to check on Caleb; his blood pressure was low and the doctors were worried and immediately called for the helicopter. Jeff Probst told *EW Magazine* that "It was the most frightened I've been in all my time on *Survivor.*"[3] Caleb spent a number of days recovering in the ICU.

Such physical endurance challenges and corresponding torture may be expected as the *Survivor* motto is "outwit, outplay, outlast." Any contestant who expects to win the one million dollar prize must outwit, outplay, and outlast all other contestants, which includes outplaying and outlasting all others in the physically challenging competitions. Furthermore, the contestants must endure and outlast the starvation and physical elements, as the contestants are left stranded in a remote area, usually an island. Each tribe must work together to build a shelter, make fire, and find food and water. They are often given a map to a well of fresh water and sometimes given small rations of food to begin.

Big Brother may not challenge the contestants as physically as *Survivor*, but there are still difficult competitions the house guests must endure. Often these are endurance challenges as well, such as holding on to a small handle while standing on a platform which leans forward. Contestants are pummeled with cold water, slime, and other distractions until each contestant eventually falls and only one remains to win Head of Household for the week.

Violence Against Women as Glamourous

The competitions in the competition-style reality shows may be tortuous. And perhaps we can justify this torture by saying the challenges must be difficult, as the contestants are fighting for a million (or a half a million) dollars. However, no matter what reality television show it is, viewers and contestants may expect hard challenges, but they do not expect to be sexually assaulted or otherwise violated.

Yet this does happen. Jennifer Pozner, in her book *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV*, argues that in reality television, sexual harassment and assault occurs, despite the television cameras. Such incidents are rarely dealt with in a healthy manner. In fact, she discusses one instance from *America's Top Model* in which a model is groped on the street, but the incident is brushed aside and the model is berated for being late to her appointment due to the assault. Pozner also argues that "when violence against women isn't being pumped for ratings-generated pathos, its being played for laughs."[4]

Suicides

Certainly, reality television contestants often face difficult experiences on set. However, after the show airs, the psychological terror continues and often amplifies. The public scrutiny from fans of the show and desire to succeed leave devastating effects on the participants' psyche. In fact, the suicide rate among contestants on reality television shows is staggeringly high.

In just a six-year span, three *Bachelor* franchise contestants committed suicide. In late 2010, Julien Hug, a Season 5 contestant featured on *The Bachelorette*, killed himself. In 2013, Gia Allemand, a contestant on Season 14 of *The Bachelor*, committed suicide. And just three years later, in 2016, Lex McAllister, another Season 14 contestant, overdosed on prescription medication in a suicide attempt. And it's not just the *Bachelor/Bachelorette* contestants who take their own lives. According to an article in the *New York Post*, at least 21 reality TV participants died by suicide in one decade alone. This includes former contestants on shows like *Kitchen Nightmares*, *Storage Wars*, and *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*.[5]

The Horror of Reality TV

Despite the humiliation, the violence against women, the psychological terror the contestants face, and even the physical pain and torture the contestants must endure, many reality shows are still unbelievably addictive and incredibly entertaining to watch. Audiences love to watch everyday people in miserable situations. Audiences love to watch the shows even (and maybe especially) when things go horribly wrong. Episodes of *The Bachelor*, *Survivor*, and *Big Brother* look fairly enjoyable from afar, sitting on a comfortable couch. Some critics argue that audiences enjoy watching the suffering and humiliation of the participants because it makes viewers feel better about their own lives. No matter what viewers are going through, they can see themselves as better than the contestants on television.

Lane Wallace, in *The Atlantic*, contends that "perhaps, like the contestants themselves, we don't realize what we're endorsing when we watch the shows."[6] Perhaps audiences love to watch reality television to make themselves feel better about themselves. And perhaps audiences love to watch the shows because their reactions to the contestants' situations are similar to their reactions when watching horror films. In fact, the desires and emotions the viewers experience while watching reality television mimic some of the same reactions viewers have when watching horror films.

These films are intended to frighten, scare, disgust, or startle its audience by inducing feelings of horror and terror. Sometimes horror films shock or repulse the viewer or even induce a sense of loathing, all for the purpose of entertainment. And audience members continue to love horror movies, even when they invoke our hidden worst fears. According to the AMC, "Horror Films are … designed to frighten and panic, cause dread and alarm, and to invoke our hidden worst fears, often in a terrifying, shocking finale, while captivating and entertaining us at the same time in a cathartic experience."[7] However, these horror films do so while audience members sit comfortably on their couches at home or in a theater.

Horror movies center on the dark side of life, "the forbidden, and strange and alarming events. They deal with our most primal nature and its fears: our nightmares, our vulnerability, our alienation, our revulsions, our terror of the unknown, our fear of death and dismemberment, loss of identity, or fear of sexuality. Whatever dark, primitive, and revolting traits

that simultaneously attract and repel us are featured in the horror genre."[8] Much the same can be said of the reality television genre.

Many of the same conventions of the horror genre are found on the mainstream competition-style reality television programs. Contestants in reality television are much like the characters in horror films in that they are often isolated or secluded from others. In fact, the isolation is a trope of horror—folks find themselves isolated in a cabin in the woods, an abandoned hotel in a winter snowstorm, or something similar, away from family and friends and the comforts of home. Characters in horror films are in creepy abandoned places, such as haunted houses or dilapidated hospitals, and abandoned mental institutes (*Asylum*, 2008, directed by David R. Ellis). The imagery of such isolated and abandoned locations, places which most other human beings have left behind, strikes a chord with viewers and sets a foreboding tone for horror films. *The Shining* (1980, directed by Stanley Kubrick) is set in an isolated historic Overlook Hotel in the Colorado Rockies. *The Thing* (1982, directed by John Carpenter) is set in a remote locale in Antarctica. *Alien* (1979, directed by Ridley Scott) is set on the commercial space tug Nostromo, far from the help of any other humans on Earth.

Additionally, the reality television programs often place the characters in situations in which they are grappling with their fears (whether that be starvation on *Survivor*, fear of heights on *Fear Factor* or even in the competitions in *Survivor*, *Big Brother,* or the dates on the *Bachelor*). Certainly characters in most all horror films grapple with their fears. The four teenagers in the original *Nightmare on Elm Street* come face to face with death (and one by one die) when their dreams are invaded by a horribly disfigured killer with a bladed leather glove, Freddy Kreuger. What can be more frightening than knowing you might die if you fall asleep? Of course, characters in the films and audience members watching the films fear deranged killers and death, but perhaps the most frightening because of their plausibility are horror movies about viruses and diseases. Virus outbreaks that infect large populations strike fear in the hearts of the characters and audience members alike: *28 Days Later, It Follows, The Crazies*, and *Quarantine*. Grappling with the fear of a virus we cannot stop and the fear of the painful death to follow, as well as the fear of the whole human race being wiped out demonstrates a major trope of horror films. Demonic possession is another fear found in horror movies. Characters in *The Exorcist* must grapple with the demonic possession of a 12-year-old girl. The mother Chris

MacNeil faces one of a mother's worst fears, and the priests who attempt to exorcise the demon out of the child must face their own fears.

Many times contestants on reality television shows as well as characters in horror films (if they are able to survive) are portrayed as being stronger once they have faced their fears. The man and woman who bungee jump together in *The Bachelor* are portrayed as having a close bond because they both overcame their fear of heights. The contestant on *Survivor* who jumps off the cliff is later interviewed in the confessional, and she brags about how she just accomplished something she never thought she could. In some instances these terrifying experiences do help strengthen the contestant. However, in many instances, especially when coupled with the other horrific aspects of the show, the contestants come away from the filming more fragile than they were before.

Often characters in horror films overcome terrifying experiences to become stronger, as well. For example, Laurie Strode, the 17-year-old high school student in *Halloween*, has to survive the stalking and attacks of Michael Myers. She fends off Michael Myers long enough to allow the children she is babysitting to escape. By literally fighting a deranged killer, Laurie does something she never thought herself capable of. Similarly, Wendy Torrance in *The Shining* must endure her husband's crazed downward spiral to insanity while trying to protect her son as well.

So why do audiences continue to watch reality television if we know that many of the participants are forever scarred by their time on the show? Do audiences just simply assume the contestants should have known what they were getting into? Do audiences enjoy watching everyday people as they are humiliated and tortured (at least it's not us, right?)

And why do producers continue to produce these shows? Certainly, the reality television genre has been a lucrative one and the main reality television shows continue to draw large audiences. Therefore, we don't expect the viewership, sponsorship, or filming and production to stop anytime soon. Lace Wallace argues that "just as the slave trade depended on having people willing to buy the slaves, the reality TV shows depend on having audiences willing to watch. We are complicit. And as long as we are willing consumers of the product, the torture will continue--both for viewers who have increasingly fewer options in terms of what to watch, and for those hapless souls who sign up for a dream, and end up in a nightmare."[9]

Notes

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Creepy Comics

Zombie Komiks in a Cacique Democracy: *Patay Kung Patay*'s Undead Revolution

Lara Saguisag

The figure of the undead can become a useful metaphor when one is describing the state of Philippine politics. After all, so many political figures who fall from grace prove themselves to be tenacious revenants. The Marcoses, the Estradas, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and Juan Ponce Enrile have been accused of grave crimes against the nation, yet they persist in running for positions in the legislature and local governments, often succeeding in their bids. These politicians, shrewd and, some may say, charismatic, seem more vampiric than zombie-like. To a cynical commentator, it is the electorate that acts like a mindless horde, one that habitually elects the corrupt and incompetent and enables the fortification of political dynasties.

President Rodrigo Duterte has himself deployed the image of the undead as a rhetorical device. Addressing the Rotary Club in Butuan City during his 2016 presidential campaign, Duterte shamelessly proclaimed that he was a dictator. Yet he pledged to abide by democratic processes, asserting that he would "never, never, never rule a country with so many zombies around."[1] Once elected, however, the strongman launched a

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barbaric "war on drugs" that has claimed the lives of thousands of impoverished Filipinos.[2] To justify extrajudicial killings and violations of due process, Duterte has referred to drug users as the "living dead" and the "walking dead," shoring up the image that those who suffer from addiction are incurable monsters that need to be eradicated.[3] His language and unabashed call for the use of violence against "drug personalities" are embraced by his many of his followers, even inspiring a mobile game titled *Duterte vs. Zombies.*[4]

Patay Kung Patay (*Dead Means Dead*), an ongoing Philippine komiks series that was launched in 2015 by Mike Alcazaren, Noel Santiago, and AJ Bernardo, also utilizes the zombie to comment on the state of the nation.[5] At first glance, the series, which is predominantly drawn in black and white, may appear to some readers as nothing more than a "Third World" knockoff of Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*. Its fast zombies also recall the rabid and seemingly tireless undead in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) and Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). It even includes visual gags that allude to the popular mobile game *Plants Vs. Zombies*. Certainly, *Patay* builds on the zombie's international currency. But like many narratives that feature the living dead, it also signifies the depravities of political and economic systems.[6] Haitian zombie folklore expresses the traumas of colonialism and slavery; George Romero's films make evident the brutalities of racism, consumer culture, late capitalism, and militarism; *Patay*, for its part, denounces the structures that favor and protect the interests of elite, landowning Filipinos. As Katrina Stuart Santiago reminds us, the series is "heavily contextualized in the state of the nation, especially the violence of our class crisis."[7] In the first volume, young Dolores Sakay, who survived a massacre of farmers on the Muguerza sugar plantation, plots her vengeance against the Muguerzas and forms a zombie army. She performs a ritual that awakens scores of murdered farmers and leads them toward the Muguerzas' mansion. As Alfredo Muguerza, Jr. throws an extravagant party to celebrate the sale of family land to the developer Zenith Property, the zombie farmers crash through the hacienda's heavily guarded gates. Wielding bolos, sickles, and other farming implements, the undead attack the guards and party guests.

The image of reanimated corpses hacking at the living is undoubtedly unsettling, much in line with the frightening zombie hordes that appear in films, television shows, comics, and games. Zombies have been used to articulate and stoke contemporary anxieties about a variety of phenomena, including the influx of immigrants, the rise of global pandemics, and the culture of voracious consumption. Sarah Juliet Lauro offers that zombie narratives also express "the harrowing notion that our own scientific achievements and technological advances could have unpredictable, and sometimes horrible, ramifications."[8] A space probe is contaminated or a virus is weaponized in a laboratory—and things go awry. In other words, zombies are fictions that not only embody and play on our fear of societal collapse; they also force us to recognize that we may be accountable in bringing about our own demise.[9]

In *Patay*, however, zombie aesthetics are revivified: It maintains that what are truly septic and dangerous are exploitative political-economic systems, not the undead. The zombies do not invade or infect; rather, they form an uprising. More specifically, *Patay* suggests the necessity of armed struggle and bloodshed in dismantling what Benedict Anderson calls "cacique democracy."[10] As Anderson explains, the Philippines' colonial history gave rise to a feudalistic, oppressive system in which the landed elite act as warlords, deploying government forces and private armies to terrorize workers, manipulate the electorate, and erect political dynasties.[11] The zombie farmers in *Patay* are a figurative but ferocious response to cacique democracy, comprising a force that attempts to unmake the ties of land ownership, wealth, and political power.

Yet the series' radical vision may be fractured by contradictions. It is often said that consciousness is foundational to—indeed precedes—progressive political and social change. What does it mean, then, that the revolution in *Patay* is largely carried out by the unconscious? One may argue that while the revolutionary actors in the series lack sentience and free will, the narrative, in infusing a call for revolution with supernatural elements, seeks to raise awareness about the monstrosities of cacique democracy. But it is worth noting that *Patay* also addresses a particular kind of reader. The series' implied audience is not the rural working class, but rather city-dwelling Filipinos with discretionary income, many of whom have likely enjoyed the films, shows, and video games that imagine worlds that have been taken over by the walking dead. In this context, is *Patay* an effective cry for radical change? Or does it

inadvertently become a diversion, providing thrills but distracting from the exacting work of interrogating and dismantling cruel and inequitable structures?

Something Rotten in the State

Clearly, *Patay* confronts the nation's class crisis head on, assaulting the divisions between the landed and the landless, the wealthy and the poor. The first issue opens with the shocking image of two mutilated corpses that have been left to rot in a field.[12] It is later revealed that these are the bodies of murdered farmers, just two of scores of other slain plantation workers. The large panel forcefully reminds readers of the Philippines' shameful secret: that the nation's economy is soaking in the blood of farmers. The image insists that in a cacique democracy, terror and carnage are not the stuff of apocalyptic fantasies; rather, they define the lives of rural, working-class Filipinos.

Consider the events that transpired in the province of Tarlac in November 2004. Approximately 5000 farmers and sugar mill workers camped out in front of the gates of Central Azucarera de Tarlac, a sugar mill and refinery that was part of Hacienda Luisita, a plantation owned by the Cojuangco family. The workers were on strike, protesting against unfair wages and the dismissal of union leaders from Hacienda Luisita. The strike made visible the failure of land reform. By that point, 16 years had passed since the enactment of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), a land distribution program designed to end the centuries-old feudalistic landlord-tenant system that was introduced by the Spanish, reinforced under US rule, and, after national independence, safeguarded by Filipino political leaders, many of whom were landowners.[13] After CARP was signed into law in 1988, the Cojuangcos took advantage of its loopholes to defy efforts at land redistribution. It is key to note that President Corazon "Cory" Aquino, under whose administration CARP was enacted, was a Cojuangco. Her public image was that of the humble housewife who valiantly became the figurehead of the anti-Marcos movement after the assassination of her husband, opposition leader Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, Jr. But, as Anderson reminds us, Cory was a member of an oligarchic dynasty, and was, at one point, treasurer of her family's holding company.[14]

The Cojuangcos called on the military and the national police to disperse the protesting farmers. Government forces then carried out a violent dispersal that took the lives of seven farmers and injured more than 200 others. This bloody conclusion reveals how the government prioritizes the landed elite, mobilizing against farmers who assert their rights to land and freedom from exploitation. And Hacienda Luisita, unfortunately, is not a singular case. State-sanctioned violence against farmers agitating for land reform was carried out in Mendiola in 1987; Escalante in 1984; Bulacan in 1982; and Pasay in 1967. Under Duterte, land reform activists and farmers have been configured as enemies of the state. In the early hours of March 30, 2019, members of the Philippine National Police, claiming to act as part of a counterinsurgency program, executed 14 farmers in Negros. Nick Aspinwall further reports that the government-backed vigilante "death squads" who target so-called drug personalities have turned to murdering activists and farmers.[15]

Patay asks readers to bear witness to these atrocities. One scene includes a road sign that leads to the Muguerza hacienda. It has been vandalized, painted over with the words "mamamatay tao" ("murderer").[16] The blood-red graffiti alludes to the words that protesters painted on the walls of Hacienda Luisita: "Cojuangco berdugo/Asyenda buwagin" (Conjuangco, executioner/Demolish the hacienda).[17] The series also consciously ties the Philippines' oppressive oligarchic system to its colonial history. In the series' second issue, Julio Antonio Gonzaga, the chairman of Zenith Property, and Saul Mira, Zenith's chief operating officer, compare the purchase of Muguerza land to the 1898 Treaty of Paris. Addressing Alfredo, Jr., one of them says, "Let me put it this way: You're Spain. Zenith is the U.S. And you just sold us the Philippines" (Fig. 10.1).[18] Many Filipinos likely understand the Treaty of Paris as a painful turning point in the nation's history, as it delegitimized Filipinos' declaration of independence from colonial forces. Yet Julio and Saul unabashedly liken themselves to US colonizers. After all, they benefit from the structures and practices that have been shaped by colonialism.

Fig. 10.1   From *Patay Kung Patay* #2 by Mike Alcazaren, Noel Pascual, and AJ Bernardo. Kwanimation Productions, Inc., Alcazaren Brothers, and Flipbooks, 2015. (Reprinted with permission)

Alfredo, Jr. and the developers are unaware that the undead have already breached the hacienda's walls. As members of the Muguerzas' private army prepare to open fire on the zombies, the three men open a bottle of champagne to toast their agreement. Notably, the facial features of both zombies and soldiers are hidden in shadow. Their facelessness suggests that in the eyes of the Muguerzas and their elite peers,

members of the laboring class are all anonymous and equally expendable. The juxtaposition between zombie attack and celebratory toast not only highlights the obliviousness and indulgences of Alfredo, Julio, and Saul; it also points to how the three men commit violence even if they are not the ones wielding rifles. The private moment that they enjoy in a quiet study entails—and even commemorates—exploitation and slaughter.

The exchange between Alfredo, Jr. and the Zenith developers reveals how the economic elite believe in their inherent right to own and defend property. Even Alfredo, Sr., the ostensibly incapacitated father of Alfredo, Jr., maintains the instinct to protect the land that he deems to be rightfully his. As the zombies approach the mansion, the Muguerzas rush to their safehouse. When some of their guests try to force their way into the safehouse, Alfredo, Jr. exclaims, "Hindi tayo kasya sa loob! … Hindi tayo pwede magsiksikan!" ("We can't all fit inside! … We can't pack ourselves like sardines in here!").[19] The panicking guests turn aggressive. In response, the senior Alfredo mutters "skwater" ("squatter"). With the help of his nurse, he guns down the guests with military-issue rifles, savagely eliminating the individuals whom he perceives to be unlawfully occupying his property.

Meanwhile, Doña Muguerza, the wife of Alfredo, Sr., is in the estate's chapel, unaware of the zombie attack. Seeking refuge from the so-called horrors of old age, she asks Jesus why she has to suffer through her husband's adultery and lechery. With her bouffant and butterfly-sleeved dress, Doña Muguerza is an overt allusion to Imelda Marcos. Imelda is, of course, remembered for her astonishing excesses. While she was the First Lady of the Philippines, she collected thousands of pairs of shoes, went on a one-day multimillion-dollar shopping spree in New York, and threw lavish parties for celebrities and world leaders. The figure of Doña Muguerza also recalls Imelda's hypocrisies and delusions. The Muguerza matriarch makes a show of praying to Jesus when in fact she seeks deliverance by snorting cocaine. When she sees that zombies are beginning to surround her, she arrives at an epiphany. "All this time na naaawa ako sa sarili ko," she cries, "hindi ko na-realize may mga taong mas nangangailangan pa kaysa sa akin!" ("All this time that I was wallowing in self-pity … I did not realize that there are those whose suffering are greater than my own!")[20] She begins to croon the love song "Dahil Sa Iyo"

("Because of You"). What follows is a bizarre musical number: The zombies seem mesmerized by the singing and they become Doña Muguerza's back-up dancers. One panel even makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video, showing the zombies dancing in sync (Fig. 10.2). Christine Bacareza Balance argues that Imelda's performance of "Dahil Sa Iyo"—a kundiman, a song of love and lament—was part of her "spectacular politics."[21] Displaying vulnerability and emotion through a sad love song, Imelda wielded the "power to charm and deceive [that was] a gendered corollary to her [husband Ferdinand's] legislative and military power by force."[22] Performing "Dahil Sa Iyo" enabled Imelda to express and solicit sympathy, obscuring her active participation in the autocratic, corrupt Marcos regime. In similar fashion, Doña Muguerza belts out the song to present herself as the farmers' savior, masking and denying her role in causing their suffering. As such, *Patay*'s allusion to *Thriller* seems less a cheeky visual gag, as it evokes the 2007 viral video of 1500 Filipino inmates of the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Centre (CPDRC) dancing to Jackson's hit song. As Áine Mangaoang puts it, the video was a product of the politics of diversion: "[t]he inmates' dance is endlessly repeated on YouTube, distracting viewers from the overall reality of Philippine prison life where many prisoners live in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions with acute overcrowding and insufficient food…It reduces the CPDRC inmates to a single, entertaining image that obscures the wider, more complex and ultimately unjust picture."[23] Ultimately, *Patay* does suggest that the spell of spectacular, distractive politics can be broken. The zombies, in carefully choreographed movements, close in on Doña Muguerza and dismember her. One can even read the musical number as nothing more than Doña Muguerza's cocaine-fueled hallucination, her last gasp in the face of the impending disintegration of the hacienda.

Fig. 10.2 From *Patay Kung Patay* #4 by Mike Alcazaren, Noel Pascual, AJ Bernardo, and Josel Nicolas. Kwanimation Productions, Inc., Alcazaren Brothers, and Flipbooks, 2016. (Reprinted with permission)

Remembering and Reconstructing Revolution

In the scene in the chapel, as in many others throughout the series, the use of bold red against black-and-white illustrations underscores the bloody costs of the zombie revolution. But the color also ties the fantastical uprising to various armed struggles in the Philippines that emerged in response to colonialism, class crisis, and oppression. The Katipunan (Gathering), a secret society established in 1892, used a red flag as a symbol of courage and commitment to gain independence from Spain at any cost. Subsequent resistance movements adopted the same color for their standards, as in the case of the Republika ng Katagalugan (Tagalog Republic), established in 1902 in defiance of the US colonial government, and the Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon (The Anti-Japanese People's Army), formed during the Japanese Occupation. The red logo and flag of the Bagong Hukbong Bayan (New People's Army), established in 1969 as the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, simultaneously signifies ideological ties with the Soviet Union and Communist China and pays homage to previous Philippine resistance movements.

The most deliberate way that *Patay* links the zombie insurrection to the history of Philippine armed struggle is through its allusion to Macario Sakay. Sakay was a member of the Katipunan. After Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States, he continued to lead the resistance against colonial rule. As president of the Republika ng Katagalugan, he declared independence from the United States—an act that the United States deemed a grave criminal offense. In 1906, Dominador Gomez, a Filipino, managed to convince Sakay to come out of hiding, asserting that the Americans had offered amnesty and were willing to recognize Philippine sovereignty. But when Sakay and his men arrived in Cavite, they found themselves surrounded by US and Philippine forces. Sakay was tried for banditry and executed in 1907.[24] In *Patay*, young Dolores Sakay bears the revolutionary leader's surname. Her figure connotes both tragedy and heroism, recalling a figure who remained defiant in the face of betrayal and defeat. Dolores's red dress also evokes the flags of Philippine resistance movements. Its tattered state suggests weariness and loss, but its color implies an enduring, burning desire to combat subjugation.

Fig. 10.3   From *Patay Kung Patay* #1 by Mike Alcazaren, Noel Pascual, and AJ Bernardo. Kwanimation Productions, Inc., Alcazaren Brothers, and Flipbooks, 2015. (Reprinted with permission)

It does seem curious that for much of the narrative, Dolores is nonverbal. In the first edition of *Patay Kung Patay* #1, the character moves across farmland in a wordless sequence;[25] she remains mute even while commanding an army of zombies. When she recites the incantation that will awaken the dead, what emanates from her mouth are not words but a black, furious, and illegible scrawl (Fig. 10.3). Her voice carries across the plantation, but it sounds more animal than human to those who hear it. The reporter Grace Tecson wonders, "Ano yun, ibon?" ("What's making that sound, a bird?").[26] Her producer, Mark Macalino, guesses the sound is coming from a dog. This scene seems to present Dolores as primitive and irrational, an inarticulate and provincial girl who, motivated by grief and rage, impulsively turns to dark magic. But her character's muteness and incomprehensibility also clarify what it feels to be traumatized by exploitation, suppression, and violence. To counter efforts to silence her, Dolores resorts to the supernatural to make others listen. The young girl's ritual symbolizes how those who have been dehumanized have the potential to rise up against the systems that oppress them. Kaiama L. Glover shows us that zombies, often depicted in Haitian folklore as "infinitely exploitable" beings who are "utterly stripped of any claim to humanity," have been imagined in Haitian Spiritualist literature as figures who "have not lost their sense of self or of significance. They suffer immensely, but they also dream."[27] *Patay* performs similar work, picturing how beings robbed of humanity can still possess a revolutionary capacity.

Patay, however, also establishes that the dead do not rise up out of their own accord. It is Dolores's will that stirs and sustains them. The zombies, devoid of consciousness and motivation, seem incapable of understanding the concept of justice. Dolores witnessed how the farmers, while living,

were deprived of their rights to life, land, and dignity, yet she may be taking advantage of their lack of agency in their death. In effect, the young girl repossesses the dispossessed. She weaponizes the dead in order to slake her thirst for vengeance. As such, the furious uprising in *Patay* is in line with the way Apolinario Mabini, the adviser to the first Philippine president Emilio Aguinaldo, envisioned revolution. As Vicente L. Rafael puts it, Mabini conceptualized revolution as "a radically new, profoundly unrecognizable and therefore thoroughly inhuman force."[28] Mabini certainly understood revolution as a restorative event that could enable a people's reclamation of their right to self-determination and self-government. But he also recognized that it could "[bear] in its volcanic bosom the germ of yellow fever or the bubonic plague."[29] As Rafael argues, Mabini sensed revolution's potential to "[lead] not to the creation of new institutions … but to sheer destruction. Like a plague, it knows no boundaries and respects no rank, inflicting everyone with its relentless violence."[30] This conceptualization of revolution as plague is particularly striking, as it is reminiscent of typical constructions of the zombie as an infected and infectious body. Of course, the zombies in *Patay* are butchers, not contagious biters. Yet they still embody Mabini's picture of cataclysmic revolution, for rather than "transforming" the living, they obliterate them.

Mabini, in warning how revolution can potentially become devolution, also deploys the image of the corpse. He writes, "If there is no more than the reunion of men that move with neither direction, nor order nor harmony, society becomes a veritable corpse … It is thus necessary to have a soul that will move this gathering toward one sense or another, and this soul is authority."[31] In *Patay*, an effective "reunion of men" is demonstrated by two female characters: Dolores and Roberta Muguerza, the daughter of Alfredo, Jr. The narrative suggests that the two are familiar with one another; they preserve their "soul" by saving one another from death's grasp. Their relationship is significant as it presents Roberta, a member of the upper crust, as essential to the fight for structural change. Undoubtedly, Roberta's values diverge from that of her family. She is plainly disgusted when she overhears her female relatives sharing erotic fantasies in which they reduce farmers to sexual objects. Having earned an Ivy League MBA, she moves to add provisions—presumably ones that favor the farmers—in the Muguerza-Zenith land contract, which her father soundly rejects. Later in the series, she hands over video evidence of her family's crimes to Grace, choosing to sacrifice her family's reputation in the

name of justice. Via her relationship with Dolores, Roberta displays capacity for empathy, a quality that her father disdains. When she angrily reminds him that he "left [her] for dead," he says, "I made a logical decision. A correct one, too."[32] He admonishes his daughter, telling her that she needs to learn how to "make the right calls without hesitation or emotion."[33]

While *Patay* invites readers to feel for Roberta, revealing through dialogue her motivations, agonies, and uncertainties, it keeps Dolores an inscrutable figure. Very little information is offered about the young girl. As she is mostly silent, readers can only guess at what she desires, what causes her torment. Her child status may evoke sympathy from readers, underscoring her vulnerability and lost innocence. But the series also maintains a sense of horror by building on the incongruity between the cherished notion of childhood innocence and the image of a vindictive child leading an army built for carnage. Readers may learn more about Dolores in the series' final episodes, but it seems the character, as the narrative's crux of mystery and dread, remains purposefully enigmatic and othered.

A Revolution Consumed?

That Roberta is a more developed character than Dolores suggests that the series' implied readers are those that resemble the former rather than the latter. Certainly, *Patay* pays homage to the cheap, mass-produced komiks that appeal to working-class and poor readers. These komiks, which peaked in circulation in the 1980s, are printed on newsprint and sold on newsstands or hawked by street vendors. They often contain action-packed, supernatural-themed serialized graphic narratives written in Tagalog.[34] Yet *Patay* diverges from its low-cost komiks cousins in significant ways. The series is written in English and Taglish, printed on glossy paper, sold in comics specialty shops, and promoted through social media and comics conventions held in urban areas. Of course, as the fruit of do-it-yourself publishing, *Patay* is expressive of the effects of marginalization, of working outside and against the establishment. Even with its devoted fanbase, even as it helps shape and benefits from a burgeoning independent comics scene in the Philippines, the series, hobbled by budget issues, has a somewhat erratic production and distribution schedule.[35] But it is clearly targeted toward city-dwelling, college-educated readers with discretionary income. As such, while *Patay* exposes its urban, educated, and moneyed readers to the horrors experienced by the lower

classes and rural workers, it may also inadvertently encourage its audience to experience empathy in a particular way: from a comfortable distance. Rather than promoting political engagement and action, it may buttress the illusion that the monstrosities of social and economic injustice occur far away, in some remote, fantastical elsewhere.

But then again, it could be that *Patay* is openly acknowledging Filipinos' strained relationship with the idea and promises of revolution. While the series sustains the dream of radical social change, it also lays bare the quandaries of realizing this dream. After all, how many times have Filipinos linked arms—and borne arms—to fight tyranny and corruption, only to witness the hardening of systems of oppression? The feudal-colonial system in the Philippines has, so far, proven to be frighteningly durable. *Patay* may provide an avenue for dealing with skepticism and fatigue with revolutionary struggle. It proposes that the eerie and entertaining are necessary weapons that keep alive dreams of freedom, equity, and justice. Perhaps to indulge in fictions about the undead enables the living work of fighting for liberation for all.

Notes

1. Aries Joseph Hegina, "Duterte: I won't rule with 'zombies' around," *Inquirer.net*, March 6, 2016. https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/771175/duterte-i-wont-rule-with-zombies-around. Support for this project was provided by a PSC-CUNY Award, jointly funded by The Professional Staff Congress and The City University of New York.

2. The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency reports that 5526 Filipinos have been killed in anti-drug operations between July 1, 2016 and June 30, 2019. The Philippines' Commission on Human Rights, however, estimates that as many as 27,000 lives have been claimed by the "war on drugs." Sofia Tomacruz, "Duterte gov't tally: Drug war deaths top 5,500 before SONA 2019," *Rappler*, July 21, 2019. https://www.rappler.com/nation/235712-duterte-government-tally-drug-war-deaths-before-sona-2019; Davinci Maru, "CHR Chief: Drug war deaths could be as high as 27,000," *ABS-CBN News*, December 5, 2018. https://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/12/05/18/chr-chief-drug-war-deaths-could-be-as-high-as-27000

3. Quoted in Marichu A. Villanueva, "Duterte likens drug addicts to zombies," *Philstar Global*, August 24, 2016. https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2016/08/24/1616655/duterte-likens-drug-addicts-zombies

4. *Duterte vs. Zombies* is one of several mobile games that celebrate Duterte's "Dirty Harry" persona. These games, in which the figure of Duterte is pitted against monsters and/or criminals, have been downloaded by millions of users. Human rights advocates have petitioned the removal of these games from the Apple Store and Google Play, writing that these "games valorize and normalize the emerging tyranny of Duterte's presidency and his government's disregard for human rights principles." "Philippines: Human Rights Groups Ask Apple to Reject Games Glorifying Duterte's War on Drugs," *Advox: Global Voices*, October 19, 2017. https://advox.globalvoices.org/2017/10/19/philippines-human-rights-groups-ask-apple-to-reject-games-glorifying-president-dutertes-war-on-drugs/

5. Initially meant to be a six-issue series, the narrative has now been expanded to eight installments. This essay discusses the first five issues. In an email message, Mike Alcazaren, one of the series' creators, writes that the final book will be a double issue (issues 7 and 8). Mike Alcazaren, email message to Lara Saguisag, October 9, 2019.

6. Much has been written about the ways zombie narratives function as political commentary. Some notable recent publications on the subject are Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); David R. Castillo, David Schmid, David A. Reilly, and John Edgar Browning, *Zombie Talk: Culture, History, Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2016); Sarah Juliet Lauro, ed., *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); and Elizabeth Aiossa, *The Subversive Zombie: Social Protests and Gender in Undead Cinema* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018).

7. Katrina Stuart Santiago, "Comics for these times," *The Sunday Times Magazine*, June 5, 2016. https://www.manilatimes.net/comics-for-these-times/265944/

8. Lauro, *Transatlantic Zombie*, 93.

9. Aiossa, *Subversive Zombie*, 21.

10. Benedict Anderson, "Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams," *Discrepant Histories: Translocal Essays on Philippine Cultures*, edited by Vicente L. Rafael (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 3–47.

11. Anderson, "Cacique Democracy," 3–4.

12. Mike Alcazaren, Noel Pascual, and AJ Bernardo, *Patay Kung Patay* #1 (Alcazaren Brothers/ Flipbooks, 2015).

13. For the history of land ownership and failed attempts at land reform in the Philippines, see Anderson, "Cacique Democracy" and Danilo T. Carranza, "Agrarian reform and the difficult road to peace in the Philippine countryside," *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*, December 2015. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Carranza_

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to%20peace%20in%20the%20Philippine%20countryside_Dec2015_
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15. Nick Aspinwall, "Duterte Turns Death Squads on Political Activists,"
    Foreign Policy, June 10, 2019. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/10/
    duterte-turns-death-squads-on-political-activists/
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17. The graffiti is captured in an undated photograph by Ruth Lumibao, as
    part of her report that marked the 13-year anniversary of the Hacienda
    Luisita massacre. Ruth Lumibao, "When harvests grow on bloodied
    fields," *Bulatlat*, November 17, 2017. https://www.bulatlat.
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18. Mike Alcazaren, Noel Pascual, and AJ Bernardo, *Patay Kung Patay* #2
    (Alcazaren Brothers/ Flipbooks, 2015).
19. Mike Alcazaren, Noel Pascual, and AJ Bernardo, *Patay Kung Patay* #3
    (Alcazaren Brothers/ Flipbooks, 2016), my translation.
20. Mike Alcazaren, Noel Pascual, and AJ Bernardo, *Patay Kung Patay* #4
    (Alcazaren Brothers/ Flipbooks, 2016), my translation.
21. Christine Bacareza Balance, "*Dahil Sa Iyo*: The Performative Power of
    Imelda's Song," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* vol.
    20, no. 2 (2010): 121.
22. Balance, "*Dahil Sa Iyo*," 121.
23. Áine Mangaoang, "Dancing to Distraction: Mediating 'Docile Bodies' in
    'Philippine Thriller Video,'" *Torture* vol. 23, no. 2 (2013): 53.
24. Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, "The Mark of Sakay: The Vilified Hero of Our
    War with America," *The Philippine Star*, September 2, 2008. https://
    www.philstar.com/lifestyle/arts-and-culture/2008/09/08/398993/
    mark-sakay-vilified-hero-our-war-america. In this essay, Nakpil offers a
    counternarrative of Sakay that pushes back against the persistent colonial
    histories that tend to diminish and demonize the revolutionary leader.
25. In reprintings of early issues, Dolores is given more dialogue. In the first
    edition of *Patay Kung Patay* #1, Dolores is silent as she casts the crumbled
    remains of a human heart into the air. In a later edition, the same scene
    shows Dolores uttering the words, "Tiempo muerto."
26. Alcazaren, Pascual, and Bernardo, *Patay* #1, my translation.
27. Kaiama L. Glover, "New Narratives of Haiti: or, How to Empathize with
    a Zombie," *Small Axe* vol. 16, no. 3 (2012): 202–203.
28. Vicente L. Rafael, "Welcoming What Comes: Sovereignty and Revolution
    in Colonial Philippines," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol.
    52, no. 1 (2010): 169.
29. Quoted in Rafael, "Welcoming," 169.

30. Rafael, "Welcoming," 170.
31. Quoted in Rafael, "Welcoming," 171.
32. Mike Alcazaren, Noel Pascual, and AJ Bernardo, *Patay Kung Patay* #5 (Alcazaren Brothers/ Flipbooks, 2017).
33. Alcazaren, Pascual, and Bernardo, *Patay* #5.
34. For more on the Philippine komiks industry, see Mynardo Macaraig, "'Komiks' Industry Fights for Survival," *ABS-CBN News*, October 17, 2010. https://news.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/10/17/10/komiks-industry-fights-survival. Also see John Lent, *The First One Hundred Years of Philippine Komiks and Cartoons* (Tagaytay: Yonzon, 2009).
35. On his Facebook page, in a reply to a comment requesting a reprint of the first issue, AJ Bernardo indicates that the current budget for the series was meant to cover the cost of printing the last issue. He did not offer any guarantees for reprints of preceding issues. AJ Bernardo's Facebook page, May 24, 2019. https://www.facebook.com/aj.bernardo.52

…Just as You Will Do to One Another!: Colonialism That Consumes Itself in Warren Publications' *Creepy*

Zack Kruse

The American comics scene of the early 1960s is often considered a location for dramatic shifts in the way comics were produced and how their messages were received, and such conversations typically center on the changes ushered in by Marvel Comics with titles like *The Fantastic Four*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The X-Men*, and characters like the Hulk. Contributors such as Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, along with line-editor Stan Lee, introduced readers to a wave of comics that challenged political norms and spoke to a readership increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo. Comics like *The Amazing Spider-Man* were grounded in a credible teenage world that was invested in the personal struggles of Peter Parker and his family every bit as much as the superheroics he performed as Spider-Man. What is less frequently discussed in comics criticism is how the anthology-style horror and weird-fiction comics of Warren Publications also spoke to the evolving politics of that same moment but outside of the conventionally popular superhero genre.

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What follows in this chapter is an American cultural studies approach and close reading of a small number of significant stories published in Warren's comics magazine *Creepy* in 1965. While there are detailed accounts by fan-historians of the contributions made by Warren Publications, including a 2019 biography of publisher Jim Warren, currently no extended scholarly interrogation of Warren comics exists. For the sake of brevity, I assume a certain knowledge for the reader that includes an awareness of the kinds of comics published by Warren as well as the writers and artists that produced those comics and the traditions they emerged from. Although this collection certainly accounts for many of the political interventions popular culture has made through the horror genre, the comics medium has its own unique tradition and the reader is encouraged to explore those histories.[1] This chapter is intended to demonstrate the value and necessity of such an exploration by providing a glimpse into how Warren comics contributed to changing and complicated political perspectives presented to mass audiences in the 1960s.

Warren was a maverick publishing house, and after finding success in the late 1950s with magazines like *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, it was poised to become one of the most innovative and politically relevant comics publishers of the 1960s. Calling back to EC Comics' horror line, and reuniting several members EC's stable of artists, Warren's anthology-style comic magazines, *Creepy* and *Eerie*, were a highwater mark for both Warren and the horror comics genre. Series editor and head-writer Archie Goodwin shepherded stories that recalled both the exquisitely gruesome and terrifying tales from EC's heyday and EC's sharp, left-leaning political tongue. This chapter considers two collaborations between Warren regulars Archie Goodwin and artist Gray Morrow at length. These stories appeared in 1965's *Creepy* #3 and #5, respectively. Both stories are thematically linked, as each calls into question racial and colonial power as they are challenged and thwarted by occult, supernatural forces and a malleable conception of time where the past and the present get too close. In Goodwin and Morrow's stories, white colonial power is resisted by those it wishes to dominate, and these stories make their appeal to readers less by championing a specific resistance movement than literally dehumanizing and bestializing white colonial power. Together, Goodwin and Morrow argue that such power is a globally destructive force which is threatened by its own consumptive greed, in some cases literally eating its own.

Goodwin and Morrow at Warren

The oft-praised Archie Goodwin was the editor and principal writer for Warren's *Creepy* and *Eerie* beginning in 1964, as well as more controversial titles like the anti-war comic *Blazing Combat*.[2] After leaving Warren, Goodwin went on to work for Martin Goodman's revived Atlas Comics line—notably reconnecting with former Warren collaborator Steve Ditko on *The Destructor*—and also Marvel Comics, where he would serve as editor-in-chief until 1977. While still at Marvel in 1979, Goodwin assumed an editorial position for the company's *Epic Illustrated*, a magazine-formatted comics anthology in the vein of the explicit content found in *Heavy Metal* but also indebted to the formatting style made tenable by Warren nearly 15 years earlier with the horror comics line edited by Goodwin. In 1982 the series resulted in Marvel's spin-off publishing imprint, Epic, which was overseen by Goodwin and generated creator-owned content, in part as a response to the upsurge in independently published, creator-owned work in the American comics scene of the early 1980s. Goodwin's approach to writing and editing was a throwback to the style of Bill Gaines, Al Feldstein, and Harvey Kurtzman at EC Comics in that it pushed boundaries and maintained a sense of left-leaning political activism. Not all of Goodwin's collaborators necessarily shared his politics, but his finesse as a writer and editor allowed for a spectrum of philosophies and ideas to be presented to readers without undermining his own political investments.[3]

Among Goodwin's frequent collaborators was artist Gray Morrow. Morrow also worked for Warren Publishing between 1964 and 1969, with stories appearing in *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and *Blazing Combat*. Although the bulk of Morrow's comics at Warren were produced with Archie Goodwin, Morrow worked with a variety of writers for the publisher. However, what is perhaps Morrow's most widely known contribution to comics history is his co-creation of Marvel Comics' Man-Thing in 1971, with writers Gerry Conway and Roy Thomas—a muck monster in the comics tradition of Hillman Periodicals' the Heap, created in 1943. Man-Thing first appeared in *Savage Tales* #1, which was Marvel's first foray into the adult comics-magazine market as part of a revitalization of the format, following the success found by the underground comix movement and Warren nearly a decade earlier. No academic biography of Morrow's life or career yet exists, but his time in comics began in the mid-1950s, when he illustrated comics for EC in the company's waning days before transitioning its

efforts to *Mad Magazine*. Morrow then went on to contribute to a number of publishers, including Marvel, DC, Skywald, and *Heavy Metal*. The pages of *Heavy Metal* featured Morrow's 12-part *Orion*, which was collected as a graphic novel in 2012. Morrow took his own life in 2001.

During his time at Warren, Morrow was no stranger to the politics embedded in Goodwin's scripts, and the two collaborated a total of 16 times at Warren between 1964 and 1969. At Warren, Goodwin tailored his scripts to what he believed were the strengths of the artists he worked with,[4] and while much of the politics were his own, he left a significant amount of latitude to his artists to make their own contributions to the visual rhetoric presented on the page.[5] The significant takeaway from this interaction is that Goodwin clearly recognized that, in comics production, even when presented with a detailed script, the artist is also a writer by way of both interpretation of the script and creative input to its presentation. One might also be inclined to note the contributions of editors in this regard, which should not be ignored. However, any changes (requested or insisted) by editors must ultimately be mediated by the artist and writer before being sent to press, and the contributions of each member of the creative team must be taken into account when interpreting comics. I am in agreement with comics scholar Andrei Molotiu, who argues that each of the formal elements of the comics page contributes to a complex interweaving of visual and narrative elements that contribute to a story's representational and thematic elements.[6] That being the case, while the work of Warren's stable-letterer Ben Oda should not be discounted, as his balloon placement and lettering support the pacing and eye-movement that Morrow's work provides the foundation for, they are not imbued with the intellectual and political heft of Goodwin's script or Morrow's visuals.

The first collaboration between Goodwin and Morrow for *Creepy* occurred in issue three from 1965, where the duo developed two stories: "Haunted!" and "Incident in the Beyond!" Prior to this issue, Morrow's earlier *Creepy* contributions were with fan-historian-*cum*-writer Larry Ivie as well as comics and pulp veteran Otto Binder. However, it's with Goodwin where the political dynamics of Morrow's work become more outward-facing for the readers. Structurally, "Haunted!" is a fairly straightforward ghost story with a twist-ending that was a hallmark of the EC horror comics of the 1950s as well as contemporary television series like *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, but embedded within the story is a commentary on greed and class. The comic is the tale of a Mr. George, a paranormal investigator hired by a young man about to inherit a hotel

from his deceased uncle. They are escorted to the property by the young man's cousin and his uncle's lawyer. Approaching the property, the lawyer lays out the hotel's history of violence and trauma: it was constructed in 1865 "on one of the bloodiest Civil War battle sites"; the architect "went berserk" and shot himself in the lobby the day it opened; in the bridal suite, newlyweds were butchered with an axe by spurned ex; a recent owner was drawn to the roof, which she promptly threw herself from; and George's uncle had apparently died of a heart attack after having been frightened to death in the hotel. As Mr. George is guided through the house, he is confronted with a series of mysterious and apparitional items linked to each of the incidents, all intended to frighten the young man away from the property. Mr. George remains unfazed by each occurrence and manages to debunk the haunted elements as being perpetrated by the cousin and lawyer who are trying to gain control of the property for themselves. These ne'er-do-wells are also responsible for the death of the young man's uncle. After solving the mystery—exposing all of the haunted elements as fakes—George says that he knows a real ghost when he sees one because he is a ghost himself. In the final panel of the comic, Mr. George proves this by delightedly removing all of his skin, revealing a bloody skeleton with a rictus grin, as the story abruptly ends.

Although "Haunted!" does not wear its politics on its sleeve as many later Goodwin-written stories would, the cautionary subtext is readily available to readers. The young man's cousin and lawyer get locked in a room to await the authorities, with the moral of the story being that greedy acts, like those committed by the cousin and lawyer, will go neither unnoticed nor unpunished by extrahuman forces. Hardly original to the kinds of comics Goodwin was writing in the 1960s, on-the-nose political tropes like this are easily identified across a variety of genres in comics. In particular, thematic elements like these appear not just in horror and suspense comics but in the crime comics genre, which directly precipitated the horror genre. Stories like "Haunted!" are useful for their demonstration of the intertextual nature of comics and how genre conventions are developed and perpetuated, but one of the significant values of stories like this are that they can serve as the thin-edge-of-the-wedge for more challenging works, like "Incident in the Beyond!"

Xenophobia in the Beyond!

Playing to the strengths and interests of an artist like Morrow, who spent a significant amount of his career producing covers for science fiction novels, "Incident in the Beyond!" is the story of a crew of Earth-based space explorers testing out a new "space warp drive" that will allow ships to travel to the furthest reaches of the galaxy in a matter of minutes. The mission is a dangerous one, however, as another ship had tested the drive many years before and never returned. Although Warren's *Creepy* and *Eerie* were horror anthologies, they frequently featured other genres, like science fiction and fantasy,[7] at the discretion of the editor and creative teams. "Haunted!" and "Incident in the Beyond!" ran back-to-back in *Creepy* #3, and, along with the difference in genres, Morrow employs different illustrative tactics. Whereas "Haunted!" features sharp black-and-white contrasts achieved with ink brushes and pens, "Incident in the Beyond!" has a softer and slightly more photorealistic style with gradated contrasts. Experimenting with a variety of visual styles was not uncommon for artists contributing to Warren's publications. These variations typically speak less to the meaning conveyed by the visual elements of each narrative than they do to the artistic freedom found at Warren that allowed not just visual experimentation but a freedom to experiment narratively at all.[8] "Incident in the Beyond!" is an instance that allows both visual and narrative experimentation because along with the shift in Morrow's approach from earlier stories, here, Goodwin and Morrow present a powerful political message absent from their earlier collaborations but not new to Goodwin's writing. It is in this story where the reader encounters the consumptively self-destructive force of white colonial patriarchy, as presented by the creative team.

"Incident in the Beyond!" subtly presents its political message over six short pages as a crew of four white, male, middle-aged space-explorers encounter an "alien ship" just moments before their experimental warp drive thrusts them across the galaxy. Unsure about where the ship is from, who is aboard, or what their intentions are, the crew attempts to establish contact with the strange ship. Unable to initiate verbal communication, the crew of explorers become nervous, and open fire on the "alien" ship. After destroying the vessel, the unnamed captain reassures himself and his mates saying, "If there's going to be trouble with an *alien culture*, it's more important that we prove this space warp works!"[9] The crew then initiates their warp drive, traveling to the distant reaches of the galaxy to

gain information so the inhabitants of Earth can exploit their discoveries. The irony is palpable. The clear suggestion of the story is that, even if the exploded ship was an alien vessel, it may well have been on an exploratory mission similar to the earthship. However, the problematics run deeper as the potential threat of the ship is that it *might* carry within it an alien culture—the very kind of culture the explorers seek to dominate. The violent xenophobia conveyed by the crew, of course, gains a racial component with Morrow's depiction of the crew as being entirely white.

After reversing the warp drive and returning home, the intrepid crew encounters another strange-looking ship and finds themselves unable to communicate with this new, strange-ship. Receiving communiques from the other ship that identify it as being an earthship, the captain has a horrific realization: the space warp they were testing distorts both time and distance. The ship that he commanded to be destroyed was actually an earlier team of explorers from years before, and now he and his crew are set to meet the same fate he offered that earlier crew. Just as they attempt to change course, and flee with their lives, the new earthship blasts them to smithereens. Symbolically, the warp drive being tested operates as a kind of contraceptive that prevents Earth from spreading its culture across the galaxy, as each successive trip through the galactic breach results in previous ship and crew being destroyed by the one that follows.

While the warnings that both xenophobia and colonization are self-destructive are available, the message conveyed by Goodwin and Morrow is not one committed to isolationism. It's not the exploration of space that is necessarily detrimental to the Earth crew, as their demise only follows their expressed xenophobia regarding "alien culture" and their murderous response to that culture. This reading is reinforced by the *denouement* where the next earthship seems to behave under similar motivations. Only when it's too late does the crew realize the error of their actions, working not just on an ironic level but a political one. On the political level, it seems clear that Goodwin and Morrow not only see xenophobia and colonization as destructive forces but also forever trapped in a cycle of violence where the perpetrators are constantly placed in mortal hazard by their own misguided actions and beliefs.

The events of "Incident in the Beyond!" emphasize the disastrous results of colonial efforts, but the story does not quite address that what is also at stake in such actions is whiteness. Although it criticizes xenophobia, the story stops well short of directly addressing race as a motivating factor in colonial efforts. Rather, it relies on verbal code like threats to

"culture" and visual representing characters as specifically white. These short-hands are easy enough to identify, but they also represent a certain kind of hedging that is not present in the final story considered for here: "Revenge of the Beast!"

Consumptive Whiteness in the American West

First printed in 1965's *Creepy* #5, "Revenge of the Beast!" offers an even clearer view that it is not just colonial power that is self-consuming but malignant whiteness. Visually, Morrow adopts a photorealistic approach similar to "Incident" that appears to rely on gradations provided by softer pencil lead and duotone overlays. The story takes place somewhere vaguely understood as the "old west" as two white travelers, Creed and Pinky, stumble across a troubling scene and "the stench of death."[10] What they find is the mutilated remains of their comrades, employees of a stagecoach company who had been plotting a new route. Immediately significant is not just the race of the characters, but that they are in the employ of American corporate interests as they assume control over new lands in order to further both commerce and white settlement. The travelers correctly assume that their friends were violently mangled by Kwi-uktena, the Beast, an Indian legend belonging to the fictional Wikasha Indian Nation, a tribe thought to be extinct. Searching the scene for signs of the Beast, Creed and Pinky spot an old Indian who had confirmed the legend for them. Filled with rage, and assuming that the old Indian was the Beast who had killed their friends, Creed and Pinky attempt to murder him. After being shot several times, the Indian reveals that he is not Kwi-uktena, and that the Beast "is the spirit of evil who must live in places of the dead!" and that the Kwi-uktena enters "the bodies of evil men, bringing out the beast that is the evil man's nature."[11] It was not the Wikasha Indians that had killed Creed and Pinky's friends. They were each possessed by the Beast and destroyed one another. At that moment, Pinky and Creed transform into monsters, ripping, tearing, and consuming one another.

Recognizing the problematics of a white creative team employing sweeping assumptions about Native American cultures in order to invent one for their own narrative and political ends, at this juncture, I'm inclined to treat Goodwin and Morrow generously. The political aim of the story is much less to reify Indigenous racial stereotypes than it is to call to attention the evils of white colonial activity in the American west and more insidious assumptions about Indigenous peoples by white culture. What a

story like "Revenge of the Beast!" presents readers with is a version of white American cultural heritage, one often romanticized in popular media, that was at once racist, murderous, and primed for its own self-destruction. The assumption by Creed and Pinky that the old Indian was the Kwi-uktena in human form plays on ostensible reader assumptions that it is Indigenous peoples who are afflicted by an uncontrollable bestial, evil, and the inversion of such dehumanizing attitudes by Goodwin and Morrow conveys a political reading of the text that asserts whiteness, through colonial action, is the necessary condition for being possessed by an uncontrollable, consumptive force. After all, who is the Beast getting revenge on if not the perpetrators of racial hatred and American land-grabbing?

Horror Comics' Return to Form

Each of these stories are small examples in larger corpus of work produced by Archie Goodwin and his collaborators, but they are exemplary of the consistently leftist, anti-war, and anti-colonial attitudes presented by Goodwin as an author and editor of horror comics. The approach to colonialism presented in these stories merits further inquiry as they actively attempt to disrupt the racist and xenophobic attitudes that drive colonial efforts by insisting that the true threat to colonizers' cultural identity is not those they seek to dominate but their own greed, racism, and violent actions. Producing these comics in the midst of the Cold War and Vietnam conflict adds contemporary political context that calls into question the actions of the American government and empire, both around the globe and in its own internal expansion. Publishing these comics alongside even more explicitly anti-war and anti-empire comics, like *Blazing Combat*, adds emphasis to the political function of these stories as they were distributed to a mass audience. Through the comics medium, Goodwin and Morrow were able to convey this distinct message subtly as a result of careful staging, layouts, and specific choices made in how characters were visually presented to readers. These subtle visual cues, delivered by Morrow's art, permitted Goodwin to politicize his scripts without Brechtian signage. The result of these types of collaboration was a soft revival of the horror comics genre as space for the innovative storytelling and political messaging that launched the genre in the 1950s.

Notes

1. Detailed studies such as Qiana J. Whitted, *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019) and Qiana Whitted and Brannon Costello, eds., *Comics and the U.S. South* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2013) are excellent entry points in considering how the horror genre has addressed significant racial and other political concerns in the comics medium.

2. *Blazing Combat* lasted for just four issues for Warren Publications across 1965 and 1966. The series was in the vein of the war comics edited and produced by Harvey Kurtzman at EC in the 1950s and carried a similar anti-war message that was delivered through its "realism." The series was written and edited by Goodwin and featured a number of Warren stable-artists, like Goodwin and EC Comics veterans like John Severin. Of note for this exploration is that the political messaging was consistent between the war and horror comics at Warren, and *Blazing Combat*'s anti-war edge, like *Creepy* and *Eerie*, coincided with the escalating Vietnam-era anti-war movement.

3. For further consideration, I would encourage the reader to consider the arguments I set forth about Goodwin's collaborations with Steve Ditko, as discussed in the introduction and chapter six of *Mysterious Travelers: Steve Ditko and the Search for New Liberal Identity*.

4. Mark Evanier, Foreword, *Creepy Presents Steve Ditko: The Definitive Collection of Steve Ditko's Stories from Creepy and Eerie*, By Steve Ditko and Archie Goodwin, (Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2013), p. 8.

5. I cover Goodwin's collaborations with Steve Ditko extensively in *Mysterious Travelers: Steve Ditko and the Search for New Liberal Identity*, and, in the case of Ditko, Goodwin's scripts at Warren played Ditko's strengths as an artist but still allowed plenty of room for Ditko to include his own brand of liberal philosophy and politics, which may or may not have lined up with Goodwin's.

6. Andrei Molotiu, "Abstract Form: Sequential Dynamism and Iconostasis in Abstract Comics and Steve Ditko's Amazing Spider-Man," in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, ed. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 89–94.

7. Recognizing that "science fiction" is a contested term and that "SF" (science fantasy) is a more contemporarily accepted term, as it helps account the often fantastical elements of such stories, I am more comfortable using science fiction in this context because it more accurately reflects the terminology used during the development of these stories and the distinction it makes among the weird, horror, and sword-and-sorcery fantasy tales also featured in *Creepy* and *Eerie*.

8. As an example of this, one might consider the work of Steve Ditko who, in the pages of *Creepy* and *Eerie*, frequently employed an ink wash to his work that was never present in the comics he produced for other publishers like Marvel or DC, or even for those who were less restrictive, like Charlton Comics.

9. Archie Goodwin and Gray Morrow, "Incident in the Beyond!," 1965, in *Creepy Archives*, ed. Shawna Gore and Archie Goodwin (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse, 2008), 1: 139. Emphasis added.

10. Archie Goodwin and Gray Morrow, "Revenge of the Beast!," 1965, in *Creepy Archives*, ed. Shawna Gore and Archie Goodwin (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse, 2008), 1: 241.

11. Goodwin and Morrow, "Revenge of the Beast!," in *Creepy Archives*, 1: 246.

CHAPTER 12

Witches in the South: Past, Present, and in Comics

Daniel V. Goff

Witches occupy a special place in American culture. Widely represented in a variety of media, witches appear as beautiful and grotesque, good and evil, young and old, and from all walks of life. While witches are commonplace in American popular culture their prominence stems from a particularly cruel episode in colonial history. The Salem Village witch trials of 1692 and 1693—often examined historically, politically, and in popular culture—overshadow the existence of other witch trials that sporadically occurred in the South. The prominence of the Salem Village witch trials stems from two critically important factors: (1) the trials were well documented and (2) 19 (13 females/6 males) people were hanged as a result of the hysteria caused by America's most well-known witch craze.

Southern witch trials, by comparison, never involved the scale of the Salem Village witch trials and the Civil War destroyed numerous Southern town halls and courthouses where witch trials would have been documented. Additionally, Southern witch trials were rarely deadly and some of the accused witches were awarded reparations when wrongly accused. Noting the uniqueness of Southern witch trials, the purpose of this chapter is to explore historical Southern witch trials and compare these findings

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to power relationships and conflicts found in modern horror comic books with witches as the main protagonists. To better articulate the similarities and differences between Southern witch trials and modern horror comic books, Machiavelli's *The Prince* and especially his thoughts concerning the ways of men and beasts are helpful. To Machiavelli, conflict takes two forms. Men resolve conflict through laws and beasts resolve conflict through violence.[1] The use of violence in *Redlands* and *Harrow County* is not for mere personal gain but an attempt to seek retribution and wield power over a community.

While horror comics such as *Redneck* (Cates and Lisandro), *Walking Dead* (Hickman and Adlard), *Bone Parrish* (Bunn and Scharf), and *Shadowman* (Diggle and Segovia) feature the South as an essential element of their narrative, this chapter will focus on *Redlands* (Bellaire & Del Rey, Image, 2018–2019) and *Harrow County* (Bunn & Crook, Dark Horse, 2015–2018) because they specifically explore the existence of witches as part of Southern society. Using what we know from historical witch trials are there any similarities found in *Redlands* and *Harrow County* which articulate societal fears and power relationships?

Historical Notes About Witches

It is worth noting that witches were once considered quite real and feared. The early European settlers to North America brought with them a belief that witches could commune with the Devil, create sickness and disease, transform themselves or others into animals, ride sticks, and summon spirits and demons. The certainty concerning witches stemmed from pre-Christian pagan beliefs that had not entirely vanished by the American colonial period and were reinforced by Bible verses which outline the activities of witches: "He sacrificed his children in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spirits. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger."[2] The punishments for witches were also set forth in the Bible: "A man or woman who is a medium or spirits among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads."[3] The laws of men also influenced American settlers' notion of witchcraft. The English Witchcraft Act of 1604 was published the same year King James I took the throne and invoked the death penalty without the presence of clergy to anyone who communed with spirits or familiars.[4] The Scottish Witchcraft Act of 1649 also called for

the death penalty for practicing witchcraft.[5] The law finally relaxed against the persecution of witches with the English Witchcraft Act of 1735, which levied a fine against anyone who claimed any person was capable of magical powers.[6]

To compound the established European perception of witchcraft, the settlers were witness to a Native American spiritual tradition that resembled closely the settlers' definition of witchcraft. Upon reaching Colonial America, John Smith wrote, "their chief God they worship is the Devil," and Powhatan, the chief, was "more Devil than man."[7] Another account by Rev. Alexander Whitaker, in a letter to a fellow priest in England, wrote of the Native Americans that "there be great witches among them, and that they are very familiar with the Devil."[8] Considering European settlers arrived in the New World with a heritage of witch prosecution and encountered a native population with religious and spiritual beliefs closely resembling their notion of witchcraft it is understandable that witch trials occurred widely in Colonial America.

SOUTHERN WITCH TRIALS

The trial of Joan Wright in 1626 was one of the earliest Colonial American witch trials. Joan Wright was a midwife (goodwife) in Surry County, Virginia, accused of witchcraft by Lieutenant Giles Allington of Kecoughtan, Virginia.[9] Mr. Allington was a respected member of the community and a stockholder in the London Company that established the colony of Virginia. Mr. Allington's accusation stemmed from Mrs. Allington who met "goodwife" Wright to assist her in her pregnancy. However, Joan Wright was left-handed, and Mrs. Allington feared and dismissed her out of superstition. After the meeting, Mrs. Allington became very ill and shortly after her baby was born the child became sick and died. Another accusation came from Ms. Rebecca Gray, who claimed that Joan Wright was responsible for murders in the community. Ms. Gray claimed that "goodwife" Wright had caused the death of Mrs. Felgate after telling Mr. Felgate that his wife would soon die, and a similar situation arose after "goodwife" Wright told a Mr. Harris that he would soon "bury his wife."[10] A third accusation came from Sergeant Booth, who claimed that he and Mrs. Wright had an argument and for a time afterward he was unable to bring down any game while hunting. Clearly "goodwife" Wright had bewitched his rifle.[11] The numerous accusations against Mrs. Wright were serious and included multiple murders but all the evidence

was either hearsay or supposition. The court found "goodwife" Wright guilty but fined her only 100 pounds of tobacco as a punishment.

One of the most famous Southern witch trials was that of Grace White Sherwood of Queen Anne County (today Virginia Beach), Virginia, in 1706.[12] Grace Sherwood had long been suspected as a witch and accusations against her dated as far back as 1697, when John Gishburn accused her of bewitching his hogs and cotton.[13] In 1705, Sherwood won a small settlement from Luke and Elizabeth Hill for assault, but the couple later accused her of witchcraft in early 1706.[14] The County Court ordered Sherwood searched by a jury of women to determine if she had the mark of the devil on her body. It was believed that when a witch gave him- or herself to the Devil, the Devil would claim the person with a mark that resembled a claw mark or alternatively a red or blue iron brand. In addition to a witch's mark a witch could be identified with a "witch's teat" which was a small protrusion much like a large wart on the accused witch. After an inspection by a jury of 12 women selected from the community it was found that Grace Sherwood not only had multiple witch's marks but two witch's teats as well.[15] To settle the matter the judge asked Sherwood if she would submit to being dunked and conduct a "trial by water" in the nearby Lynnhaven River to prove her innocence. Dunking was a common technique to prove a witch's innocence or guilt. The prevailing belief was that a witch could not be submerged under water because the Devil would reject any apparent attempts at a baptism and therefore a witch would simply float on top of the water. Conversely, a woman who sank would be considered innocent. The trial by dunking ended spectacularly for Grace Sherwood as she evidently escaped her bonds and came to the surface of the water in such a fashion that she shocked the onlookers but also condemned herself as a witch.[16] The Sheriff was ordered to throw Grace Sherwood in jail, but she was released sometime in 1708. In 2006, 300 years after Grace Sherwood's trial Virginia Governor Timothy M. Kaine pardoned Sherwood and restored her good name with a small ceremony at Virginia Beach which was accompanied by a reenactment of the trial by water.[17]

In 1792, in Fairfield County, South Carolina, a fever swept the population and cattle fell ill and died as well. The weary population suspected a group known as the "Gifted Brethren" of practicing witchcraft and several were accused along with a German immigrant named Mary Ingleman. A known practitioner of folk medicine, Mary Ingleman along with three other residents (one male, Mr. Harding) of Fairfield County were illegally

detained and tried as witches in the barn of a local farmer by the name of Thomas Hill.[18] The case against Mary Ingleman included the testimony of her son Adam who claimed that on one occasion Mary Ingleman asked Adam for a cow and when he refused her request she made the cow fly into the air and then caused it to crash back to the ground, breaking the cow's neck. Jacob Free, Mary Ingleman's grandson also testified that she transformed him into a horse and rode him to pick apples in an orchard six miles away. As punishment for being proven to be witches the defendants were tortured, whipped, and had their feet badly burned.[19] After being released, Mary Ingleman brought a civil suit against those who assaulted her and William Yongue, a Presbyterian Minister, ruled in favor of Mary Ingleman and ordered those who orchestrated the illegal trial to pay a five-pound fine.

After an examination of surviving Southern witch trials one finds that it was not uncommon for those accused of being witches to file a suit for defamation or slander and win reparations or have fines levied on accusers. In 1703, in Albemarle County, North Carolina, Thomas Bouthier was forced to pay damages to Susannah Evans for slander when he accused her of being a witch upon the death of his wife.[20] In Fentress County, Tennessee, around 1830, Rebecca French accused an elderly and "misshapen" man named Obed Stout of witchcraft when she fell ill in her home. Mr. Stout was taken into custody but when Ms. French did not appear to testify in court the judge ordered that she pay all the court costs. However, another person, Isaac Taylor, did testify against Mr. Stout but was ordered to pay damages for assaulting Mr. Stout when he took him into custody.[21]

Not all witch trials took place on land and it is worth examining witch trials conducted at sea, held aboard ships bound for the Southern colonies. On board ships destined for Maryland, Mary Lee (1654) and Elizabeth Richardson (1658) were both tried and hanged at sea for being witches.[22] In 1654, Richard Manship's wife was accused and tried aboard a ship bound for Maryland but was found not guilty. Her accuser, Peter Godson, was ordered to pay damages for slander and apologize to Mr. and Mrs. Manship.[23] In 1656, William Harding was tried and found guilty of being a witch and as punishment was whipped ten times and banished from the colony of Virginia.[24] Also aboard ships destined for Virginia, Katherine Grade (1658) was found guilty of witchcraft and hanged while a Mrs. Robinson (1659) was accused of being a witch but acquitted. Mrs. Robinson's accuser, Ann Godby, was forced to pay 300 pounds of tobacco

for slander.[25] The details of each case are unknown, but a consistent theme was the accusation that the witch in question had summoned dangerous storms which may account for the high rate of executions in an effort to alleviate the storms as quickly as possible.

Noting the witch trials at sea as an exception, Southern witch trials followed a less violent and deadly set of outcomes. Southern witch trials, by and large, were settled legally and never involved the scale of violence experienced in the Salem Village witch trials.

Redlands

Redlands Vol. 1, published in 2018, contains the first six issues of the series. The first page of the volume begins the story showing a burning tree with three blazing nooses in front of the Redlands, Florida, police station. This is evocative of not only of the Salem Village witch trials but the history of racial tensions in the American South.[26] The three main characters of *Redlands* are witches named, Ro, Alice, and Bridgette. They take over a corrupt police force and reign over the town of Redlands as seemingly benevolent protectors. The women have abilities traditionally associated with witches; they can commune with the dead, change shape, and summon otherworldly powers. The three women are portrayed as strong, confident, and exceptionally powerful. As the town's police officers, the three witches are confronted by a mysterious killer given the name Rembrandt who murders three young women. He also knows the witches' true nature. The victims are picked because they resemble the trio of witches and Rembrandt stages their bodies in a field as if on a crucifix to draw more attention to the backwoods town in an effort to expose the trio. The coven of witches is not entirely benevolent, however. The witches require a blood sacrifice from a virgin during intervals known as the "Feast Day" and Alice uses her role as a trustworthy police officer to lure an unsuspecting victim.[27] The teenage girl is ritually murdered, and the witches replenish their power in an erotic blood-soaked two-page sequence of panels.

Beginning with the earliest chapters the threat and act of sexual violence perpetrated against women is a consistent theme in the series. Mr. Cody, a local high school teacher, offers unwanted sexual advice to a 15-year-old teenage girl once he learns she is a virgin. This is the same girl who is later sacrificed by the Redlands coven as Alice seemingly escorts the young girl to safety only to murder her. Later in the story, a truck driver picks up a young woman and attempts to rape her at knifepoint. However,

the woman was the coven's master in disguise, and he forces the man to cut off his own nose and drive him to Redlands before having the driver set himself and his truck on fire.

The main and final plot point involves a spirit named Nancy Montgomery who inhabits Bridgette's body in order to be able to unravel the details of her own death in 1984. As Nancy uncovers the story of her life it is revealed that she was a sex slave as part of a larger sex trafficking organization that covered many Southern states. Nancy escapes her captors at "Sparkletown" but dies seemingly of exposure in a desolate highway culvert. Once her body is recovered, Nancy's spirit seeks to avenge her death by hunting down the man who tormented her while she was a sex slave. Nancy, still inhabiting Bridgette's body, tracks down her tormenter, Teddy Johnson, at his home and submits him to a round of questions which reveals his repugnant view of women, "Them girls workin' they knew their place and they knew they weren't going to amount to anything … she was a dirty, worthless whore … whores deserve nothing!"[28] A brutal and gruesome three-page fight sequence ensues and ends with Nancy tormenting Teddy the way he did before raping her, "can I get a smile?"[29] Bridgette's body burst into flame and sets Teddy and his house on fire. Nancy finally finds redemption among the flames and the story arc ends on this impactful note.

Clearly this use of violence is what Machiavelli would describe as "the way of beasts."[30] However, this is not an entirely negative characterization because Machiavelli concluded that if the laws of men are insufficient then a person must "have recourse to the second."[31] To Machiavelli, people must be able to possess the abilities and uses of both man and beast as the situation warranted. The witches of Redlands and Nancy demonstrate the power of beasts in the violence they enact on those who are unpunished by the law. This is first demonstrated in the overthrow of the corrupt police force they supplant in issue 1. Most prominently, the finale of the first story arc emphasizes the violence delivered against Teddy Johnson for the abuse he perpetrated on Nancy.

Harrow County

Harrow County is a 32-issue Southern Gothic tale published from 2015 through 2018 about witches and monsters known as "haints" set in the rural South in the early twentieth century. Like *Redlands*, *Harrow County* begins with imagery of the hangman's noose. Hester Beck was found

guilty of practicing witchcraft and hung and then burned by the good people of Harrow County.[32] Initially, Hester was a kind witch who used her magical knowledge to help the people of Harrow County, in a way not unlike the case of "goodwife" Wright and Ms. Ingleman. However, Hester had a dark side and she stole children in the night and committed other horrors, which revealed her true nature.[33] Upon Hester's death a baby girl was found and raised as one of the people of Harrow County but many suspected that little Emmy was the second coming of Hester. When Emmy turned 18, she was attacked by her own father out of fear of what she might become but he eventually spared her out of parental love. Later, we learn that Emmy had an evil twin sister Kami who returns to Harrow County to rule the farming community as an all-powerful witch. Kami is ultimately defeated by Emmy and she eats Kami's flesh to gain her power in case Hester ever returns from the dead. However, Emmy's consumption of Kami triggers Hester's return and the last issues details the battle between the good witch Emmy and the evil witch Hester.

Hester's desire to return to Harrow County is nothing less than the goal of ruling the county as an all-powerful witch queen. As Emmy tries to maintain a balance by protecting the people and friendly haints of Harrow County she loses the loyalty of both as she battles Hester for power. This is a situation reminiscent of Machiavelli's famous question, "whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse."[34] To Machiavelli a ruler should strive to be compassionate but if a ruler must choose between compassion and cruelty then it is wise to choose cruelty to maintain order through fear of punishment.

Emmy and Hester battle as equals, but Hester is more experienced and does not feel morally constrained against exploiting the people and creatures Emmy has grown to care for and protect. In a final act of desperation, Emmy casts off all the power of witchcraft and defeats Hester, who decays into the dead and burned corpse that was buried many years before.[35] The act of relinquishing of all magical powers turns Emmy into a "normal" person and *Harrow County* concludes with Emmy saying goodbye to the friends and lands she cared for and protected, never to return.

It is worth noting that *Harrow County* lacks the sexual violence pervasive throughout *Redlands*. However, Emmy, like the trio of witches in *Redlands*, does resort to violence to maintain order very much in line with Machiavelli's conclusion that the violence of beasts is at times warranted

to maintain order and control. Emmy's intent is never to harm; she does so only after she consumed her twin sister Kami and consequently her powers began to take a ruthless and violent aspect.

Conclusion

Many scholars have tried to explain the Salem Village witch trials through economic, religious, political, and gender lenses with varying degrees of persuasiveness.[36] Elaine Breslaw advocated an innovative multicultural approach to better understand the Salem Village mayhem, by examining the Native American slave Tituba's influence and testimony which increased the cycle of hysteria.[37] A gender-focused study is applicable to Salem Village and many Southern witch trials. However, this approach does not explain why six men were hanged at Salem Village nor does it explain the cases against Mr. Harding and Obed Stout.

Another possible explanation of the differences between Southern witch trials and the Salem Village witch trials was the religious diversity found in the Colonial South. While Christianity was extremely important in the Colonial South the presence of Catholics, Anglicans, and Protestants in the Southern colonies may have led to greater acceptance of differences among the people in those colonies.[38] While these approaches, on the surface, appear helpful for understanding the Southern witch trials, none are overly compelling. Ultimately, power and its expression in religious, legal, and political terms best articulate the Salem Village witch trials and Southern witch trials and are key to understanding the societal concerns expressed in *Redlands* and *Harrow County*.

Redlands and *Harrow County* have clearly articulated power dynamics and illustrate two elements relevant to the modern social and political landscape that were not present in Southern witch trials. *Redlands* illuminates the depravity and extent of sexual assault prevalent in modern American society. The #MeToo movement has exposed and illuminated the degree to which sexual assault permeates all levels of society and has been part of highly charged public debates ranging from the fitness of Presidents and Supreme Court nominees to the fitness of CEOs and other notable leaders.[39] *Redlands* paints a portrait of sexual violence perpetrated against women which resonates with modern society, albeit in a wildly fictitious setting. *Redlands* articulates the anger and frustration in the American legal system which is insufficient to stem sexual violence and

imagines a world where the power of beasts is the only means available to stop sexual violence. It is worth noting that it was not the legal system or acts of violence which brought sexual violence to the forefront of American consciousness but rather social media which is somewhere in between Machiavelli's concept of conflict through legal means (men) and violence (beasts).

While *Harrow County* does not address sexual assault, it, along with *Redlands*, addresses what it means to wield power. The trio of witches in *Redlands* monopolize and legitimize the use of violence when they take over the police department of Redlands and use community trust to perform heinous acts, paradoxically all the while protecting the community from outside threats such as Rembrandt. Power is veiled through law enforcement, but the true nature of their power resides in their ability to perform violence.

Likewise, the central theme of *Harrow County* revolves around use of power but articulated in a different manner. Emmy and Hester battle for absolute control of Harrow County as supreme beings unconstrained by the will, legal constraints, or power of other people or even magical creatures. The nature of power constructed in *Harrow County* is a zero-sum situation in which Emmy or Hester will have all of it or none of it and it must be settled through violence. Clearly, in the case of Hester, she could not survive without power and for Emmy the destruction of all magical powers was preferable to the possibility of Hester retaining absolute power.

Even though *Redlands* and *Harrow County* conceive of power differently, they highlight that the Southern witch trials were perpetrated against a vulnerable and powerless few, although there were cases in which legitimate power (the legal system) did function properly on several occasions. However, these two comics highlight that the relationships of power in legal systems and the use of violence in social and political situations are often in conflict, which resonates historically and with modern times. The current #MeToo movement in particular and abuses of power more generally, at the hands of social and governmental institutions, best articulate the overarching theme which threads between Southern witch trials, the works *Redlands* and *Harrow County*, and modern society. Any other exploration into these realms not considering power relationships runs the risk of missing the mark, because power in legal systems and the use of violence allow individuals or groups to prey upon those without the means to adequately defend themselves.

Notes

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961), 99. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Shaun Baker of the US Naval Academy for editorial support. Any errors or deficiencies in this chapter are solely my own.
2. 2 Chronicles. 33:6
3. Leviticus. 20:27
4. *Religion and Belief.* https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/religion/overview/witchcraft/ (Accessed 1 June, 2019).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. *There Be Witches Among Them.* http://www.virginiamemory.com/blogs/fit-to-print/2017/10/26/there-be-great-witches-among-them-witch-craft-and-the-devil-in-colonial-virginia/ (Accessed 1 September, 2019).
8. Ibid.
9. CL Gammon, *Dixie Witches: 9 True Southern Witch Trials* (Lafayette: CreateSpace, 2017), 5.
10. Ibid., 6.
11. Ibid., 7.
12. Marion Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007), 97–98.
13. CL Gammon, *Dixie Witches: 9 True Southern Witch Trials* (Lafayette: CreateSpace, 2017), 16.
14. Ibid., 16–17.
15. Ibid., 19.
16. Ibid., 21.
17. *Va. Gov. Gives Informal Pardon to Witch.* http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/10/AR2006071000495.html?noredirect=on (Accessed 22 May, 2019).
18. CL Gammon, *Dixie Witches: 9 True Southern Witch Trials* (Lafayette: CreateSpace, 2017), 26.
19. Ibid., 29.
20. CL Gammon, *Dixie Witches: 9 True Southern Witch Trials* (Lafayette: CreateSpace, 2017), 15. The ruling of the Grand Jury read as follows, "Wee of Ye Grand Jury Find no bill and ye person IGNORAMUS and it is Ordrd that the sd Susannah Evans be acquitted."
21. Ibid., 16.
22. Frederick Drake, "Witchcraft in the American Colonies, 1647–62," *American Quarterly*, Vol 20, No. 4 (Winter 1968):702.
23. Ibid., 706.

24. Ibid., 705.
25. Ibid., 706.
26. Bellaire, J. and Del Ray, V. *Redlands* Vol. 1, Portland: Image, 2018, 1.
27. Bellaire, J. and Del Ray, V. *Redlands* Vol. 1, Portland: Image, 2018, 136.
28. Ibid., 46.
29. Bellaire, J. and Del Ray, V. *Redlands* Vol. 1, Portland: Image, 2018, 142.
30. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961), 99.
31. Ibid.
32. Bunn, C. and Crook, T. *Harrow County #1*, Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2015, 1–3.
33. Bunn, C. and Crook, T. *Harrow County #1*, Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2015, 3.
34. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961), 96.
35. Bunn, C. and Crook, T. *Harrow County #1*, Milwaukie: Dark Horse, 2015, 12–13.
36. Isaac Reed, "Why Salem Made Sense: Culture, Gender, and the Puritan Persecution of Witchcraft," *Cultural Sociology*, Vol 1, No. 2 (November 2007), 209–234.
37. Elaine Breslaw, "Tituba's Confession: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Salem Witch-Hunt," *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Summer 1997), 535–556.
38. Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 2–5.
39. An alternative interpretation can be offered that the allegations against Judge Kavanaugh are a modern-day witch trial with no reliable evidence outside of personal testimonies establishing his guilt.

Nightmarish Nature

"Bring Him the Blood of the Outlanders!": *Children of the Corn* as Farm Crisis Horror

Kathleen P. Hunt

Children of the Corn, the 1984 horror classic, with its images of sprawling corn fields and idyllic farm town, continues to haunt the American Midwest.[1] I heard it frequently incanted by fellow "outlanders"—to borrow Malachai's famous cry—when I lived in Iowa, where much of the movie was shot and where corn remains a key cash crop. Considered an "iconic" horror film, *Children of the Corn* is by now cemented in US popular culture.[2] Perhaps the film endures, at least in part, because of its representation of a dark period in twentieth-century agriculture.

The 1980s Farm Crisis was constituted by compounding political, economic, and environmental shocks, with lasting impacts on the global food system and local farming communities. Following the economic logic and fiscal policy of the time, farmers used credit to "get big or get out," intensifying capital investment to expand their operations.[3] In 1980, however, commodity prices began to plummet and farmers struggled to pay down debt. The Farm Crisis was particularly devastating in the Midwestern corn belt, where state economies are largely dependent on agriculture. By the

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mid-1980s nearly four million farms went out of business, over half of US banks failed, and 900 Midwestern farmers committed suicide.[4]

In the midst of this upheaval, *Children of the Corn* offers a critical assessment of US agripolitics and the rise of neoliberal agriculture. I suggest the film articulates what Bell calls "the real horror of the rural," or the disenchanting loss of agrarian livelihood.[5] In this chapter, I analyze Farm Crisis themes encoded by the film's depiction of a desiccated Midwestern farm community and villainous food crop.

The 1980s Farm Crisis

Stephen King's short story "The Children of the Corn" was originally published in 1977 by *Penthouse* magazine, at a time of great agricultural expansion. Encouraged by escalating farmland value and readily available credit, farmers financed expensive machinery and irrigation systems.[6] Unfortunately, during these "halcyon days … few recognized the vulnerability of the agricultural sector."[7] By the end of the 1970s inflation was high and general unemployment increased to 8.5%, plunging the US economy into the deepest recession since the Great Depression.

In 1984, when the film adaptation of *Children of the Corn* was released in theaters, farm debt exceeded income by 350%.[8] Not unlike Burt and Vicky's calamitous misadventure, the Farm Crisis was largely unanticipated by US policymakers and economists. In an effort to fight inflation, the Federal Reserve tightened monetary policy by raising interest rates. Given the degree of speculative farm investment, this move "sen[t] the farm sector on a downward spiral" of increased operating costs and declining crop prices.[9] Indeed, nationwide farm debt doubled to $206 billion between 1976 and 1983.[10] The grave conditions produced by 1970s agricultural policy left farmers wary of outside influences and disillusioned by the loss of their agrarian livelihood.

The rapid pace at which US agriculture became integrated within the global economy "set the stage for the massive turbulence [of the Farm Crisis]."[11] USDA Secretary Earl Butz advised farmers to "grow fencerow to fencerow," overseeing federal farm policy that decimated wetlands and other natural habitats to expand production of commodity crops like corn, soy, and wheat.[12] From opening new markets like China to the Cold War weaponization of food aid, opportunities for exporting US agricultural products greatly increased throughout the 1970s.[13] Farm incomes "reached levels unrealized since the 1940s."[14] Yet banking on foreign

demand for commodity exports can be risky, and indeed US agricultural exports reached their peak in 1981. The Soviet grain embargo, among other fluctuations in international markets, left US producers with significant surpluses.[15] Corn prices were especially impacted, decreasing by 64% between 1980 and 1986.[16] The vulnerability created by the intrusion of outside influences—from economists to foreign trading partners—is thus a key theme in the cultural narrative of the Farm Crisis.

Agricultural expansion pulled farmers into overwhelming debt, making the "human costs to the farm crisis … substantial."[17] Indeed, the crisis reverberated across the agricultural sector closing local businesses and factories, and local banks, "brought to [their] knees with loan losses and migration of [their] best borrowers," also failed at exponential rates.[18] Foreclosures and job losses instigated a mass exodus from farm towns as those forced off their land moved to larger cities.[19] Depressed by their loss of livelihood, farmers reported "feeling shunned and ostracized by their friends and neighbors."[20] Farming has historically articulated with independence, virtue through hard work, and self-sufficiency; economic failure symbolizes loss of the American dream.[21] Having decimated rural communities, the Farm Crisis left a "ghostly version of the pastoral ideal" in its wake.[22]

The 1980s thus remain "a defining period for agriculture in the US," forever reshaping the political economy of food production.[23] As Wendell Berry predicted, policy since the Farm Crisis has "accelerate[d] the mechanization and chemicalization of farming, increase[d] the price of land, and … increase[d] overhead and operating costs" that prioritize commodity production for foreign export and continue to push small farmers out of the market.[24] Contextualized within the Farm Crisis, I argue, *Children of the Corn* proffers a horrific articulation of "societies which seem idyllic, but which are malignant, at a dead end, and viewed in the grip of their own death throes."[25]

Rural Horror and Vegetal Revenge

Passing through the Midwest on their way to Seattle, Burt and Vicky encounter a murdered boy tumbling out of a cornfield. Looking for help, the hapless couple wind up in Gatlin, a small farm town in Nebraska, the state known as "The Home of the Cornhuskers." A child preacher named Isaac has indoctrinated the town's youth into a corn-based cult that worships a deity known as He Who Walks Behind the Rows; Malachi is Isaac's

subsidiary who helped orchestrate the massacre of Gatlin's adults. Job and Sarah, younger children not involved in the cult, befriend our protagonists as they fight to escape their sacrifice. With Job's help, Burt ultimately burns the cornfield, using an irrigation pump to quell the fiery fury of the corn monster.

Children of the Corn dramatizes the economic and political consequences of the Farm Crisis by blending elements from the rural horror and plant horror genres. A variation of the slasher film, rural horror is typified by several key features. Sites of "bucolic tranquility" like mountains or woods, as well as old cabins or abandoned farmhouses, are common backgrounds to terror.[26] Narratives are usually structured around characters passing through (say, on a trip or adventure), getting lost, breaking down, or even trespassing in the foreign territory.[27] Protagonists are most often portrayed as educated, "white, middle-class, and relatively young urban and sub-urban outsiders."[28] The aggressors tend to be poor, "backwoods" or uncivilized, sexually or religiously deviant "Others" native to the rural setting. *Deliverance, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Friday the 13th* are well-known exemplars.

These representations of rurality articulate broader social processes and cultural anxieties.[29] Images of "monstrous, insular, and dangerous" country folk reinforce problematic class- and race-based stereotypes.[30] The trope of highway (the means by which the protagonists are led into the countryside) allegorizes an "anti-frontier myth" that inverts the Westward logic of Manifest Destiny and signifies the stagnation of a (perceived) utopic pastoral era.[31] Similarly, the "notion of people that time forgot … [who] stay tied to the land in a chosen state of decline" serves as a warning about economic disenfranchisement.[32]

Although *Children of the Corn* draws on several of the tropes described above—the small-town setting, the murderous youths that remain after the parricide, their disturbing cult—it also pushes the rural horror genre in interesting ways. Here, farming is more than a mere backdrop for violence; instead, symbols of agribusiness (a grain elevator, machinery, and implements) saturate the *mise en scene*. Indeed, the children wield sickles, meat hooks, and other implements to inflict their terror and an irrigation pump fuels the film's climax. Additionally, although Southern "rednecks" and "white trash" are the archetypes on which most rural horror villains are modeled,[33] *Children of the Corn* is set in the Midwest, a region arguably synonymous with agricultural production.

Flowers, bushes, trees, and vines are often figured as monstrous in plant horror films. Well-recognized examples of predatory flora include the tree-like triffids in *The Day of the Triffids*, the leafy pods from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and even the comically carnivorous Venus flytrap in *Little Shop of Horrors*. Though less common, evil edible vegetation has appeared in films such as *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* and *The Thing from Another World*. Plants become villainous by taking on qualities "we think of as 'human' (reason, will, agency, autonomy, mastery, control)."[34] Evading the triteness of existing for decoration, shade, or food for humans (their supposed *natural* states), feral plants assert a menacing and even murderous agency (a decidedly *un*-natural state). Vicious plants also eschew the immobility assumed by their rootedness in soil by, for example, growing, spreading, and otherwise proliferating (Marder, 2013). Plant horror narratives are thus marked by vegetation's "vengeful return," using various retaliatory tactics to destroy humans.[35]

By "counter[ing] the marginalization and instrumentalization of the vegetal world,"[36] plant horror challenges existential assumptions about human subjectivity and anthropocentrism. By inverting the predator-prey relationship, carnivorous plants force us to acknowledge that we "become[] the landscape from which we spend our lives trying to distinguish ourselves."[37] Plants are presumed to be passive as many species have been domesticated (read: tamed). Through deforestation, development, and, I would add, farming, humans have long oppressed botanic species for "our own self-serving uses."[38] Killer plants thus vengefully reclaim their power, dramatizing the consequences of ignoring humans' hegemony and ecological destruction.[39]

Children of the Corn's vegetal thematic is deceptively obvious, illustrated by, for example, endless monocropped fields and the youth cult's corn-based religious rites. Yet the film cunningly exploits the "wild and potentially untamable proliferation"[40] corn always already articulates. Used in the production of more than 4000 products, humans directly and indirectly consume corn as fresh or frozen produce, processed foods like popcorn and grits, corn-fed animal proteins, corn-sweetened beverages, and even as non-edible items like shampoo and gasoline.[41] Thus, I suggest, corn is a uniquely menacing plant because of the eerily invisible omnipresence with which the global food system imbues it.

Conjuring the Farm Crisis

I turn now to the ways *Children of the Corn* proffers an implicit critique of the rise of commodity-based agribusiness propagated by the Farm Crisis. I argue that the overproduction and subsequent export market collapse of the early 1980s are represented by the betrayal of so-called outlanders. Additionally, Gatlin's state of decline stands in for the rural depopulation and loss of pastoral livelihood wrought by agriculture's neoliberalization.

Outlanders and Overproduction

"What *is* it with this corn?"—Vicky.

As Burt and Vicky make their westward drive, the highway invites them into the seemingly charming countryside. This is illustrated by their playful mocking of an evangelical preacher on the radio, until their car accident. Joseph, falling out of the corn and into the road, has been killed for attempting to escape the cult. Their trip to Gatlin is no coincidence, however, as Isaac reveals a divine vision: "He who walks behind the rows did say I will send outlanders among you … [they] will be unbelievers and profaners of the holy. But the man will sorely test as he has great power, even greater than that of the Blue Man!" Referring to the police officer who previously (and, clearly, unsuccessfully) tried to destroy the cult, the "Blue Man" was a threat, a betrayal of the corn god. Isaac thus instructs the children: "And just as he was offered up on to Him, so shall be the unbelievers!" Our protagonists now join the Blue Man and Joseph as fellow "profaners" who must be sacrificed. Re-read through the lens of the Farm Crisis, Burt and Vicky symbolize the "outlanders" (policymakers, economists, and bankers) who encouraged speculative investment, betraying the farmers now left with fields swelling with surplus crops. *Children of the Corn* articulates this dystopia with images of expansive agriculture and the menacing proliferation of corn stalks.

Driving, Burt and Vicky are surrounded by nothing but acres of corn. The stalks grow so tall and tightly clustered, they dwarf anyone standing among them. As Tenga notes, "[t]he sheer extent of the cornfields is itself imposing."[42] Wide shots halved by clear blue sky and golden-green cornfields invoke images of a sprawling sea. Indeed, mile after mile of identical cornfields create a confusing labyrinth that seems to be leading Burt and Vicky into Gatlin. Shots of corn whizzing by faster and faster, hitting the car like rocks, disorient the viewer. Outside the farmhouse where Job and

Sarah play, cornrows nearly run into the yard and are planted close against the barns and out-buildings. When Burt gazes from a bedroom window, the point-of-view shot is filled by nothing but unharvested corn; his face registers a bewildered disbelief. Farmers here seem to have gotten big, but gotten out.

He Who Walks Behind the Rows also articulates the corn's surplus, through His haunting omnipotence. Like ectoplasm or slime, the corn god's presence is marked by silage. In search of a telephone, our protagonists first head to Hensen's Café upon entering Gatlin. Dried cornstalks are stuffed in trash cans and planters, they spill from the mouth of a standing mailbox, and are strewn about the street and empty sidewalk. Inside the abandoned diner corn leaves, stalks, and dried cobs litter the countertops and plates, dangle from the ceiling fan, and lay across booths. Burt finds a similar site when he peers through the window of the Gatlin School and Town Hall. The corn plant's disturbing proliferation is perhaps the most jarring when Burt finds his car bursting with silage, portending Vicky's kidnapping by the cult. This visual effect emphasizes the plant's frightening power—corn clearly does not grow in these spaces but somehow spreads beyond the field. Indeed, the corn later becomes nearly inescapable; burning the entire cornfield is the only way to exorcise the corn god (Fig. 13.1).

Fig. 13.1 Burt's car stuffed with dried cornstalks. (Author-generated screengrab from *Children of the Corn* [1984])

When Burt and Vicky come to Gatlin, they are not only unwelcomed but denounced as "outlanders" who must be sacrificed to He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Their misadventure into the corn belt re-articulates the "frontier myth inversion" common in rural horror[43] with farming, recontextualizing the destructive force of capitalist expansion within the Farm Crisis. Industrial agriculture is always already exploitative, historically fueled by the colonization of Indigenous lands and domestication of plants for food crops. Agripolitics of 1970s amplified this, with outside "experts" calling for bigger farms, more debt-financed investment, and greater surpluses that, as Wendell Berry ominously prophesied, would result in the "deliverance of American agriculture to the corporations."[44]

Children of the Corn registers the consequences of capital-driven surplus production through the corn's ominous excess. Corn is now one of the most widely produced commodities worldwide, enabled by the continued reliance on foreign export. Placing humans within the "unsettling context" of the food chain,[45] a vegetal villain like corn not only exposes the extent to which this crop now proliferates across our food system but challenges the hegemony of surplus cultivation.

Desertion and Devotion

"It's dead—like everything else around here."—Burt.

Gatlin, the "Nicest Little Town in America" according to its welcome sign, is not marked on Burt's map. In town, everything from the stores to the farmhouses looks old and lifeless. Burt quips, "It looks like a swingin' place," as he takes in the deserted Main Street. The buildings' dilapidated state belies a quaint charm; their emptiness augments a sense of eerie loneliness. Exterior footage for the Gatlin scenes was shot in Whiting, Iowa, where the Community State Bank (seen in the film, Fig. 13.2, right) failed in 1988 and the current population remains less than 800. The fictional town thus functions as a powerful synecdoche for actual agriculture-dependent communities devastated by the 1980s downturn. Through its depictions of the isolated and deserted farm town, *Children of the Corn* lays bare "a new ghostly version of the pastoral ideal"[46] left behind after the Farm Crisis.

Fig. 13.2 (Left) Opening scene, members of the Gatlin community leaving church with the marquee noting that week's sermon, "Corn Drought and the Lord." (Right) Exterior footage of Main Street, featuring the Community State Bank of Whiting, Iowa. (Author-generated screengrabs from *Children of the Corn* [1984])

The film's preface, narrated by Job, depicts an idyllic mid-century farm community: the bell rings as parishioners leave a white-clapboard church, shaking hands with Reverend Timothy Chase after services (see Fig. 13.2, left). These images of "simple folk, earnest neighborliness, and stalwart religiosity" lend Gatlin the nostalgic charm often associated with the countryside.[47] Leaving church, happy Gatlinites head to Hensen's Cafe for Sunday lunch, "just like always," Job explains. The diner, replete with jukebox and retro Blue Bunny ice cream ads, looks unchanged since the 1950s. That the massacre occurred only "three years ago" creates a disturbing dissonance against the modernity of the present day. Although the hats, frocks, and shoes worn pre-parricide were perhaps already old-fashioned for the 1980s, the children are now clad in flour-sack dresses and ragged ill-fitting pants reminiscent of the Dust Bowl. The aesthetic shift is palpable—what was once a vibrant community is now a decimated and crumbling ghost town.

Reading the film's plot against the history of the Farm Crisis, the environmental and economic fallout that ensued reframes Gatlin's depopulation. "Corn Drought and the Lord," displayed on the church's marquee, primes viewers to acknowledge "the forces of nature and capitalist society [that] exert direct control over farmers' productivity and material fortunes."[48] Other finance-related signifiers reinforce this running subtext. For example, we first meet Job and Sarah playing a game of Monopoly,

fantasizing about who is going to "have all the money in the world." Additionally, a sign that reads, "Credit Makes Enemies With Friends," hangs above the counter in Hensen's, and a pink public sale notice is posted next to the diner's rotary telephone.

Since the parricide, He Who Walks Behind the Rows has taken Gatlin under its spell. As noted, it is through the corn that this vengeful deity exercises its monstrous power. The corn plants "possess a malicious intelligence" by which they become animate.[49] In the cornfield, the tall stalks part and invite Burt into their labyrinth, and then quickly close behind him. At the film's climax, corn leaves grab and trip Burt, ensnaring his legs and bending to wrap around his torso. Through a "rushing montage … the corn get[s] bigger, closer and more aggressive."[50] Violently ganging up on him, other nearby stalks slap and beat him, even throwing themselves over Burt's body as if to smother him. Corn also flourishes by means of the cult; relics like offering bowls and talismans are fashioned from corn cobs and leaves. Indeed, the children act as "the corn [god's] agents,"[51] carrying out instructions to "Bring Him the blood of the outlanders!" They even demonstrate their devotion through self-sacrifice when they reach 19. Their vegetal ideology illustrates the chilling extent to which the corn has spread.

Standing in for the widespread impact of the Farm Crisis, Gatlin's deteriorated state exposes "the real horror of the rural," or the disillusioning loss of a once idyllic agrarianism.[52] Indeed, the massive loss of land, homes, and jobs caused by the 1980s downturn discredits a cultural imaginary in which the farmer is configured as "the self-sufficient individual [that] can triumph over all odds."[53] Like many post-Crisis farm towns, Gatlin is now depopulated and barely surviving. The bloodthirsty deity that seems to thrive on an overabundance of corn thus frighteningly articulates "community-killing agriculture."[54]

He Who Walks Behind the Rows therefore represents what is perhaps most insidious about the Farm Crisis—its supersession by a broader cultural narrative of agro-technological progress.[55] Farm families heavily in debt after the 1970s boom became disillusioned by their loss of land and livelihood, felt "written off" as a causality in the onward march of capitalism.[56] More than "the notion of people that time forgot,"[57] post-parricide Gatlin represents the fallout of agriculture's neoliberalization. Violent and vengeful corn thereby articulates the farmer as a revenant of the industrial food system.

Conclusion

Heeding the "get big or get out" rallying cry of the 1970s, farmers relied on credit to buy up land and finance new equipment. By the 1980s efforts to tighten monetary policy and reduce inflation sent grain prices plummeting. Reverberating across the agricultural sector, the Farm Crisis decimated local communities and forever reshaped the political economy of US food production. Against this backdrop, *Children of the Corn* offers an implicit critique of the rise of commodity-based agribusiness.

Blending elements of rural horror and plant horror, the film represents Midwestern rurality "in the grip of [its] own death throes."[58] Through its depictions of a deserted farm town and villainous food crop, the film articulates not only the hegemony of surplus cultivation but also an industrialized food system centered around corn. *Children of the Corn* thus interprets the trauma of the Farm Crisis, exposing the most damaging impacts of neoliberal agripolitics.

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mother! and the Horror of Environmental Abuse

Emma Frances Bloomfield

"Could you get down from there? That sink's not braced yet," Jennifer Lawrence as the unnamed character "mother" addresses yet another person sitting on the sink.[1] "That sink's not braced yet," she repeats, but no one listens. What seems a polite reminder becomes ever more pressing, urgent, and tense, until finally the sink breaks free from the wall, rupturing the plumbing and letting water burst from the walls and flood the kitchen.

Part of the beauty of Darren Aronofsky's 2017 film *mother!* is that the horror and brutality of the film come from these relatively simple scenes—there is little blood and gore, but there is the ever-present feeling of dread with every ignored request and dismissed concern. In *mother!*, Lawrence is an agreeable wife who lives to tend to her husband, named "Him," played by Javier Bardem, and to remodel the house they live in after it was destroyed in a fire.

The film's plot follows the couple as they begin to receive more and more visitors to their home. The beginning features mother and Him on their own. But, as the film continues, more and more people arrive until

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the house erupts in complete chaos and pandemonium, being ripped from its foundation and destroyed by the increasingly bizarre and chaotic actions of the invaders. The film follows mother and her relationship with Him during the destruction of their home. This relationship is a vehicle through which we can view a deeper, more poignant relationship: the relationship between humanity and the Earth.

I argue that the film *mother!* is a symbolic representation of the Anthropocene, which is our current epoch of geological time designated after the Holocene. The Anthropocene is markedly different from the Holocene because it signals a shift from balance and homeostasis between humans and nature to humanity's harmful impact on the environment. The Anthropocene thus proposes a new perspective on the relationship between humanity and the Earth where what was previously stable has become adversarial and destructive. In *mother!*, the character mother can be interpreted as Mother Earth, while Him and other characters represent humanity; their relationship is abusive, exploitative, and unsustainable. By following the main character's perspective, *mother!* invites audiences to sympathize with the plight of mother nature and recognize humans, our religion, our technology, and our search for progress, as her tormenters.

Instead of creating an overt argument for environmental protection, *mother!* shows the horror and chaos of a world that disregards the suffering of nature to persuade us to avoid following that path. The characters in *mother!* represent humanity and the various ways that we have exploited, disregarded, and abused the Earth for our own benefit. Like Him, we ignore mother and silence her voice. Like Man, we go against mother's wishes and cause pollution. Like Woman, we invite chaos and disruption by violating mother's space. As a reflection of our most pressing societal anxieties, horror films like *mother!* are a powerful vehicle through which to analyze the plurality of fears that contribute to and could potentially correct our anthropocentric attitudes.

Scholars frequently lament the difficulties in communicating the impact that humans have on the environment.[2] In *mother!*, the complicated dynamics of human-nature relationships are presented as a visual and visceral human drama. In what follows, I describe important scenes in the film that highlight the representation of the human impact on the environment, the metaphor of an abusive relationship to understand the Anthropocene, and how the audience is invited to sympathize with

mother. These themes work together to create a concrete, tangible picture of human-nature relationships, to prompt reflection on humanity's impact on the Earth, and to question if/how the relationship can be saved, rehabilitated, and restored.

Eden, Interrupted

At the beginning of *mother!*, mother and Him live peacefully. Him is working on writing poetry and mother is working on renovating their home; we see scenes of mother thoughtfully deciding on which colors to paint the walls, fixing Him meals, and cleaning the house. Things are calm until a guest arrives to their home, simply called "Man." Him happily invites Man into their home, but mother seems concerned; we sense that Man has disrupted the peace of the home. While tending to the visitor, mother becomes short of breath and doubles over in the kitchen, suffering from a dizzy spell that disorients her and the audience.

Shortly after Man has been invited by Him to stay at the house, he uses a lighter to ignite a cigarette in the parlor, to which mother responds, "We don't smoke." As Man continues smoking, he says, "That's smart." Seeing that her point has not gotten across, mother continues, "in the house, I mean." Man reluctantly flicks the cigarette out of the front door and seems to acknowledge her request. But later, mother finds an ashtray full of still smoking cigarette butts in Man's room, evidence that he has dismissed her reasonable request to respect her rules. At this point, mother experiences her second dizzy spell, brought on by the presence of carbon pollution in her home.

After Man comes Woman; Adam and Eve are now staying in the peaceful, idyllic garden and quickly make themselves at home. When Woman arrives, mother answers the door, disrupting her routine enough that breakfast begins burning. Man and Woman are guests but act like they have the right to explore the house without permission and use items they find at their leisure. For example, one morning Woman takes it upon herself to make lemonade. What seems like a benign, helpful gesture becomes less so once mother goes to the kitchen and sees the mess of lemon seeds, rinds, and pulp, stirring spoons, utensils, and glasses strewn about the previously immaculate kitchen table. Similar to the cigarette butts, humans have begun to leave their mark, their footprint, on the home, which falls to mother, and mother alone, to clean (Fig. 14.1).

Fig. 14.1 Woman leaves a mess in the kitchen after making lemonade. (Author-generated screengrab from *mother!* [2017])

Throughout *mother!*, people behave in ways that might otherwise be helpful but do so without taking mother's needs into consideration. In this sense, they end up doing more harm than good. During a scene later in the movie, after considerably more guests have arrived, mother finds a few people painting the walls. When she asks, "What are you doing?" one of the painters responds that it's "no big deal." mother does not want them to paint the house and tells them immediately to stop. The painting is not only contrary to what mother wants for her home renovations but is also distracting her from larger problems. These scenes portray people as naïvely acting in a way they think is beneficial but in fact only repairs superficial, aesthetic features instead of addressing more serious issues.

mother! shows how small, individual disruptions can become tipping points to larger, irreversible damages. For example, mother warns Woman not to enter Him's study, telling her, "That's private." But, this does not deter Man and Woman from invading the room again only a few scenes later, seemingly driven by a sense of "Manifest Destiny" to explore their environment. When mother and Him are talking in the kitchen, we hear a crash, the sound of Woman dropping a beautiful, clear crystal Him keeps in his office. Ignoring mother's warning to stay out of the study, Man and Woman damage one of Him's most valued possessions. This interaction causes mother's third dizzy spell, during which she looks increasingly weak and disoriented.

Fig. 14.2 mother pokes at a wound in the floor that appeared after Younger Brother's murder. (Author-generated screengrab from *mother!* [2017])

Because of this invasion of private space, Him removes the doorknob from his study's door, blocking further entrance. The doorknob is not immediately replaced because mother must suddenly respond to a new visitor who has barged in without invitation, Woman and Man's son, Younger Brother. The doorknob is forgotten as Oldest Son arrives shortly thereafter and the family gets into a brutal fight. A dispute over money ends in the death of Younger Brother at the hands of Oldest Son, who uses the recently-dislodged doorknob as his murder weapon. The story of Cain and Abel unfolds on mother's floors, and she is now tasked with cleaning the sins of human aggression and violence from the wood. mother is unable to fully erase the stain of Younger Brother's blood from the floor; the house has been irreparably damaged (Fig. 14.2).

One of the more poignant symbols in the film is the repeated imagery of a heart beating behind the walls of the home. A few times in the film, mother leans on and puts her hand to the wall, showing that she can feel, and the audience can see, the heart's contractions. When mother is painting at the beginning of the film, the heart appears healthy, pinkish, and beats normally. But, as the home and mother become ever more disturbed, the heart mirrors this degradation. After the death of Younger Brother, the heart grows black spots and beats a bit more slowly; near the end of the film the entire heart turns black, shrivels up, and ceases beating.

Unsustainable Relationships

One of the main tenets of the Anthropocene is that humans and nature have reached a state of "rupture."[3] Similar to a romantic relationship that becomes abusive, what should be cooperative and loving becomes exploitative and coercive. Throughout the film, Him controls mother's actions, responds for her, makes requests of her, and is overwhelmingly dismissive. For example, when Man arrives in the home and offers mother a drink, Him responds, "She's not much of a drinker." Shortly thereafter, Him offers that Man should stay, noting, "We always talk about how this place is too big for the two of us." Mother's face clearly shows confusion, while still trying to maintain composure in front of their guest. A puzzled expression frequently adorns mother's face, who is constantly in tension between living up to Him's unreasonable expectations, managing an increasing number of guests, and trying to maintain a semblance of order in her home.

It is not only her husband that ignores mother; everyone who comes through the house minimizes her voice and needs. In offering Man tea upon his arrival, he mutters "Hmm?" forcing mother to repeat her question, "some tea?" Similar to the warning of the unbraced sink, these initial interactions seem mundane and commonplace, but soon, the accumulation of the repeated requests becomes overbearingly frustrating. Throughout the film, mother is asked, "Pardon?", "What?", "What do you mean?", "Are you sure?", "I'm sorry?", and "Excuse me?" as if her individual statements are meaningless without repetition or clarification. While the audience hears her messages, her distress, and her pain clearly, no other character seems capable of or interested in listening.

In a particularly disturbing scene near the middle of the film, mother and Him begin to have an argument. At the end of the fight, Him forces himself upon mother, violently overpowering her, which she initially rejects and screams, "no!" until eventually seeming to give in, resulting in her becoming pregnant. In speaking for mother, in not taking her concerns into consideration, even physically forcing her to participate in sex, we see Him silencing mother, disregarding her opinion, and exploiting her for his own benefit. mother is not an equal partner in the relationship. She is treated like a mere resource to be used and discarded when Him receives attention from others, including Man, Woman, and the fans of his poetry who begin appearing near the end of the film.

Sympathizing with Nature

Early on in *mother!*, we know very little about her besides that she is a dutiful wife who is restoring their home. About a third of the way through the film, we hear mother speak more than a few, meek words. When Woman questions, for the second time, whether mother is capable of completing the home renovations on her own, mother says, "We spend all our time here. I want to make it paradise. And I love the work." In these statements, we get a peek into mother's passions and the value she places on the home, calling it "paradise." The audience is invited to more deeply sympathize with mother and the priority she places on the order of her home. While mother views the home as a paradise, Woman notes, "This is all just setting," juxtaposing how humanity views the home with how mother does.

The audience sees through mother's perspective and follows her gaze throughout the film. Scenes are framed largely from over mother's shoulders or feature mother's face and her reactions. Instead of following action where it happens, we see mother's perspective of it. In the scenes where we view mother's reactions, her face takes up most of the screen; our focus is on her, her emotions, and how she is experiencing the ever-more bizarre series of events occurring under her roof. We follow mother's disorientation during her dizzy spells, with the edges of the screen pulsating accompanied by piercing noises. We are exposed only to mother's narrative, her experiences, and thus one side of the story without knowledge of what horror awaits mother in her own home. When mother is ignored, we feel frustrated. When mother is disoriented, we are confused and concerned. When people invade the home, we feel a sense of violation as well.

For example, during the fight between Younger Brother and Oldest Son, mother is trapped between the brothers and the parents and repeatedly yells, "Stop, please!" Although mother tries to intervene, Younger Brother ends up dead on the floor with mother sitting next to the body horrified and covered in blood. The family rushes to take Younger Brother to get medical attention. mother pleads with Him, "Please don't leave me! Please don't leave me!" but Him leaves despite her protestations. As the camera view widens, we see mother has been left behind, her and the home abandoned due to the violence of humanity. Alone, mother moves through the kitchen to reach the sink to wash her hands and passes by the still-present lemonade remnants. What was originally presented to

the audience as a stunning scene of human selfishness now pales in comparison to the horrific murder scene mother must now scrub from her floors.

After Younger Brother's death, mourners arrive and begin settling in without concern for mother or the home. As mother attempts to keep people in line, Woman interrupts mother and tells her that she will never understand the loss Woman now feels, because "You don't have a child." Woman continues, "You give, and you give, and you give, and … it's just never enough." mother quietly replies, "I understand," to which Woman snaps back, "Do you?" In this exchange, we hear Woman describe exactly what mother does—nurture, give, and sacrifice for her home and her husband—but no one present recognizes these actions as meaningful or motherly. mother is not respected or treated as a "real" mother; Woman claims this title only for herself.

At this point of the film, the funeral service has exploded into a multitude of people and mother moves frantically from crisis to crisis, desperately trying to prevent all her hard work from further collapse. But, as the sink comes unbraced and mother find enough of her voice to yell, "Get out!" there is a shift from the chaos to a temporary rebalancing and calm in the house. Everyone leaves, save Him, to whom mother jokingly mentions, "I'll just get started on the apocalypse," as she moves toward the kitchen to start cleaning. This utterance can be interpreted a few ways. In using the term "apocalypse," perhaps mother is referring to the destruction and damage the family and mourners have caused or she may be referring to the cleaning process itself. If we consider the apocalypse to be a destructive act, we may interpret it as the former, but the apocalypse can also be interpreted through the lens of renewal,[4] where the apocalypse is the restoration of the home to its former glory. In either interpretation, mother's determination to fix her home is soon thwarted as chaos quickly returns.

While the last hour of the film could carry its own separate analysis for the many symbols within it, I want to highlight just a few features in the ensuing pandemonium that represents various human inventions and tools that transform mother's idyllic home into a nightmare: religion, greed, and violence. After Him releases another publication of his poetry, the house is overrun once again and this time much more suddenly and abruptly, with dozens and soon hundreds of people clamoring to get into the house. There is exponential population growth

beyond the capabilities of the house to sustain. The newcomers appear to take on the role of pilgrims, with one noting, "We've all traveled a great distance" to come see Him. Later, Him is seen performing rituals similar to laying hands, where religious leaders heal the sick. People start building shrines to Him and perform rituals to appease him all within the previously calm house. These scenes can be interpreted as religion separating humanity from their obligation to care for nature. While there is evidence that some people of faith are motivated to care for the environment, others point to religion as an obstacle to environmental protection.[5]

When the zealots are finally let into the house, they begin eating the food that mother had prepared for Him. When mother cries out, "No! That's not for you … It's not yours," the person she speaks to responds that Him had instructed everyone "to share" and that the hungry and thirsty need the food. mother seems to accept the necessity of satisfying the zealots' basic human needs, but soon the stealing extends beyond survival. Mother screams, "This doesn't belong to you!" to deaf ears while people around her start stealing plates, appliances, and even the phone mother tries to use to call the police. When people start tearing pieces of the wall away, mother is confused and asks why, to which one responds, "Proof we were here." The human need to mark our presence has damaged nature such as carving names into rocks and monuments and moving and damaging natural formations for our amusement.[6] These scenes in *mother!* prompt reflection on human greed and what is damaged in our selfish pursuits.

The house becomes so packed with people that mother, now very far along in her pregnancy, struggles to traverse her own home. As mother moves through the house, she feebly mutters, "No, don't," at various people, but is never heard or acknowledged. Police arrive and there is briefly hope that they might help, but instead their presence results in more violence and rioting. What was once a peaceful, normal home has now fully erupted in a variety of simultaneous crises. There are people chanting and marching, others being executed on the dining room floor, women locked up in cages, bombs going off, and near-constant fighting and screaming. With no explanation for any of these occurrences, the audience feels just like mother: confused, scared, and helpless (Fig. 14.3).

Fig. 14.3 mother discovers a cage of women imprisoned in her house. (Author-generated screengrab from *mother!* [2017])

Amid the chaos, Him and mother's son is born. Him wants to show the baby to the people, but mother is scared of Him and does not let him even hold the child. Desperate for the attention of his zealots, Him steals the boy away from mother when she falls asleep and passes the infant to his followers. mother desperately tries to get her son back, her voice strident with pain as she is unable to reclaim her child. As the baby floats across the outstretched arms of followers, there is a small snap and the baby stops crying. We see mother's immense anguish as everything she tried to keep sacred, to protect, has been destroyed. In a sea of people, the house so damaged it is nearly falling down, the audience is left wondering how anything could ever be salvaged after such bedlam.

The Future of Human-Nature Relationships

Only mother has the solution. After her child has been killed by the mob and she hears the heart of the house stop beating, mother lets out a terrifying "No!" that is so powerful it ruptures the ground she is kneeling on. Yelling, "It's time to get the fuck out of my house!" mother pushes her way down into the basement, punctures an oil storage container, and ignites the lighter that Man had used to smoke in the house. Him tries to stop her, but mother has decided to end it. She laments, "I gave you everything. You gave it all away," echoing the words of Woman who doubted that mother truly understood the sacrifices of motherhood. mother drops the lighter and sets the basement aflame, destroying herself, the house, and everyone there. Despite being helpless through most of the film, mother asserts herself and takes back control through this destructive act (Fig. 14.4).

Fig. 14.4   mother screams, "No!" and causes the floor to rupture after the heart of the house stops beating. (Author-generated screengrab from *mother!* [2017])

Her power is short-lived, however, as the audience sees that Him has survived the blast. Him carries mother from the basement and places her down, reaches inside her, and retrieves her heart, which he crumbles into a clear crystal not unlike the one Woman broke when she invaded his study. At this moment Him says, "Now I must try it all again," signaling that this has all happened before. Him represents humanity's fatal flaw: Even though pain and suffering are happening right before our eyes, we cannot see or refuse to see the damage we are causing. We repeatedly choose other things, such as religion, greed, ego, and violence, over mother (nature). Her heart removed, mother crumbles into the house, returning to dirt and ash. Placing the crystal back in its prized position in his study, Him laughs as the house begins to restore itself. The Earth has renewed, humanity gets another chance, but the audience is left with the terrifying knowledge that the cycle will simply repeat. This possibility seems all the more inevitable as the credits roll over the song, "It's the End of the World."

While there were many moments in the film where this ending could have been avoided, it was not. With all the evidence laid out upon us, are we no better than Him turning a blind eye to nature's suffering or the horde of invaders that thought only for themselves? The representation of nature as a nurturing woman and of humanity as indifferent, violent, and selfish houseguests constructs a new perspective on human-nature relationships. Instead of valuing ourselves, we are forced to view the climate crisis through the eyes of nature, who will be harmed most by our actions. Through eliciting fear, discomfort, confusion, and frustration,

mother! positions audiences as responsible for mother's fate, with whom we have been invited to sympathize with and care for throughout the film.

It is incredibly hard to communicate the severity and urgency of climate change because it lacks physical and temporal immediacy. In *mother!*, audiences come face to face with the horrors of environmental destruction and how rapidly such devastation can unfold. *mother!* proposes a new lens through which to view human-nature relationships. This reading of *mother!* offers hope that entertainment media and horror narratives can package complicated environmental messages in ways that resonate with and make sense to the general public. In the future, I expect that we will see more horror films that evoke themes of human-nature relationships, because horror movies often reflect society's most deep-seated fears and anxieties, and there is little more troubling and horrifying than the fate of the Earth and humanity.

Notes

1. Following the conventions of the film's title, I have chosen not to capitalize the character's name in the text.
2. For example, see Julie Doyle, *Mediating Climate Change* (Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315594583; Esben Bjerggaard Nielsen, "Climate Crisis Made Manifest," in *Topic-Driven Environmental Rhetoric*, ed. Derek G. Ross (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 87.
3. Clive Hamilton, "The Anthropocene as Rupture," *The Anthropocene Review* 3, no. 2 (August 1, 2016): 94, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019616634741
4. Emma Frances Bloomfield, "Ecocultural Identity in the Creation Care Movement: Analyzing Contemporary Performances of Religious Environmentalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identity*, ed. Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor (New York, NY: Routledge, forthcoming).
5. Lawrence J. Prelli and Terri S. Winters, "Rhetorical Features of Green Evangelicalism," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2009): 224–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/17524030902928785; Bloomfield, "Ecocultural Identity in the Creation Care Movement: Analyzing Contemporary Performances of Religious Environmentalism;" L. White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *1996*, 1967, 3–14.
6. For example, see "7 Cringe-Worthy Cases of Tourists Defacing Natural and Cultural Landmarks around the World," Matador Network, accessed January 19, 2019, http://matadornetwork.com/life/7-cringe-worthy-cases-of-tourists-defacing-natural-and-cultural-landmarks-around-the-world/.

Let the Bodies (of Water) Hit the Floor: Development and Exploitation in John Boorman's *Deliverance*

Chelsea Renee Ratcliff and Salvatore J. Russo

This idea of unwitting, "civilized" man wandering into parts of nature where he should not, and nature extracting a pound of flesh in return, is not uncommon in the horror genre. Indeed, this premise helped spawn an entire sub-genre of mostly regrettable films known as "eco-horror." In eco-horror, the environment strikes back against humanity for abuses waged against the natural world.[1] The threats facing humanity in these films can run the gamut from the rubbery monsters of the "big bug" movies of the 1950s and 1960s (*Beginning of the End*, 1957), *Them!* (1954), as well as their successors in the 1970s (*The Kingdom of the Spiders*, 1977; *The Empire of the Ants*, 1977), to the colossal beasts in the *Godzilla* series (1954–present), to a single animal out for payback (*The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, 1953; *Orca*, 1977), to indigenous communities pushed too far

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(*Cannibal Ferox*, 1981; *Cannibal Holocaust*, 1980; *Green Inferno*, 2013). The unifying theme in these films is that modern society has pushed too far against the natural world, and must be taught a violent lesson.

One film that touches on this subject of human intrusion into nature that is generally excluded from analysis of this sub-genre is John Boorman's 1972 film *Deliverance*. This chapter will analyze Boorman's film, and then discuss its place within the eco-horror genre, the societal fears that gave rise to the eco-horror's resurgence in the 1970s, and also how the film transcends the genre. We will then look at the influence the film continues to have today.

Deliverance: Overview of the Plot

Deliverance begins with four friends from the Atlanta suburbs—Lewis, a daredevil outdoorsman; Ed, thoughtful and Lewis's closest friend; Bobby, an aggressive, smart-aleck salesman; and Drew, a gentle guitarist—agreeing to spend a weekend on a canoe trip in an area of North Georgia. This is their last chance to see the area before it is to be flooded to make way for a hydroelectric dam.

As they drive into the remote back country of Georgia, they meet some of the rural folk who live there. While Lewis arranges for two local men to drive the friends' cars ahead to Aintry, where the canoe trip is to end, Bobby pokes fun at some locals, and Drew plays guitar with a mute, deformed young banjo player. The first day on the water goes well, ending with a pleasant, campfire dinner. The four are separated from each other while rafting over some unexpectedly rough waters the next day, and Bobby and Ed run aground. Bobby and Ed are then attacked by two mountain men in the dense woods; the men humiliate, strip, and rape Bobby at gunpoint. As the mountain men are about to force Ed to perform fellatio, Lewis emerges from the treeline and kills one mountain man with a bow and arrow. The second mountain man runs from Drew into the wilderness.

The four friends now face the dilemma of what to do with the body of the slain rapist: do they report the whole situation to the law, as Drew suggests, or do they bury the body and pretend nothing happened, as Lewis suggests? Lewis explains that the entire area will soon be flooded due to the construction of the dam, so the body would never be discovered. Bobby vigorously agrees with the idea of dumping the corpse and moving on, and Ed, more reluctantly, eventually agrees. As they try to make their way on the river and continue to their planned destination, Drew slumps

over and falls off the boat, lost in the rushing rapids. Shortly thereafter, Lewis capsizes and breaks his leg. Lewis insists that Drew was shot by the surviving mountain man, and that they must find and kill the mountain man before he picks them off, one by one, in the valley. At night, Ed must scale the cliffs and kill the mountain man with Lewis's bow and arrow. After Ed does so, the man's body falls off the sheer cliff into the river. The surviving friends finally make it back to civilization—in the form of Aintry, which is soon to be destroyed by the dam's placement—and they stick to their story regarding what happened. The sheriff—played by writer James Dickey himself in a cameo role—is suspicious, but tells them to leave and let the town die in peace.

Deliverance: Technical Aspects

Deliverance is a (relatively) large-budget, Hollywood film with two proven stars, Burt Reynolds and John Voigt. The film was a commercial success, nominated for several Academy Awards—losing Best Picture to *The Godfather*, Boorman losing Best Director to Bob Fosse for his work on *Cabaret*, and editor Tom Priestley losing to David Bretherton, also for work on *Cabaret*—and is based on the highly successful 1970 novel by James Dickey, the 1966 US Poet Laureate. One of the most striking features of the film is that *Deliverance* has little music outside of the famed "Dueling Banjos," and a few short acoustic stings. Apart from these memorable sequences, Boorman was content to let the natural environment provide the soundtrack. In capturing the scenery of the natural environment, Boorman mutes the rich greens of the woods; the film was shot entirely on location, so the numerous outdoor shots feature a preponderance of the color green. Boorman stated that he intentionally subdued all other colors to draw attention to one specific "acid green plant."[2]

A notable feature of the film is that it defies neat categorization. Is *Deliverance* "rednecksploitation"?[3] An adventure movie? A horror movie?[4] For critical analysis, it is the film's relationship to the eco-horror that yields the most fruitful results. At first glance, *Deliverance* contains clear eco-horror elements. In the film, urbanites are seeking to develop an unspoiled plot of land: Atlanta businessmen have apparently agreed to flood the Georgia backcountry in constructing a dam that will generate hydroelectric power for the city's growing suburbs. Also keeping with the eco-horror tropes, people entering into this bucolic stretch of land face peril and even death.

Appropriate to the eco-horror genre, the four friends in *Deliverance* are suburbanites out of their element, and their unfamiliarity with nature leads them into danger. This is a trope that is often repeated in eco-horrors, new and old alike. Eli Roth's 2013 *Green Inferno* is often classified as a modern eco-horror film.[5] *Green Inferno* is based on/an homage to Ruggero Deodato's 1980 *Cannibal Holocaust* and Umberto Lenzi's 1981 *Cannibal Ferox*, the defining films of a genre.[6] Worthy of an analysis of its own, the cannibal film is very much a variation of the eco-horror. Almost invariably in these films, "civilized" First-World intruders enter the jungles of South America—occasionally Southeast Asia—and wind up leaving a trail of atrocities in their wake. Animal cruelty and exploitation of the indigenous peoples are the order of the day, until the indigenous peoples gain an upper hand and subject their unwelcome guests to punishments that ultimately culminate in cannibalism.[7] The better of the genre—including *Cannibal Holocaust*, clearly the strongest of the cannibal films, despite the inclusion of actual animal cruelty—will include a more overt question as to whether the First-World inhabitants are in actuality more "savage" than those in the primordial jungles. All of the films, however bad, include the theme of nature getting its revenge on the arrogant, urban intruders. This can be seen in Roth's film, as well as the films that inspired it. The similarities to *Deliverance* seem apparent, and help demonstrate how well *Deliverance* fits into the eco-horror genre. Indeed, like a cannibal film, *Deliverance* features animalistic antagonists, uncivilized and foreign to urban, polite society. In *Deliverance*, the four weekenders are attacked by two mountain men who are missing teeth, wearing filthy clothes, and enjoy inflicting sadistic torments on Bobby and Ed for seemingly no reason other than because they can. As society has "developed," it has left behind this rural mountain community. They are pushed into living in the natural world, alien and apart from civilization and at home in nature.

Viewers can see the trope of "civilized" urbanities and suburbanites entering into the natural world, and suffering at the hands of those more in harmony with nature. The antagonists can be seen as being *of* nature itself. Additionally, in both the cannibal film sub-genre of the eco-horror, and in *Deliverance*, it's the "civilized" world that lands the first blow against nature. Where *Deliverance* adds a novel element is in the manner in which civilization first attacked nature. The four friends in *Deliverance* did not personally commit any offenses against the rural people of Aintry and the surrounding communities, while in cannibal movies and other

eco-horrors, it's usually the interlopers themselves who have harassed, exploited, or otherwise harmed the indigenous communities.[8] However, it was the society from which the friends in *Deliverance* come, Atlanta, that has sentenced the entire region around Aintry to a watery grave. Note, too, how Lewis literally buries the body of Bobby's rapist in land that will soon be flooded over. Atlanta unknowingly hides the sins of its citizens.

A close analysis of the film reveals that, ultimately, *Deliverance* transcends, and even tweaks or spoofs, the eco-horror genre. It does not crudely condemn development, as often seen in eco-horror. In *Deliverance*, development is presented as inevitable as nature itself: bad things happen to the weak, and only the fittest survive. As happens in nature, and not the idealized, sanitized version of nature often presented in eco-horrors and in the environmental movement, everything is part of the food chain: the mountain men in *Deliverance* exploit the weekend explorers; Atlanta exploits the river and neighboring rural area to produce electricity. In a break from the eco-horror, the four weekend warriors in *Deliverance* are innocents; they are only the scapegoats for Atlanta's damming of the river—and flooding over the backcountry—for profit.

Eco-Horror

Eco-horror has waxed and waned in popularity as a genre, first appearing in the 1950s, enjoying a resurgence in the 1970s, and reviving yet again in more modern times. The initial 1950s rise of the eco-horror can be seen as a reaction to American fears rising from life in the Atomic Age. Monsters unleashed by radioactivity, or mutated by radioactivity, or drawn by radioactivity, lumbered into our suburbs and urban centers.[9] As the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, movie-going audiences began losing interest in radioactive beasties. However, eco-horror was not done just yet. Appropriately enough, it mutated.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is often seen as having begun the modern environmental movement.[10] As public awareness over the damage that mankind was doing to its natural world rose, so, too, did new anxieties in the American public, and global events did little to ease America's fears. In 1971, OPEC succeeded, for the first time ever, in a consummate increase in the price of oil.[11] In 1973, the Arabian members of OPEC agreed on an outright embargo in response to the Western reaction to the Yom Kippur War.[12] The fragility of the modern way of life was put on full display, as nations far removed from the average Americans' consciousness

were able to grind the country to a standstill. The newly evolved eco-horror genre found a ready audience.[13] Since then, economic anxiety and social strains have led to periodic revivals of this genre.

One common trope in the eco-horror genre is the use of the "Earth Mother" metaphor. The concept manifests as a maternal force pushed too far; a "Mama Bear" ferociously defending her cubs. The environmental movement, especially, likes to depict nature as a mother figure ("The earth is our mother, we must take care of her" Hymn 1073, Unitarian Universalist Hymnal). Traditionally, nature is depicted as maternal, as seen in the traditional depiction of Mother Nature, and mother goddesses in numerous religious traditions: the Greek deity Gaia, the Roman Terra Mater, or the Hindu goddesses Parvati and Durga. Darren Aronofsky's 2016 film *mother!* was described by the director and some viewers as an allegory about humanity's despoiling of the environment. Jennifer Lawrence's character, "Woman," watches as uninvited guests cause increasing chaos, culminating in their ritual murder and consumption of her baby son. She finally destroys the home, killing the intruders as well as herself. Some have taken this as a message about nature—Mother Earth—being able to endure only so much abuse before destroying the human race.[14] Others, however, have dismissed Aronofsky's and Lawrence's environmental explanations as being essentially for the sake of promotion.[15] In our view, the film seems more a straight biblical allegory that, Aronofsky acknowledges, borrows heavily from Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962).[16] The 2013 horror short *Mother Nature*—a film that is also highly derivative of *Deliverance*—drops subtlety in making the point of Mother Nature being both protector and predator.

Another way *Deliverance* defies the expectations of the eco-horror is by flipping the script on the maternal aspects of nature: *Deliverance* does not embrace the Earth Mother concept. Nature is one member of cast of (almost) all male characters. No character in *Deliverance*, even the brief appearances of the four friends' wives or the bed and breakfast patrons, seems especially maternal. Viewers would likely note that the mute "Banjo Boy" is seen without any maternal supervision. Despite his physical disabilities, he sits by himself with his instrument near a filthy garage in one scene, and later stands alone on the bridge, ominously watching the four friends row past.

The Overwhelming Indifference of Nature

Nature is harsh and indifferent. Even the mountain men, acting as malevolent avatars for the river in *Deliverance*, die in agony. When Man treads where he should not, nature punishes without regard for "good" or "bad" intentions. This more naturalistic depiction of nature—rather than being an anthropomorphic Mother Figure in the film, nature is a realm where the strong and the cunning survive and the weak or foolish are killed— calls to mind an almost real-life eco-horror film, Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005). The mauling death of environmental activist Timothy Treadwell by the bears he spent his adult life trying to protect causes Herzog to comment: "And what haunts me, is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature." Like the hapless victim in his own eco-horror, Treadwell, who compulsively recorded his thoughts and activities in rural Alaska, viewed nature as needing his protection. The bears of Alaska, far from being helpless children in need of Treadwell's coddling, cared nothing of Treadwell's feelings for them, and this indifference led to his brutal death. The overwhelming indifference of nature is what the heroes and villains in *Deliverance* must contend with, and helps distinguish the film from the environmental morality-tales that typify the eco-horror genre. As Herzog elaborates, "I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility, and murder."

In keeping with Herzog's theory, it makes little difference to nature that Lewis loves the raw, untamed beauty of the Georgia backcountry, and regrets that it is going to be flooded over for development. In the first lines of the film, Lewis is heard explaining to the other men that it's important they take advantage of the unspoiled nature before the dam is built, explaining that the reason for their camping trip is:

> Because they're buildin' a dam across the Cahulawassee River; they're gonna flood a whole valley, Bobby, that's why. Dammit, they're drownin' a river; they're drownin' a river, man … You push a little more power into Atlanta … a little more air conditioners for your smug little suburb…and you know what's gonna happen? They're gonna rape this whole landscape. They're gonna rape it.[17]

Lewis is thus presented as the only of the four vacationers who sees something profound in the loss of nature, even ironically referring to the (over) development of the land as its rape. Nonetheless, it is only the efforts of avowed suburbanites Bobby and Ed that keep Lewis from perishing in the rapids he thought important to experience one last time. Nature's indifference to the motivations of the four men can be seen in Drew's fate, as well. Of the four men, Drew was the only one who tried to make a friendly connection with the rural people they met, playing guitar with the "Banjo Boy" at the garage while Bobby taunted an older man, Lewis argued with a mechanic, and Ed stood aloof, not speaking with any of the locals. Drew also sought to contact the law after Lewis killed Bobby's rapist, rather than simply leaving the body in a shallow grave that would soon be flooded over by the dam. Despite his kindness and concern for the rural people they encounter, it is Drew, not Lewis, Bobby, or Ed, who is killed by the other mountain man while trying to paddle down the rapids. The mountain men themselves, too, both die in pain, each shot to death by Lewis's bow and arrow. It is telling that both mountain men are killed by a piece of equipment that Lewis brought to hunt deer—wild animals—in the backcountry.

THE WATER'S END: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is likely that Boorman did not specifically aim to influence entire genres or shape the American view of the rural South when making this film. Yet, the movie has proven to be a highly durable part of the international cultural fabric. It is likely because the film does not neatly fit into any one genre that it remains so important and influential. However, it is when viewed as a subversive take on eco-horror that the film warrants an especially close look. Rather than following traditional tropes of the genre, the film dips its toes in the water of the eco-horror format, only to defy the conventions and expectations commonly associated with the genre. Thus, while the eco-horror genre may wax and wane over time, *Deliverance* continues to remain relevant.

The cultural influence of *Deliverance* is not confined to the background of the cinematic world and has entered the cultural mainstream. Comedic sources ranging from *The Simpsons*, *Father Ted*, *The Kids in the Hall*, *Family Guy*, *SCTV*, and *South Park* to independent clips on sites such as *Funny or Die* have all referenced the infamous "squeal like a pig" rape sequence. The "dueling banjos" tune has been featured in films and commercials alike as a way to set the scene for an ominously rural environment.

In a less amusing context, dismissive references to a rural or poor white area of the United States as "Deliverance County" are not uncommon. Reactions to the 2016 presidential election in online political discourse—typified by social media platforms such as Twitter—were marked by this phrasing, as urbanites sought to explain how the upset victory of Donald Trump could have occurred, and who was to blame.[18] It's worth wondering how many angry "Tweeters" have been exposed to rural communities outside of Twitter tropes. The likely overlap between those using these dismissive comments about rural America and those who hold the child-like view of the environment seen by the victims in *The Green Inferno* (and even in *Grizzly Man*) would be worth exploring. Similarly, we wonder how many people making use of the references to *Deliverance*—or laughing at them—have actually seen the film itself, or whether it has become so part of the cultural common parlance that actually *seeing* the banjo-playing sequence is not necessary to know what the tune of Dueling Banjos connotes. As American political anxieties increase and polarization worsens, we may yet see more eco-horrors in the coming years. It is worth wondering whether they will all simply follow the formulaic plot points of the predecessors, or if any, like *Deliverance* will take a more subversive approach to this tested genre.

NOTES

1. Beard, Drew. (2011). "Eco-Horror Defined." Society for Cinema and Media Studies 2012 Panel, Boston, MA. Very special thanks to Damien K. Picariello, for tireless work editing this volume and getting this project off the ground. A round of thanks, too, to all the participants of the Politics of Fear panel at the 2019 Popular Culture Association in the South/American Culture Association annual meeting, where this book first started taking shape and where we first received valuable feedback on this chapter.
2. *Deliverance* Deluxe Edition DVD (2007)
3. While the term made a resurgence during the early 2000s craze of reality television shows focusing on poor whites ("*Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo*" being a particularly noxious example), there is a canon of films that fit this genre, mostly coming out of the 1960s. In rednecksploitation films, the setting is generally the rural American South, and playing on stereotypes about poor, rural whites, the "extreme" behavior of the residents serves to shock, titillate, or repulse the audience. Hershel Gordon Lewis' *2000 Manaics!* (1964), festooned with Confederate flags and released during the height of the Civil Rights battle in the United States, is perhaps the

quintessential rednecksploitation film. The genre itself warrants further discussion in other works.

4. Koenig, Abby. "Top 10 'Cabin in the Woods' Movies." *The Houston Press.* April 16, 2012. Retrieved June 14, 2019.

5. Gordin, Dana (Devorah). "Green Horror: The Use of Environmental Themes in Modern American Horror Cinema." Master's Thesis, University of Michigan, 2019.

6. Both films admittedly predated by Lenzi's 1972 *Man from Deep River*. The two above-named films, however, serve as templates for the genre, and also as the most (in)famous films in the genre.

7. Other examples of the genre include *Cut and Run* (1985), *Mountain of the Cannibal God* (1978), *Eaten Alive!* (1980), *Last Cannibal World* (1977), *Mondo Cannibale* (1980), *Cannibal Terror* (1981). Careful viewers will notice the same actors, directors, and, in extreme cases, the same footage, appearing and reappearing in these films.

8. *Green Inferno* also adds ironic elements missing in earlier cannibal films, as the intruders are well-meaning, if clueless, environmentalists going to the rain forest to protest deforestation. The environmentalists are then attacked and tortured by native tribes.

9. Merchant, Brian. "The Evolution of Eco-Horror, from Godzilla to Global Warming." *Vice.* November 14, 2012. Retrieved June 14, 2019.

10. Griswold, Eliza. "How 'Silent Spring' Ignited the Environmental Movement." *The New York Times Magazine.* September 21, 2012. Retrieved August 18, 2019.

11. Lacey, Robert. (1981) *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Sa'ud.* New York, NY: Avon Books.

12. The Shah did not want Iran to take part in the embargo, but did support the general price increase. Lacey, 406

13. Ulaby, Neda. "'Eco-Horror': Green Panic on the Silver Screen?" *National Public Radio.* June 14, 2008. Retrieved June 14, 2019.

14. Truffaut-Wong, Olivia. "What Does Jennifer Lawrence Represent in 'Mother!'? Her Character is as Symbolic as it Gets." *Bustle.* September 15, 2017. Retrieved June 14, 2019.

15. Broady, Richard. "Darren Aronofsky Says "Mother!" is About Climate Change, but He's Wrong." *The New Yorker.* September 20, 2017. Retrieved June 14, 2019.

16. Hilalian, Meri. "Darren Aronofsky Explains 'Mother!' and Buñuel's Influence." *Film Independent at LACMA.* November 17, 2017. Retrieved June 14, 2019.

17. *Deliverance* Deluxe Edition DVD (2007).

18. See, for example: Orwell, Paul. *Total Sh∗t: An Excremental Essay About President Trump.* New York, NY: Oceania Press, 2019.

"'The Mayor of Shark City': Political Power in *Jaws*"

Leslie Stratyner

In Steven Spielberg's 1975 film *Jaws*, we are encouraged to see the shark as something primal, willful, and malevolent; this in in part what establishes the film as firmly within the horror genre. Depicted as a primitive, ancient force, the shark exists outside of and before and beyond any human reason or human law. Power, to a fish, is irrelevant. Thus the shark functions literally and figuratively in a state of nature. And in that state of nature it is a terrifying force, killing several people, including a child, before being stopped at the end of the film by Chief Brody's gun and a tank of compressed air. We see that no fish, even the most terrifying, is subject to governmental rule. No fish can consent to be ruled or be intimidated into obedience.

Power is not irrelevant, however, to the denizens of Amity, which is the island around which this three-ton fish has chosen to stake its claim. There, power is wielded by Mayor Larry Vaughn, and the selectmen who collectively seem to run the town. In them we find that there are elements in the film even more terrifying than the shark. Film critic Antonia Quirke states that "the biggest blessing fate bestowed on Spielberg in the 1970s was an

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indifference to politics."[1] Though that might be true in a larger sense, in that he did not produce movies directly reflecting the US involvement in Vietnam, or Watergate for example, nothing could be further from the truth with regard to his first masterpiece: *Jaws*.

MAN VERSUS MAYOR

Though *Jaws* is often seen as an elemental battle of man against nature, at least in the first half of the film the battle is an utterly political one—one that pits Brody against Mayor Larry Vaughn, and the council of selectmen that form the political power structure of the town. The political conflict in *Jaws* swirls over who has the power to close the beaches, and for how long. It is a conflict between the responsible and well-meaning new chief of police and the venal Mayor. Mayor Vaughn, one of the most invested politicians in the history of cinema, ensures that the shark remains well fed, by insisting that the beaches remain open despite the primordial threat.

Martin Brody is the new chief of police, who is spending his first summer in the town. He thinks that he has political authority. Unfortunately, he is wrong. When a young woman named Chrissie Watkins is killed and parts of her wash up in the surf, the coroner initially rules that a shark attacked her, as we ourselves have watched in the famous opening set piece of the film. When he's informed it's a shark attack, the chief does what any responsible chief of police would do: He deems swimming unsafe, and decides to close the beaches.

The conflict is established early in the film, during the fateful trip that Martin Brody makes on the Amity ferry with various town bigwigs eager to dissuade him from his mission. During that ferry ride Brody's authority is challenged, as he attempts to spare the population of Amity from the shark, only to be overruled by Vaughn, characterized by one critic as "a mushy-twanged character in a naff suit."[2] Wanting to avoid a "panic on our hands on the Fourth of July," the mayor suggests Chrissie's death was a boating accident instead, and the coroner, who has obviously been won over to the mayor's point of view, suggests they will have to amend their reports to that effect. Brody, who shrinks to the left side of the screen as he is overwhelmed by the town's powers that be, is overruled.

The power structure evident is one typical of the organization of small New England towns, and the movie displays a savvy understanding of local government. We are informed of the nature of this power structure during the ferry ride when Vaughn asks Brody if he is going to close the beaches

on his own authority. Brody is not aware that any other authority is needed. He's informed, however, that what's needed is "a civic ordinance or a resolution by a board of selectmen."

"And that's just going by the book," injects Vaughn.

Man Versus Town

During the next scene, which takes place at the beach, we also find out something essential about the sociopolitical aspects of the town. Brody is on the beach to do his own policing of the surf. If Vaughn and the selectmen are not going to let him close the beach, then he is going to do the next best thing: watch the beach himself. In the midst of the chief's attempt to protect the people of Amity, Spielberg is showcasing a key issue and a key irony in this situation. Brody is not one of them and they will never accept him as one of them. His attention is of course on the water, and he's not really paying any mind to the conversation going on around him—but we are. As Brody dutifully keeps his eyes on the ocean, his wife Ellen asks a townie when she will be considered an "islander." Brody's family has been there only a few months, which is of course a short time, but Ellen Brody is informed that time is not the issue; since she wasn't born in Amity, she'll *never* be an islander. Tom Cassidy, the paramour of Chrissie Watkins whom we saw failing in his attempt to disrobe at the beginning of the movie, is considered an islander even though he goes to school in Hartford and his parents live in Greenwich. This is because his parents are from there and he was born there. But Ellen and Martin are not and never will be, no matter how long they stay.

His wife is an outsider, and Brody is an outsider, a cop from the burned-out shell of 1970s New York who came to Amity because he believes "one man can make a difference." This dichotomy—the idea that Brody is an alien who will never understand the town or its needs, interposed with Brody's brave and stalwart determination to do right by the town nonetheless—is a conflict that helps to propel the first half of the film.

During that first half we barely even see the shark.[3] The animal is not seen at all in the attack on Chrissie Watkins, and only observed as a dark, rolling mass when it attacks Alex Kintner. There is a vague profile observed when it kills the man in the cove, as well as its tell-tale fins, but as for an up-close look at the shark, we must wait until the second half, and the sight is so terrifying that Brody tells Quint they are "going to need a bigger boat."

It is the political wranglings of the town that we witness during this initial part of the film, and Brody's conflict with the powers that be. But it is not simply the major political conflicts that Brody must endure; it is the smaller ones as well. During this fraught watch on the beach, his focus is stolen several times by Amity residents themselves. As he sits on the beach, scanning the water for trouble, we see what Brody really wishes to mark, which is the swimmers in the ocean. But there is Harry, teasing him about not going in the water. Another resident, the husband of the woman who tells Ellen she'll never be an islander, interposes himself between Brody and the water to complain about parking outside of his business. The politics of the town is not only figuratively but literally interposing itself between Brody and his ability to do his job. Brody can't go anywhere, apparently, without being harangued by townsfolk. He's got this incredibly important task to do right here at the beach, but his vision of the ocean is constantly interrupted.

Man Versus Money

Harry, we find out, is also not just any resident of the town. He is one of the town's board of selectmen, mentioned earlier in the scene on the ferry. The evidence of the power of this board of selectmen emerges after the second swimmer is killed on the beach as Brody watches helplessly, a young boy by the name of Alex Kintner. After his gruesome demise, the townsfolk collect at what can only be assumed to be the center of the town's government: their city hall. The death of Kintner and the presence of a 3000-dollar bounty on the killer shark are causing an unwanted sort of interest in the town, and the townsfolk are upset. They are of course upset about the shark, but it doesn't seem that it is sympathy over the deaths that preoccupies them. They are worried about bad publicity, which might cause people to avoid their "summer town," or come there for the wrong reasons, such as to collect the bounty on a killer shark, or rubberneck another possible disastrous encounter with it.

Because Amity, as Mayor Vaughn puts it, "need(s) summer dollars," the people of the town, like their leader, are at this point in the movie in willful denial of the presence of the shark. The motel owner, who herself was at the beach when Alex Kintner was killed, and who doubtless saw the panic that ensued as well as the mangled, bloody raft that washed up, is actually heard to assert that "We don't even know if there's a shark around here!" But there is no doubt that there is a shark and that the people of

the town either do or should know it. The town is motivated by its own self-interest, which demands that the beaches remain open seemingly in order to maximize profit.

At the town hall, the citizens of Amity are tangled in the vestibule, all talking at once, when Vaughn suggests that they all "go back to council chambers where we'll have more room." Spielberg has made a conscious decision here to emphasize the governmental structure of the town, and model it on existing New England political organizations. The council of selectmen arrange themselves in this council chamber, taking over a semi-circle table, with Vaughn as mayor in the middle, and presiding over the discussion.

At first there is complete discord, verging on unmanageable. We over-hear the concerns of the town, including the motel owner, who is heard to say, "I have a point of view, and I think it speaks for many of the people here." That point of view is that the beaches must remain open. From the way that this scene is presented, it doesn't seem that anyone disagrees.

An unnamed man says, loudly, "I hope they don't close the beaches!"

The council of selectmen, with Vaughn in the middle, are obviously supposed to serve as the political authorities here. But Martin Brody is not among them, which continues to emphasize his alienation from the pro-cess of governance. Throughout the entire scene, Brody sits off to the side, and his powerlessness is evident as he watches the discussion unfold, looking from the crowd to the board of selectmen mutely. Mayor Vaughn tries a couple of times to restore order but he is frustrated by the prickly citizens who are interested in only one thing.

"Are you going to close the beaches?" asks the motel owner.

Brody quietly admits that they are, and more pandemonium ensues. The townsfolk definitely do not want the beaches closed.

It's here we see that Brody has no political authority, as it is Vaughn who speaks up attempting to calm the crowd, telling the townspeople: "Only for twenty-four hours."

"I didn't agree to that!" says Brody. No one hears or cares. Someone in the crowd cries out, "Twenty-four hours is like three weeks!" The thought of a closed beach has driven the citizens of Amity into a panic. Even Larry Vaughn's gavel can't calm them now. It's only Quint's nails on a black-board that does this.

Quint's speech here is one of the most famous in film, only slightly less so than his later monologue which recounts his presence during the

sinking of the *Indianapolis* at the end of World War II. But how is Quint important with regard to the political atmosphere?

Quint clearly exists outside of the political landscape of the town. Spielberg makes this point clear by situating Quint at the back of the room by a blackboard. He is there to "school" them, not to natter among them. On that blackboard is the subject of his lesson—a crudely drawn picture of a great white shark with a stick figure in its mouth. We must presume Quint has drawn it himself.

And though he excludes himself from the discussion, it is safe to assume that he could be an islander, because he begins his speech with "You all know me…" Thus Quint deeply understands the motivations of the residents of Amity. It's exactly as Vaughn has suggested. The town lives or dies on its "summer dollars," and it is this basis upon which Quint makes his argument. Quint says nothing about the deaths of Chrissie Watkins or Alex Kintner. He says nothing about killing the shark out of vengeance or to do right or prevent future deaths. He certainly says nothing about what his real motivations are—that the shark represents a singular challenge for him as a seaman and sharker. Quint knows exactly how to approach them, and, as the residents of the town don't seem to care that a girl and young boy are dead, they absolutely won't care about Quint's determination to prove himself against three tons of man-eating fish. Quint appeals to the town's pocketbook. He promises that he can kill the shark, but that "We gotta do it quick. That'll bring back the tourists that will put all of your businesses on a payin' basis."

But Quint reveals something else, which might explain the seemingly political rapacity of Vaughn, and the callousness of the town's inhabitants. It's easy to view the town's concerns as simply a selfish exercise of capitalism, because it seems that the town wants to capitalize on its beach access and quaint reputation to make the motel owners and businessmen rich. (Supposedly *Jaws*, which Fidel Castro called "a metaphor for predatory capitalism,"[4] was one of his favorite movies for this very reason.) But Quint suggests that it's more serious than that. It turns out that Mayor Vaughn was not overstating things when he told Brody, "We need summer dollars." The consequences of the loss of those dollars aren't quite clear until Quint's speech. Those summer dollars are what literally keep the town afloat throughout the year. These people do not drive BMWs, and it turns out that the loss of tourism as a result of the shark attacks translates to life-and-death stakes for Amity.

"You wanna stay alive and ante up?" Quint asks, "or you wanna play it cheap, and be on welfare the whole winter?"

It seems at first, however, that the town won't have to take Quint up on his offer, that Mrs. Kintner's bounty on the shark has succeeded in bringing in the beast that killed her son and endangered the town. A large shark is caught off of Amity, resulting in a short respite from the worry plaguing Brody as well as Vaughn. "We can start breathing again!" Vaughn says when he sees that several men have caught a large, man-eating shark, though a tiger shark and not a great white. He hustles through the throng, shaking hands, making sure that the photographer gets plenty of pictures, and literally ignores Matt Hooper, the shark specialist played by Richard Dreyfus, until it becomes obvious that Chief Brody is listening to him and taking him seriously.

Brody and Hooper, though in the midst of the crowd, are talking by themselves. Vaughn listens half-smiling as neither Brody nor Hooper notices him, until he hears Hooper say that the bite radius of the tiger shark is different from that of the shark that killed Chrissie Watkins. Murray Hamilton's performance here is something of a marvel. Vaughn looks off to his right, almost as if to check to see if anyone else can hear what Hooper is saying. Then he begins blinking rapidly, his nervousness overcoming him. Because what Hooper is suggesting is that the shark that killed Chrissie Watkins and Alex Kintner is still out there. And if that shark is still out there, the beaches must remain closed. We all know that cannot happen.

Up until this point, we can at least sympathize with Vaughn's desire to keep the beaches open. It's been made clear to us that the town's very livelihood depends on the beaches remaining open, and that closing them will mean a winter (and perhaps more) of poverty. And we also understand Vaughn's reticence to do as Brody and Hooper suggest—to cut the tiger shark open—because he doesn't want to "see that little Kintner boy spill out all over the dock."

But after the death of Ben Gardener, that changes. Because Vaughn is presented with ironclad information that the shark is still out there, and still he does nothing. During the argument with Brody and Hooper in front of the defaced "Amity Welcomes You" billboard, Mayor Vaughn is dubious about the threat—let alone the existence—of a great white off of Amity's waters. "We depend on the summer people here for our very lives, and if you close those beaches, we're finished!" he tells them after Brody and Hooper's nighttime search for the shark. Then he further reinforces

their outsider status by asserting that "I don't think either one of you are familiar with our problems!"

Well, we have become very familiar with their problems, but here, however, Hooper's judgment cannot be questioned. We watched as he inspected the body of Chrissie Watkins, using medical and Latin terms to describe the body and identify the possible species of shark. As a true scientist, he became in that scene the intellectual center of the film. We then watched as he cut open the tiger shark, and then braved the water to inspect the hull of Ben Gardener's boat, pulling a shot glass-sized tooth out of the hull in the process. Hooper lives and breathes sharks, and it is not possible to cast doubt on his judgment concerning them.

Yet cast doubt Vaughn does. It is here in front of that defaced sign that Vaughn—and the politics of the town—emerges as the true villain of the first half of the film. Here, Vaughn is faced with the absolute certainty that the tiger shark was not responsible for the deaths of Chrissie Watkins and Alex Kintner, yet he is very willing to believe that the shark killed by the bounty hunters is "the" shark. And Hooper? According to Vaughn the ichthyologist is just a fortune hunter, motivated by the desire to get his "picture on the cover of *National Geographic*." Compassionate, funny, intelligent, and self-effacing, Hooper is anything but a fortune-hunter, especially since he is from a very wealthy family. Yet Vaughn seems more upset by the vandalized billboard—which depicts a crudely drawn shark's fin menacing a young female swimmer—than the prospect of the "eating machine" Hooper describes, more concerned with the punishment of the vandals than the fact that he is, in Hooper's words, "lining up to be a hot lunch."

The lowest point for Vaughn, as both a human being and a politician, is when as per his order those beaches do remain open on the Fourth of July, and Vaughn attempts to get the people to go into the water, despite the fact that he has been informed that the shark is still out there. In fact, when questioned by a reporter about the presence of a "killer shark," what Vaughn (whom film critic Nigel Andrews calls "a master of the politic euphemism")[5] says is, "We have in fact caught and killed a large predator, that supposedly injured some bathers."

That large predator, he knows, is not *the* predator. And *the* predator did not merely "supposedly injure some bathers"; it ripped them to pieces and killed them. Yet Vaughn encourages one of the town's residents and his family to go swimming, though they are obviously reticent because of the lifeguards as well as numerous boats in the water with armed men. As a

helicopter flies overhead, Mayor Vaughn looks up at it with great annoyance, and mouths the word "bastards." Because no one is going in the water. And if no one goes in the water, Amity is not a "summer town." And if Amity is not a "summer town," then what, pray tell, is he the mayor of?

And here is where we are confronted with one of the most provocative questions that the movie poses: What and whose interests do the leaders of the town actually represent? Because the townsfolk do not want to go in the water. They are not averse to making a show of being there, but they don't want to swim. No one wants to be the first in, the first to ring the "dinner bell" that Brody warns of. Swimming would put them in danger of the shark, which—despite their seeming assertions to the contrary during the town meeting—is actually there and which presents a very real danger to the them personally. Politics here is as personal as it gets, because each citizen on that beach puts their lives in danger as a result of their desire to keep the beaches open. As a group, they represent the capitalistic interests of the town. As individuals, they retreat to the basic instincts of individual and familial survival. If Castro is right, and *Jaws* is a metaphor for predatory capitalism, this metaphor is in the position to literally eat them, and the immediacy of that threat becomes even more powerful than the threat of Quint's threatened winter on welfare.

And of course, disaster ensues. The shark spares the beach with most of the bathers and heads instead into the cove, where Brody's older son is in a boat with his friends, and a young man is rowing his own small red skiff. Brody's son witnesses the death of that young man, who's knocked out of the boat by the shark and who dies screaming in its teeth, and Brody's son suffers shock as a result.

And here is where Vaughn can no longer deny the presence of the shark. Addled, he seems to float around the hospital where Brody's son is being admitted as a patient. Beaten and wrung with worry, knowing full well that the onus of blame will fall on him, he is already rehearsing his defense. Brody wants him to sign a voucher allowing him to hire Quint to kill the shark. "I was acting the town's best interests … acting in the town's best interests," Vaughn mumbles to himself. He is no longer the mayor of Amity, which he has stated "means friendship"; Brody asserts instead that Vaughn is now "the mayor of shark city."

But what are the political consequences for Mayor Vaughn? What is the cost to him for the cover-up? The willful blindness to the threat? The gross underestimation of the danger to the citizens of and visitors to Amity?

This is the last time we see Vaughn in the movie, which shifts at this point from a political drama to a sea quest adventure, in which Vaughn has no place. In the book Vaughn disappears with his wife, sent into hiding by the mafia. However, the movies do provide us with another look at Mayor Vaughn, not in *Jaws* but in *Jaws 2*, when a shark again menaces the population of Amity. When Brody attempts again to warn the population of the menace, despite his formidable bravery, the heroic and true-hearted Martin Brody is fired. But Larry Vaughn? Frederic Jameson believes that *Jaws* is "a ritual celebration of the renewal of the social order and its salvation, not merely from divine wrath, but also from unworthy leadership."[6] But in *Jaws 2*, Larry Vaughn remains mayor.

Notes

1. Antonia Quirke, *Jaws* (London: BFI Publishing, 2002) 49.
2. Nigel Andrews, *Nigel Andrews on Jaws* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 2.
3. See Carl Gottlieb, *The Jaws Log: 25th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2001) for an overview of the mechanical problems that plagued the shark(s) during the filming.
4. Capuzzo, "The True Story of Jaws." BBC, July 13, 2016. http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160713-the-true-story-of-jaws
5. Andrews, *Nigel Andrews on Jaws*, 44.
6. Frederic Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), 35–36.

Return of the Repressed

Fear of Founding from Plato to *Poltergeist*

Damien K. Picariello

Tobe Hooper's 1982 film *Poltergeist* opens with the strains of the National Anthem of the United States. We're shown abbreviated opening credits, and then a series of unidentifiable images fills the screen: perhaps they're unclear, or perhaps we're too close to make them out. As the Anthem concludes, the camera pulls back, and we're able to make out the final image: It's a shadow version of the United States Marine Corps War Memorial, depicted the raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima.[1] Then the screen fills with static, and the camera pulls further back to reveal what we've been watching: It's a television screen, at the base of a shelf, in front of a man sleeping in a comfortable chair as his golden retriever sneaks a taste of his abandoned snack food.

The choice to open a horror film with the National Anthem seems an odd one; there doesn't seem to be anything particularly scary about the National Anthem, or about the iconic statue of the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima. And yet a version of this opening appears even in Steven Spielberg's draft screenplay for the film, incorporating even more patriotic imagery:

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> The National Anthem resounds over the precision maneuvers of the Navy's Blue Angels. When Old Glory fills the frame the local announcer identifies the station, signifies the megahertz and signs off for the morning. Transmission ends and a BLAST of disturbing static rules the airwaves.[2]

It's clear that the choice to open *Poltergeist* in this fashion was a deliberate one, and I'd argue that it points us to one of the film's main themes. *Poltergeist* is a film about one family and the ghosts it encounters, and it's also a film about the United States of America, and *its* ghosts. *Poltergeist*'s Freeling family are proxies, not only for the film's audience, but for an entire political community, as it comes face to face with its anxieties about its origins, and its fear that its bloody past may not stay buried.

It's a commonplace to say that horror often involves the "return of the repressed": a past misdeed that resurfaces, a long-forgotten trauma that comes back years later, someone who knows what you did last summer.[3] *Poltergeist* shows us one particular version of this phenomenon: horror that reflects an anxiety about the terrible things buried in the origins of our communities, and the costs we may incur when we obscure or repress such origins.

"They're Here!"

When *Poltergeist*'s Carol Anne Freeling famously exclaims, "They're here," she's referring to the spirits that will soon abduct her and haunt the Freeling home. These spirits, we discover later in the film, have set themselves on the Freelings because the land on top of which their community was built used to contain a cemetery—and the community's developer neglected to relocate the bodies before breaking ground. The suburban paradise of Cuesta Verde, California, is therefore quite literally built on the bodies of the forgotten dead, effacing their memories and their resting place with antiseptic planned housing.

It's a common misconception that *Poltergeist*'s Cuesta Verde is built on top of an Indian burial ground, the persistence of which misconception has spawned wide discussion of the Indian burial ground trope in American horror film.[4] And it's easy to see why viewers and movie fans might accept so easily the misidentification of *Poltergeist*'s generic cemetery as an Indian burial ground. In the American context, when we imagine our communities as being built on death, we most readily imagine the slaughter of Native Americans.[5] That *Poltergeist*'s somewhat less specific scenario

(planned community built on top of mishandled cemetery) brings so readily to mind the far more specific sense that our American political community was built on the slaughter of Native Americans—the film supplies the outline; we fill in the details—shows the degree to which the film's animating anxiety hits home. We strongly suspect that our communities, however angelic their aspirations, have positively devilish beginnings. And we fear that we may be unable to escape or obscure these beginnings, no matter how hard we try—even if we build subdivisions on top of them.[6]

But why are we so sure that even the best political communities begin unjustly, even violently? Why do we so strongly suspect that there's something unsavory at the origin—and therefore, perhaps, the heart—of our communities?

One of the most compelling explorations of this theme—the compromised origins of political community—appears in Plato's *Republic*, and emerges from an exchange that Socrates has with Glaucon and Adeimantus, two of his young interlocutors.[7] Socrates and his companions are pursuing the question of justice, and Socrates suggests that they "investigate what justice is like in the cities," reasoning that justice in a political community will be "easier to observe closely" than justice in an individual human being, since a community is that much larger than a person. The group takes up Socrates's suggestion and determines to "make a city in speech from the beginning," narrating the chronology and causes of their imagined city's founding.[8]

Socrates suggests that "a city … comes into being because each of us isn't self-sufficient, but is in need of much," and his companions agree. They therefore found a city based on the satisfaction of basic human needs—food, shelter, clothing, and so on—in which the citizens are "partners" in the attainment of communal self-sufficiency.[9] This city seems, in its way, a happy, simple place: Its citizens will "live out their lives in peace with health … and at last, dying as old men, they will hand down other similar lives to their offspring."[10]

But one of Socrates's companions is unhappy with this arrangement. Glaucon says to Socrates: "You seem to make these men have their feast without relishes." He mocks Socrates's imaginary city: "If you were providing for a city of sows, Socrates, on what else would you fatten them than this?" Glaucon's forceful condemnation of what Socrates calls the "healthy city" has a point. As one commentator notes, the simple city Socrates has described is both "impossible"—insofar as it "depends on an

unfounded belief in nature's providential generosity" and the harmony of "private and public interest"—and "undesirable," in the sense that it makes no room for human, as opposed to animal, desires, and therefore no room for human virtue.[11] Regardless, the simple, self-sufficient "healthy" city will not satisfy Socrates's companions, so they must now found a different sort of city, a "luxurious" or "feverish" city, which for its beginning and maintenance will require far more than a naturally harmonious partnership among citizens.[12]

Violence marks the start of the transition away from the healthy city and thus the birth of the feverish city. In order to found their city, Socrates and his companions "must … cut off a piece of our neighbors' land, if we are going to have sufficient for pasture and tillage." To satisfy human desires, as opposed to basic physical needs, it's necessary to take from others by force. This encroachment on the city's neighbors will produce "war as a consequence," and will in turn generate the need for a "whole army" made up of "guardians" dedicated to the defense of the city.[13] Now the violence at the heart of the feverish city has mushroomed: our founding theft requires ongoing violence to protect what has been stolen.[14]

This birth of our city in violence and theft is one important part of the story; another part is how Socrates deals with the issues that this founding produces for what we might call the legitimacy of the city. How will the citizens of this city make peace with their city's origins? For this, Socrates turns to "one of those lies that come into being in case of need," a "noble lie" that will both explain the origins of the city and account for the possibility of violence in its defense. The citizens of this city, says Socrates, will be told that they were "born of the earth"—that they emerged from the land itself—and must therefore do their utmost, alongside their "brothers," to defend their homeland, which is their "mother and nurse."[15] The founders of this city, in Socrates's "noble lie," were not thieves but rather "earth-born men," holding natural title to their land by virtue of their emergence from it.[16]

This vision of founding leaves us in an uncomfortable position: Human desires (as opposed to basic physical needs) mean that the founding of political community is accompanied by violence and theft, which necessitates further violence in order to protect what has been stolen. In other words: Because of the way people are, our political communities are born in unpleasantness. At the same time—and also because of the way people are—we'll need to tell ourselves lies, or at least myths or half-truths, about our communities' beginnings. "Why did the Athenians believe in their

autochthony," one commentator asks, "except because they knew that robbing others of their land is not just and because they felt that a self-respecting society cannot become reconciled to the notion that its foundation was laid in crime?"[17]

"Can We Dig It Up and See the Bones?"

The *Republic* tells us a story about the founding of political community: how it works, why it entails violence and injustice, and how and why we might collectively repress the truth about our communal beginnings. With this story in mind, we can turn back to *Poltergeist* and discover many of the same motifs within a distinctly American context. *Poltergeist* features a community built (literally, as it turns out) on injustice. In its depiction of the Freeling family's life in Cuesta Verde, the film explores the human desires that lead to and are satisfied by these kinds of communities, and it provokes the viewer to consider a connection between these desires, on the one hand, and Cuesta Verde's original sin—so to speak—on the other. The film depicts the repression of Cuesta Verde's founding crime and its eventual return, thus dramatizing the fear that origin stories of the sort that appear in the *Republic*—the kinds of stories we can't help but imagine characterize the beginnings of our own communities—will eventually have to be reckoned with, one way or another.

After the film's opening scene, the rest of *Poltergeist*'s opening credits play over a series of panoramic vistas of Cuesta Verde, accompanied by soothing music; the images emphasize the just-so-ness of the community, its pleasant, comforting, almost impossibly peaceful neatness and order. This is a place with no traffic, where every house is pristine and children play in the streets as their parents look on in satisfaction. A nicely washed car is parked at the perfect angle in every driveway. A sign offers *Sales Information & Model Homes*—but here, all the homes look like model homes. This is a blessed land, where children happily swarm the ice cream truck while their fathers gather to watch football and their mothers see to the housework. Even when the fathers' football game unexpectedly switches to *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, their exasperation betrays a comfortable contentedness; even when Carol Anne's pet bird dies, the Freeling family handles it with aplomb, burying the animal and replacing it with a pair of goldfish.

Spielberg's screenplay calls this "The middle America World War II bought and paid for," but as we'll see, the provenance of Cuesta

Verde—the precise manner in which the land on which it sits was bought and paid for—is a bit more complicated, and a bit more sinister, than that.[18] As if to emphasize the point, Robbie Freeling, Carol Anne's brother, asks of the buried bird, "Ma, when it rots, can we dig it up and see the bones?" as their dog paws at the ground where the animal rests. Carol Anne, having recovered from her pet's death, asks with a smile: "Can I get a goldfish now?" But the land on which the community sits does not share Carol Anne's almost amnesiac taste for gleeful reinvention; in Cuesta Verde, the dead aren't gone, and the past has a debt to collect. Later, as Carol Anne feeds her new fish and Robbie reads a *Captain America* comic, a storm brews ominously outside, framing the gnarled tree outside their window in sinister fashion and foreshadowing the juxtaposition between the Freeling's carefree American dream and the dark reckoning to come.[19]

After the kids are tucked in, Steven Freeling reads a biography of Ronald Reagan while he and his wife smoke pot and discuss the children and plans to dig a pool. As it turns out, the Freeling family does more than just live in Cuesta Verde: As Steven tells Robbie, "my company built the neighborhood." Spielberg's screenplay points us in this direction even earlier, in the film's very first scene, in which the Freeling living room features "trophies of outstanding achievement in annual home sales" and "real estate maps and lease contracts."[20]

On the second night we spend in the Freeling home, the National Anthem plays once more; the Freelings seem to make a habit of falling asleep with the television on. We linger for nearly the entire song, suggesting again that the film intends for us to pick up on a theme. The Anthem and accompanying patriotic imagery again yield to static, and the static awakens Carol Anne, who approaches the television (this had also happened the previous night, when Carol Anne appeared to converse with the TV). The television flashes, and then a spectral hand emerges and grasps at Carol Anne, then releases some sort of energy into the walls which causes the house to shake uncontrollably, awakening the rest of the family. When the shaking stops, Carol Anne delivers her famous line: "They're here!"

When we rejoin the Freelings, it's morning, and a bulldozer digs up the ground outside their house. The violation of the earth is forceful, disturbing, and the cigar box containing Carol Anne's dead bird is carelessly disinterred and swept aside in the machine's wake. The Freelings are getting the pool they've been talking about—but they've forgotten about the corpse they buried only the day before, just as Carol Anne exchanged her

bird for goldfish as soon as the former was in the ground. This scene dramatizes in miniature the costs of the Freeling's American dream, to which the family is oblivious: A new pool, but at the price of disturbing a dead bird's peace; a new neighborhood, but at the price of … we'll see.

"It's Just People"

As the film moves forward, Carol Anne's relationship with the "TV People"—with whom she'd conversed that first night—deepens and becomes troubling. Though it's not clear that her relationship with television is entirely healthy, even leaving TV People to the side; when she stares at a static-y television, her mother says, "that's no good for you," and switches the channel to a war movie featuring explosions and the screams of dying men. Clearly Diane Freeling feels that the sights and sounds of violence and death, rendered appropriately harmless by the fact that they're experienced through television rather than in "real life," are healthier for a child than the prospect of eye damage. In any case, on the second full day we spend with the Freelings, the TV People begin to make their presence felt in the house, bending silverware and rearranging furniture. Meanwhile, Steven shows model homes to prospective Cuesta Verde neighbors, who enthuse over the fact that they "can't tell one house from the other." "The grass grows greener on every side," says Steven, just after revealing that his was the first family to move into the newly built neighborhood. Clearly, Steven believes in the product he sells.

That night, the old tree outside the children's window—"it was here before my company built the neighborhood," says Steven—reaches into the house and plucks Robbie out of his bed, a tornado menaces the Freeling home, and Carol Anne is abducted by the mysterious TV People and begins to speak to her family through the static-y television (presumably in the same way that the TV People had spoken with her). To retrieve Carol Anne, the Freelings enlist the help of a team of paranormal investigators. As we follow Steven Freeling, the visible signs of his stress—he's smoking cigarettes, drinking in the daytime, and unshaven—hint at the deterioration of his picture-perfect family. The sins at the heart of their community have returned to haunt the Freelings, and to make their presence felt in Cuesta Verde.

The Freelings continue to communicate with Carol Anne through the television, and it's worth noting how the role of this device in their household has remained central and yet changed dramatically. Before, Steven

and the neighborhood dads had gathered around the television to watch football, and he'd argued with a neighbor about remote control signals making it difficult for the two households to watch different programs at the same time. He'd fallen asleep in front of the living room television, and he and his wife had relaxed in front of the bedroom television. Now, this device that holds central place in the Freeling household—what is more symbolic of post-war American middle-class bliss than the television?—is the instrument of the Freeling family's torture, broadcasting the distorted voice of their missing child.

After a night filled with paranormal happenings, the Freeling family gets a visit from Mr. Teague, Steven's boss at the real estate office. Mr. Teague is worried that Steven may be thinking about leaving Cuesta Verde, so he takes his number one salesman on a ride to a nearby hilltop. There are signs that Steven's recent experiences have already altered his relationship to the land; when Mr. Teague shares plans for a new hillside development, Steven expresses his distaste at the idea of "a bunch of homes cutting into the hillside." As Mr. Teague continues his pitch, he makes clear the extent of Steven's responsibility for Cuesta Verde: Steven is responsible for nearly half the sales in the entire development. "That's a whole generation of security," says Mr. Teague, oblivious to the radical insecurity that pervades the Freeling family's home and characterizes their current predicament.

Then the view shifts, and we see that behind Steven and Mr. Teague, on top of the hill, sits a graveyard. "We own all the land," says Mr. Teague, "we've already made arrangements for relocating the cemetery." Steven doesn't like the idea: "You're kidding. That's sacrilegious, isn't it?" But Mr. Teague doesn't agree. "It's not ancient tribal burial ground," he says, "it's just people." Then, as the score turns sinister, Mr. Teague explains to Steven that all of Cuesta Verde's 300 acres are the former site of a cemetery, relocated by the community's developers before building commenced. Mr. Teague tries to calm Steven, but it's clear he's bothered by this information, and we are struck—as he is—by the juxtaposition between the hilltop cemetery and the sweeping panorama of Cuesta Verde in the background; Spielberg's screenplay says: "Steve is speechless. He looks back and forth between the existing cemetery and Cuesta Verde Estates below."[21] There is something viscerally wrong with what's happened here, with what was displaced to make way for this almost eerily perfect (until recently) community. Our next view of Cuesta Verde is jarring, the expanse of the development packed unevenly into the frame and

surrounded by suddenly ominous mountains, and the score again turns unsettling.

That night, the Freelings are joined by Tangina Barrons, a clairvoyant enlisted by the paranormal investigators who have taken up the Freeling's case. Barrons confirms that, alongside the lost souls wandering about the Freeling's home, there's a "terrible presence": "so much rage, so much betrayal … I've never sensed anything like it." To Carol Anne, Barrons explains, this presence is "simply is another child … to us, it is the beast." Clearly, Cuesta Verde's communal amnesia, its obliviousness to (or repression of) the lie at its heart, has awakened something even more sinister than the dead.

With the help of Tangina Barrons and the heroism of Diane Freeling, Carol Anne is saved. Barrons triumphantly announces: "This house is clean." When we return to the Freeling family—it's unclear how much time has passed, but Spielberg's screenplay says it's "Two Weeks Later"—they're preparing to move.[22] Boxes are being labeled and loaded into a truck. The Freeling family is happy; though Diane looks longingly at their house and says, "We worked so hard for this," she knows—they all know—that leaving is the right decision.

That evening, while Steven is cleaning out his office in preparation for departure, the spirits return—or perhaps it is the beast. Robbie has a terrifying encounter with his toy clown, and Diane finds herself tossed about her room by invisible forces and then menaced by a fearsome spectral creature. Seeking help from the neighbors, Diane falls into the mud-filled ditch where the Freelings had hoped to install a pool, and finds herself surrounded by skeletons disinterred by the rain. Coffins start to rise from the earth, out of which emerge the skeletal corpses of their occupants.

Diane manages to rescue her children, and then Steven and Mr. Teague arrive at the Freeling house, just in time to catch the coffins erupting from beneath the ground inside and outside the house, violently discharging their passengers. Steven grabs Mr. Teague by the lapels and shouts: "You moved the cemetery, but you left the bodies, didn't you?" Mr. Teague doesn't deny the accusation, and now more and more coffins are shooting out of the earth, hurling corpses in every direction. As the Freelings flee, we see that the dead are rising throughout the neighborhood: what started at the Freeling house is spreading throughout Cuesta Verde.

The Freeling house implodes into a ball of light, Mr. Teague hangs his head in shame, and Freelings pass a road sign on their way out of town: *You are now leaving Cuesta Verde—we'll miss you!* In the film's last scene,

the Freelings check into a roadside motel, and Steven takes the television out of the room and leaves it on the balcony.

"The Grass Is Greener on Every Side"

In removing the television from his family's motel room, Steven Freeling does two things: he rejects the device through which mysterious spirits had entered his home and tormented his family, and, more broadly, he rejects the lifestyle that this device represents. In leaving behind Cuesta Verde, the Freeling family also intends to leave behind "[t]he middle America World War II bought and paid for," as found in Cuesta Verde and communities like it. We don't know where the Freeling family will go next (not having seen *Poltergeist II: The Other Side*), but we can imagine that it won't be another planned community, and we can imagine that they'll ask some unusual questions before settling in.

Might it be the case that the Freelings have drawn connections, like Plato's Socrates, between the crime at the heart of their community and the desires that their community allowed them to satisfy? The next time a beloved family pet dies, will it perhaps not be so quickly replaced and forgotten, and then disinterred to make way for a backyard swimming pool? The next time Steven is tempted by financial and professional success, will he perhaps examine more closely the product he's selling? In looking to the future, will the Freelings take more care not to betray the past, thus avoiding the "rage" and "betrayal" that Tangina Barrons sensed in the souls of those buried under Cuesta Verde's homes, parks, and pavement? In rejecting the television and all it represents, have the Freelings decided to "have their feast without relishes," and therefore to avoid the horrors to which the pursuit of such relishes tempts us?

Or perhaps there's nothing that the Freelings could have, or should have, done differently, and therefore nothing they might do differently in the future. Perhaps it's simply the case that, as Thomas Hobbes speculates in his seminal *Leviathan*, "there is scarce a Common-wealth in the world, whose beginnings can in conscience be justified," and that this is so simply because of the way people are.[23] Perhaps we believe this, too, and that's why we're so receptive to movies like *Poltergeist*, which whisper to us that if we look past the surface of even the most idyllic communities, there's something terrible buried just underneath.

Notes

1. I'm indebted to Roger Ebert's review of *Poltergeist* for confirming my sense of this image. Roger Ebert, "Poltergeist," June 1, 1982 (https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/poltergeist-1982). The University of South Carolina Sumter generously provided funding and other support toward the competition of this piece. I'm grateful to my fellow panel participants at the 2018 meeting of the Popular Culture Association in the South/American Culture Association in the South. Thanks to the Institute for Humane Studies for assistance with conference travel and expenses. My colleagues at USC Sumter have been generous with their time and insight, in particular Andy Kunka and Kristina Grob; I'm also grateful for the time and insight of the students in my Film, Politics, and Social Change class. Finally: Jil and Lenny Picariello, Alex Picariello (with whom I first watched *Poltergeist*, and whose DVD I borrowed to write this piece), and—as always—Erin.

2. Steven Spielberg, "Poltergeist," 1. I'm relying on an undated version of the *Poltergeist* screenplay credited to "Steven Spielberg" and marked "1st Draft," found on dailyscript.com (http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/Poltergeist.pdf)

3. "One might say," says Robin Wood, "that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror" ("An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in Barry Keith Grant, Ed., *Robin Wood on the American Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews* [Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2018], 79). For example: Valdine Clemens, *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from* The Castle of Otranto *to* Alien (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

4. Dan Nosowitz, "Why Every Horror Film of the 1980s Was Built on 'Indian Burial Ground,'" *Atlas Obscura*, October 22, 2016 (https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/why-every-horror-film-of-1980s-was-built-on-indian-burial-grounds). See also Colin Dickey, *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 37–48.

5. John Lutz talks about this in the context of *The Shining* in "From Domestic Nightmares to the Nightmare of History," in Thomas Fahey, ed., *The Philosophy of Horror* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 161–178. We might also consider the horrors of slavery, which consideration brings to mind New York City's African Burial Ground (https://www.nps.gov/afbg/learn/historyculture/index.htm)

6. Stephen King points to this broader point in *Danse Macabre* when he says that "the truest definition of the haunted house would be 'a house with an unsavory history'" (New York: Berkley Books, 1981, 267). Similarly, Robin Wood says that "what the 'terrible house' … signifies is the dead weight of the past crushing the life of the younger generation, the future" ("An Introduction to the American Horror Film," 98).

7. This framing emerges from a conversation I had about the *Republic* with Kristina Grob, in which she noted the importance of this first attempt at creating a "healthy" city in speech. I'm very grateful for her insight.

8. *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), Book II, 368e–369c.

9. Ibid., II, 369b–369c.

10. Ibid., II, 372d.

11. Ibid., II, 372c–372e; Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," in *The Republic of Plato*, 346–348.

12. Ibid., II, 372e.

13. Ibid., II, 373d–374e.

14. "It would appear from this presentation that war is requisite to the emergence of humanity … The city may exist for the sake of life, but it needs men who are willing to die for it" (Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," 348).

15. Ibid., III, 414b–414e.

16. Ibid., III, 415d. "This tale" works to conceal "the unjust origin of this regime (which we have seen) by a just account of its origin. On the basis of the lie, the citizens can in all good faith and conscience take pride in the justice of their regime." As readers of the dialogue, our position is somewhat different: "The lie, because it is a lie, points up the problems it is designed to solve. Perhaps no rational investigation of them could yield a basis for political legitimacy" (Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," 366–7)."

17. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 130.

18. Spielberg, 3. We're pointed back to WWII soon after, when we come upon Steven Freeling watching *A Guy Named Joe*, a 1943 film set during the war. For more on the decline of WWII-era "victory culture," see Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

19. In Spielberg's screenplay, "The twisted branches that seem to suggest arms and the split trunk that appears to suggest horns is all too real even at first glance" (23).

20. Ibid., 1.

21. Ibid., 68.

22. Ibid., 90.

23. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 721–722.

Post-Racial Lies and Fear of the Historical-Political Boomerang in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Cammie M. Sublette

In their introduction to *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui argue that twenty-first-century conceptions of the monstrous, particularly in American pop culture, cluster around our shared fears regarding rapid change.[1] However, in Jordan Peele's and Colson Whitehead's twenty-first-century imaginings of the monstrous, the thing to be feared most is not change but its absence. Peele's 2017 film *Get Out* and Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad* are both neo-slave narratives, and both use the genre of horror to undermine conceptions of a post-racial moment.[2]

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The Lie of the Post-Racial Moment

For Peele, the first horror film he wrote, directed, and produced—*Get Out*—began as a refutation of what he saw as the "post-racial lie" purported when Barack Obama was elected to the presidency.[3] Like so many people of color in the United States, Peele started to hear the lie that the country was post-racial or at least heading in that direction. Yet during Obama's two-term presidency, many videos and stories of white vigilante violence and police lethal use of force against black men and women came to light, and rarely were the perpetrators held to account.[4] Peele was profoundly aware that being a black man in Obama's America did not mean he was any less likely to be the victim of police harassment (or worse) than he was prior to Obama's election. The murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and subsequent acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman, launched the Black Lives Matter movement, and this on the heels of Obama's election to his second term in office.[5] In 2014, the nation watched, stunned, as video footage captured 43-year-old father of six Eric Garner's last moments: a police officer restrains Garner in a chokehold for 15 seconds as he begs for his life, saying, "I can't breathe," not once, not twice, but 11 times.[6] Also killed by police in 2014 were John Crawford, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, and Tamir Rice, all of whom were young black men, none of whom posed an imminent threat to the police officers who killed them or to anyone else in the vicinity.[7]

To further belie that America was "post-racial," Obama's presidency was plagued with the racist "birtherism" invective of Donald Trump, what journalist and author Ta-Nehisi Coates explains is a "modern recasting of the old American precept that black people are not fit to be citizens of the country they built."[8] This charge that Obama was not a citizen of the United States (and thus ineligible to serve as president) was baseless from the start and should have shamed anyone who believed it, especially when Obama publicly submitted his own birth certificate for scrutiny. However, the false claim nonetheless contributed greatly to Trump's political rise. Additional Trump bigotry evidenced itself in his repeated claims of guilt against the Central Park Five, a group of black and Latino men who were teenagers in 1989 when a white woman was raped and beaten nearly to death in Central Park.[9] Convicted despite their DNA not matching the semen sample taken from the rape victim, and despite their confessions being coerced while they were without parental guidance or legal representation, the Central Park Five's sentences varied, but all five young men

served time ranging from five to fifteen years before finally having their sentences commuted.[10] Though DNA evidence and another man's confession exonerated these young men, who were subsequently awarded $41 million for false arrest and imprisonment and racially motivated mishandling of their case, Donald Trump still insisted they were guilty.[11] While on the campaign trail in 2016, Trump called the financial settlement made to the Central Park Five "a disgrace."[12] As Peele noted, there was ample evidence we were not living in a post-racial moment, yet he was being told regularly, "we had a black president now, so racism is over."[13] Therefore, couching his narrative in the American Northeast, his neo-slave masters cast as twenty-first-century white liberals, Peele challenges not just notions that we're post-racial, but also that we're at all removed from slavery and its traumatic legacy.

Get Out

Peele begins his neo-slave narrative in New York, with a black man, Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), agreeing to travel to upstate New York to meet the parents of his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage (Allison Williams). Though Chris is nervous about meeting Rose's parents, particularly since she admits she hasn't mentioned his race to them, Chris agrees to go because he's in love and because Rose is adamant that his race won't matter to her liberal parents. Almost as soon as they leave the city, things start going sideways: they hit a deer, which dies slowly, and then, when police arrive and start questioning Chris, who was merely a passenger in the car, Rose escalates the situation despite Chris's unease and objections. For Chris, this escalation could mean arrest or death, so he does as black and brown young men in the United States are often coached by parents: he cooperates. He is respectful, quiet, and tries to hand over his identification when it's requested. Rose is disrespectful, uncooperative, and ultimately prevents Chris from handing over his state ID, saying, "No, no, no. Fuck that. You don't have to give him your ID because you haven't done anything wrong."[14] Eventually, Rose uses her white privilege to back down the police, and they leave the scene without Chris's information. Chris seems a little awed by Rose in the moment, and indeed, it's tempting to cheer her on, as she's beginning to look something like a white savior, a trope Peele deliberately undermines in the film and uses to mislead viewers into thinking, like Chris, that Rose is on his side.[15] Later it becomes

obvious that she just wanted there to be no trace of Chris's presence in the area, for he's about to "go missing."

As they arrive at the plantation-esque Armitage estate,[16] Chris is greeted warmly by Rose's parents, but he's disconcerted by the Armitages' two black servants, Georgina (Betty Gabriel) and Walter (Marcus Henderson). Apparently, the Armitages retain trappings of a nineteenth-century servant-master (or slave, as we eventually learn) system, though Dean attempts to explain this away by highlighting the servants' devoted care of his parents, implying that failure to employ them after his parents' deaths would be a disservice to these faithful servants. Both Georgina and Walter are stand-offish with Chris at times, overly warm at other times, and both speak in the clipped accents of their white employers, even when alone with Chris. They behave oddly in other ways, with Georgina bursting into tears unprovoked, Walter sprinting past Chris in the middle of the night at a dead run, and both regularly appearing out of nowhere to leer at Chris. Rose's parents, also, almost immediately make Chris uncomfortable, for, as Rose predicted, her father, Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford), tells Chris that he "would have voted for Obama for a third term."[17] In addition, Rose's father attempts to use black slang, calling Chris "my man" and asking him how long "this thang" has been going on between Chris and Rose. He gives him a weirdly thorough tour of the house, skipping over the basement due to a "black mold" problem, and tells the story of his father losing to track and field legend Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympic trials.[18] Rose's mother, Missy Armitage (Catherine Keener), is quieter in her racist micro-aggression, but she starts asking Chris overly personal questions and seeking to hypnotize him (she's a psychiatrist), ostensibly to help him quit smoking. Once Rose's deranged brother, Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones), shows up for dinner and starts haranguing Chris about why he doesn't take up Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighting, referring to Chris's impressive "genetic makeup," Chris is ready to pack his bags and leave.[19] Rose talks him out of it, though, and, despite his mounting fears, he stays.

The next day, after a fitful and restless night in which Chris is almost certain he was hypnotized against his will, Chris becomes an uncomfortable and reluctant guest of honor at a party hosted by the Armitages, where almost all the attendees are white, wealthy, middle-aged or older, and racist. Although Chris is under the false impression that it's merely a coincidence he and Rose arrived in tandem with the Armitages' annual party, he is actually the reason for the gathering. This is, as the audience learns, a slave auction, and Chris is being sold to the highest bidder.

Throughout the party, Chris is pummeled with the guests' racist micro-aggressions: everything from an assumption that he is good at golf like Tiger Woods, to a sexually aggressive elderly woman's question of Rose, "Is it true? Is it really better?" as she gropes Chris's arms and chest.[20] Chris is ready to flee, but Rose shames and cajoles him into staying with her.

Chris is pretty sure he should be terrified, or at least deeply annoyed at the racist behavior he has been subjected to, but he loves Rose, and she is sympathetic even as she gaslights him, making it seem like he's right to feel wronged but wrong to leave. He begins to think maybe he's overreacting. As Peele remarks, "As a black man, sometimes you can't tell if what you're seeing has underlying bigotry, or if it's a normal conversation and you're being paranoid. That dynamic in itself is unsettling."[21] Of course, each time Chris engages with a black person on the outside, such as his super-paranoid black best friend Rod Williams (Lil Rel Howery), or one who has a lucid moment out of "the sunken place," such as fellow party attendee Andre Heyward (Lakeith Stanfield), Chris is urged to "Get out!"[22] His contact with other black people is being restricted, however, and certainly, his contact with those not already body-snatched by the Armitages is severed once his phone goes dead (and keeps getting unplugged by Georgina).

Eventually when, after the party, Chris has no more capacity for tolerating the creepy invasiveness of these people and tries to leave, he is betrayed by Rose, attacked and imprisoned by her family. He learns that his entire relationship with Rose was a farce designed to ensnare and enslave him. At this point in the movie, it becomes clear this is not just a story about some painfully awkward and racially unenlightened white liberals, but rather is a neo-slave narrative, for, as Peele summarizes the horror of the film, "This family is hypnotizing and re-enslaving black people."[23] Chris has been sold to the highest bidder in a literal auction held the day of the party—in this case, the highest bidder is a blind art dealer who "wants his eyes," for Chris is a talented photographer. During his imprisonment in the Armitage basement, Chris learns that Rose's family is several generations into a lucrative trade in black bodies, one involving a surgical procedure wherein they perform a partial brain transplant, transforming an able-bodied black person into an enslaved host body for one of their decrepit and wealthy white friends or family members and sending the black person's consciousness to "the sunken place," where they only half-exist in suffocating paralysis. Georgina and Walter, we learn, are acting so strange because they are the enslaved hosts to Rose's grandparents.

In the film's ending, Chris escapes his bonds only moments before the brain transplant that would have doomed him to the sunken place, does battle with the entire Armitage family, and flees the house. He is pursued by Rose, who shoots at him, and then, when Walter joins the fight and seems about to kill Chris, a moment of lucidity opens Walter's consciousness, and he shoots Rose and then himself. In the original ending, Rose continues to fight Chris, but he finally gets the upper hand and is on top of her, strangling her, when the police arrive on the scene. He puts his hands in the air, a look of utter defeat on his face, before being taken into custody. The last we see of him, he's in an orange jumpsuit, behind glass, having a bleak conversation with his friend Rod. There is no hope for him. His fate seems sealed for the police have ocular evidence of his attack on a white woman.[24] Despite his innocence, he is lost to a corrupt system more than five times more likely to incarcerate black men than white.[25]

Except this is not the ending Peele ultimately went with. He reshot it, electing instead to have Chris's friend Rod show up in his TSA cruiser, lights flashing but with no intent to take Chris anywhere but home. As the two friends drive away, the Armitage house is visible in flames in the distance behind them. There is hope and redemption here, for what could have been a story of a system rigged to trap and enslave black people becomes, instead, a story of black friendship and triumph. Chris survived. He "got out." He even managed to set fire to the house that has come to represent the spoils of slavery.

Peele's decision to go with the alternate ending was most definitely motivated by fear of the political moment. This film began as a project to remind people that even if we elected a black president, racism was still alive in the United States. But the film became something else once Trump was president. "By the time I showed the film to an audience," says Peele, "the culture had changed. Black Lives Matter had become a presence, and there was now attention to racial violence in a way there hadn't been when I first wrote [*Get Out*]."[26] Furthermore, as Sasha Abramsky wrote for *The Nation* in 2017, "the number of white-supremacist groups is growing rapidly, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which now tracks more than 900 hate groups."[27] Encouraged by Trump's tacit support for white supremacists and their ilk, as well as his open invitation to supporters to rough up the opposition,[28] the propensity for violence against people of color in the United States seems unlikely to taper off soon. "I made *Get Out* for everybody … but I really made it for black audiences," says Peele.[29] Black audiences hardly needed a reminder of the lack of racial

equality and justice in this country or the rise of violence against people of color, for while whites may have the luxury to think about race—or not—as they see fit, people of color must always be cognizant of race and racism; to forget is to be left vulnerable and unprotected. Furthermore, the fear and anxiety incurred by constant vigilance act as a pressure cooker: "When I think about the fears we deal with, I think that anything we suppress as people, anything we push down and hold deep, it's gonna explode,"[30] says Peele. *Get Out* offers one way for exploring and legitimizing these fears, providing a much-needed catharsis and affirmation of the power of black community, black friendship. Peele says that what black people really needed in 2017 was "a hero, a release, a cheer," so he changed the end of the film to provide a more positive and hopeful conclusion.[31]

The Underground Railroad

Like Peele, Whitehead positions a neo-slave narrative in rejection of the post-racial argument, dislocating his narrative of slavery by crafting a nineteenth-century US antebellum narrative of chattel slavery, then embedding within it historical atrocities visited upon black Americans post-emancipation (including lynching, eugenics, segregation, and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study). Although he borrows some techniques from the genre of nineteenth-century slave narratives such as those written by Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, he also borrows from literary fiction and the horror genre. Most notably, he seems to be influenced by Toni Morrison, particularly her willingness to blend genres and invoke the supernatural in her neo-slave narrative, *Beloved*.[32]

Whitehead's neo-slave narrative includes a dose of magical realism as he transforms the underground railroad, a term used to denote the people aiding runaway slaves as well as their systems of communication, codes, and logistics, into an actual railroad built underground.[33] For the protagonist, Cora, escaping the horrors of the Randall plantation in Georgia, where first her grandmother and then her mother before her were enslaved, would have been impossible without the railroad. Even with it, she and fellow slave Caesar almost don't make it out, and then, for the remainder of the over 300-page novel, she is hunted by the slavecatcher Ridgeway, a man whose entire life is dedicated to tracking, capturing (sometimes killing), and returning slaves to their owners. Ridgeway's obsession with Cora is only partly inspired by the hefty bounty Terrance Randall offers for her return. Mostly, he is determined to catch her and return her to Randall

because he failed to catch her mother, Mabel, years earlier when she ran. Cora, only ten when her mother ran, leaving her behind on the Randall plantation, is as ignorant to the whereabouts of her mother as Ridgeway, but both falsely assume Mabel made it to freedom, and both loathe her for it, even as they admire her. In truth, Mabel didn't make it far from the plantation, stopping on an island in the swamp near the plantation to enjoy breathing free air and eating two turnips. Deeply fulfilled, she decides she must return to Cora, who needs her, but she is bitten by a cottonmouth snake and dies before she makes it back, her body swallowed up by the swamp so completely that there are no traces of her for Ridgeway to find or young Cora to mourn.

When Cora decides to follow in her mother's footsteps and run, it is mostly because the alternative has become unbearable. She was originally a slave on James Randall's property, but after his death, Terrance Randall inherits his brother's half of the family estate, including Cora. Terrance delivers her most brutal beating to date and orders as well that she be whipped for three consecutive days after the beating—all for the crime of using her own body to shield a child from Terrance's violent wrath.[34] For runaways, Terrance goes to great lengths to have stocks made that will ensure a slow and painful death. When Ridgeway eventually catches up to Cora and tells her of fellow runaway and dear friend Lovey's fate once she was returned to the Randall plantation, Cora screams for ten minutes.[35]

Being returned to the Randall plantation is therefore unthinkable, so Cora runs hard and long, first landing in the relative freedom of South Carolina, where progressive whites are dedicating themselves to racial uplift and education, buying slaves out of slavery and then helping them advance their education and learn trades. This at first seems like an idyllic dream, but Whitehead, like Peele, seems determined to interrogate the motives of white liberals, particularly given the wide lens of history that indicts many liberal/progressive whites. Therefore, these same progressives in South Carolina who are helping former slaves learn to read, mend clothing, and use proper table etiquette are also responsible for programs of eugenics and have begun a medical experiment on black men that looks suspiciously like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.[36]

In this example and others, Whitehead dislocates time and place, drawing into his 1850 narrative events that happened later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In so doing, Whitehead conflates the horrors of post-slavery America with antebellum horrors, crafting a condensed timeline that reinforces the awful influence of slavery over black lives. In one

particularly telling example of this dislocation of time and place, Whitehead imagines a "Living History" exhibit of slavery within a museum space. Romanticizing even the Middle Passage in this deliberately inaccurate presentation, the whites who script the story of chattel slavery in the United States treat it as a romantic but flawed system and as something far removed—and this, simultaneous with the ongoing institution of slavery.[37]

Forced to leave South Carolina as Ridgeway closes in, Cora flees again on the railroad, arriving in North Carolina, which has taken a decidedly different approach to the management of slaves: theirs is a project of genocide. As she enters North Carolina, she is greeted with the gruesome road called the "Freedom Trail," a trail lined with black "corpses hung from trees as rotting ornaments."[38] Whitehead here inserts the horrific history of lynching in the United States from 1877 to 1950. In what can only be described as acts of racially motivated terrorism, a documented 4075 black men, women, and children were lynched by white mobs.[39] When the white underground railroad station master tells Cora that "the bodies go all the way to town," we get a glimpse of the enormity of the horror. Knowing that this is what awaits her if she is discovered in North Carolina, Cora hides for months in a tiny attic loft reminiscent of Harriet Jacobs's hiding place described in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[40] Whitehead goes further than just alluding to lynching in the abstract, delving into spectacle lynchings that take place in a park adjacent to the home Cora hides in. Horrified, Cora is forced to hear, if not watch, as night after night, crowds gather to witness the execution of the latest hapless victim.

Aside from restricting spectacle lynchings to North Carolina and dislocating them in time to coincide with slavery (when most occurred after the abolition of slavery), Whitehead is not fictionalizing the historical record. Spectacle lynchings were, for a time, popular entertainment in the United States. Advertised in advance and drawing such large crowds that railroads frequently ran special cars to accommodate these crowds, lynchings were then staged, the public torture and slow death of the victims part of the ritual.[41] Photographers often took pictures and then sold souvenir postcards at lynchings, often with huge crowds of men, women, and children posed around victims' corpses.[42] We know this about lynchings in America in part because of the determined journalistic work of Ida B. Wells, who appeared, for a time, to be waging a one-woman war against lynching and against the white journalists who advertised, celebrated, and encouraged lynchings.[43] The newly formed NAACP also sent out field investigators and published accounts of lynchings, as did black presses such as the

Chicago Defender. This is a history white Americans have yet to acknowledge, let alone reconcile, but it is one black Americans are painfully aware of. The fear of the lynch mob, as well as outrage over the slow-to-act or failure-to-act justice system, remains, for even fewer lynch mobs were brought to justice than are police today who shoot unarmed black men.[44] The central purpose of the lynch mob was to control black Americans through fear,[45] and control through fear is likewise the objective in the recent resurgence of white supremacists invoking lynching symbols[46] and their vandalism of the memorial to the nation's most collectively mourned victim of lynching, 14-year-old Emmett Till.[47]

Despite the horrors of Cora's story, Whitehead seems disinclined to give us a completely dismal ending, though to be sure, he is also not giving us a happily-ever-after. Cora is captured, briefly, by Ridgeway, but escapes in Tennessee when salvation arrives in the form of Royal, a bold, young, free black man, who, with two of his associates, sees Cora being led about in chains by Ridgeway and decides to intervene and rescue her. Following her capture is a beautiful respite Cora enjoys with Royal and a community of other free blacks in Indiana on a farm named for the man who hosts this harmonious community, Valentine. Cora's peace and happiness on the Valentine Farm is eventually shattered by Ridgeway and a posse of whites who ambush and slaughter as many on the farm as possible. Cora survives, but Royal does not. Shortly after Royal's death, Ridgeway shackles Cora and forces her to show him the nearby underground railroad station. She does, but as the two descend into the railroad's depths, she clasps her arms around Ridgeway and pulls him down with her. Although both survive the fall, Cora is the only one able to walk away. She again takes a railroad passage to a new state, where, given the established pattern, Cora will experience new possibilities and likely new horrors. The book concludes ambiguously but with a semblance of hope as she catches a ride on a wagon with an elderly black man whose "eyes were kind" and who offers to share stories and a meal with her as they travel to St. Louis.[48]

In making the case that slavery and its haunting legacy remain very much with us in the twenty-first century, Peele and Whitehead refute the notion of a post-racial moment and even prophesy a return to overt racism and racial oppression in the United States. This prophecy, sadly, has proven accurate, which may be one reason both *Get Out* and *The Underground Railroad* have resonated deeply with audiences. As black horror scholar Tananarive Due asserts, "Black history *is* black horror,"[49] and in couching

their neo-slave narratives within the subgenre of horror, Peele and Whitehead reveal that in America, the terror of the historical-political boomerang is the most horrifying subject matter of all.

Notes

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2. *Get Out*, 2017, Amazon Digital Services, directed by Jordan Peele (Los Angeles: Blumhouse in association with MonkeyPaw Productions and Universal Pictures, 2018). Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016; Anchor Books Trade Paperback, 2018).

3. Bethonie Butler, "Jordan Peele Made a Woke Horror Film," *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jordan-peele-made-a-woke-horror-film/2017/02/22/5162f21e-f549-11e6-a9b0-ecee7ce475fc_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3a800062e8b7. See also Jordan Peele, "Jordan Peele *Get Out* Keynote," 2017 Film Independent Forum, October 23, 2017, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnpDiuE8HJU

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11. Ibid.

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13. Bethonie Butler, "Jordan Peele Made a Woke Horror Film."
14. *Get Out*, 2017.
15. *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*, directed by Xavier Burgin, with Jordan Peele, Robin R. Means Coleman, and Tananarive Due, Shudder Digital Services, Shudder Exclusive, 2019.
16. For a more detailed analysis of the Armitage home's plantation characteristics, see Cammie M. Sublette, "The House That White Privilege Built," in *Horror Comes Home: Essays on Hauntings, Possessions and Other Domestic Terrors in Cinema*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, 83–94 (Jefferson: McFarland, 2019).
17. *Get Out*, 2017.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Anthony Carew, "American Horror: Genre and the Post-Racial Myth in *Get Out*," *Screen Education* 94 (2019): 14–21, 16.
22. *Get Out*, 2017.
23. Jordan Peele, "*Get Out* Keynote."
24. That she is white and he black is crucial to reading this scene through a political-historical lens. The central justification offered for the violent terrorism and lynching of black men throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth century was that the lynch mob was all that stood between black male rapists and white women. This claim was carefully, thoroughly refuted by Ida B. Wells and many black journalists and activists who followed in Wells's footsteps, but that mattered little to the white supremacist politicians, authors, filmmakers, and journalists who continued to defend lynchings. The most famous example of this argument appears in D. W. Griffith's 1915 silent film, *The Birth of a Nation*, about which then-President Woodrow Wilson declared, "It is like writing history with lightning, my only regret is that it is all so dreadfully true." Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," *Representations* 9 (1985): 151. Like Wilson, many Americans continued to believe the mythology purported about black men and their uncontrollable desire for white women (as well as their penchant for violence). This legacy is still alive in today's judicial system. For more on this history, see Ida B. Wells's *On Lynchings: "Southern Horrors," "A Red Record," "Mob Rule in New Orleans,"* 1892, 1894, and 1900, New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times*, 1969 and Joel Williamson's *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*, 140–79 (New York: Oxford UP, 1984).

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34. Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 34, 36–37.

35. Ibid, 212.

36. Ibid, 103, 115–116, 124.

37. Ibid, 110–113, 128–130.

38. Ibid, 155.

39. "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," 3rd edition, eji, Equal Justice Initiative, 2017, https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/

40. "Colson Whitehead's 'Underground Railroad' Is a Literal Train to Freedom," *Fresh Air*, NPR, interview by Terry Gross, November 18, 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/11/18/502558001/colson-whiteheads-underground-railroad-is-a-literal-train-to-freedom

41. Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 29–31.

42. The most complete photographic collection documenting racially motivated lynchings in the United States is *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2003).

43. Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 43–104. For an example of a white newspaper's advertisement of a lynching, see the full report "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror." Included in the report is a clipping from a New Orleans paper from June 26, 1919, which includes the headline, "3,000 Will Burn Negro," and provides details on the planned spectacle lynching of John Hartfield.

44. As is reported in "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," "Of all lynchings committed after 1900, only 1 percent resulted in a lyncher being convicted of a criminal offense."
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Cradle to Grave

"The Mother Who Eats Her Own": The Politics of Motherhood in Irish Horror

Eamon Byers

In her memoir *Mother Ireland* (1976), the author Edna O'Brien memorably summarizes the gendered nature of how her homeland is perceived, both abroad and by its own national imagination:

> Countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire. Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare.[1]

Such imagery has a long history. The name "Ireland" derives from the Gaelic mother goddess Ériu. The national personification is Kathleen Ni Houlihan. In moments of national crisis, such as the Famine of the 1840s or the regular waves of emigration the country has endured in response to economic hardship, Ireland is imagined as either a cruel mother unable to provide for her children, or as a grieving mother lamenting her loss. This symbolism neatly mirrors the dynamics of Irish society itself, which, though never truly matriarchal, has always venerated both its heavenly and

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earthly mothers. Traditionally, by far the most important figure in Irish Catholic devotion, even above God or Jesus Christ, is the Virgin Mary, while until comparatively recently, the single most common forename for Catholic girls and women was Mary. Illustrative of this stereotype are the only two women ever to have held the position of President of Ireland—Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese—whose unparalleled popularity while in office doubtless stemmed, at least in part, from their unique ability to embody the role of "Mother Ireland." Even the constitution of the Republic of Ireland, in its most frequently contested passage, places motherhood firmly at the center of both national life and women's lives:

Article 41.2

1. In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
2. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

Despite, or perhaps owing to, such widespread veneration of saintly mothers, Irish society has long struggled to reconcile its sentimental idealism with the complex reality of motherhood and the place it occupies within the female experience. For over a century, Magdalene Laundries and similarly infamous institutions served as little more than prisons for girls and women who failed, in one way or another, to embody the feminine ideal. These included prostitutes, criminals, unmarried mothers, orphans, bastards, victims of abuse, the disabled, and the mentally ill. Tragically, such a system was not merely imposed on the population by state authorities but reflected the entrenchment of conservative social attitudes on both sides of the border. As late as the 1980s, referenda held in the Republic of Ireland resulted in the legal ban on abortion becoming enshrined in the constitution and the prohibition on divorce being upheld. Such prejudices began to shift with any impetus only in 1984 when society was scandalized by the story of Ann Lovett, a 15-year-old girl from the midlands village of Granard, who died after giving birth to a stillborn baby, alone and in secret, in a grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary. This slow process of social change was accelerated in 2012, when Savita Halappanavar died from septic miscarriage after being

denied an abortion at University Hospital Galway, galvanizing public opinion in favor of advocating for women's reproductive rights. This paved the way for the historic referendum in 2018 that voted to lift the constitutional ban on abortion in the Republic of Ireland, as well as a vocal campaign that finally secured the same reform in Northern Ireland in late 2019.

Given this background, it is easy to understand the prevalence of maternal motifs in practically every area of Irish culture. The *aisling* poetic tradition, for example, developed in early modernity as a response to British imperial aggression and communicated its rebellious messages by imagining a *spéirbhean* or heavenly woman, symbolizing Ireland, who bemoans her sorrowful condition and calls on her sons to come to her aid. The influence of this imagery on drama is profound, stretching from W. B. Yeats's and Lady Augusta Gregory's play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) to Christiane O'Mahony's *Seahorse* (2018). Meanwhile in music, the singer-songwriter Sinéad O'Connor has spent her career reflecting on her own experience of motherhood and relating it to potent social issues such as women's rights and child abuse, most notably on her seminal album *Universal Mother* (1994). Such concerns, of course, can also be seen across cinema, in celebrated films such as *My Left Foot* (1989), *Some Mother's Son* (1996), and *Angela's Ashes* (1999), to name a few. Motherhood, it might be argued, is also the preeminent concern of Irish horror.

It is curious that while Ireland has produced some of the most important writers in the history of Gothic fiction, such as Charles Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu, Bram Stoker, Oscar Wilde, and Lord Dunsany, it is only in recent years that horror cinema has emerged as a significant cultural product. For several decades, only schlocky foreign productions employed Ireland as a setting for horror films, and even these are few and far between. Nevertheless, it is telling that in their attempt to reflect Irish society through the prism of the horror genre, these films find themselves employing maternal themes. Francis Ford Coppola's *Dementia 13* (1963), for example, concerns a wealthy Irish family dominated by an hysterical matriarch, Lady Haloran (Eithne Dunne), who is obsessed by the untimely death of her only daughter, who is named, not insignificantly, Kathleen. Furthermore, in George Pavlou's cult classic *Rawhead Rex* (1986), the eponymous demon can be defeated only by a woman wielding a totem depicting a fertility goddess, replete with engorged breasts and an ostentatiously exposed vulva. Since then, homegrown horror films have begun to be produced in prolific numbers, and, luckily, with much greater subtlety.

Yet while they may be more sophisticated than the likes of *Dementia 13* and *Rawhead Rex*, these films have also proven fertile territory for exploring anxieties about, and those of, women. Indeed, many can be classified as belonging to the subgenre of "maternal horror."

As the name suggests, "maternal horror" is centered on the relationship between mother and child, exploiting the faultlines of this archetype to spin female angst into filmic spectacle. Take, for example, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). Like Roman Polanski's *urtext*, maternal horror allows Irish filmmakers to explore the anxieties and griefs engendered by pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood through a cinematic vocabulary that is both archetypal and intensely personal. It is also, perhaps, national.

Mother Country: *The Daisy Chain*, *Wake Wood*, and *The Hole in the Ground*

The most prominent examples of Irish maternal horror are Aisling Walsh's *The Daisy Chain* (2008), David Keating's *Wake Wood* (2009), and Lee Cronin's *The Hole in the Ground* (2019). All three films concern young mothers, whether married or single, who seek refuge in the countryside after suffering tragedy or trauma in the city. In *The Daisy Chain*, Martha (Samantha Morton) and her husband Tomas (Stephen Mackintosh) leave her native London to settle in his hometown on the west coast of Ireland after losing their firstborn daughter, Chloe, to cot death. While awaiting the imminent birth of their second child, Martha and Tomas take in an orphan, Daisy (Mhairi Anderson), whose family have all died in suspicious circumstances. Ultimately, despite fiercely defending Daisy from angry locals convinced that she is a fairy changeling, Martha dies at the hands of her adopted daughter. In *Wake Wood*, Louise (Eva Birthistle) and her husband Patrick (Aidan Gillen) relocate from Dublin to the titular village after their only daughter, Alice (Ella Connolly), is mauled to death by a dog. They soon discover that their new neighbors perform an arcane ritual allowing the dead to return for three days and seize upon the opportunity to see their daughter once again. Alice, however, is not the sweet little girl she once was, but a demon who slaughters animals and adults indiscriminately before dragging her mother with her as she returns to the grave. In *The Hole in the Ground*, meanwhile, Sarah (Seána Kerslake) flees Dublin and her abusive husband with their son, Chris (James Quinn Markey), to take up residence in a nameless rural locale. Initially, she is welcomed with

open arms by all but one of her new neighbors. Noreen (Kati Outinen), a psychotic pensioner rumored to have killed her son when he was eight, attacks Sarah and Chris while driving home, screaming, "He's not your son." It is not long before Sarah gives credence to the old woman and becomes convinced that Chris, who has begun to exhibit disturbingly violent behavior, is an impostor. Believing a mysterious sinkhole in the woods to be responsible for this sinister substitution, Sarah descends into the dirt to rescue the real Chris, and burns his doppelganger alive.

The classic division between the city and the country delineated in these synopses illustrates the extent to which these three films conform to generic conventions. For their protagonists, as in innumerable other horror films, the countryside represents a chance to escape the vices of the modern metropolis and embrace a more innocent way of life, only for their arcadian dream to descend into nightmare. While all three mothers may be conspicuously modern and metropolitan in comparison to their rustic neighbors, they are intimately and elementally connected to their newfound rural landscapes. In *The Daisy Chain*, both the story and the cinematography consistently focus on water. It is in the sea that Daisy drowns her brother and attempts to kill three other children; it is in a swimming pool that she tries to drown Martha's niece; and it is while being given a bath that she kills Martha. The symbolic consonance of water and the womb is made explicit when, in the moments before her death, Martha is shocked into labor and her blood drips into the water that has been sloshed over the bathroom floor. As each of these examples attests, the motif of water is employed to reflect the precarious balance between life and death inherent in the experience of pregnancy. This same frisson is exploited in both *Wake Wood* and *The Hole in the Ground*, where, instead of water, the figure of the mother is symbolically equated with the earth. It is fitting that Martha, an Englishwoman, is aligned with the amorphousness and liminality of water, while Louise and Sarah, both Irishwomen, are identified with the land beneath their feet. In *Wake Wood*, the ritual that resurrects Alice begins with Louise mixing her blood and local mud, and ends with mother and daughter buried alive in the same sod. Crucially, in the hours before descending into the earth, Louise discovers she is pregnant, despite previously believing herself to be infertile. When Patrick resurrects her in turn, it is intimated that he will snatch life from the jaws of death and deliver the baby. The fact that this child has been gestated both *in utero* and *sub terra* illustrates just how intricately the film weaves together imagery of earth with the motif of the maternal body.

Similarly, in *The Hole in the Ground*, the eponymous aperture is positively brimming with Freudian associations. It is both a grave, burying the dead children it lures within, and a vagina, parturitating the sinister changelings that torment their mothers (Fig. 19.1).

Fig. 19.1   Mhairi Anderson (Daisy) and Samantha Morton (Martha) in *The Daisy Chain* (2008). (Author-generated screengrab)

By so closely associating mothers and the landscapes they inhabit, these films might be interpreted as presenting the maternal body as an avatar of the nation. Much like Ireland, each character is haunted by trauma and loss, riven by internal divisions, and tormented by the violence perpetrated by their children. Alternatively, these characters may be viewed less as embodiments of national dilemmas and more as individuals beset by deeply personal issues that can affect any woman, Irish or otherwise, including grief, adoption, infertility, domestic abuse, mental illness, or misogyny. Martha lost her own mother to cancer when she was four, while her firstborn child died at only three weeks old. So strong is her maternal instinct that she wishes to adopt the orphaned Daisy, but struggles with both state bureaucracy and social opprobrium. Louise has also lost her daughter, a bereavement made all the more agonizing owing to her apparent inability to conceive again. Sarah, meanwhile, is a victim of domestic

abuse. Mental illness, and the ways in which women can be patronized as hysterics by medical professionals and male authority, is also a recurring theme in these films. "I went crazy in London," says Martha, "That's why we're here." It is intimated that one of her symptoms was obsessive-compulsive cleaning, which manifests itself again during her second pregnancy, prompting Tomas to complain: "Come on, not all this again." Perhaps she feels so drawn to Daisy because of the child's own apparent psychological issues. When she begins to grow concerned about her son, Sarah is diagnosed with anxiety and prescribed sedatives, just as Noreen had been institutionalized decades earlier (Fig. 19.2).

Fig. 19.2 Eva Birthistle (Louise) and Ella Connolly (Alice) in *Wake Wood* (2009). (Author-generated screengrab)

In the closing scenes of the film, Sarah has returned to Dublin, forsaking the ancient terrors of the countryside for the rational modernity represented by the city. However, she still cannot be certain that Chris is himself and not an impostor, scrutinizing photographs of him for telltale signs of his otherness. This translation of an object of horror from the country to the city subverts the conventional divide between the two spaces. In this way, the trauma Sarah experienced is not simply displaced to a geographical and temporal hinterland; it remains urgently present. Thus the fear of the changeling, which sits at the heart of so much Irish folklore, persists as a potent encapsulation of maternal anxieties in the modern nation (Fig. 19.3).

Fig. 19.3 James Quinn Markey (Chris) and Seána Kerslake (Sarah) in *The Hole in the Ground* (2019). (Author-generated screengrab)

Disenchanted Folk: *St. Patrick's Day*

Unlike her counterparts in *The Daisy Chain*, *Wake Wood*, and *The Hole in the Ground*, the protagonist of *St. Patrick's Day* is neither a mother nor an incomer to the countryside, but a single young schoolteacher working and living in the suburbs of Dublin. We first meet Elizabeth (Ruth Bradley) in the classroom, marking exercise books while her students watch a creaky old documentary recounting St. Patrick's legendary expulsion of the snakes from Ireland. It is clear that Elizabeth desperately longs for a child of her own, judging by the yearning way in which she stares at a mother and baby passing by the school gates. Gráinne (Isolt McCaffrey), a rather intense and unsettling pupil, senses her teacher's longing and conspires with her father (Peter Campion) to give Elizabeth what she desires. Yet what she conceives is not a child but a serpent. As the doctor tells Elizabeth, in a knowing wink to the film's own lineage, "Have you ever seen the Hollywood movie *Rosemary's Baby*? If you replace 'baby' with 'reptile'… that's what you have. It's like 'Rosemary's Reptile'". Over the course of an epic 396-day pregnancy, Elizabeth descends into madness and despair, before giving birth in her bathtub. In its final act, the film shifts into folk horror, as Gráinne leads Elizabeth into the fields where she cavorts around a ragtree and a ritual fire with her offspring and a host of revelers clad in animal masks.

Released as a chapter of the portmanteau film *Holidays* (2016), which uses horror to subvert the sentimentality and commercialism of celebrations such as Valentine's Day and Christmas, the exuberant humor of *St. Patrick's Day* allows Shore to puncture both the twee homogenization of the eponymous national holiday and the shibboleths of the nation itself. In the video Elizabeth's students watch at the beginning of the film, the overdramatic presenter essentially foreshadows the central conflict of the film:

> Shamrocks, Irish dancing, parades of green. These are some of the images that come to mind when we think of St. Patrick's Day. But who exactly was St. Patrick? And how did he deliver the word of God to Ireland, a land once in the grip of druids, pagans and devil worshippers? According to legend, Patrick banished all of the snakes from Ireland by casting them into the sea. Although evidence suggests there were no snakes in Ireland in the fifth century, most scholars believe this to be a metaphor – St. Patrick's expulsion of the pagans and mystics. Long may Ireland let slip from memory its paganistic days of old.

The triumphalist flourish with which this speech ends betrays an anxiety that, in true Gothic fashion, Christianity and modernity might be threatened by the irruption of the pagan past they supplanted. In the contest between past and present for control of the nation, Elizabeth becomes a surrogate for Ireland, as these opposing temporal forces fight a proxy war over the site of her body.

She is a fitting embodiment of such a vexed image of Irishness as she manifests both contemporary and classical stereotypes. At the same time as she might be seen to represent the anxieties of millennial womanhood—being professionally successful and sexually liberated, but socially isolated and personally unfulfilled—she is also an incarnation of idealized Irish femininity. In her classroom, festooned with tricolors and leprechauns, she exhibits the authority and gentleness proper to a mother as she nurtures the youth of the nation. Therefore, when she conceives a snake—such a potent incarnation of the pagan past once vanquished by St. Patrick—she is faced with the dilemma of embracing the maternal role venerated by her culture or rejecting the progeny which symbolizes everything Ireland abhors. This crisis is powerfully symbolized in a scene where Elizabeth visits a church and gazes imploringly at a statue of the Virgin Mary standing over the snake from the Garden of Eden.

Just as the higher power to which she appeals is a feminine one, the adversaries competing for control over her body are, refreshingly, not men but her fellow women. The forces of modernity are represented by her doctor, who advocates abortion, and her sister, who arranges for Elizabeth to be administered by the vets at Dublin Zoo. The past, meanwhile, is represented by Gráinne—whose freckled face, red hair, and Gaelic name position her as another emblem of Irishness—who arranges Elizabeth's impregnation in the first place, watches over her labor, and leads her by the hand to the ritual celebrating her childbirth. Ultimately, such is the intensity of Elizabeth's desire to bear a child that it transcends the ideals of Irish Catholic motherhood and embraces a more primeval imperative to generate life. Elizabeth's enthusiastic acceptance of her status as an inversion of the Virgin Mary, being the mother of a reborn paganism rather than the mother of Christianity, serves almost to turn the conventions of horror on their head. So far from being something to fear, the serpent is capable of providing a level of fulfilment otherwise unavailable in the society by which it is shunned. Indeed, as Gráinne's father rhapsodizes, Elizabeth was only susceptible to her fate because of the moribundity of modern life:

> I bet there's a whole lot of disenchanted folk out there just waiting for a bouncing snake to lighten up their lives. I bet if we tap into that lonely, miserable demographic, in a few short years and a bit of luck, we might just hit pre-Patrick numbers.

At the end of the film, it is implied that this "lonely, miserable demographic" is not confined to single women such as Elizabeth, but extends even to those symbolically married to Christ, such as her replacement at school, Sister Burnadeath (Ciara Cullen Shore). Both her vocation as a nun and her name— "Burnadeath" being a grim pun on "Bernadette," a common appellation among Irish Catholic women—position her as an even more compelling embodiment of idealized femininity. When Gráinne gives Burnadeath the same gift she gave Elizabeth, a wicker snake with the message, "Only your deepest wish can make me smile," it is clear that, at least within the world of the film, the Ireland established by St. Patrick is in its dying days (Fig. 19.4).

Fig. 19.4 Ruth Bradley (Elizabeth) in *St. Patrick's Day* (2016). (Author-generated screengrab)

DIRTY LAUNDRY: *CHILDER* AND *THE DEVIL'S DOORWAY*

If *St. Patrick's Day* depicts maternal aspiration at its most extreme, Aislínn Clarke's short film *Childer* (2016) portrays the polar opposite. The protagonist, who is tellingly named Mary (Dorothy Duffy), is a single mother living in a house in the woods with her young son Mark (Luke Walford). In the opening scene, her preoccupation with cleanliness is made apparent when she discards a fallen leaf that has disturbed the otherwise pristine quality of her driveway. Over the course of the film, we regularly see her engaged in cleaning, from the stereotypical—hanging sheets out to dry on a clothesline in the garden, to the neurotic—vacuuming the grass on her front lawn. Her obsession with maintaining a clean home is mirrored in her relationship to her own body. Not only does she dress immaculately at all times, even when engaged in rigorous housework, she also bathes compulsively. The intimate relationship between Mary's domestic space and her personal space is demonstrated in her behavior toward the postman, Mr. Cooper (Charlie Bonner). When he delivers a package to Mary, and attempts to invite her to join the local book group, she reacts fearfully. What is worse, when she finds Mr. Cooper in her home tending to Mark after he loses a tooth while playing outside, she becomes extremely agitated and erects a sign by the gate reading: "NO TRESPASSERS / NO POST." It might be inferred that her behavior indicates revulsion toward men, or a fear of them, perhaps resulting from a history of abuse. Maybe, like Sarah in *The Hole in the Ground*, she has found herself raising a child

alone after escaping a violent husband. What is clear is that the presence of a man in her home is felt as acutely as if it were a violation of her body.

Similar sentiments appear to underpin her attitude toward her own son. While she does fulfil her maternal responsibilities, inasmuch as she provides for his basic needs and attempts to protect him from the dangers she perceives beyond the family home, she does so in an erratic, often neglectful, and even psychologically abusive manner. When Mark loses his tooth, she is more concerned with the blood on the floor than with his wellbeing. When it is his turn to look after the school frog, she refuses to let it into the house, confining it to the yard. We also see her manically police his eating of an egg, a neat use of maternal symbolism, castigating him when he drops a dollop of yolk on the table: "That's disgusting! Don't be disgusting!" Perhaps her inability to tolerate the messy reality of raising a child is connected to the relationship between her home and her body. Just as Mark is wont to sully her home with blood and food, he has already debased her body during pregnancy and childbirth. Indeed, when he asks, "Where do childer come from?" she says, "Children come from a cabbage patch at the bottom of the garden." This decorous answer might not be intended to preserve Mark's innocence as much as it is meant to shield Mary from contemplating the indelicate truth herself. After all, when Mark ponders how a child might grow inside its mother, he is eating the egg that sends Mary into such a rage. However, even displacing sexuality and reproduction to the earth by maintaining that children grow like vegetables fails to preserve Mary's standards of decorum, as she is repulsed by nature itself. She dreams that foliage grows around her body as she is lying in bed, eventually engulfing her on the forest floor. The sexual suggestiveness of this image is underlined when she wakes, breathing heavily, her chest gleaming with sweat, and finds a single leaf between her breasts. Furthermore, when she ventures into the woods to find Mark, she becomes overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of the natural world, and bathes as soon as she gets home.

When Mark returns, he reveals that he has been playing with the "childer." This word, an Ulster dialect variation on "children," appears throughout the film. At first, Mary corrects Mark, clearly attempting to impose order on his speech in the same way she seeks to control other aspects of his behavior. However, gradually the term becomes synonymous with the ragged group of children who appear at the bottom of

Mary's garden and torment her, both with their unkempt appearance and with their actions, such as pelting her laundry with soil. Naturally she tells Mark not to play with them. "Don't go near them," she warns, "They're dirty." By playing with them, not only has Mark disobeyed her orders, he has also become tainted. This prompts Mary to proclaim, "You're filthy!" and order him upstairs to wash, where, in the harrowing climax of the film, she drowns him in the bathtub. Normally, the image of a mother bathing her child is an illustration of the nurturing intimacy natural to this most archetypal of human relationships. Here, it is perverted and travestied, with the water acting less as an agent of physical cleansing, and more as a means of moral purification. In this regard, it is suggestive of baptism, but instead of welcoming a child into the world, in this instance it condemns him to death. Underlying this cyclical pattern is Mary's burying of Mark's body in the cabbage patch from which he purportedly sprang, and the intimation that, much to her horror, he has now joined the ranks of the childer (Fig. 19.5).

Fig. 19.5 Dorothy Duffy (Mary) and Luke Walford (Mark) in *Childer* (2016). (Author-generated screengrab)

The perversion of religious imagery at the conclusion of *Childer*, much like the use of the name "Mary" for the mother, is evidently a deliberate choice on Clarke's part. The same must surely be said of the decision to give the role of the infanticidal protagonist to Dorothy Duffy, who previously starred as an unmarried mother in Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene*

Sisters (2002). That film depicted in detail the abuse meted out in homes for "fallen women," exposing these injustices to an international audience, and fueling the national debate regarding the suffering endured by women and children at the hands of religious authorities in Ireland. Drawing on the cinematic vocabulary of *The Magdalene Sisters*, and perhaps on Aisling Walsh's contemporaneous *Sinners* (2002), in her most recent film Aislínn Clarke amplifies the hellishness of such institutions to produce a harrowing, and thought-provoking, horror film.

The Devil's Doorway (2018) is presented as documentary footage recorded by two priests, Father Thomas Riley (Lalor Roddy) and Father John Thornton (Ciarán Flynn), who are sent to investigate a purported miracle in a Magdalene Laundry in 1960. There, not only do they discover statues of the Virgin Mary weeping blood, but also systemic cruelty, Satanic worship, and demonic possession. On the surface, the film is an effective example of "religious horror" or "exorcism horror" combined with the generic trappings of "found footage horror." However, it is also an excoriating indictment of the moral hypocrisy that allowed Magdalene Laundries and their like to flourish, as well as a reminder that Irishwomen continue to labor under the yoke of such attitudes owing to their role in restricting reproductive rights. As in all of the films already discussed, these conflicts are, once again, inscribed upon a female body.

Hidden away in the bowels of the asylum is a young woman named Kathleen O'Brien (Lauren Coe). The choice of the name Kathleen, like the daughter in *Dementia 13*, is unavoidably resonant of Ireland's national personification, Kathleen Ni Houlihan. Furthermore, as Kathleen is both pregnant and a virgin she is typologically aligned with the Virgin Mary. The conjunction of these national and religious connotations makes it impossible to perceive the character as anything other than a symbol, or at least a reflection, of Ireland. Despite ostensibly embodying the platonic ideal of Irish Catholic womanhood, Kathleen is dismissed as insane by the nuns and, as the priests discover, possessed by a malignant spirit. The condition in which Father Thomas and Father John find Kathleen—filthy, chained to the walls of a squalid cell and surrounded by women in other rooms crying out for their babies—is a clear comment on the attitudes toward female mental illness that governed such institutions. Her demonic possession, meanwhile, is both a concession to generic expectations and a means of addressing more subtle theological debates. Kathleen is not, refreshingly, simply a poor imitation of Regan MacNeil in *The Exorcist*

(1973). Instead, when not driven to acts of violence or telekinesis, she exhibits a sweet piety and regards herself not as the plaything of a creature from Hell, but as the incumbent of a special role in Limbo:

> I am in Limbo. So are you, the children … In some ways, Limbo is worse. The babies have no mothers, so I am their mother. They are suffering for the sins of others. Isn't that always the way?

While never officially acknowledged by Catholic doctrine, "The Limbo of Infants" has long been regarded by many faithful as the eternal domain of babies who die before baptism can absolve them of original sin. The invocation of this belief within the context of the film inevitably calls to mind Seamus Heaney's poem "Limbo," a set text familiar to many Irish schoolchildren, which imagines the tragic circumstances behind the true story of a newborn baby who was drowned off the coast of Donegal. As the guardian of such children, Kathleen fulfils her maternal role not as the mother of the Church or of the nation, but of the souls cast out by both. Moreover, when she says, "I am in Limbo. So are you," it might be inferred that she is judging society as a whole as existing in a parlous state between sin and grace. This conflict is symbolized by her contradictory physical condition, being both pregnant and virginal, as well as by her potential to give life but only at the expense of her own. According to the doctor who is called on to examine Kathleen, her chances of surviving childbirth are negligible. His suggestion that priority be given to saving the life of the child allows the director indirectly to comment on the use of such arguments in the debate over abortion rights for women in Northern Ireland.

Despite their protests, the Mother Superior makes it clear that the priests have neither the authority nor the understanding to intervene in the affairs of women. As she warns Father John when Kathleen goes into labor: "Get out of here, stop interfering in woman's business." While the Mother Superior is the villain of the film, and a representation of matriarchy at its most cruel, she is afforded the opportunity to explain her actions as being merely the symptoms of a wider system of patriarchal corruption:

> You send all the country's dirty wee secrets here, here to my home, and sally off without a care in the world. Sweep it all under the carpet and expect us to hide the dirty laundry. Isn't that it, Father? Leave all the dirty work to the

women…You worry about how we treat the girls? Ha! What about how you treat us? Leave us to hide all the messes and cover it all up and swan in all holier than thou. Do you know how many of the church's messes that I personally have had to clean up? Do you know how many of the babies born here had fathers who were fathers, Father?

The symbolism of "dirty laundry," which recalls the visual vocabulary of *Childer*, is powerfully exploited throughout the film. We regularly see the women washing and stitching, ostensibly seeking to atone for their own impurity, only for bloody handprints to appear on the white sheets drying on the clotheslines outside. A similar juxtaposition is made in the miraculous appearance of bloody tears on all the statues of the Virgin Mary in the asylum. This image is redolent not only of Mary's holy passion, but also of the everyday reality of feminine suffering. Kathleen, after all, both cries and bleeds as she gives birth. Taking such gynecological imagery one step further, the film itself is structured around an essentially sexual dynamic. Firstly, the title *The Devil's Doorway* is inherently suggestive of female genitalia, and misogynistic religious attitudes toward them. Secondly, the plot concerns two fathers who enter a female domain, attempting to penetrate its mysteries, which leads them to a climactic chase through a series of narrow tunnels, at the end of which they find both their deaths and a baby. Yet the tunnels are not simply a womb. They are also a grave, filled with the bones of babies taken from their mothers and slaughtered by the nuns in a chilling inversion of the maternal role.

Gender roles are similarly inverted throughout the film. While the nuns are portrayed as violent and potent, the priests are gentle and powerless. In the closing scenes, Father Thomas searches frantically for Kathleen's baby, only to be killed by the Mother Superior. Though his death may be shot from his point of view, the sound effects imply that he has been stabbed, a penetrative act which represents a symbolic inversion of sexual intercourse. In this way, the mother proves victorious over the father, death conquers life, and the Devil vanquishes God. The inversion of such binaries serves as a demonstration of their damaging reductiveness. If matriarchal authority is capable of violence every bit as heinous as patriarchal rule, then such taxonomies of gender are inherently unsustainable. The virgin/whore dichotomy that reifies Mary and Kathleen Ni Houlihan while oppressing their daughters is revealed, through the actions of the nuns, to injure men, women, and children alike (Fig. 19.6).

Fig. 19.6 Lauren Coe (Kathleen) in *The Devil's Doorway* (2018). (Author-generated screengrab)

The fact that films such as these could be produced, let alone enjoy the success they have, is a remarkable sign of progress considering how gleefully they skewer the sacred cows of Irish society. Where once cultural output was either censored by the state or drummed out by religious authorities, today, public bodies such as Northern Ireland Screen and Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board actually provide funding for the likes of *The Devil's Doorway* and *The Daisy Chain*. Yet the subject matter of these films is a stark reminder of precisely how little has changed in the lives of Irishwomen. Just as the legacies of the Famine and the Troubles remain open sores, the suffering endured by women at the hands of religious authorities, national laws, and social attitudes has never truly been reckoned with. Horror, as we have seen, is one possible means of processing this past. By sublimating social issues into narrative and aesthetic structures, the anxieties of the nation are rendered potently immediate. As they are manipulated by the cinematic tricks of the horror form, the viewer experiences an emotional response to what they see on screen.

And while they may not engage intellectually with political subtexts, they have been prompted to engage with them emotionally.

If nothing else, scaring the living daylights out of people is certainly a powerful means of making them pay attention.

NOTE

1. Edna O'Brien, Mother Ireland (New York, NY: Plume, 1999). 1.

Frankenstein's Dream and the Politics of Death

Jeff J. S. Black

I

What horrifies us in *Frankenstein*? Surely it is the fate of Victor Frankenstein, the monster's creator, whose discovery of forbidden knowledge sets loose an inevitable, implacable nemesis that destroys everyone he loves. Surely it is also the fate of the monster himself, who is incapable of happiness, ill-fitted to the world, condemned to solitude and vengeance despite a longing for companionship and sympathy. We are horrified to think that the fates of these characters might also be ours. But behind these deep terrors lies a deeper one, their cause: the monster's ugliness. Were he not ugly, Frankenstein's monster would not be solitary; were he not solitary, the monster would not have become Frankenstein's, and humanity's, murderous foe.

Shelley's novel insists on this. At least 15 people, other than Frankenstein himself, see the monster up close; every single one of them is horrified by the monster's ugliness. As a rule, the children shriek, the women and old men faint or flee, and the young men fight: not just to defend themselves

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or their companions, but to destroy the being of such appalling hideousness. The exceptions to this rule are few and striking: Victor Frankenstein first flees, then faints, though he is a young man, and Robert Walton, the arctic explorer who like the reader has heard Frankenstein's full story, fails to attack the monster only because the monster's ugliness makes Walton close his eyes.[1]

Frankenstein explains the causes and hints at the meaning of the monster's ugliness in his story of that "dreary night of November"[2] when he animates the monster. Once he finishes crafting the monster's body, Victor gathers the "instruments of life … [to] infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing"[3] before him. He sees the creature's eyes open; he sees it gasp for air and convulse; and he flees his workroom for his bedroom, where he falls into a deep sleep. The sleeping Victor has "the wildest dreams," though he recounts only one. "I thought I saw Elizabeth"—that is, Elizabeth Lavenza, his cousin, his childhood companion, and his intended wife—"in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt," the college town where Victor has been studying chemistry. "Delighted and surprised," he continues,

> I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel.[4]

Victor's eyes open, he starts and convulses, and he wakes from one horror to another. The monster is looming over his bed, staring at him! The monster's mouth moves, he utters "some inarticulate sounds" that might be words, he grins, and he stretches out a hand.[5] At this, Victor flees his bedroom for the courtyard below. It will be more than two years until Victor meets his monster again, on a glacier north of Geneva.[6] By that time, the monster will have taken the lives of two members of the Frankenstein household: that of Justine Moritz, a family servant, and that of William Frankenstein, Victor's youngest brother.

This creator pays a high price for abandoning his creation. So why does he flee, not once, but twice? And why does he distinguish his first flight from his second, with the story of one of the wild dreams that separated them?

The cause of Victor's first flight is clear: he cannot bear to see his monster's ugliness. The path he takes is short, from his workroom to his

bedroom, a gallery and a staircase away,[7] but long enough to remove the monster from his sight. Having gained his bedroom, he tries immediately to sleep, because he wants to forget, for as long as sleep allows, the sight of his monster. But this reaction requires further explanation. Victor has devoted months to researching and constructing his creature. Why does his monster's ugliness strike him only now?

Victor did try to make his monster beautiful. He fashioned proportionate limbs; he obtained "lustrous black … flowing hair" and "teeth of a pearly whiteness."[8] But something went wrong with the monster's "watery eyes" and "straight black lips"—and especially with his skin, which yields a "shriveled complexion" and "scarcely cover[s] the work of muscles and arteries beneath."[9] Also, Victor's good intentions could scarcely have covered the intrinsic grisliness of his work, which required vivisections, and visits to graves, dissecting rooms, and charnel houses.[10] He admits, "often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation."[11] So Victor was not blind to the ugliness of his awful labors. But he hoped they would end in something beautiful; and he was sustained in this hope by another dream.

Years earlier, the young Victor chanced to read a book on alchemy by Cornelius Agrippa. This encounter led him to the rest of Agrippa's works, followed by those of Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus.[12] Victor's later education at home and in college at Ingolstadt proved unable to weaken his attachment to the dreams of these alchemists, and in particular to their dream of "the elixir of life."[13] "What glory would attend the discovery," he enthused to himself, "if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!"[14] Doubtless, the death of his mother Caroline from scarlet fever, contracted while nursing Elizabeth through the disease,[15] strengthened Victor's attachment to this dream of immortality, and drove him to uncover the principle of life, and to animate a lifeless being.

Just as Victor's youthful dream of immortality set him up for a shocked awakening and flight in the face of his monster's ugliness, so too it helps to explain his later dream of Elizabeth become his mother's corpse, and his second awakening and flight. Comparing the monster when inanimate and when animate, he stresses the contribution motion made to the monster's ugliness. "I had gazed on him while unfinished," Victor recalls; "he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived."[16] The sight of a body built from parts harvested from human and

animal corpses, and infused instrumentally with a "spark of being," becoming an animate creature, first wakes Victor from his dream of immortality. This sight shows him that animate creatures, conversely, are really just corpses infused with this "spark of being." Victor's dream of Elizabeth becoming his mother's corpse follows accordingly. Elizabeth's illness killed Victor's mother, and his mother's death drove him to end illness, so Elizabeth becomes Victor's mother's corpse—the animate corpse that all of us really are. Victor then wakes from this second dream to see his monster not just moving, but making the motions of a rational being: looking, grinning, making sounds that might be speech, and gesturing "seemingly to detain."[17] While his first flight is from his monster's ugliness, brought home by animation, his second is from the sight of an animate corpse become a rational animal, that is, from the sight of our ugliness.

  Frankenstein certainly horrifies us as a tale of technology run amok, as a tale of the punishment following the attainment of forbidden knowledge, and as a tale of the monster's incurable, insufferable solitude. These themes are present in Mary Shelley's novel, but especially in its first edition a deeper concern of the work is with the goodness of enlightenment, and the prospects for achieving a happy life by human effort alone. It is tempting to read Victor's comparison of his monster to one of Dante's imaginings as a reflection on supernatural punishment; but Victor, who professes immunity to "supernatural horrors"[18] more likely has in mind the natural logic of Dante's *contrapasso*: that the torment fits the crime by making visible the nature of the criminal. By this logic, the dream of immortality fittingly issues in an ugly monster, because the dreamers of this dream are ugly monsters.

II

Victor Frankenstein is not the only one who dreams of immortality. The dedication of *Frankenstein* reads, "To William Godwin, Author of Political Justice, Caleb Williams, &c."[19] This apparently uncomplicated dedication of the novel by its anonymous author to what would turn out to be her father is complicated by the novel's epigraph. "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?" is a question asked by Adam in *Paradise Lost*, in a soliloquy after the Fall.[20] When juxtaposed with the dedication, this epigraph leads us to wonder whether it voices not just the monster's

complaint against Frankenstein, but also Mary Shelley's complaint against her father and author. For near the end of Godwin's 1793 masterwork of political theory, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*, there is a chapter titled "Of the Objection to this System from the Principle of Population." In it, Godwin defends his anarchistic system from an objection raised against socialism: should anarchism make human beings happy, it will also cause them to flourish, which will lead to overpopulation, and eventual human misery.[21] Godwin stresses that his response to this objection, and his remedy for this problem, is speculative. Anarchism might not necessarily lead to overpopulation, he cautions; and even if it does, there might be a better solution than the one he proposes. But it will not undermine the truth of his system to offer a mistaken solution to an unlikely problem. To the contrary, it will suggest that even this unlikely problem is not without remedy; and if his solution is correct, it could be "the medium of a salutary modification" to our conduct in the present. With these qualifications in place, Godwin proposes his solution to overpopulation: human immortality.

We all have experience, Godwin begins, of the mind causing changes in the body, both voluntary and involuntary. Sometimes we move at will, sometimes we flee willy-nilly. And we all also experience that these effects, whether voluntary or involuntary, can be changed by mental habit.[22] Practice perfects our willed movements, and courage can keep us from unwanted flight. So "[i]f mind be now in great degree the ruler of the [bodily] system," Godwin asks, "why should it be incapable of extending its empire?" Indeed,

> [t]here is no principle of reason less liable to question than this, that, if we have in any respect a little power now, and if mind be essentially progressive, that power may, and, barring any extraordinary concussions of nature, infallibly will, extend beyond any bounds we are able to prescribe to it.[23]

It is reasonable to expect that mind will one day become, through the techniques of modern science, omnipotent over matter. This omnipotence will extend to the matter of our own bodies.[24]

Next, Godwin asserts that aging is one of the mind's involuntary effects on the body. Aging is hastened, and may even be *caused*, by bad mental habits: by letting our cheerfulness, perspicacity, and benevolence be diminished by the lack of novelty that comes with additional years.

Godwin admits that novelty is not always available, but he insists that virtue is—and virtue produces the very habits of mind that prolong life.[25] To the objection that cheerful, perspicacious, and benevolent people sometimes die young, Godwin responds that it is not enough just to have these qualities; they must be incorporated through continuous attention to our bodily functions. We need a science of mental medicine that will train our attention to comprehend many simultaneous objects,[26] presumably to bring involuntary mental effects like respiration and blood circulation under voluntary control. This science will teach us to cultivate and incorporate "fortitude … equanimity … [and] a kind of benevolent propensity"[27] in order to prolong our vigor. It will teach us to do without sleep, "death's image," because sleep is accompanied by inattentive, "irregular and distempered" thoughts.[28] That is, the science of mental medicine will eliminate sleep in order to eliminate dreams. It will teach us how to avoid accidental changes in our cheerful moods, since "we are sick and we die, generally speaking," according to Godwin, "because we consent to suffer these accidents."[29] Lastly, this science will teach us to eliminate sexual desire, which is only the result of the desire for novelty and the "absurd" imagination that sexual intercourse will lead to sympathy and mental intercourse with charming and excellent human beings.[30]

"The men therefore who exist when the earth shall refuse itself to a more extended population," Godwin concludes, "will cease to propagate, for they will no longer have any motive, either of error or duty, to induce them."[31] They will no longer mistake their longings for emotional and intellectual intercourse for longings for physical intercourse; they will no longer be obligated to reproduce their kind. "In addition to this," he continues, "they will perhaps be immortal."[32] Dismissing this fleeting thought that the science of mental medicine will leave us as a mortal species without any desire to reproduce, Godwin envisions his future "people of men, and not of children" in a utopia where they can pursue the truth without pause or setback—a utopia where there is neither war nor crime, no need for the administration of justice, "no disease, no anguish, no melancholy, and no resentment."[33] While immortality may be far off, the ends to war, crime, and the need for government "are at no great distance; and it is not impossible that some of the present race of men may live to see them in part accomplished."[34]

III

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a monster of many parts. But one of these parts is surely a filial retort to this parental dream of immortality—a dream to end all dreams, one that is silent about women, and excludes sleep, sex, and children. Victor Frankenstein and William Godwin both wish to "banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death"[35]; Godwin goes further with the hope that the elimination of war and crime will follow, freeing man from much of the fear of violent death as well. But Victor's discovery of "the cause of generation and life"[36] belies Godwin's premise that mind controls body. This discovery gives Victor the power to animate any frame capable of receiving this cause, be it "an animal as complex and wonderful as man" or "one of simpler organization,"[37] like a worm. In either case, it seems the procedure is the same: build a suitable frame from lifeless but once-living materials, then "infuse" this frame with "a spark of being."[38] Instead of mind controlling body, then, Victor discovers that body controls mind, because mind is an *effect* of bodily structure. The "spark of being" is the same for all animate creatures; their shape determines whether they are rational animals. While Victor was at first horrified to see his monster gesture like a reasoning being, he later judges that, were he to make his monster a female companion, she would be a thinking and reasoning animal "in all probability."[39] The "spark of being" only sets the body in motion; but thinking and reasoning are only complex and wonderful bodily motions.

Not only does Victor's discovery belie the chief premise of Godwin's utopian dream of immortality; it also denies one of Godwin's main inferences. All non-anarchistic politics, Godwin implies, and perhaps especially our modern liberal politics, is a politics of death. He can only expect the prospect of very long life, if not of complete immortality, to put an end to crime, war, and mental suffering, if he thinks that the prospect of a short life, the awareness of our mortality, is the *cause* of these occurrences. To defend this view of modern liberalism, at least, Godwin could point out that Thomas Hobbes founds his government on the fear of violent death,[40] and that John Locke founds the right to property on the fact of effective scarcity[41]—that is, on the fear of premature death. But the career of the monster denies that crime, war, and mental suffering are due chiefly to the fear of death. The monster is taller, more flexible, more powerful, and more agile than a human being; he may also be

smarter.[42] Though he knows he can be wounded by a human with a pistol,[43] and eventually carries firearms to defend himself against such weapons,[44] there are very few beings on earth at whose hands he need fear violent death. The monster is also a vegetarian, so he has no need to kill animals for his food.[45] He is more capable than humans of eating coarse sustenance, and more resistant to cold and heat.[46] While he does feel the scarcity of fire and food early in his career,[47] by the end of the novel he is able to provide for both Victor and himself in the wastes of the Arctic.[48] The monster does sleep,[49] but he has very few other needs, so he need not fear starvation. Not having grown,[50] he also may not age. He may be invulnerable to disease, as his maker intended. Finally, though he demands that Victor make him a female companion,[51] and though Victor seems to have meant him to reproduce,[52] the monster seems to have no need for sex. So even though he foresees his own death and regards himself as mortal,[53] Frankenstein's monster approximates the beneficiary of Godwin's mental medicine, in that, given adequate food and sleep, he may well be immortal. When at the end of the novel he promises to commit suicide, the monster proposes immediately to immolate himself,[54] rather than to wait in isolation for the very long time it might take his life to reach its natural end.

Yet despite these advantages, and the fearlessness of death they impart,[55] the monster commits the crimes of several murders, declares war on his maker and on humanity, and suffers deeply from anguish, melancholy, and resentment. The cause of these experiences is the monster's ugliness, as we have said, which makes most human beings faint, flee, or fight. But the monster cannot endure his own ugliness in isolation, or in masked interactions with humans,[56] because he desires to be seen, known, and loved as a benevolent being.[57] It is his pride, rather than his sexual needs or his desire to reproduce, that best explains why the monster demands of Frankenstein: "create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being."[58] The horror of the monster's ugliness is also that his desire to be truly esteemed cannot be satisfied by human beings, or very likely even by another ugly monster created expressly for that purpose. If we too are ugly monsters—under the skin—then once we are seen for what we are, we cannot be truly esteemed either. We too seem to have no prospect for happiness by our efforts alone.

IV

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* does not deny that our modern liberal politics is, as Godwin implies, a politics of death. It does not deny that human beings incorporate in political associations out of fear of violent death or due to the fact of scarcity, nor that, once thus incorporated, we tirelessly acquire property out of the same motives. Indeed, Shelley goes further than Godwin by stressing the horror of the insight that, in a sense, we humans *are* dead. Like the monster, we are animated structures of once-lifeless materials; we keep the animation conveyed by the spark of life going in ourselves by eating—that is, by stealing and incorporating materials from other living beings. Unlike the monster, we have just enough skin to cover up this fact of our being, and even sometimes to make ourselves seem beautiful.

But Shelley's novel does deny that our politics is *only* a politics of death. Were we to approach or achieve immortality, either by Godwin's mental medicine, or by modern biotechnological engineering techniques, or in something like the transhumanists' Singularity—in which we transfer our consciousness to an immortal, nonbiological substrate—we could reduce or eliminate the fear of natural death. The fear of violent death might also decrease, especially if great longevity or immortality brought with them other advantages that were not equally distributed among all human beings. But Shelley suggests that this eradication of the fears at the root of our politics of death will not eliminate crime, war, or mental suffering. To the contrary: it will make these experiences more frequent, and the prospect of violent death more likely. For according to Shelley, stronger than the Hobbesian fear of violent death or the Lockean desire to acquire property—neither of which the monster feels very strongly, because he has no equals, and partly because he has few needs and seems not to age—is a Rousseauean desire for esteem. This desire in the monster resembles the pride of the savage human being in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*; his is a desire to "look at … others and to want to be looked at himself," a desire to be considered by others as "the best, the handsomest, the strongest, the most adroit, or the most eloquent"[59]—that is, a desire that others judge him both absolutely and relatively good. Were he not so ugly, the monster thinks, he could easily satisfy this desire in the company of human beings like his cottagers; as he is, he hopes to satisfy it with a companion built for the purpose. Satisfying his pride in this way should

not cost his companions, human or otherwise, anything, and it should make the monster happy.

We should wonder, though—if this desire dwells deep in all ugly monsters like us—whether it can be so easily satisfied for all. Surely it costs me something to recognize another as the best, if I have a deep desire to be considered the best in his place. If our fears of natural and violent death are diminished or eliminated by technology, but our pride remains unsatisfied, perhaps we will do as Rousseau suggests: lacking hope for or fear of supernatural punishment, we will punish perceived wrongs ourselves, and "vengeances [will become] terrible, and men bloodthirsty and cruel."[60] The monster takes this step, and he swears "by the sun, and by the blue sky of heaven"[61] and doubts that his soul will survive the death of his body.[62] But even if technology replaces in this way our acquisitive politics of death with a warlike politics of pride, Shelley might finally also disagree with Godwin about the value of this replacement. In this too she might follow Rousseau, who nonetheless judges the savage state of terrible vengeances and bloodthirsty cruelty "the happiest and most durable epoch," the state "the least subject to revolutions, the best for man."[63]

Notes

1. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus. The 1818 Text.* Edited, with Variant Readings, an Introduction, and Notes, by James Rieger. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 216. Thanks to J. Walter Sterling, Dean of St. John's College in Santa Fe, for the invitation to present an earlier version of this chapter at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Association for Core Texts and Courses Conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on April 13, 2019. Thanks also to the audience and to my fellow panel members for their comments on that earlier version. Any errors or monsters that remain are my own.
2. Shelley, 19.
3. Shelley, 52.
4. Shelley, 53.
5. Shelley, 53.
6. Shelley, 72.
7. Shelley, 50.
8. Shelley, 52.
9. Shelley, 52.
10. Shelley, 49–50.
11. Shelley, 50.

12. Shelley, 32–33.
13. Shelley, 34.
14. Shelley, 34.
15. Shelley, 37–38.
16. Shelley, 53.
17. Shelley, 53.
18. Shelley, 47.
19. Shelley, 5.
20. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*. Second Edition. Edited by Scott Elledge. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), Book X, lines 743–745.
21. William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*. In Two Volumes. Volume Two. (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1793), 860–861.
22. Godwin, 863.
23. Godwin, 865.
24. Godwin, 862.
25. Godwin, 863–864.
26. Godwin, 866–867.
27. Godwin, 868–869.
28. Godwin, 868.
29. Godwin, 869.
30. Godwin, 870–871.
31. Godwin, 871.
32. Godwin, 871.
33. Godwin, 872.
34. Godwin, 872.
35. Shelley, 34.
36. Shelley, 47.
37. Shelley, 48.
38. Shelley, 52.
39. Shelley, 163.
40. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Revised Student Edition. Edited by Richard Tuck. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Chapter 13, standard page 62; Chapter 21, standard page 114; and A Review, and Conclusion, standard page 389.
41. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*. In *Two Treatises of Government*. Edited by Thomas Hollis. (London: A. Millar *et al.*, 1764), Chapter 5, section 42.
42. Shelley, 95, 114, and 116.
43. Shelley, 137.
44. Shelley, 204.
45. Shelley, 142.

46. Shelley, 116.
47. Shelley, 98–101.
48. Shelley, 201–202.
49. Shelley, 98.
50. Shelley, 117.
51. Shelley, 142.
52. Shelley, 49.
53. Shelley, 143.
54. Shelley, 220.
55. Shelley, 165.
56. Consider Shelley, 96.
57. Shelley, 127–128.
58. Shelley, 140.
59. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. In Volume Three of *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Edited by Christopher Kelly and Roger D. Masters. Thirteen Volumes. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990–2010), 47.
60. Rousseau, 48.
61. Shelley, 144.
62. Shelley, 220–221.
63. Rousseau, 48.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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