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Cover Image: *Sasha's Hell* (Nikita Lavretski, 2019, Belarus), used with permission from the director.

We dedicate this issue of *Monstrum* to the memory of Denis Saltykov.

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The Cacophonous Politics of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells"

Michael J. Blouin

Published in 1848, and then revised in 1849, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells" still triggers a rift between some of his critics. Certain readers approach the poem as satirical, antagonizing, or fatalistic; other readers approach the poem as transcendent, a lyrical masterpiece that perfectly distills Poe's poetic principles. It remains relatively uncommon, however, for readers to approach "The Bells" as a *political* text, perhaps for the reasons that I have already mentioned: its nihilistic overtones suggest existential—rather than earthly—concerns, and its purported purity as a poem ostensibly removes it from the messy business of politics and raises it to a higher level of contemplative art. But neither Poe nor his reader can fully evade political concerns; "The Bells" reflects, in particular, a palpable fear that post-Jacksonian America was rapidly declining into mindless repetition, clamorous discourse, and craven spellbinders. This essay analyzes the political valence of "The Bells" by excavating from the poem a number of Poe's political concerns as well as the likely concerns of his larger audience. Due in part to its intertextuality and in part to its deliberately Platonic design, "The Bells" subtly rails against the inherently corrupting influences of American democracy.¹

Poe drew "The Bells" into four quarters, each of which represent a different season in a human life through the sounding of bells. The jolly first quarter signifies birth as well as the Christmas season via "tinkling" sounds, while the equally uplifting second quarter evokes marriage through "molten-golden notes" (Poe 1984, 92).² The penultimate quarter, in contrast, marks the arrival of danger as a fire alarm rings out to create a veritable frenzy among the masses. Finally, in the fourth quarter, the quarter to which this essay will mostly attend, the poem tilts its ear to iron bells, conjuring the sound of funeral bells as well as the accompanying sense of mortal dread. On its surface, "The Bells" compels its reader to contemplate the monotony of existence. The seasons march ever onward and the progression causes listeners to feel wearier and wearier. Yet I contend that the third and fourth quarters of "The Bells" convey

¹ For further discussions of Poe's well-known distaste for democracy, see Faherty (2005), Rodriguez (2011), and Whipple (1956).

² All references to Poe's works in this essay are to *Poe: Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984).

a political subtext. Just who is the devilish ringer of the bells, and who are the riotous people below that so fervently obey its orders? By pivoting from the hysteria of the madding crowd to despotic, ghoulish bells, “The Bells” underscores the latent horrors of democracy: a mode of government, Poe regularly maintained in his works of fiction and nonfiction alike, that generates unrest and leads invariably to an authoritarian nightmare. Each stanza, and eventually the poem as a whole, moves into alignment with the cacophonic bells being rung by a despot.

But would Poe’s contemporaries have been able to understand the political valence of “The Bells”? Is it reasonable to assume that Poe’s nineteenth-century reader would have understood the symbol of noisy bells to be a correlative to the political discourse of the day? When and where were bells employed by Poe with the explicit intent of producing a political soundscape? Throughout the nation’s first century of existence, bell-ringing remained a sign of revolutionary feeling, or “a rhythm of cascading excitement” (Linebaugh 2013, 236). During the Revolution, and then again during the War of 1812, bells alerted American audiences to encroaching forces and marshalled them into sharing patriotic sentiments in concert with calls for revolutionary fervor. Clamorous bells, however unconsciously, attuned the listener’s sensorium to a swelling revolutionary chorus. For multiple reasons, Poe would have been repulsed by the resultant din. The story goes that Poe composed “The Bells” after a sleepless night in New York City in 1848; his hostess, Marie Louise Shew Houghton, prompted him to respond to his frustration with the never-silent city. But it seems probable that Poe was at least in part channeling his own long-standing discomfort with blind obedience to so-called patriotic bells. After all, one of the pealing bells that he heard from Houghton’s apartment was the New York Liberty Bell, housed in nearby Middle Collegiate Church. This special bell arrived in America prior to its twin in Philadelphia, and it was deemed so important symbolically that American forces moved the bell to protect it during the Revolution. Moreover, Poe had relocated to Philadelphia a decade earlier in 1838, the same year that he published “The Devil in the Belfry” (discussed below), and he would have witnessed first-hand the much-hyped naming of the other major Liberty Bell. Paul Haspel demonstrates how the Liberty Bell became a symbol of abolitionism, and how “the promulgation of Liberty Bell ideology”—sounded through bell-themed propaganda—would have negatively impacted Poe (Haspel 2012, 46). As a relatively isolated person and a political outsider, Poe would have very probably felt himself constantly harangued by both the New York Liberty Bell and the bells of the Philadelphia State House, rung incessantly on patriotic occasions such as George Washington’s birthday,

Independence Day, and so forth. Poe's poetry and fiction reveal a writer who loathed the idea that the ringing of bells could shepherd the populace into a state of sheep-like docility. In Poe's estimation, democracy in particular paved the way for demagogues, since democracy catered to the appetites of an unleashed crowd and allowed mobs to bypass the sage counsel of ruling elites. He appears to have equated these incessant bells with what he perceived to be the shortcomings of America's democratic ideals: in his numerous accounts, to ring the proverbial bell was the primary occupation of the populist tyrant, and to join the ensemble of obstreperous bells was the primary occupation of individuals seeking to participate in the ill-fated *demos*. "Their king it is who tolls," and the ghoulish people—"ah, the people"—swing to the rhythm of their nefarious leader. For Poe, there is something intrinsically demagogic about ceaseless bells.

Significantly, Poe was not the only recognizable writer during his era to address the political implications of bell imagery.³ One might think of the cacophonous bells that Herman Melville sounds in *Benito Cereno* (1855). Melville's "drearily" reverberating bells, which toll as though for an execution, alert characters to the omnipresent specter of democratic revolution (Melville 2002, 82).⁴ Elsewhere, Nathaniel Hawthorne, an early advocate of Poe's work, recognized the rich symbolic potential of cacophonous bells, especially when it came to addressing the swells of Jacksonian democracy. Hawthorne's short story "A Bell's Biography" (1837) recycles the symbol of the bell to ruminate upon young America's political imaginary. The story personifies a neighborly

³ Nor would Poe be the last to play with this theme of political bells. In "The Horror at Red Hook" (1925)—a story that focuses in large part upon the ostensible dangers of a multiethnic democracy—the noted horror writer H.P. Lovecraft signaled the corruption of Red Hook in a manner that echoed Poe, one of Lovecraft's greatest inspirations: "The shivery tinkle of raucous little bells pealed out to greet the insane titter of a naked phosphorescent thing" (Lovecraft 2005, 141). This connection between the bells of Lovecraft, an outspoken racist, and the bells of Poe, a figure who often aligned himself with the American South, reveals how their shared anti-democratic sentiments potentially germinate from the seeds of a widespread racism. Indeed, the correlation between anti-democratic attitudes and racism continues to plague the contemporary U.S.

⁴ In this context, readers might also consider Melville's 1855 short story "The Bell-Tower," a story about the erection of a "great state-bell" that ultimately collapses under its own weight (Melville 1969, 225). While the story extends a rather obvious critique of overzealous aristocrats, constructing unstable monuments to their own greatness, it also gestures at the relationship between democracy and the story's doomed bell(s). During the building of the bell-tower, "Those who (...) thronged to the spot—hanging to the rude poles of scaffolding, like sailors on yards, or bee on boughs (...) inspirited (the builder) to self-esteem" (224). In other words, Melville appears to implicate, to some degree, the unruly mob in the impending catastrophe, because "the republic's" hunger for a spectacle of "public spirit" leads to disaster (225).

bell who speaks with an iron tongue. Although Hawthorne characteristically equivocated in his depiction of cacophonous bells—at the close of the story, the narrator highlights some of the positive traits of the bell, such as its ability to toll “a requiem for all alike,” or its levelling effect—much of the text uses the din of bells as an excuse to rail against the limitations of American democracy (Hawthorne 1974, 109). Hawthorne’s bells are forged in France in a hotbed of revolutionary zeal and, in typical Jacksonian fashion, their ringers employ them to “stir up” certain sentiment, like the “beat of (a) drum,” in the name of haranguing bystanders into strict compliance with the status quo (105-106). Hawthorne’s bells thus retain acutely negative associations: in their “empty repetition,” they confuse the “careless multitude” and catalyze “many a revolution... invariably with a prodigious uproar” (103). The titular bell stands out as a “member of that innumerable class, whose characteristic feature is the tongue, and whose sole business, to clamor for the public good”; in other words, the anthropomorphic bell cannot escape from his “noisy brethren, in our tongue-governed democracy” (103). Hawthorne’s “A Bell’s Biography” anticipates Poe’s “The Bells” in a variety of ways, then, but perhaps in no way more significantly than in its political subtext. Whether or not Poe consciously recalled Hawthorne’s story during the composition of “The Bells,” one can safely deduce that in Poe’s age bells remained a highly politicized symbol—and, even more specifically, that this political symbol was frequently sounded as an alarm against democracy run amuck.

The Din of Poe’s Many Bells

To read “The Bells” as a political poem, readers must place it both within the context of the 1830s and 40s and within the larger trajectory of Poe’s literary evolution. Poe included cacophonous bells throughout his stories in a manner that augmented their political subtexts. Think of “Hop-Frog” (1849), for instance, with its rebellious dwarf Hop-Frog dressed in motley, including the jingling bells upon his cap. Adorning a subversive agent, the dwarf’s bells become a *leitmotif* that signals the repulsive nature of democratic revolution. Recognizable by his distinctive cap and bells, the dwarf fools the king and his advisors to dress like Ourang-Outangs before stringing them up and lighting them on fire in a horrifying act of disobedience. While Poe certainly did not paint a flattering portrait of the sovereign, he saved his most grotesque imagery

for the moment of insurrection.⁵ Poe's story notes how the chains that secure the royal band, like the bells on Hop-Frog's cap, serve to increase "the confusion by their jangling" (Poe "Hop" 1984, 907). The acoustic profile of the downfall of the king thus involves a steady stream of jingling noises.

Or, consider Poe's (in)famous tale, "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether" (1845). One of Poe's most blatantly political texts, this narrative takes place within an asylum where the inmates have overthrown the guards and now pantomime normality. Poe's title directly alludes to democratic revolution: the system of tarring and feathering is in essence the democratic project (Hawthorne similarly wrung his hands over the latent barbarism of democracy in his 1832 tale "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"). But readers should mark how this supposedly perverse reversal of authority *sounds*—that is, the unique sonic qualities of Poe's Gothic burlesques on the subject of democracy. Poe amplified the dread that simmers beneath the surface of "System" by creating a slow-building soundscape. When the narrator at last realizes that democracy has ushered insane individuals into power, he feels himself to be drowning in a wave of clanging voices from below: "An infinite variety of noises" (Poe "Tarr" 1984, 715).

The political implications of Poe's myriad cacophonies extend into his poetry as well. In "Tamerlane," for example, a powerful leader realizes (albeit too late), that he has prioritized power—or, the *agon*, the political sphere—over love. Once again, Poe represented the theme of excessive politics in an acutely sonic form: "The undying voice of that dead time, / with its interminable chime, / Rings, in the spirit of a spell, / upon thy emptiness—a knell" (Poe "Tamerlane" 1984, 24). In the stanza in question, the narrator addresses his "yearning heart," thereby taking aim at his own political ambition. His use of the word "emptiness" indicates that he now acknowledges the vacuity of a life in politics (24). Poe returns here to the image (and sound) of a bell to underscore the utter inanity of political concerns. The propagandistic bells goad listeners into acting against their own best interest, "in the spirit of a spell," and, at the same time, the bells mark an absence, an emptiness that alerts the listener to the futility of all political pursuits. The bells remain a catalyst of political delusion as well as an alarm meant to awaken citizens from said delusion. Or, let us consider one of Poe's best-known poems "Lenore" (a poem, like "The Bells," almost never interpreted in political terms).

⁵ Katrina Bachinger focuses upon the carnivalesque aspects of "Hop-Frog" and how Poe capitalized upon the carnivalesque in the name of "dethroning the establishment" (Bachinger 1991, 394). Yet I would argue the story's "competing voices" are, like the dwarf's jangling bells, cacophonous—and the cacophony of a rebellious public is far from the ideal melody that Poe elsewhere espoused.

To read “Lenore” politically requires an appreciation of its density, which is to say, its thick allusions and intertextual reference points. I ought to begin with the name De Vere, which would have signified aristocratic refinement for readers in Poe’s day. That sense of refinement stemmed in part from the bestselling British novel, *De Vere; Or, the Man of Independence*, published in 1827 and positively reviewed by Poe. The author of the novel, Robert Plumer Ward, was himself an English barrister who helped to found and edit *Anti-Jacobin*, a publication that fueled anti-revolutionary sentiment. I am not the first reader to note the name De Vere, or the correlations that exist between Ward and Poe, artistically or politically speaking. Burton Pollin points out that Poe would have been attracted to the name because of its anti-political signification, and Poe also recycled another name from the Ward corpus—Poe’s use of the name Lady Tremaine in his short story “Ligeia” may be a gesture at Ward’s novel *Tremaine; Or, The Man of Refinement* (1833). Killis Campbell likewise makes this connection, if in a more understated manner: “*De Vere* in Poe’s *Lenore* may have been suggested by the title of another of Ward’s novels” (Campbell 1913, 67).⁶ Yet I would argue that the connection to Ward’s titular protagonist yields greater fruit than Pollin or Campbell acknowledge. Ward characterized the eponymous De Vere as an aristocrat who resists the corrupting influence of a life in politics. Like Poe, Ward viewed commoners as akin to Orang-Outangs, and he lamented the very notion that “the descendent of a hundred barons [De Vere] should be content to pass a life in mere parliamentary maneuvering” (Ward 1827: 48). De Vere thus stands head and shoulders above the political crowd, those cavorters participating in their “masquerade,” each of whom winds up “a mere instrument of party politics” (349 – 50).⁷ With this context in mind, let us turn to Poe’s “Lenore,” a poem that involves the conflict between a group of villagers and a gentleman named De Vere. The crowd wants to

⁶ Indeed, Ward’s *Tremaine; Or, The Man of Refinement* echoes the thesis advanced in *De Vere*: it is a novel dedicated to the ideal of the country gentleman, both aristocratic in temperament and divorced from the noise of political brawling. At his best, Tremaine, like De Vere, distinguishes himself from the “mere vulgar crowd” (Ward 1825, 7). Throughout the three volumes of *Tremaine*, its eponymous hero must come to terms with a life in which he no longer throws himself “into party,” learns to prefer Plato to the cynics, sets aside his reading of “party tracts” by figures like Walpole, and gradually accepts missing out on “the greatest activity [that] prevailed in politics” (50, 74, 79). In short, Poe’s multiple gestures at Ward’s fiction may indicate a common set of concerns between the two writers, including a belief that landed gentry should remain elevated above the political fray.

⁷ Poe sounds a good deal like Ward in one of his earliest poems, “O, Tempora! O, Mores!”—a poem that compares commoners to apes and then chides individuals who choose a political career: “A little while / Will change me, and as politicians do, / I’ll mend my manners and measures too” (Poe “Tempora” 1984, 22).

mourn Lenore's passing and Lenore's lover De Vere wants to celebrate it. This heated conflict manifests in a debate about the ringing of bells. The crowd cries out, "Let the bell toll!" To which De Vere retorts, "Let no bell toll" ("Bells" 68 – 69). Poe's possible reference to Ward's novel *De Vere* adds a uniquely political dimension to Poe's poem by pitting a singular man against the so-called mob. Ever-compelled to bell-ringing, the mob threatens to strip the nobility of their innate dignity. De Vere rejects public clamoring in the name of protecting the private sphere from the gross paws of the people. Echoing Ward's novel, "Lenore"—indeed, a good number of Poe's poems—reveals itself to possess a layer of political meaning that might otherwise be ignored.

Most aptly for my discussion of "The Bells," though, I must highlight Poe's satirical tale "The Devil in the Belfry" (1839). In the Dutch borough of Vondervotteimittiss, townspeople march in accord with the chiming bells in the steeple of the House of the Town-Council. The belfry-man, charged with the maintenance of the bells, holds dominion over the slow-witted populace below. Poe portrayed the locals as simplistic to the extreme, capable only of carving cabbages and clocks. Indeed, he likened the locals to pigs: "Corpulent and lazy... the very pigs look up to (the belfry-man) with a sentiment of reverence" (Poe "Belfry" 1984, 301 – 2). Poe's "Devil" mocks the assumed orderliness of petty tyrants, deposing the despot as well as the doomed masses that depend upon despots to organize their daily lives. Critics have surmised that Poe was ridiculing Martin Van Buren, heir apparent to the Jacksonian machine and an exceedingly influential politico charged with oiling the gears of a vast political apparatus. "'Two!' continued the big bell; and 'Dool!' repeated all the repeaters" (304). The town starts to fall apart when a "scoundrel" commandeers the clock, forces it to strike thirteen, and sets off a chain reaction of idiocy: "In his teeth the villain held the bell-rope, which he kept jerking about with his head, raising such a clatter that my ears ring again even to think of it" (305-6). Once more, Poe equates the clattering of bells with the assumed failures of a democratic experiment: this time, the bells mark the gaslighting enacted by a populist charlatan as well as the empty-headed, chaotic character of a crowd unmoored from the (necessary) dictums of a centralized authority. Poe's burlesque makes clear overtures to Washington Irving, thanks in part to its comical Dutch designations. Yet beneath the cosmetic similarities, one can likewise trace a deeper resonance between Poe and Irving in their shared distaste for democratic advances. "The Bells," too, involves an unhinged belfry-man—"he dances and he yells"—who takes over the steeple to initiate the unhinged blathering of the rabble: "Tolling, tolling, tolling" (94). The illustrator Edmund Dulac ostensibly perceived this correlation between the clamoring of the bells and the noisy

demands of the democratic polis (see figure 1). It is in this context that Poe's readers can detect the political undertones of "The Bells." In stories like "Devil," Poe laughed at the notion of a democratically-engaged electorate and encouraged his more enlightened readers to view populist leaders as deranged belfry-men and democratic mobs as being comprised of obstreperous fools.



Figure 1. Edmund Dulac, Illustration for *The Bells and Other Poems* by Edgar Allan Poe. Published by Hodder and Stoughton, NY, 1912.

The Politics of Pure Poetry

Yet most critics have read Poe's "The Bells" as apolitical. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. conveys a widely-held belief when he describes Poe as a "solitary genius," presumably self-alienated from the flow of American politics (Schlesinger 1922, 211). One reason for this apolitical analysis is the fact that "The Bells" has been almost exclusively catalogued as a representative sound poem. Sound poetry by design appears to reject social or political layering. Stephen J. Adams contends that Poe peddled in sound poetry to gesture at a realm of "Platonic purity" (Adams 2018, 63).⁸ By stripping poetry down to its

⁸ Jonathan Elmer argues that Poe "sticks in the memory as one who trades more in musical affects than in significant poetic meaning" (131). For Elmer at least, Poe's "The Bells" recreates a tension between the programmed affects of modernity and the "failure of such a technocratic compulsion" (Elmer 1997,

musical core—that is, to its formal sound, its capacity to strike the ear without the pesky intrusion of critical insight—Poe sought a degree of separation from what he saw as the quotidian political concerns of his day. “The Bells” recreates the experience of hearing church bells: the immediacy of their sound; the soulful transcendence they provoke. It plays with “the spiritual relationship of bells to the Divine” (Adams 2018: 79). Because they endure as non-referential signifiers, Poe meant for his bells to defy his critics, especially critics looking to outwit the poet and spot the hidden meaning of the poem. Hervey Allen Israfil muses, “The croak of the raven is conveniently supposed to be purely lyric” (Israfil 1926: xi). Pollin likewise amplifies “the graphic quality” of Poe’s poetry by demonstrating the ways in which Poe aimed to present the word as a thing—not a thing to be decoded but to speak to listeners directly (Pollin 1980: 169).⁹

Sonic bells retain “originality and theoretical purity” and so they reach listeners at a level that cannot be swayed by mere political concerns (Adams 2018, 93). Poe’s “The Bells” reveals itself to be apolitical, then, on at least two fronts: first, because the “cosmic Truth” of the sounding bells purportedly evades political analysis, and second, because the relationship between bell and listener remains an intensely private one, an invitation to “spiritual self-cultivation” (“Bells” 89, 93). As one of the most recognizable American sound poems, “The Bells” obfuscates political reading at the basic level of poetic form.

In turn, Jerome McGann makes a compelling case that Poe challenged his readers to transcend the trap of political meaning-making. Ever-decadent, Poe aspired to glimpse “the encompassing harmony that the poetry desires to reach” (McGann 2014, 180). In “The Bells” specifically, Poe pushed his readers to recite the poem aloud and thereby make specific choices about how to articulate themselves, elevating a sort of ethical reading above what one might refer to as a political reading (in this context, “political” means stubbornly partisan, or anchored to the concerns of its specific historical moment). McGann continues:

The absence of manifest referential content, its aggressively literary and formal qualities, have led many readers to... seek out coded references to race, politics, and gender. But in reading Poe we have to be specifically wary of all such moves since they can so easily lead us to retranslate the

143). While this reading retains obvious political implications, it also seemingly puts Poe at odds with politics—a separation that carries with it a number of significant blind spots.

⁹ Pollin continues, in an interview with Barbara Cantalupo, to unpack Poe’s self-defined “graphicality,” which is to say, his use of “images that are striking and startling, in their nuances and the particular adumbrations... those objects, images... in language” (Cantalupo 2001, 109).

work back into conceptual—Poe called them “Didactic”—terms. Poe’s great subject is poetic representation itself. (150)

Said another way, contemporary readers might be lulled into transposing Poe’s poetic form into prose, or into a narrative explanation of his poem in overtly political terms. But Poe maintained that “form is everything” and so “The Bells” ostensibly privileges a staunchly ethical, rather than political, hermeneutic (169).¹⁰

Conventionally formalist analyses of “The Bells” confirm a broader tendency to treat Poe as an apolitical writer. In his influential study, Larzer Ziff claims that Poe stood out as “a man without a country [...] unconcerned with social matters” (Ziff 1981: 67). For Poe, Ziff continues, poetic beauty offered “a release” from the political weights of the world (69); art was an occasion to strain inward, to “the closed world of the troubled mind,” or to the deeply personal realm of one’s “inner depths” (70). “The Bells” prepares its audience to transcend petty political squabbles. Art, that is, restores “psychic processes otherwise ignored, denied, or maimed by bourgeois democratic institutions” (80). I would not fully disagree with McGann or Ziff, since “The Bells” unquestionably appeals to an apolitical sensibility. Its carefully crafted cacophony is meant to move the listener in primal ways, minus the critic’s arrogant interventions. However, it would be an error to assume that being apolitical is not, in and of itself, a political position.¹¹ Even as Ziff argues that Poe’s output lacked a “social correlative,” he admits that Poe thought the American Revolution was “a failure” (75, 72). The fact that Poe sought to overcome “bourgeois democratic institutions” betrays an anti-democratic substrate within Poe’s works. As a poem meant to unshackle the listener from the mediation of conscious interpretive processes, such as, say, the democratic process, “The Bells” further unveils Poe’s particular political program: a program meant to undermine the presumed political affinities of American

¹⁰ Jonathan Elmer argues that “The Bells” produces a tension between Poe’s attempts to formalize, that is, to “program affects” and the (inevitable) “failure of such a technocratic compulsion” (Elmer 1997, 143). In other words, Poe poses as both an agent of modernity, with his technocratic repetitions, and as a critic of this modern condition. Through his exhaustive formal inventiveness, Elmer argues, Poe sought to evade capture within the dominant paradigms of his day.

¹¹ In a retrospective on Poe’s works, Evert Augustus Duyckinck described Poe as “what Napoleon named an ideologist—a man of ideas” (Duyckinck 1850: 337). To illustrate Poe as an ideologist, Duyckinck interestingly compared the writer to a bell ringer, “a Campanologist, a Swiss bell-ringer, who from little contrivances of his own, with an ingeniously devised hammer, strikes a sharp melody, which has all that is delightful and affecting” (338).

readers by training these readers to aspire to achieve a purportedly purified understanding of the world as well as their place within it.

A heavy emphasis on poetic form therefore engenders a kind of anti-politics, what John Bunzel has described as “the rejection of politics in the name of some nonpolitical ‘truth’” (Bunzel 1979, 3). Just as Plato privileged the intellectual elite while downgrading the masses, Poe routinely retreated into contemplative solitude; accordingly, “The Bells” appears to avoid the corrosive influence of politics by fueling the white-hot conviction of a private person in a state of existential crisis. Like his contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson, a figure often categorized as one of Poe’s many literary antagonists, Poe effectively reduced the density of human experience to a singular man and the music that he alone can hear. What ostensibly has no place in “The Bells,” in either form or content, is the “the spontaneity, variety, and continuous unrest of democratic politics” (10). But I would counter that “The Bells” ultimately does take aim at a political target. To encounter the poem as purified sound, with all of the assumptions that attend this perspective, is to overlook the poem’s dependence upon a common political theme in Poe’s work (democracy as the cacophony of bells) as well as the poem’s layers of intertextual meanings.¹² To unpack the issue of intertextuality, I now turn to one of the most prominent examples, one that carries with it a particular political valence.

The Dickensian Toll

The remainder of this essay places “The Bells” in dialogue with a vital antecedent to Poe’s work: Charles Dickens’s sequel to his enormously popular text *The Christmas Carol* (1843). Poe was unquestionably indebted to *The Chimes: A Goblin Story of Some Bells that Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In* (1844); he confessed the debt in a letter to his good friend Frederick William Thomas (Israfel 1926, 749). Indeed, Poe added two stanzas to the original poem in 1849 after engaging in detail with Dickens’s work. Poe met Dickens in Philadelphia during the latter’s tour of the U.S. in 1842—a meeting that both men eagerly anticipated. “If there was a British author whom Poe admired and appreciated

¹² Because of Poe’s bathos, his contrivances, and his emphasis on the drone of convention, Daniel Hoffman frames Poe as a signifier of some essence that exists outside of the political arena: “Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe, the name resounded, soon becoming not a name at all but now a note, a tone struck upon some inward anvil of my being, one syllable in a chord I strained to hear, an ineffable harmony plucked from some sphere beyond the meshes of our common feelings” (Hoffman 1985, 2).

throughout his career [...] that was Charles Dickens” (Galván 2009, 13).¹³ Dickens’s *The Chimes* departs from its predecessor due in no small part to its much more aggressive political message, and this departure itself reveals a good deal concerning the role of *The Chimes* as source material for Poe’s poem. Katrina Bachinger makes the case that Poe was no stranger to British politics due in part to the influential years he spent living in London from 1815 – 1820. During those influential years, Bachinger asserts, it is likely that Poe would have become familiar with the politician George Canning and his followers the Canningites. Canning too expressed a great wariness concerning the concept of an unchecked democracy like the one that he saw taking hold in Jacksonian America. Poe maintained a life-long interest in British political discourse, and he would channel Canning when he made what Bachinger calls “Canning-like” comments (Bachinger 1991, 224).

Assuming that Poe would have been a well-informed political reader of *The Chimes*, I propose interrogating Dickens’s work in terms of its unique political profile. In so doing, Poe’s reader better equips herself to bridge the apparent divide between this text and Poe’s “The Bells.” Just what are the political meanings behind Dickens’s (in)famous sequel? What are some of the politicized debates that endure in the wake of its publication? *The Chimes* was beloved by Dickens, who felt that this book spoke more effectively than *A Christmas Carol* against the social diseases that the author sought to expose. Echoing Poe’s sleepless night in New York City, Dickens apparently composed the work in response to bells that he regularly heard during a sojourn to Italy. The protagonist Trotty begins the text with a firmly-held belief that the working class is inherently wicked. In addition to the dreadful tolling of the bells, Trotty encounters two government officials that affirm his bleak outlook. After a nighttime visit to the local steeple, in which he, like Ebenezer Scrooge before him in *A Christmas Carol*, experiences visions as well as an epiphany, Trotty realizes that the bells do not mark the drudgery of a wicked existence, but the hopeful march of humanity’s inevitable progress. The story of Trotty’s transformation calls for a better treatment of the poor and clearly caricatures the wealthy and politically well-connected. On the surface, then, there is a glaring difference between *The Chimes* and “The Bells”: Dickens’s text holds out hope for the future, while Poe’s poem gradually devolves into anarchy and death.

¹³ In one particular review of Dickens’s works, Poe was uncharacteristically profusive in his praise: “Mr. Dickens, through genius, has perfected a standard from which Art itself will derive its essence” (qtd. in Thomas 1978, 216). To an extent, then, Poe fell prey to what his friend George Lippard described as “Boz Fever” (qtd. in Thomas 324).

While it remains common for readers to interpret the trajectory of “The Bells” in private, existential terms—that is, as a record of a single human life, from birth to death—this trajectory might be a collective one. The first stanza opens with beautiful silver bells: “*What* a world of merriment their melody foretells!” (“Bells” 92) From its opening line, “The Bells” seems to gesture at a world, not just a solitary experience of that world, and it is ostensibly a better world built upon the premise of melody, harmony, and consensus. The second stanza maintains this utopian gloss, describing how the bells foretell a world that is “all in tune” (93). Poe may not have relegated his reader to a private, existential arc; rather, the “euphony” of the first two stanzas may connote a rapturous political scheme like American democracy, which promises equality and the glorious melding together of a Jacksonian people (93). As a political poem, “The Bells” graphs a devolution, or descent into a maelstrom: a shift from the utopian prophecy of an absolutely harmonious world to the chaos of a fully-realized democracy, driven by the reckless passions of the populace and the craven manipulation of opportunistic populists. This reading would affirm Poe’s pessimism in contrast to Dickens’s doe-eyed docility. But there is much more to discuss than initially meets the ear.

Like Poe, Dickens’s political proclivities cannot be described as truly democratic, in the sense that he neither petitioned for genuine egalitarian ends nor called for greater engagement by the disenfranchised masses. Michael Sheldon illustrates how Dickens wrote *The Chimes* with the “singular, coherent political purpose” of advocating a type of free trade radicalism (Sheldon 1982, 330). Whereas the conservative Tories purportedly passed the Corn Laws (between 1815 and 1846) to enact a protectionist agenda, Dickens fought for what he thought was the untapped potential of middle-class industrialists, unshackled from feudal landlords. Yet Dickens’s faith in industrial progress based upon less restrictive *economic* conditions, rendered sonically in his story by the sounding of the bells, was markedly not accompanied by an investment in the *political* power of everyday citizens. Instead, “Dickens advise[d] the lower classes to exercise patience and restraint” in the face of “the inevitability of change” (349).¹⁴ Poe proved to be even less sanguine, barely disguising his contempt for the so-called rabble.¹⁵ A commonality nonetheless persists: both

¹⁴ Rob Breton makes a related point: while he supports the notion that *The Chimes* is more political than *A Christmas Carol*, he also highlights the ways in which Dickens’s narrative contends disinterest in economics signals a type of moral superiority. But this disinterested moralism only threatens to further remove the compliant reader from participation in the political process.

¹⁵ Burton Pollin points out, “The strong moralistic and social-minded intent in Dickens (a plea for the poor) is absent from Poe’s long ending” (Pollin 1998, 222). Pollin contends that “The Bells” lacks “the

writers contended that the antidote to societal ills was decidedly not political empowerment of the general populace.

An echo of Poe on the opposite side of the Atlantic, his critics have frequently accused Dickens of being naively apolitical. Dickens was a proponent of middle-of-the-road ideas that preferred good feelings to political strife (a position, I repeat, that remains always-already political). Accordingly, Michael Slater contends that *The Chimes* is “less Radical than Liberal” (Slater 1970, 507). Dickens fostered a greater sympathy between the classes, as his narratives plead for kindness and a softening of relations rather than outright revolution.¹⁶ Beneath his Victorian love of “progress,” an affection that Poe never fully shared, Dickens harbored a political vision that was certainly not democratic in any substantive sense. Slater argues Dickens never advanced an agenda founded upon “complete social equality”; like the well-known Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, a man to whom Dickens looked for support of his own idealism, Dickens clung to the concept of “government by the best and wisest” (Slater 1970, 514). Poe’s keen interest in British politics as well as his long-standing appreciation for Dickens likely informed the distinctive political tone of “The Bells,” especially in its third and fourth stanzas.

At the same time, *The Chimes* and “The Bells” each respond to historical pressures. Dickens engaged (however unconsciously) with the Chartist movement in Britain: a political movement that demanded suffrage for all eligible male citizens. The Reform Act of 1832 had already extended suffrage to one in five British men. Metaphorically speaking, the unruly bells were ringing out with the sound of revolution, and incremental reformists like Dickens would have been a bit nervous about the rebellious crowds that followed. Poe too spent his adult life resisting a democratic premise that, in his mind at least, foreshadowed anarchy. In “The Bells,” the crowd panics at the first sign of trouble, blending into a horrifying composite with the “frantic fire” (“Bells” 93). When faced with an emergency, the people cannot reason their way out of their predicament, instead sinking into a state of “mad expostulation” (93). There is no way to distinguish between the “clamorous appeal” of the bells and a fire that grows steadily “higher, higher, higher” (93). In his well-known study, Elias Canetti unpacks how certain symbols have been used routinely to generate

Dickensian Leaven of an uplifting message” (226). While I would disagree that “The Bells” lacks a “social-minded intent,” I would agree with Pollin that Poe’s poem never fully suppresses its melancholy undertones.

¹⁶ Dickens told his biographer John Forster that he felt *The Chimes* to be “a great blow for the poor” (Foster 2020: 133). But the nature of this “great blow” remains the subject of considerable debate.

negative connotations around the democratic crowd. Fire is one such potent symbol: “Fire is the same wherever it breaks out; it spreads rapidly; it is contagious and insatiable; it can break out anywhere, and with great suddenness; it is multiple; it is destructive” (Canetti 1962, 77). Poe’s poetic convergence of the people with fire remains injected with political meaning. Dickens and Poe therefore turned to the symbol of the bells, high up in the steeple, to pontificate upon the political changes swirling all around them and threatening to unleash hell.

I wish to consider in a bit more detail the two politicians that plague *The Chimes*: Sir Joseph Bowley and the officious Alderman Cute. Notorious due to their willingness to bloviate, Bowley and Cute clang like the clamorous bells above, cueing Dickens’s reader into the reality that politics is only so much noise. The superficiality of this din becomes palpable to readers in the gap Dickens imposed between “what Bowley and Cute actually are (Appearance) and what the Chimes represent (Fate)” (Tarr 1972, 211). In other words, a fissure separates politics—a veritable cacophony—from reality, or the moral firmament that supposedly exists beneath political commotion. Dickens’s verbose politicians “symbolize a system that is anathema to Justice” (Dickens 2018: 214). In effect, Dickens wanted to expose the deeper chime of Justice, which he depicted in the form of “the deep Bell” (67), at a degree of removal from the ignoble realm of political participation. While it makes sense that Dickens would strive to undercut obstructionist politicians in his apparent attack on the establishment, it is crucial that readers not lose sight of the fact that for a writer like Dickens or Poe to cultivate in his audience a distaste for politics meant simultaneously undermining the very premise of democracy: a system of government that can only function through widespread political commitments. In reality, “Parliament (Bowley is an MP) is never considered for a moment in *The Chimes* as a likely source of help” (Slater 1970: 511). Or, to return to Poe’s graphicality for a moment: against the rhetorical trickery of politicians, the use of rhetoric being their primary distinction, Dickens, like Poe, attempted to strike a metaphysical chord and tune into the cosmic frequency of a Platonic Truth. This Platonic resonance elevates kindness, softened relations, and a fuzzy notion of Justice above and beyond the political arena of figures like Bowley and Cute. The purported answer to various social crises is never a democratic one. Poe would have been a willing listener to this particular Dickensian message.

The two political figureheads of *The Chimes* implicate the despotic drift of democracy. Alderman Cute is a “famous man for the common people,” while Bowley tells the masses “I know what is good for you; I am your perpetual

parent” (Dickens 2018, 29, 43). These two leaders claim to be mouthpieces of “the people” (a tenuous political construct in and of itself) and, as such, they reveal the flaws of a democratic order. Gullible voters will be easily duped by populist mountebanks. These politicians remain joint to “the great people” (83), in a deadly embrace that unveils the self-defeating nature of democratic politics. I call to mind once more the unhealthy infatuation of Poe’s ghoulish mob with its chosen, and unholy, representative: “And he dances and he yells” (“Bells” 94). At the center of it all, in the very closing moments of Poe’s poem, readers encounter a king who tolls: a boisterous leader, like Cute or Bowley, recognizable by the fact that his “merry bosom swells” as he issues his decrees (94). The king in the steeple is not an outright tyrant—rather, he sings “Paeans” (94). In the context of Greek democracy, paeans were enthusiastic songs of praise and triumph, and they gradually became a tool for shrewd politicians to tame unruly crowds. Paean was a healing god in the Greek pantheon, and so Poe’s king soothes the people below. But instead of stilling the bells, the king’s paeans only exacerbate the chaos, inciting ever greater enthusiasm. These paeans “roll” (94); they surge over the masses like a wave accumulating sediment, even as they move in a circular pattern, “rolling” always back to the point of origin: the despot himself. Indeed, the “rolling” of the final stanza evokes a damning circularity that fetters the *demos* to the demagogue.

To convey its undemocratic message, Dickens’s *The Chimes* moves through three stages of political imagery. First, with a gesture at the tyrannical Henry the Eighth, Dickens critiqued the bells as aristocratic, “ragged with rust,” likened to “indolent and fat” spiders with “long security, swinging idly,” and busy erecting themselves gossamer “castles in the air” (Dickens 2018, 3). “The Bells” appears to maintain a similar distinction between aging iron bells, with “the rust within their throats,” and the mindless bells that represent the *demos*. Yet I cannot stop at this juncture, because simply establishing oneself as being against feudal authority figures is not automatically the same thing as being pro-democracy. These bells are pushed and pulled, after all, by a “wandering” and “wild” wind—a metaphor for the capricious whims of the populace, whose empty-headed papers, so “full of observations,” prove to be windy at best (Dickens 2018, 2, 11). I would jump ahead here to Totty’s dream of a future election night, driven by “restless and untiring motion” (70). *The Chimes* envisions the people as the chaotic wind that moves the machine, or the noisy bells that clamor with neither rhythm nor reason. In Bowley Hall, Totty glimpses people “flocking” together, creating “confusion, noise, and opposition” (86). The fluid masses appear to express “some motion of a capsizing nature”: a torrent of blustering opinions caused by “vast multitudes...

incoherently engaged” (85, 77). Dickens summarily denounced the rabble in Bowley Hall as “an abject crowd” (116). The rabble of “The Bells,” meanwhile, receives no finer laurels from Poe: “They are neither man nor woman,— / They are neither brute nor human, / They are Ghouls” (94).

The final pivot of Dickens’s novel occurs when *The Chimes* rejects both the despot and the aspiring *demos*—fatally entwined, “rolled” into one—in favor of an imagined moral core. Dickens preferred the calming presence of “blended voices,” otherwise known as the “Spirit of the Chimes” (Dickens 2018, 76). James E. Marlow argues that Dickens endowed the symbol of the bells with an “evocative potency” that “would eventually trigger associations” for attentive listeners between the bells and “promise” as well as “hope” (Marlow 1975: 28 – 30). Poe similarly endowed his bells with an animistic quality meant to move listeners. But Poe remains the darker of the two Romantics: he viewed the so-called spirit of the bells as possessing an unwitting audience and pushing them, against their will, into a zombified frenzy. Poe’s fatal embrace between the *demos* and its demagogue involves a revolutionary spirit that spellbinds the crowd and lets loose their Bacchanalian essence. In the closing stanza, the question of what originally catalyzes the cacophony becomes increasingly convoluted, as the people respond to the tyrant’s “tolls.” At the same time, the tyrant is compelled to “keep time” (95), with a rhythm being marked for him by the clamoring bells, which is to say, by the people. Poe’s nightmarish vision of democracy thus dismantles clear causal chains as well as “natural” hierarchies in favor of an all-consuming din. The stanza’s various pronouns (“we,” “they,” “he”) collide and collapse upon themselves; all that remains is a disorienting crescendo of voices crying out in monotonous, grating unison. So much for the democratic delights of harmony promised in the first two stanzas.

For Dickens, unlike Poe, history still moves in a predictable manner: a sign of the metaphysical vision of “progress” to which he paid consistent homage. Beneath the clamor of his lesser, political bells, Dickens’s deeper, apolitical Bell remains “dear, constant, steady” (Dickens 2018, 122). Although Poe’s “The Bells” does not mimic Dickens’s optimistic conclusion, stressing instead a more “melancholy meaning,” Poe nevertheless shared with Dickens a belief in some hidden frequency, a melody, a harmonious consensus accessible to the select, well-attuned few (“Bells” 94). Dickens and his admirer Poe refused the democratic dance of crowd and tyrant in their similar pursuits of a musical consensus that would require little or no input from the masses. On the one hand, “The Bells” recreates a grotesque illusion of democratic harmony, generated by the populist spellbinder in his efforts to enchant the ghoulish, toiling masses: the “out of tune” clamoring of the third stanza falls into a strict

rhythm by the close of the fourth stanza, as the poem shifts into its final hammering repetitions. Enthralled citizens slowly syncopate to a beat imposed from atop the proverbial soapbox at the center of town. At the same time, like Dickens, Poe used this false melody of the demagogue to gesture at a higher form of prosody, recognizable only to the cultivated ear of the expert. The poem reveals that “the ear, it fully knows” of the dangers that surround it; “yes, the ear distinctly tells” how the “jangling” and “wrangling” of the political theatre imposes a kind of metronome and marks the capriciousness of a democratic society enslaved to public opinion, or “the sinking or the swelling” of the people’s “anger” (94). Said another way, only an omnipotent, divine ear can delineate melodies heard at a loftier frequency from the base cacophony of democratic noise.

To interpret “The Bells” in this way does not require that I dismiss McGann’s assertion that Poe was responding to what he felt was a deficient political imaginary. Poe did in fact conceptualize an ethical position defined by a prioritization of pure prosody. Not unlike his contemporary Hawthorne, Poe at times ruminated upon “the potential hiatus between ethical theory and its distortion by partisanship” (Davis 2005, 32). It would therefore be entirely too reductive to argue that Poe was always and everywhere political, or that the political truth of his poetry remains its “only truth” (Davis 2005, 9). Yet by accepting the notion that “form is everything,” the critical pendulum can swing too far in the opposite direction. An excessive emphasis upon the formalism of “The Bells” risks upholding the misconception that Poe “rarely” commented upon “political events of his time” (McGann 2014, 169, 146). Poe remained in truth an active participant in the political discourses of his day, be they British or American. Try as he did to rise above the proverbial fray, Poe kept one foot firmly set in the *agon*; like Hawthorne, he occasionally sought “the political capital” of an “avowedly apolitical, artistic position” (Davis 2005, 93). Ernest Marchand effectively demonstrates how Poe’s anti-politics was, in fact, a political choice with real-world consequences.¹⁷ Although readers will do well to recognize how “The Bells” was forged from the furnace of nineteenth-century aesthetico-ethical ideals, they should also keep in mind the layers of political meaning-making that accompany analyses of the poem, then as well as now. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, whereas various authoritarian-leaning

¹⁷ Marchand contends that, in an age defined by social planning, “Poe had little faith in social reform” (Marchand 1993, 30). More important still, Poe often shared the sentiments of “the propertied classes”—his imagined inheritance as a tenuous member of the Southern aristocracy—in his outspoken “scorn for Democracy” (39).

individuals turn politics into art, a more emancipatory perspective turns art into politics. Readers can—indeed, I would posit, must—reclaim a political Poe.

In closing, I urge Poe's readers to attend in greater detail to the political underpinnings of one of his best-known poems. Whenever Poe recycled bell imagery, he was dependably advancing a critique of petty despots, their zealous ringing of bells to command the masses below, and the blind obedience of a cacophonous mob. "The Bells" offers both political and formal satire, as the poem demands absurd repetition from its audience. It forces a literal reenactment of the droning mimicry of populist sloganeering as it re-enforces Poe's critique of a mindless, obedient populace, one conditioned by democracy to align itself thanks to the sorts of noxious repetitions that typically galvanize a mob. Poe's reader must occupy, simultaneously, the unenviable role of the haranguing despot standing atop his soapbox, reciting mindless drivel with a heightened sense of self-seriousness, as well as the pitiful role of hapless citizen, compelled to parrot the nonsensical ravings of a charlatan. I would again point to evidence for this reading in Poe's biographical connection to the revolutionary bell-ringing of Philadelphia; in stories like "The Devil in the Belfry," a pointed satire of president Martin Van Buren, Poe revealed a proclivity for this type of gesture. Moreover, Poe was well-aware of Dickens's *The Chimes* and, as an active consumer of British political discourse, he would have understood well the broader political implications of that text. While it has become relatively common for readers to interpret *The Chimes* as well as "The Bells" as apolitical—especially in their refusal to look to politicians for answers—these interpretations are, themselves, hardly apolitical. At best, these readings maintain a blind spot when it comes to politics (see, once more, the widely-embraced interpretation of "The Bells" as Platonic sound poetry); at worst, to interpret "The Bells" as apolitical risks ignoring the anti-democratic impulse in so much of Poe's work, since aspiring to bypass mediation and elevate oneself above the masses as an elite listener always-already indicates a degree of willingness to pivot away from democracy toward something else—say, a patrician elite looking down upon the so-called rabble, the members of which remain woefully deaf to the grand sounds of enlightenment thought. It was no accident that one of Poe's contemporaries once deemed him "Dictator Poe, of Scribbler's Row" (qtd. in Moss 1970, 13). In short, Poe's "The Bells" extends the poet's not infrequent commentary upon the deficiencies of American democracy. This added layer of meaning should render Poe's poem all the more tantalizing to contemporary audiences.

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**The Imagination of Deterioration:
Human Exceptionalism, Climate Change, and the Weird Eco-Horror of
David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future***

M. Keith Booker

To an extent, David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022) represents a rousing return to the body horror with which its director exploded onto the independent-film scene in the 1970s and 1980s. In this case, though, the film updates Cronenberg's earlier concerns via an especially strong focus on the impact of environmental deterioration on human beings and human society, placing the film in the realm of eco-horror as well. The action of the film occurs in a decaying near-future world in which climate change and other worsening conditions have led not only to a general decline in the quality of life (both material and emotional) but also to strange (and sometimes macabre) mutations in the human body itself. The strangeness of these climate-related mutations places *Crimes of the Future* in the realm of ecological horror, and especially of the recent turn toward the "weird" in eco-horror. Nature seems to have been almost obliterated in this future world, but these weird mutations, beyond the control of any of the human forces in the film, challenge the notion that humans stand apart from a nature that they can easily understand, dominate, and control. These mutations also contribute to a growing sense in the future world of the film that things are getting out of hand and that there is no identifiable fix for the general deterioration of conditions, a sense that resonates with widespread attitudes in the world of the early 2020s.

Climate Change, Evolution, and the Myth of Human Exceptionalism

Although Cronenberg's film gives us very few details regarding the social and political organization of the society in which *Crimes of the Future*'s action takes place, it is clear that that conditions are rather grimly dystopian, a fact that is largely conveyed through the depiction of decaying material conditions in this future world, where virtually everything seems seedy and rundown, in a state of total decay. There also suggestions of nefarious workings of official power in

this world, especially via the activities of the rather sinister New Vice Unit, primarily represented in the film by Detective Cope (Welket Bungué). However, what is “new” about the “vice” that this organization is meant to combat is that it is less about the conventional violation of officially accepted codes of conduct and more about a revolt of nature against the human systems and conduct that have done so much damage to the natural world during the period of the Anthropocene.

Importantly, this revolt includes even human biology. The film’s central character, Saul Tenser (Viggo Mortensen), is suffering from an increasingly common condition known as “Accelerated Evolution Syndrome,” in which individuals experience a variety of unexplained mutations, leading to biological changes in individuals that might otherwise take place over many generations of evolution¹. In particular, Tenser has started growing new internal organs, which his partner Caprice (Léa Seydoux), a former trauma surgeon, then surgically removes before spectators as a form of performance art. Individuals with conditions such as Tenser’s are clearly believed to be a threat to the status quo, though it is also the case that Tenser is working as an undercover agent for the New Vice Unit, which is seeking to suppress these new forms of mutation, beginning with the work of their subsidiary, the supposedly top-secret “National Organ Registry,” which has been charged with tracking the epidemic of mutations such as Tenser’s. This registry is staffed by the investigators Wippet (Don McKellar) and Timlin (Kristen Stewart), who serve as important characters officially charged with attempting to squelch, or at least administer, the phenomenon of accelerated evolution.

The film also features underground resistance forces—led by Lang Dotrice (Scott Speedman)—that embrace accelerated evolution and even hope to further it through surgical modifications that give them the ability to digest plastics and other pollutants—and thus to help cope with the environmental contamination that is perhaps the single most important defining characteristic of this future world. However, far from serving as advocates for the natural environment, Dotrice and the rebels of the film are proponents of thorough modernization. Thus, Dotrice declares their commitment to the notion that it is time for “human evolution to sync up with human technology,” envisioning a human future “at peace and harmony with the techno world that we’ve created.”

¹ Evolution doesn’t really occur during the lifetimes of individuals, of course, but *Crimes of the Future* is not the sort of film that is concerned with scientific accuracy. It is essentially a satire and is willing to stretch the science in order to make satirical points.

One might compare here the “New Humans” of Paolo Bacigalupi’s award-winning 2009 novel *The Windup Girl*. These genetically-engineered humans have been designed to serve various human needs and function virtually as slaves, though they are identified in the text as a possible key to a better future in which the challenges posed by climate change and resource depletion have been overcome, because they can also be designed to function better than conventional humans in the new climate-changed world. Thus, unlike the mutations of *Crimes of the Future*, the possible changes in the human race envisioned in this novel are intentional and controlled, adding stronger energies to the text, though it is not entirely clear how these changes would benefit the natural world.²

The natural world in *Crimes of the Future* doesn’t just lack advocates: it has been virtually obliterated, leaving only a completely manmade world of the kind Fredric Jameson has associated with postmodernism and late capitalism, when “modernization triumphs and wipes the old completely out: nature is abolished along with the traditional countryside and traditional agriculture” (Jameson 1991, 311). However, whereas Jameson envisions a completely modernized post-natural world of superficial “glittering simulacra” that cover up a rotten capitalist core (recalling the “society of the spectacle” of Guy Debord), *Crimes* is set in a post-postmodern world in which modernity, its emergence having been completed, is now in a state of decay, the rot of this core moving outward, reminding us that the “abolition” of nature is likely to have dire ultimate consequences. Thus, rather than the dazzling (but deceptive and alienating) consumerist spectacles discussed by Debord, this society is reduced to the degraded spectacles of public surgery as performed by Tenser and Caprice (and others).

One sign in the film of the separation between humans and nature is the fact that there are absolutely no nonhuman animals in the film. In such a decaying urban environment, one might expect to find scurrying rats or cockroaches, but there are none. In the few exterior scenes, there are not even birds. No one has pets, as far as we can see. The film does not stipulate that nonhuman animals have literally been obliterated in this future world, but this lack of animals can be taken as a sign of the separation between humans and nature in the world of this film, a separation of the kind that any number of environmentalist scholars have seen as a major reason that humans have done so much damage to the climate and the rest of the natural world. In particular,

² For a detailed discussion of the relationship between these New Humans and climate change in *The Windup Girl*, see Booker (2023b).

Donna Haraway (2016) has emphasized an aspect of this phenomenon that involves the human lack of a sense of kinship with other animal species. The absence of nonhuman animal life in *Crimes of the Future* can be taken as an indication of this lack.

Instead of animals, what we do see in the film are lots of examples of technological devices whose parts look like weirdly distorted parts of the bodies of animals, as if to signify the complete colonization of the world of animals and nature by humans and their technology. This sort of transgression of the boundary between the biological and the technological has something of a Gothic feel (and has occurred frequently in the films of Cronenberg). But the clear environmental emphasis of *Crimes of the Future* places this transgression in this particular film within the specific context of environmentally conscious writing, as in Rune Graulund's description of the "Southern Reach" trilogy of Jeff VanderMeer as exemplifying "a general trend in environmental humanities responding to the conceptual and concrete problems of the Anthropocene with a recognition of the necessity to shed former supposed boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, individual and environment" (Graulund 2022, 60).

VanderMeer's work, of course, has generally been associated with the burgeoning genre of "weird" fiction, a speculative genre that has built on the earlier work of writers such as H. P. Lovecraft in such distinctive waves to have attracted the label "New Weird" from critics. In his introduction to the anthology that solidified the notion of the New Weird as a genuine literary phenomenon, VanderMeer himself suggests that the New Weird can be defined as

a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy. New Weird has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects. (VanderMeer 2008, xvi)

This description clearly applies to *Crimes of the Future* quite well, even though the designation "New Weird" was originally associated mostly with literature, and especially the novels of writers such as VanderMeer, M. John Harrison, and China Miéville.

In point of fact, though, the success of the New Weird in fiction has helped to fuel a recent surge of weirdness in film and television, as well. For Roger Luckhurst, works of the weird are tied together by an ability to disorient their audiences, partly through combining the energies of science fiction, horror, and fantasy in a single work. Noting that the recent surge in the weird includes works of film and television, as well as fiction, he points out that filmmakers such as Yorgos Lanthimos and Athina Rachel Tsangari have particularly been associated with a “Weird Wave” in Greek film, while weirdness has become prominent even in popular television series, such as *Stranger Things* (2016) and the first season of *True Detective* (2014) (Luckhurst 2017, 1041–42; forthcoming). Discussing this Greek Weird Wave in film, incidentally, Wilson Holzhäuser lists Cronenberg, along with David Lynch, Leos Carax, Todd Solondz, and Lars Von Trier, as directors who have long been considered “weird” because of the unsettling nature of their films, while acknowledging that Lanthimos and Tsangari have taken weirdness in some exciting new directions. It might also be worth noting that one of the most striking weird films of recent years is *Infinity Pool* (2023), directed by Cronenberg’s son Brandon Cronenberg.

Weird fiction has often focused on environmental themes, where its popularity as a form reflects the “weird reality” of the changing climate of our contemporary world (Weinstock 2022, 15). Indeed, as first popularized in a 2010 *New York Times* Column by Thomas Freidman, the term “global weirding” has sometimes been used as a substitute for the once-popular term “global warming.”³ A key aspect of this (often Gothic) weirdness is the recognition that “anthropocentric beliefs in endless progress and the rightful dominance of the human species” need to be re-examined (Graulund 2022, 45). Weird fiction thus serves to undermine the centuries of rationalist attitudes that have convinced modern humans that knowledge of the natural world gives them the ability to dominate it⁴. Recent films such as Alex Garland’s *Annihilation* (2018, an adaptation of VanderMeer’s 2014 novel of the same title) and Ben Wheatley’s *In the Earth* (2021) take the weird into this environmentalist direction, featuring strange natural realms that humans cannot dominate with their logic and technology.⁵

³ For a collection of essays on weird fiction and global weirding, see the special issue of *Paradoxa* edited by Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman (2016).

⁴ For representative essays on eco-horror with a Gothic inclination, see the collections edited by Smith and Hughes (2013) and by Edwards, Graulund, and Höglund (2022).

⁵ For a reading of Garland’s *Annihilation* as an example of weird eco-horror, see Booker (2023a).

The virtual elimination of nature from the world of *Crimes of the Future* would appear to run contrary to this tendency in weird fiction. However, in this film nature re-emerges with a vengeance via the weird mutations that are occurring *inside* humans, thus completely deconstructing the notion that humans are the lords and masters of a natural world that is other to them. These mutations, in general, are the central driving force behind the action of the film. They are also completely out of the control of humans. In general, the mutations seem to occur at random, and even Tenser (regarded in the film by Timlin as a sort of artist of extra organ growth) admits that he has absolutely no ability to anticipate or control the emergence of his new organs, which can then be seen as nature's response to human-caused climate change, suggesting the way in which the results of climate change are so difficult to control or even predict.

Even the intentional "mutations" of Dotrice and the rebels ultimately get out of control when, in a surprising Lamarckian development, Lang's son Brecken (Sozos Sotiris) has apparently inherited the special digestive abilities that his father had attained through surgery. Brecken thus functions for the rebels as a sort of Chosen One, the Miracle Child who has the potential to change everything. When we learn that Brecken only eats "plastics and other synthetic things," the implication that the products of modern industrial technology have invaded his biology seems clear: plastics, after all, are the iconic form of a manmade material that is damaging to the environment. It is also not insignificant that synthetic plastics are made from crude oil, natural gas, and coal, the very fossil fuels that are the main drivers of climate change.

Brecken's inherited mutation (which actually involves a whole series of systemic mutations) was not an expected result of his father's surgeries. In fact, Brecken's unprecedented condition was a complete surprise to his father and the other rebels, illustrating the way in which the fundamental upheavals in this future world are not controlled (or even understood) by humans at all. Instead, they represent a turn toward the weird that has become an important current in recent eco-horror. Weirdness such as the novel mutations in *Crimes of the Future* suggests that, in fact, nature is far richer and stranger than is dreamt of in the rationalist philosophies of capitalist modernity. Indeed, Brecken's startling transformation is perhaps the weirdest turn in the entire film.

Of course, not everyone welcomes the sort of transformation represented by Brecken. Indeed, the authorities have formed the New Vice Unit because they are alarmed about mutations in general, and especially about the kind of changes being promoted by the rebels. As Detective Cope tells Tenser, "They are evolving away from the human path. It can't be allowed to continue." Meanwhile, the film begins with a shocking opening sequence in which Brecken

is ultimately murdered by his own mother, Djuna Dotrice (Lihi Kornowski), the estranged wife of Lang. When Tenser later suggests to her that he wouldn't kill his own son because he was a mutant, Djuna responds with an indication of the horror with which many in this society have responded to the rising tide of mutations, "But he wouldn't be your own son. He wouldn't even be a little kid." Asked what he *would* be, she says flatly, "A creature, a thing."

Djuna's reaction, like the work of the New Vice Unit in general, is clearly driven by a form of replacement theory, by the fear that these new humans might eventually come to replace unmutated humans. In this sense, the dystopian conditions that prevail in this society are highly reminiscent of the increasingly prominent fear among contemporary white Christian nationalist extremists that the United States (which they view as an inherently white Christian nation) is in danger of being overrun by dangerous hordes of nonwhite and nonChristian newcomers who immigrate to the United States in alarming numbers and then multiply at prodigious rates once they arrive, thus threatening to "replace" white Christians as the dominant demographic group in America.

One might here compare *Crimes of the Future* with Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), a novel that, in fact, has a great deal in common with *Crimes of the Future* in this sense, even though its satire is more specifically aimed at Christian Nationalist groups that respond to a wave of spontaneous mutations in the American population of the novel by seeking to seize control of the entire reproductive process in order to ensure that only unmutated babies, regarded as a contamination of the purity of the human race, will be delivered. Still, *Future Home* helps to illuminate *Crimes of the Future* because Erdrich makes it quite clear that the mutations occurring in her novel result from climate change and environmental degradation, something that is indicated less overtly in Cronenberg's film.

One particularly striking feature of the sudden acceleration of evolution in *Future Home of the Living God* is that it appears to function as a direct reversal of normal evolution, with humans (as well as other animal species) beginning rapidly to retrace their evolutionary paths back to primeval states. In short, Erdrich's novel directly recalls the racist notion of "degeneration," which became a huge source of popular anxiety in much of the Western world in the last years of the nineteenth century and first years of the twentieth. Fueled by widespread misunderstandings of Darwin's theory of evolution and propped up by the work of misguided thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and Max Nordau, degeneration theory was driven by fears that the white Europeans then colonizing Africa would come into contact with primitive peoples and cultures

that might somehow contaminate them and cause them (and European culture) to begin to evolve backward into a more primitive state.⁶

There is no indication that the mutations in *Crimes of the Future* involve backward evolution, but the history of degeneration theory indicates the way in which evolution and mutation have often been troubling to certain groups in society. Frequently, objections to the very notion of evolution have arisen for religious reasons because the well-established scientific fact of evolution clearly situates human beings in a relation of kinship with other animals rather than standing apart as a unique creation in the image of God. The opposition to accelerated evolution in *Crimes of the Future* does not seem to have anything to do with such religious beliefs, but it does have to do with the parallel belief that humans occupy a distinct position apart from the natural world, a belief that is threatened by the very notion that human beings can undergo biological evolution. The whole evolution motif in *Crimes*, then, has clear ecological implications because it disrupts the myth of human exceptionalism, a myth that has driven so much of the damage done to the natural environment by human activity.

The New Vice Unit is charged with attempting to gain control of the accelerated phenomenon by suppressing it, while the rebels attempt to gain control of the phenomenon by engineering it in a direction that is consistent with their ideology. But the ultimate weirdness of the mutations in *Crimes of the Future* suggests that they might not be so easy to control by either side. For example, the unanticipated mutations of the boy Brecken have escaped the control of both the New Vice Unit and the rebels, even if they would appear to work to the advantage of the rebels. As Detective Cope plainly states, having gained access to the body, “The kid was pretty weird inside.”

After Brecken is killed, Dotrice recruits Tenser and Caprice to perform a public autopsy of Brecken so that the boy’s marvelous mutations can be revealed to the world. Unfortunately, Caprice finds that the dead boy’s insides seem shockingly ugly and grotesquely contaminated, his organs heavily and bizarrely tattooed. By now an experienced performer, she then quickly improvises, continuing her narration, ending with an apparent Conradian literary allusion and attributing the weirdness of the boy’s insides to the fact that “the crudeness and the desperation and the ugliness of the world has seeped

⁶ For an excellent survey of the degeneration scare of this period, see Kershner (1986).

inside even our youngest and most beautiful. And we see that the world is killing our children from the inside out. [...] Let us create a map that will guide us into the heart of darkness.” It turns out, however, that the strange condition of Brecken’s body as discovered in the autopsy has been caused by the fact that Timlin has replaced all of the boy’s original organs with the grotesque ones that Caprice finds in the autopsy, thus undermining the rebel project to present the boy as the harbinger of a new kind of humanity.

The Imagination of Deterioration: Structures of Feeling in *Crimes of the Future*

The mysterious mutations that are taking place in the world of *Crimes of the Future* contribute to a general sense of anxiety, a general sense that humans are no longer in control of their fates or of the natural world. These mutations, in general, are small ones, causing only minor changes in human biology. Still, the fact that even human biology has become unstable certainly suggests a state of crisis, possibly announcing the beginning of a slow decline in humanity’s status as the dominant species on the planet. Human dominance, in this film, is not approaching a sudden, cataclysmic end; it is beginning a gradual, extended decline. We are approaching, not a bang, but a whimper.

This kind of slow decline is, in fact, embodied in virtually every aspect of the film. For example, any number of visuals in the film directly suggest a state of material decay. Beginning with an opening shot that contains a rusting capsized ship, we see one image after another of wreckage and dysfunction. Meanwhile, every interior space we see in the film seems depressingly dark and grimy, badly in need of cleaning and painting, as if no one even bothers to make the effort to do such things any longer. All in all, then, the atmosphere that informs this “future” would seem to be a sort of allegorized version of the present time in which the film was released, a time in which a global pandemic that had just killed millions was still far from over, while a gnawing awareness (despite mass attempts at denial) of the increasing danger posed by climate change was creeping up even on those who preferred not to think about it.

The overall anxious atmosphere of decline in the film can perhaps best be understood by an appeal to the notion of “structures of feeling,” first put forth by Raymond Williams back in the 1970s. Noting how social and political analyses are often applied in past tense to phenomena that are now complete and can be studied and understood in terms of fully-formed concepts such as “ideology,” Williams argues that, in order to study the present, we need less

formal concepts, such as structures of feeling, which describe an overall sense of the world that is still evolving. For Williams, these structures of feeling “can be defined as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available” (Williams 1977, 133–34).

Williams also suggests that structures of feeling, because they are vaguely defined and still evolving, are often first clearly stated in certain prophetic works of art. One thinks here, for example, of Susan Sontag’s (1966) well-known notion of the “imagination of disaster” to describe a general sense of impending sudden doom that resulted from the tensions of the Cold War, tensions that were widely reflected in the panoply of alien invasion and postapocalyptic narratives that dominated the science fiction films of the 1950s. In contrast, one might describe the structure of feeling of our own time as more of a vague uneasiness, as a sort of “imagination of deterioration,” informed principally by the slow violence⁷ of climate change, but recently boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic as well⁸. We are also surrounded by crumbling infrastructure and a widespread sense that crime and the economy are bad and getting worse. Meanwhile, in the U.S., we live in a time of political crisis and charlatanism, with fascism lurking in the shadows, barely even bothering to disguise itself. *Crimes of the Future* addresses this structure of feeling in its general depiction of a deteriorating future world.

For Sontag, the science fiction films of the 1950s ultimately tended to allay our fears and thus to operate “in complicity with the abhorrent,” rather than to serve as a cry of protest against the insanity of the Cold War arms race (1966, 225). The open-ended *Crimes of the Future*, on the other hand, provides very little solace or reassurance. After all, the imagination of deterioration is thoroughly informed by a sense that things are not only bad but are getting worse and will continue to do so, leaving little room to imagine improvement. Moreover, while nuclear holocaust is easy to identify as the source of Sontag’s imagination of disaster, the imagination of deterioration results more from a gloominess the vagueness of which can be attributed to the simple fact that climate change is, in reality, an extremely large and complex phenomenon, along

⁷ This widely cited term was coined by Rob Nixon (2011) to describe the slow pace (relative to things like nuclear holocaust) at which climate change is causing violent destruction around the world.

⁸ There is no mention in the film of COVID or any other infectious disease—which makes sense, given that humans in this world are now generally impervious to infection. Yet the fact that Tenser generally wears a face mask when he goes out in public serves as a clear visual cue that COVID forms part of the mood of this film.

the lines of the “hyperobjects” discussed by Timothy Morton as being so vast that we simply can’t get our heads around them, thus evading comprehensive mapping and logical analysis much in the way such analysis is evaded by the weird and the Gothic (Morton 2013).

It is useful here to recall Fredric Jameson’s widely cited comments in relation to the popularity of postapocalyptic narratives due to what he sees as the failure of utopian imagination in the postmodern era. Writing in the early 1990s, Jameson refers specifically to the apocalyptic effects of climate change when he notes that “it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism” (Jameson 1994, xii). Roughly a decade later, Jameson elaborates his point about postapocalyptic narratives by noting that, amid a general postmodern loss of the ability to think historically, contemporary culture has largely lost the ability to envision the end of capitalism and the rise of something better via any sort of normal historical process. As a result, our culture has become fascinated by visions of the destruction of civilization itself as the only way to end capitalism. As Jameson puts it (in a widely quoted, but somewhat enigmatic, declaration), “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (Jameson 2003, 76).

I would argue that the imagination of deterioration is the next stage in the decline of the historical imagination described by Jameson. In particular, *Crimes of the Future* suggests that we have now reached the stage when we can no longer even imagine the end of the world and can instead imagine only a slow, inevitable decline that continues forever, with no conclusion in sight. There is no indication that the decaying world of *Crimes of the Future* is the result of some cataclysmic event so much as the slow and steady decline of the natural environment, accompanied by a concomitant decline in public social and political structures and rise in personal pessimism. Thus, the imagination of deterioration is far more pessimistic than the imagination of disaster: the latter of these visions posits an apocalypse that might lead to rebirth and renewal; the former posits nothing but more of the same ongoing deterioration.

One of the key signs of deterioration in the world of *Crimes of the Future* is the strange state of that world’s technologies. Technology, after all, has been one of the key drivers of modernity from the Industrial Revolution onward, both in terms of dramatic improvements in quality of life and in terms of the environmental effects that drive climate change and threaten to make the earth uninhabitable. Though the title suggests that the film takes place in the future,

the world of the film certainly doesn't seem futuristic, because it lacks the gleaming future technologies that we associate with science fiction, substituting instead grotesque Cronenbergian technologies that seem to belong in a horror film. When we do see more conventional technological devices in the film, they do not seem futuristic at all, including a couple of shots of antique-looking CRT television sets. These sets serve not as a sign that the action might actually be set in our past, so much as a reminder that the future we are looking at is not the gleaming, utopian one of classic Gernsbackian science fiction. It is a future in which conditions, technological and otherwise, have severely declined, a dystopian future that recalls the retro technology of something like Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985)⁹, though with the added Cronenbergian touch that much of the technology looks so biological. The message seems to be clear: we cannot count on technology alone to save us. Technology, in fact, might be a big part of the problem.

Films, of course, have been warning us of the dangers of encroaching technology for a long time. One thinks, for example, of Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and its iconic image of the poor Tramp being fed through the gears of a factory machine like film through a projector. Indeed, it is significant that one of the key devices that warn of the dehumanizing potential of technology in *Modern Times* is the "Billows Feeding Machine," a device that is designed automatically to feed workers while they stay at work on the line, thus eliminating the need for lunch breaks. This machine thus represents the ultimate in the use of technology to exploit workers. Predictably, it goes berserk, pummeling the Tramp and leaving him covered with food. The automatic feeding chairs in *Crimes of the Future* don't work much better, adding an additional note of horror through their skeleton-like appearance and through their even more invasive activity, which includes manipulating the entire body during the feeding process, supposedly to optimize digestion, given that digestion is another of the natural things that doesn't seem to be functioning well in this decaying world.

These chairs remind us that most of the technological devices that we see in *Crimes of the Future* look back to Cronenberg's earliest body horror films, though their strange hybrid appearance, seemingly combining technology and biology, is perhaps most directly reminiscent of the devices in *eXistenZ* (1999), which strongly infuses its body horror with science fiction. In *Crimes of the Future*, though, this combination, more than in Cronenberg's earliest films, points to

⁹ And, of course, the retro technologies of *Brazil* clearly riff on the generally depressed conditions that prevail in Oceania in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

the way technology has corrupted nature, which is one of the film's clearest signs that we are looking at a film in which human technological development has invaded and infected the natural world so thoroughly that they can no longer be separated. Meanwhile, this process comes at a cost to humans, who have also been infected by technology, even if they can no longer be infected by microbes. The message is clear: we cannot change the natural world with technology without also suffering repercussions that change humans because humans cannot be separated from nature.

The imagination of deterioration in *Crimes of the Future* reflects the fact that climate change is impacting human psychology, as well as biology. One of the key consequences of late capitalist society that Jameson sees reflected in postmodern art is what he calls the "waning of affect," a general decline in the ability to experience genuinely deep emotional connections that, for Jameson is related to the psychic fragmentation of postmodern subjects, leaving them too unstable to be able to feel and experience things as deeply as people once did. In *Crimes of the Future*, the most obvious allegorical indicator of this sort of waning of affect—which makes the Imagination of Deterioration more a structure of *unfeeling* than a structure of feeling—is the general loss of the ability to experience pain, which stands in as a sort of physical objective correlative for the inability to experience deep emotion. Individuals in the society are literally numb. But the imagination of deterioration that pervades this film also involves a deterioration of feeling in an emotional and psychological sense. One of the major consequences of the imagination of deterioration is the grim acceptance that conditions are getting worse and worse and that nothing much can be done about it. Meanwhile, much of the film involves attempts by individuals to somehow feel *something*, somewhat in the mode of the characters in Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), who inflict horrendous injuries on themselves in automobile accidents as a way to try to connect with genuine feeling. In both *Crimes of the Future* and *Crash*, meanwhile, the quest to overcome numbness carries a powerful erotic energy, though eroticism in *Crimes* has also deteriorated, to the point that no one in the film ever actually has sex, despite the fact that so many things are sexually charged. Indeed, there are suggestions in the film that the conventionally erotic, along with so many other emotionally charged categories, has now deteriorated into obsolescence.

After Caprice finishes a show in which she makes a spectacle of Tenser's inner organs, the audience gathers for a reception with the artists. Timlin, who seems painfully shy, possibly autistic, approaches the recovering Tenser and says, in the weird robotic whisper-speak that Stewart employs throughout the film, "Surgery is sex, isn't it? You know it is. Surgery is the new sex." She is

clearly aroused, in her own affect-less way. She tells Tenser, in fact, that, when she was watching Caprice cutting into him, she wanted him to be cutting into her. “Art triumphs once again,” Tenser tells Caprice after Timlin leaves, suggesting the way in which representations that *suggest* sex have now replaced sex itself.

In a key later scene, the obviously starstruck Timlin corners Tenser in her office and explains that her work with the registry exposes her to a great deal of spectacle: “It’s, in our line of work, very easy to be dazzled by the glamour of the performance world, the charismatic people we meet, like you.” She tells him that he is the center of the world of the registry, that what he creates lights up her world. She describes Wippet and herself as “drab little bureaucratic insects,” who pale in comparison with a star like himself. The seeming reference to Kafka here is surely intentional on the part of Cronenberg, if not of Timlin, and much of this film has a Kafkaesque feel, even if it blows past Kafka in its vision of a world regimented to the point of absurdity. Then, in the film’s most straightforward attempt at a conventional sex scene, Timlin launches an awkward attempt at all-out seduction, beginning with a weird version of talking dirty, noting that Tenser’s “powerful gravitational field” is causing her to imagine “hurtling towards you, plunging into your black hole that pulls all light into it.” She keeps moving toward him as they continue to talk, while he keeps backing away, trying to change the subject. She’d love, she says, to have him inside her—or at least she says she’d love to be in that surgical module with him operating on her. Then she launches herself at him physically, inserting her fingers somewhat clumsily into his mouth as if searching for something. What she is searching for, apparently, is some kind of human connection. She withdraws her finger from his mouth and puts it in her own mouth; then, she even tries a conventional kiss, but he immediately backs off and starts loudly attempting to clear his throat, which has been trying to close up throughout the film. “I’m sorry,” he tells her. “I’m not very good at the old sex.”

And, lest we think that his lack of interest in a sexual connection with Timlin arises out of loyalty to Caprice, it should be noted that he and Caprice never have the “old sex,” either, but confine themselves to the machine-mediated new sex of surgery. In one scene, Tenser even uses their equipment to perform some minor “practice” surgery on a gloriously nude Caprice, to which she responds as if to sex. Tenser suggests that she might be in the next show, but she says, “Maybe this is just for us.” Tenser then removes his own clothing and joins her in the device, setting the control on automatic and lying with her as the machine cuts into both of them simultaneously. This is about as

close as they can come to any sort of genuine emotional connection, though there is another even more sexually explicit scene that occurs a few minutes later, after Tenser pays a call on another surgeon, Dr. Nasatir (Yorgos Pirpassopoulos). Recruiting Tenser to appear in an “Inner Beauty Pageant,” that will bring surgery to a new level of spectacle, Nasatir has installed a sort of abdominal zipper that will make it easier to access Tenser’s inner organs so that he can more easily compete in the pageant. Caprice is a bit nervous that Tenser might be moving away from her with this new installation, but he reassures her by suggesting that this zipper could never replace the sexual aspect of their interpersonal surgery. “Zippers have their own sex appeal,” she says suggestively (in a moment that takes the analogy between sex and surgery to a hilarious new level). She drops to her knees, unzips his surgical zipper, and starts to perform oral sex on the thusly opened wound. “Careful,” he says, “don’t spill.” In this moment, Tenser and Caprice do seem to establish an odd sexual connection, though its poignancy is undermined to some extent by the outrageous riff on oral sex. In any case, the moment also shows the extremes to which people in this world have to go to achieve any sort of connection, to feel anything at all.

There are, in short, few moments in *Crimes of the Future* that seem to provide respite from the imagination of deterioration. There is, however, a faint glimmer of hope in the film’s open-ended conclusion. The film ends on a note of uncertainty as Tenser decides to try eating one of the plastic/petroleum bars that the rebels have developed as a new food to nourish their modified bodies, a food that is deadly to unmodified humans. At first, Tenser reacts as if he might be dying as well. However, as the camera moves in to an extreme closeup of Tenser’s face, he opens his eyes and a hint of a smile flickers across his lips, suggesting the possibility that he himself might have somehow now evolved to be able to digest plastics. It is not clear whether this would be a good thing or a bad thing, but the imagination of deterioration is so grim that even uncertainty is an improvement.

Conclusion

While *Crimes of the Future* is, in many ways, a return to the body horror of director David Cronenberg’s early films, it updates those films through its emphasis on issues of global concern in the early twenty-first century. For example, climate change seems to be the central driving force behind the weird mutations that drive the film’s body horror, making the film a work of eco-

horror, as well. Meanwhile, the horror of this film extends beyond the body. The film constructs a grim future world in which virtually everything seems to be in a state of decay, leading to a “structure of feeling” that clearly comments on our own present moment at the beginning of the 2020s. Analogous to the “imagination of disaster” that Susan Sontag identified in relation to Cold War narratives of the 1950s, this even more pessimistic structure of feeling can be described as the “imagination of deterioration.” It is marked by a general sense that most of our social and political systems are in a state of slow, inevitable decline, though it is perhaps most centrally driven by an awareness of climate change, which thus wreaks havoc on the people of this future world both physically and emotionally. Still, while *Crimes of the Future* contains little in the way of utopian energy, it ends on a note of uncertainty that offers a slim wedge of hope.

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**“The Finest Examples of Motion Picture Art”:
Prestige, Stardom and Gender in the Critical Reception
of Silent and Early Sound Horror**

Shane Brown and Mark Jancovich

Introduction

Although research on horror often presents the genre as a disreputable one, the following essay demonstrates that a very different picture is suggested if one examines the critical reception of horror films released during silent and early sound eras. Certainly, during the 1910s, the US film industry made a bid for respectability, so that it could appeal to affluent, middle class audiences; and those aspects of horror that were understood as lower class, melodramatic entertainment were a problem for this bid. However, by no means were all horror materials seen as a problem and, by the 1920s, the genre was primarily understood as “artistic” and one that demonstrated the potential of the new medium of cinema. Consequently, as we will demonstrate, the horror film not only attracted top directors and stars but was also associated with female audiences, audiences that were crucial to Hollywood’s bid for cultural respectability.

The tendency to associate the horror film with disreputable and even low-budget productions is rooted in particular trends in film scholarship; and it is crucial to Robin Wood’s (1986) influential account of the genre, in which he claims that the genre’s disreputability “sets it apart from other genres: it is restricted to aficionados and complemented by total rejection, people tending to go to horror films either obsessively or not at all” (77). This claim is also linked to his presentation of the genre as a low-budget one that exists outside of Hollywood norms (or at least marginal to them) so that it is also “the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive” (Wood 1986, 84).

Elsewhere, Barbara Klinger has discussed the idea of the “progressive” text in film studies, and the ways in which this idea is used to differentiate certain texts from “mainstream” Hollywood cinema in aesthetic or ideological terms, and so bestow a sense of distinction upon them (Klinger 1984). Similarly, Mark Jancovich (2002) and Greg Taylor (1999) have (in different ways) demonstrated the importance of “cult” readings to the development of film criticism, a strategy that also privileges some texts

at the expense of others. Furthermore, Klinger, Jancovich and Taylor show not just how this operates in relation to specific films, but also that it privileges specific sections of the film industry, so that distinction is conferred upon low-budget films, and upon specific genres (such as western, horror, and film noir), which have been claimed to exist outside of, or marginal to, Hollywood norms. For example, not only did Andrew Sarris identify himself as a “cultist,” but he argued that “The so-called ‘big’ pictures were particularly vulnerable to front-office interference, and that is why the relatively conventional genres offer such a high percentage of sleepers” (Sarris 1976, 247). In this way, the film critic not only acquires a distinction that marks them off from common viewers—they can identify the hidden gems in the mass of Hollywood product—but this distinction gives them a purpose: they become the arbiters of cultural value.

Consequently, while Wood’s work on horror is hardly current, his association between horror on the one hand, and low budget and/or disreputable cinemas on the other, is constantly recycled today. This is partly due to his huge influence on academic studies of the horror film, but it is also because of the dynamics of film studies as a practice; and the persistence of this idea can be seen recently in relation to David Church’s writings on “post-horror” (Church 2021). Here, Church challenges the association between horror and the low budget and/or disreputable, and explores recent forms of cinematic horror that are explicitly presented as “elevated” above the genre more generally. However, he simultaneously illustrates the persistence of this association: if recent promotion and/or criticism presents some contemporary horror films as distinguished or “evaluated,” this presentation draws on (and reproduces) the assumption that horror is commonly associated with the low budget and the disreputable.

Of course, we acknowledge that, even before “post-horror,” some horror films have been seen as “elevated” examples of cinema. Various films (such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1920] and *The Shining* [1980]) have been distinguished from both the low budget and the disreputable. But these films are usually presented as exceptional cases and usually isolated from the genre in general. To put it another way, if various individual films have been given an “elevated” status, there is still too little analysis of how *the genre* has been understood and evaluated in the past.

This essay therefore builds on work done elsewhere on both the 1940s and the 1960s, where we have shown that the horror film has long been associated with high-budget productions that were targeted at mainstream audiences, and these films were often the most influential horror productions, at least in terms of industrial trends (See Jancovich 2017a and 2017b). Our point here is that the same is true in the silent and early sound period. Films such as *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931) were hardly low-

budget productions, and they were hardly disreputable either. Both were adaptations of major theatrical hits, and both featured name directors (Tod Browning and James Whale) and respected actors from the theatre (Colin Clive, Bela Lugosi and Edward Van Sloan). Furthermore, they did not initiate a cycle of 1930s horror films, as is usually claimed. On the contrary, as Jancovich (2021) has demonstrated, they emerged from a cycle of horror films that started in the 1920s, even if they sent that cycle in some new directions.

One objection to our arguments about the status of silent and sound cinema might be that, as some critics claim, the films of this period were not horror films and that the horror genre did not exist before 1931 (See, for example, Benshoff 2014; Hutchings 2004; Phillips 2018; Rhodes 2018a).¹ However, as Jancovich and Shane Brown (2022) demonstrate, the films of this period were clearly understood in terms of genre at the time, and the genre with which they were associated was clearly referred to as “horror,” a genre that was associated with a series of familiar plots and features, such as settings, props, and so forth (Jancovich and Brown 2022). Certainly, the term most commonly used to describe this generic “type” was not “horror” and, for various reasons, these films were more often discussed in terms of “mystery,” a term that did not distinguish “horror” from “detective stories.”² On the contrary, the terms “horror” and “detective stories” were used interchangeably so that, on *Frankenstein’s* original release, *Variety* assumed that the “audience for this type of film is probably the detective story readers” (Rush 1931c). Both horror and detective stories were understood as featuring an investigation into seemingly inexplicable mysteries, mysteries that were associated with the strange, eerie and uncanny.

Some might also object that we are working with a definition of the genre that is too broad and that some of the films that we discuss are not actually horror films at all (even if the term existed). However, it is crucial to our method that we not start without an attempt to define the genre at all. On the contrary, our approach acknowledges that genres are understood in

¹ For a different view of the period, see Spadoni 2007. Tom Gunning also offers an interesting intervention on horror in the silent period, although his focus is on responses to cinema in the 1890s, where it was viewed as an uncanny medium (Gunning 1995). The problem, for our purposes, is that we found very little evidence that the cinematic medium was seen in this way by the 1920s, and his account is largely a theoretical one that does not discuss specific films from the period or how they were generically understood at the time. Finally, Gunning’s article calls for a medium-specific definition of genre, a strategy to which we have various objections. Most centrally, it largely ignores the fact that many of the horror films of the silent and early sound period were adaptations of theatrical hits (or imitations of theatrical hits) that sought to enhance the reputation of cinema through its association with the theatre. Even the German Expressionist classics were (as Thomas Elsaesser notes) imitations of art in other media: again, the film industry imitated these other media in the hope of acquiring cultural caché through an association with them (see Elsaesser 2000).

² See also Rhodes 2018b.

different ways in different historical periods and, rather than limit our study to the examination of films that fit generic definitions developed in later periods, our analysis of the silent and early sound period focuses on those films that were identified as (or associated with) the horror genre by critics at the time.

When the genre is approached in this way, it becomes clear that the films associated with horror were hardly understood as being disreputable productions, but were often associated with high culture (and not just through their status as adaptations). Again, in this period, horror was often understood as an *artistic* genre that not only enabled the stylistic experimentation essential to the new medium of cinema but, in the process, the genre was also used to sell the cinema to affluent, middle class audiences. Not only were many of the “artistic” films from Europe associated with horror, but reviewers saw foreign directors such as Paul Leni, and even “home-grown” actors such as Lon Chaney, as key exponents in their cinematic professions.

The industry’s pursuit of respectability also meant that female, rather than male, viewers were seen as the crucial audience.³ As Douglas Gomery has pointed out, exhibitors recognised that they could make more money from affluent, middle class consumers than those from the poorer classes. These audiences had more disposable income and could pay more for a prestige product; and so these audiences also offered exhibitors a larger profit margin. However, the middle classes were not imagined as a collection of individuals but as “the ideal family trade,” and, to attract these families, exhibitors focused on “the ‘New American Woman’ and her children.” By attracting middle class women and children, exhibitors acquired “a stamp of respectability that could (and did) lead to more money and a favourable image in the community” (Gomery 1992, 31). Furthermore, when it came to the consumption of cultural goods, women were understood as being the key decision makers in the middle class home—they decided what cultural products should (and should not) be consumed by the family—so that the targeting of middle class women was understood as a way of targeting the family as a whole.

To explore the status that horror films enjoyed during the silent and early sound period, the following article analyses reviews, but these reviews are not only a tool for studying perceptions of respectability, they are also a

³ For some time, as Wood illustrates, male scholars often promoted a masculine version of the horror film, so that, even when feminist scholars began to examine the genre in the 1980s and 1990s, their arguments often reproduced the idea that horror is a masculine genre (see for example, Creed 1993; Doane 1987; Williams 1984; and even Clover 1993). Since then various accounts have taken issue with this characterization of the genre (see for example, Berenstein 1996; Cherry 1999; Snelson 2015). However, the idea of horror as a masculine genre is still recycled today (see, for example, Faramond 2020).

sign of respectability. To put it another way, reviews did not really appear, even in the trade press, until 1907, when *Moving Picture World* started production (*Variety* began to publish film reviews soon after in 1908). Moreover, reviews in the mainstream press did not start until much later. For example, the *New York Times* would become one of the most respected and influential publications in terms of film reviews (Klinger 1994), but it did not start reviewing films until 1913, and it only reviewed films on a regular basis from the late 1910s.

Accordingly, the main focus of this essay will be on the 1920s and early 1930s, when film had reached a sufficient level of respectability for reviews to be prevalent; and it will *focus* on two publications. Given its status, the *New York Times* is a good indicator of cultural respectability, while *Variety* gives a strong sense of how the industry understood these materials and their audiences. The point here is not to suggest that all publications or audiences read texts in the same way or made the same judgements about them—which they clearly didn’t—but rather that, as Barbara Klinger puts it, film reviews can be read as “types of social discourse which ... can aid the researcher in ascertaining the material conditions informing the relation between film and spectator at given moments” (1994, 69).⁴ Furthermore, specific cultural judgements are always negotiated: they are asserted in anticipation of other evaluations and so reveal how the reviewer imagines the structure of oppositions between cultural judgements. Each reviewer is clearly aware of estimations of cultural value that they consider to be “beneath” them, and others that they consider to be “above” them—too joyless, pretentious or condescending. Consequently, specific judgements of cultural value give a clue to the shape of the broader cultural field within which they are made.

⁴ Elsewhere, Donald Crafton has taken issue with reception studies on the grounds that it does not tell us “about who was watching” a specific film and that reviewers are not “representative of other viewers” (Crafton 1996, 460). In response, we would stress that neither Klinger nor ourselves use reviews to determine the composition of the audience, nor are we taking the “interpretations of a few [reviewers as] the index of the film’s general reception” (460). First, we are not primarily concerned with the reception of *individual* films but rather with identifying larger patterns of reception within specific historical periods. Second, we dispute that there is ever a “general reception”: most reception studies start out from the *differences* in reception and seek to understand the *meanings* of those differences, i.e. the complex causes and effects of those differences. But this also means that, while there is no “general reception,” reception is not simply “uniquely determined by personal opinions and idiosyncratic concerns” as Crafton claims (1996, 461). Instead, as Klinger puts it, reception studies is concerned with “the material conditions informing the relation between film and spectator at given moments” (1994, 69). Finally, we would note that when Crafton actually engages with press coverage, he does not even examine reviews. Instead, he takes issue with press accounts of *The Jazz Singer* that were written several years after its initial 1927 release and which misrepresent its original reception. Certainly, this study demonstrates that these sources do not give an accurate account of the film’s reception, but this does not invalidate the method of studying reception that we have undertaken.

While we focus on the *New York Times* and *Variety*, we analyse these publications in the context of others from the period, particularly *Exhibitors Herald*, *Film Daily*, *Harrison's Reports*, *Motion Picture News*, *Moving Pictures World*, *Photoplay*, *Picturegoer*, and *Picture-Play*. However, some sense of focus is necessary: no account can be fully comprehensive and, even if it could, our interest is not simply in detailing the *fact* of differences in interpretation (or evaluation) but of examining “the meanings of difference” (Ang 1989, 107). For example, while many reviews valued the genre highly, these judgements were often presented as reactions against those of other groups, who viewed the genre as a problem in need of censorship. There were even reviewers who sided with those campaigning for censorship, although (as we will see) these reviewers clearly presented themselves as dissenting voices who challenged the general trend among reviewers.

To this end, the essay will be divided into three sections. The first examines the high regard with which individual horror films were judged, but also demonstrates that the genre as a whole enjoyed considerable cultural status. The second section then explores these issues further, through an account of the top stars (or would-be stars) who were attached to the genre in order to develop their careers in positive ways. The third and final section focuses more closely on the genre's relationship to female audiences, particularly in relation to the new codes of sexual behaviour in the period and to the pleasures and the dangers that were supposed to be associated with these new codes.

“The Finest Exemplifications of Screen Artistry”: Horror, Art and Cultural Status

While some silent horror films were clearly seen as disreputable, many were actually high profile productions associated with the prestige of both literature and the theatre. Many even made it into the *New York Times*' annual roundup of the top films, with its list of “Best Films of 1920” featuring “that gruesome work ‘Behind the Door’” (1920), and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1920), in which John Barrymore was claimed to have given “one of the finest performances of the year” (Anon. 1921a, 4). The following year, both *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) and *The Golem* (1920) were identified as being among the top fifteen “most important photoplays” (Anon. 1922a, 2), while in 1922, a much longer list was provided that included *Jane Eyre* (1922) and *The Phantom Carriage* (which was known in the US at the time as *The Stroke of Midnight*, 1921) (Anon. 1922c, 3). The top films of 1923 were supposed to include *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *Trilby* (1923) (Anon. 1923d, 4); while the “ten outstanding pictures” of 1924 included *He Who Gets Slapped*

(1924), which was explicitly declared to be a “masterpiece” (Hall 1925a, 5). In 1925, the list changed to include the best films of the previous *two* years and featured both *He Who Gets Slapped* and *The Unholy Three* (1925), while both F. W. Murnau and Browning were identified in a list of top directors (Hall 1926a, 5). By 1926, however, these numbers fell significantly and the genre seems to have subtly changed in status. If horror was still associated with prestige productions in the late 1920s, there was also a huge increase in production so that horror no longer enjoyed the rarity and distinction of the early 1920s. Nonetheless, although neither Murnau’s *Faust* (1926) nor Victor Sjöström’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1926) were straight-forwardly horror films, both were given special mention in 1926 (Hall 1927a, 7) and, in the following year, both *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) and *Metropolis* (1927) achieved the same distinction (Hall 1928a, 6). *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) also got special mention in 1928, when both Murnau and Leni were identified as key directors (Hall 1929, 4).

The film reviews also indicate the high regard with which critics viewed both specific films and the genre as a whole, whether or not those films made it into the top films of their year. For example, *Behind the Door* was said to be “decidedly one of the best made pictures produced since before the beginning of the war” (Anon. 1920a, 15), and while some reviewers objected to aspects of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, it was still regarded as “high up there among screen accomplishments” (Anon. 1920b, 18). *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, however, was a completely different case: “Few motion pictures have excited more interest, advance or accompanying, than the latest German production to reach this country,” and its central importance was due to its visual style in which “space had been ‘given a voice,’ and had ‘become a presence’” (Anon. 1921b, 2). *The Golem* was also praised as one in which its director, Paul Wegener, “has shown his greatest artistry” and in which the film’s “power is derived mainly from a combination of exceptional acting and the most expressive settings yet seen in this country” (Anon. 1921c, 17). *The Phantom Carriage* was also praised, and its makers were clearly distinguished from “ninety-nine out of a hundred producing companies you can think of” given that they were claimed to have demonstrated an “imagination” that was in stark contrast to the “literal-mindedness” of many other filmmakers (Anon. 1922b, 16).

American horror productions also received praise. For example, *Trilby* was claimed to be “far ahead of most productions presented on Broadway” (Anon. 1923d, 4), while *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was noted to have “attracted unusual interest” and to be distinguished by Chaney, who “hopes that his performance” will not just be outstanding but “a contribution to the art of the motion pictures” (Anon. 1923c, 2). The sets were also highly regarded and the overall judgement was that *Hunchback* was

a film that “will appeal to all those who are interested in fine screen acting, artistic settings and a remarkable handling of crowds who don’t mind a grotesque figure and a grim atmosphere” (Anon. 1923e, 9). As we have seen, *He Who Gets Slapped* was claimed to be a “masterpiece”, while *The Unholy Three* was described as “a startlingly original achievement that takes its place with the very best productions that have been made. It is encouraging to witness something so different from the usual run of films” (Hall 1925b, 14). *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) received fewer plaudits but it was still “an ambitious production in which there is much to marvel at in the scenic effects” (Hall 1925c, 15). Reviewers also celebrated Chaney’s performance in the film, while his acting in *The Blackbird* (1926) was even described as “one of the finest exemplifications of screen artistry one would hope to behold” (Hall 1926b, 16). Finally, *The Magician* (1926) was praised for Rex Ingram’s “excellent work” as its director, and its villain was commended for his similarity to figures such as “Svengali and that other shadow character, Dr. Caligari” (Hall 1926c, 15).

As we have seen, *Faust* was considered to be a film of special significance, which not only featured a “masterful performance” by Emil Jannings but was “as far removed from the ordinary movie as a Tintoretto painting” (Hall 1926f, 21). Like *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Metropolis* provoked ambivalent responses: while the *New York Times* declared that it “stands alone, in some respects, as a remarkable technical achievement,” it was also claimed to be a “technical marvel” that was “as soulless as the manufactured women of its story” (Hall 1927b, 16). In contrast, *The Cat and the Canary* may not have made the end of year list but it was praised as one of “the finest examples of motion picture art” (Hall 1927c, 9). If *The Phantom* and *Metropolis* were technical marvels that were undermined by their baser materials, *The Cat and the Canary* was, conversely, “the first time that a mystery melodrama had been lifted into the realms of art” (Hall 1927c, 9). This was then followed by Leni’s next film, *The Chinese Parrot* (1927), which was claimed to be “a worthy successor” and demonstrated that the director was “a master of camera technique” (Anon. 1928, 28). *Dracula* didn’t quite get this level of praise but it could “at least boast of being the best of many mystery films” (Hall 1931a, 21), although even *Dracula* seemed “tame” beside *Frankenstein*, which was “the most effective thing of its kind” and more than a technical success, or a crowd pleaser. On the contrary, it was an “artistically conceived work,” regardless of “what one may say about the melodramatic ideas here” (Hall 1931b, 21).

While these reviews clearly distinguished their own judgements from those of the industry, and of the paying public, the horror films they cover were not low-budget efforts discovered by the discerning critic. On the contrary, as should be clear, these films attracted top directors, and not

simply as a stepping stone to more prestigious productions.⁵ Certainly, some merely made specific contributions but then moved on once they had established their status as directors. For example, Sjöström made his name in the US with *The Phantom Carriage* but moved to productions which were less explicitly identified as horror—*Tower of Lies* (1925), *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Wind* (1928)—although even as late as *The Scarlet Letter*, critics noted its association with horror and observed that its villain displayed “a beard and expression mindful of Svengali” (Hall^d 1926, 19). Conversely, other directors (such as Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang) continued to work within the area for the rest of their career. Leni and Benjamin Christensen were also seen as specialists in the field, and while the latter was sometimes derided as a maker of melodramatic nonsense, Leni was clearly understood as one of the key directors of the 1920s, being the director “of that memorable German subject, ‘The ‘Three Waxworks,’ and the designer of the settings for ‘Variety’” (Hall 1927c, 9). However, Leni’s status was not only due to his work at UFA, as he was also celebrated for his contribution to Hollywood. *The Cat and the Canary* was claimed to feature “scenes ... that are amazing” (Hall 1927c, 9), while *The Chinese Parrot* “once more proves that with individual treatment an only fair-to-middling story can be made into a film that is at once original and imaginative” (Anon. 1928, 28). He was also claimed to be “expert” in his “handling” of *The Man Who Laughs*, “for he revels in lights and shadows, and takes advantage of the full details” of its hideous protagonist (Hall 1928b, 12). Even *The Last Warning* (1928) featured “some finely directed passages” and sequences in which Leni “revels in some dissolves and camera angles,” although the film was seen as an inferior work given that “other scenes don’t appear to interest him nearly so much” (Anon. 1929, 36). In fact, as Christensen, Carl Dreyer, Lang, Leni, Sjöström, and Wiene all demonstrate, many of the most prestigious US imports from the European cinema during the 1920s were associated with the horror genre.

Nonetheless, the genre was not simply limited to the Europeans and many of the top Hollywood directors made contributions. Of course, Tod Browning was a key director who has long been seen as a key figure in the horror film, largely through his association with Lon Chaney (although he went on to have a strong association with the genre after Chaney’s death and made various films such as the Universal *Dracula* and a virtual remake of *London After Midnight* [1927], *Mark of the Vampire* [1935]). Roland West was another key director who was strongly associated with the genre and, in 1918, the *New York Times* ran a feature on him, where it discussed how he

⁵ See, for example, Tod Browning, Benjamin Christensen, Nick Grinde, Cecil B. De Mille, Maurice Elvey, D. W. Griffith, Alfred Hitchcock, Rex Ingram, Henry King, Fritz Lang, Rowland V. Lee, Paul Leni, Rouben Mamoulian, F. W. Murnau, Fred Niblo, Victor Sjöström, Maurice Tourneur, Roland West and James Whale.

had made his name in theatre before directing *De Luxe Annie* (1918) for Norma Talmadge. This film featured a heroine with a dual personality and was likened to *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by critics (Jancovich and Brown 2022), while the *New York Times* described it as “one of the greatest screen money makers of recent years” (Anon. 1918, 2). After this, West made other horror films such as *The Unknown Purple* (1923), Lon Chaney’s *The Monster* (1925), and the film version of the hit horror stage play, *The Bat* (1926). This play was the model for numerous other horror plays, which would in turn become the basis for films later in the 1920s.

Other top directors had a less obvious relation to horror, but their association with the genre still demonstrates the status of horror. In some cases, these projects were chosen by the director and, in others, the choice was made by the studio; but in neither case would the decision have been made if the genre had been seen as a waste of their talents or one that might threaten their reputations. Nonetheless, George Melford directed a number of horror films, such as *The Sea Wolf* (1920), *The Charlatan* (1929) and, most significantly, the Spanish language *Dracula* (1931), which Universal filmed at the same time as Tod Browning’s version of the story. Cecil B. DeMille made both *The Ghost Breaker* (1914) and *The Devil-Stone* (1917), the latter being “a drama of weird fascination” that De Mille promoted as a warning against that “world-old stumbling block of man—superstition” (“Devil Stone Pressbook” 1917, 3). Griffith made *The Avenging Conscience* (1914), *One Exciting Night* (1922) and *The Sorrows of Satan* (1926). Also, while critics were clear that *One Exciting Night* was not one of Griffith’s most prestigious efforts, they also stressed that it “is probably the best of his ‘low-brow’ pictures” (Anon. 1922e, 2). Even Rex Ingram contributed to the genre with *The Magician*, a film in which his “expert direction rather overshadows the fantastic narrative” (Hall 1926c, 15). Nor was the film read as an aberration for Ingram but simply as a project that was distinguished by his “brilliant work” (Hall 1926c, 15).

“A Marvellous Depiction of Bestiality”: Stars, Performances and Horror

Unsurprisingly, then, these films attracted many top stars and, of the four male stars of the period that Gaylyn Studlar analyses in *The Mad Masquerade* (2005), only Douglas Fairbanks seems to have no association with horror. For example, despite Studlar’s claim that Lon Chaney’s films were not “horror movies” but “straight melodramas that were classified by reviewers as ‘suspense shockers,’ ‘thrillers,’ ‘mysteries,’ or ‘mystery-melodramas’” (2005, 205), Chaney was clearly viewed as a horror star. Many of the terms

that Studlar mentions were closely associated with horror at the time, and often interchangeable with it (Jancovich and Brown 2022), and many of Chaney's key roles were in films that were explicitly identified as horror at the time. For example, *A Blind Bargain* (1922) was described as: "Another addition to the 'horror' situation so prevalent in fiction, theatre and on the screen for the past year" (Skig. 1922, 33). Similarly, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was condemned by *Variety* precisely because they argued that Universal had made a "mistake" by producing this big-budget horror film. It was therefore referred to as "a two-hour nightmare. It's murderous, hideous and repulsive" (Sime. 1923, 22). It was also described as "morbid", "gruesome" and "gory" (Sime. 1923, 22). *The Monster* was also clearly seen as a horror film about a "terrifying" mad doctor, even if *Variety* complained (on this occasion) that "Chaney does not make the crazed surgeon as terrifying a picture as he might have, and in that the film lets down to a certain extent" (Fred. 1925, 41). Finally, *The Phantom of the Opera* was another case that was clearly identified as "another horror" from Universal Pictures, which was "probably the greatest inducement to nightmares that has yet been screened" (Skig. 1925, 35). It was even doubted whether, following *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Chaney would ever be able to "erase the impression of these two makeups" and so escape an association with horror; while it believed that "Universal is evidently out to establish itself as the champ ghost story telling firm" (Skig. 1925, 35).

However, as Rick Altman has pointed out, although some films may have been explicitly identified as horror, the "naming of a genre" is actually quite rare and a sense of generic affiliation is usually conveyed through a series of associated terms (Altman 1999, 128). Horror films, for example, are often suggested through terms such as morbid, nightmarish, gruesome, gory, terrifying, eerie and weird. This strategy can be seen in other reviews of Chaney's films, such as *The Unholy Three*, which was described as "a crook melodrama" but also as one that was distinguished by an "exceptionally weird and dramatic atmosphere" (Anon. 1930b, 12). Elsewhere it was also claimed to be distinguished by its "increasing overtone of horror" (Anon. 1930a, 17). If these qualities added value to *The Unholy Three*, *Mr. Wu* (1927) was criticised (like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera*) for being "too gruesome" (Ung 1927), while *The Unknown* was seen as a disappointment *despite* being "ghastly" and "gruesome" (Sid. 1927, 20). Alternatively, *The Blackbird* was associated with horror through the claim that it had "a streak of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (Hall 1926b, 16).

Also, while Studlar argues that an association with the freak show was central to Chaney's stardom, this association also directly associated his films with horror through the grotesque and weird; and even on the rare occasion that his characters were not disfigured, they were often figures such as

clowns and magicians, who were associated with the weird and uncanny through their use of masks, illusions and disguises. Even in cases such as *While the City Sleeps* (1928), where Chaney is simply cast as a detective, the action is set in a location designed to evoke the weird, eerie and uncanny: “Mr. Younger has thought up the idea of having a number of the scenes take place in a funeral parlor and of having the crooks hide their loot in a coffin. In order to get information on the band, Mr. Chaney, this time as an indomitable sleuth, hides in one of the coffins” (Hall 1928c, 29). Similarly, *While Paris Sleeps* (1923) is described as a “weird” story that involves “a half demented manager of a wax works” (Fred. 1923, 46) and *London After Midnight* is a “murder mystery” in which Chaney’s detective solves a murder with hypnotism and illusion, which he uses to create “an atmosphere of mystery” and to suggest the presence of “unearthly characters,” such as ghosts and vampires (Mori 1927, 18). Indeed, as discussed earlier, the distinction between horror and detective fiction was not yet in operation in the 1920s; and, as the reviews above suggest, Chaney’s association with horror meant that his presence often tinged his films in particular ways, and transformed the ways in which they were read. As one article put it: “In each and every picture, the unmistakable menace of Chaney will be there—the nightmare shocks—the lurking, nameless terror that grips the heart, and makes each separate hair to stand on end” (Ussher 1927, 30).

Even John Barrymore, whom Studlar discusses as a matinee idol, repeatedly returned to horror productions throughout the period. Although he was already a star in the theatre, his breakthrough role in the cinema was in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a film that clearly worked through “the contrast between” his dual roles as “the philanthropic and high-minded physician and the fiendish ‘Mr Hyde’” (Jolo. 1920, 93). If the first role clearly conformed to his reputation as a matinee idol, the second role did not depart from his image but was clearly meant to suggest another side to it, a shadow or double of the matinee idol. As the *Variety* review put it, Hyde is “a marvellous depiction of bestiality” but, whether Barrymore is playing Jekyll or Hyde, he “is always Jack Barrymore” (Jolo. 1920, 93).

Hyde was therefore crucial to Barrymore for a various reasons. It allowed him to add complexity and ambiguity to his more “high-minded” roles while also allowing him to demonstrate his abilities as a celebrated theatrical actor. In fact, *Variety* observed that this dual role was the type of role “a star revels in” (Jolo. 1920, 93), and, at the same time that Barrymore was appearing as Jekyll and Hyde in the cinema, he was playing another role on the Broadway stage, one that was far closer to Hyde than to Jekyll—Shakespeare’s notorious villain, Richard the Third. In this play, Richard’s villainy is even written on his body and these physical deformities,

particularly his hunchback, not only echo those of Mr. Hyde but also the roles for which Chaney became famous.

Barrymore is also doubled with another hideous villain in the film version of *Sherlock Holmes* (1922), although in this case his double, Moriarty, is played by another actor. The importance of Moriarty is also carried by the title of the film, when it was released as *Moriarty*, rather than as *Sherlock Holmes*, in the United Kingdom. As has been pointed out elsewhere, the Holmes films of this period were also explicitly described as, or strongly associated with, horror (Jancovich and Brown 2022), and Barrymore followed *Sherlock Holmes* with yet another horror film with literary associations. *The Sea Beast* (1925) was an adaption of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1950) in which Barrymore is once again confronted by a double, although in this case his double is a "villainous half-brother" (Sime. 1926, 41). Here, however, it is Barrymore's Ahab who is the physically monstrous character, and most reviews see the film as revolving around a scene of torture after Ahab loses his leg to the whale: "Barrymore's expression of suffering while having a tourniquet tied to his severed limb, and more so as they applied an antiseptic blazing iron to the raw flesh, are comparable to nothing that has been seen in a moving picture. While Mr. Barrymore's entire performance here, from method to make up is worth a serious study" (Sime. 1926, 41). Barrymore even remade *The Sea Beast* in 1930, although the latter version reverted to the novel's original title, *Moby Dick*.

Then, in 1931, Barrymore made another horror film, *Svengali*, in which he appeared as another famously hideous and villainous character from literature and one that explicitly played on an idea that *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* had also suggested: that the female audience might actually be attracted by the hideous and the villainous. The film is therefore seen as depending on "the fascination of Svengali for women," even if some critics had "doubts" that "the young will go for it" (Sid. 1931, 22). Despite these doubts, Barrymore quickly followed *Svengali* with *The Mad Genius* (1931), another horror film in which he played a mesmerizing and controlling figure. Again, this was seen as a "magnificent piece of acting" but *Variety* was doubtful whether it would appeal to his core (female) audience and dismissed it as a vanity project, in which Barrymore "has a much better time" in the role "than the audience has in watching" it (Rush. 1931b, 19). Interestingly, although the role explicitly played on the monstrous but fascinating features of Svengali, its failure was clearly identified with the absence of that which was often seen as central to Chaney's monstrous characters: the primary character was claimed to be "too remote ... to engage sympathetic interest" (Rush. 1931b, 19).

The last horror-related films associated with John Barrymore are interesting due to the ways in which they return to the strategy of *Sherlock*

Holmes and contrast John Barrymore's heroic and/or romantic lead with a double that was played by another actor: in these cases, his brother, Lionel. For example, *Arsene Lupin* (1932) features John as the "glamorous Lupin," a role that actually works to his disadvantage: "although John has a monopoly on the romantic interest throughout, Lionel gets the acting punch" (Rush. 1932, 20). Similarly, in *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932), it is claimed that "John is always at a disadvantage when Lionel is on the same celluloid," given that Lionel's villains leave John "totally eclipsed" (Abel. 1932, 14). Furthermore, the horror associations are clear in the description of Lionel's performance as Rasputin, which give the character "a little of the old Svengali-Frankenstein treatment" so that the film "gives out a little Frankie-Dracula stuff" (Abel. 1932, 14).

Like his brother, Lionel also was a prestigious actor and enjoyed a long association with horror. In the cinema, he starred in *The Bells* (1926) before moving on to films like *The Thirteenth Hour* (1927), of which the *New York Times* claimed that "it seems as though Lionel Barrymore had decided to invade Lon Chaney's thrilling realms" (Hall 1927d, 18), while *Variety* noted that "he adopts a grim expression and a stoop to conform to the standard conception of an old and cagey rascal who takes any means to gain his end" (Waly. 1930b, 30). *Variety* also dismissed the film as "unadulterated melodrama" and claimed that "Barrymore probably snickers to himself over these roles," the implication being that he not only enjoyed playing this type of role but that he was frequently drawn to it, too. Elsewhere, when Lionel Barrymore directed *The Unholy Night* (1929), the title was seen as an attempt to "capitalise" on "a successful Chaney picture," *The Unholy Three* (Waly. 1929b, 33); and in *West of Zanzibar* (1928), he even appeared opposite Chaney with Barrymore playing the villain and Chaney playing his revengeful victim. Lionel Barrymore would also appear in *Mark of the Vampire*, which is often seen as a remake of Chaney's *London After Midnight*; and in *The Devil Doll* (1936), of which *Variety* observed that the big moment was "a remake by Tod Browning of the scene which highlighted his 'Unholy Three' some years ago" (Bige. 1936, 18). In this film, Barrymore masquerades as an "old lady," a performance that was claimed to be "reminiscent of Chaney's" performance in *The Unholy Three*. Again, then, this role was hardly one that Barrymore saw as being beneath him but, on the contrary, it was claimed that "the leading part is a field day" for him (Bige. 1936, 18).

As should be clear, then, it was not simply that horror films were able to gain respectability through the use of major stars but that major stars could enhance their reputations through horror. Chaney's ability to play grotesque figures was crucial to his reputation as an actor who was not only able to transform himself but virtually erase himself through performance (see, for example, Gebhart 1923) while John Barrymore's horror

performances also stressed his acting credentials rather than his reputation as a matinee idol of extreme beauty. However, the relationship between horror and beauty also worked another way so that even Rudolph Valentino was associated with the genre. As Studlar (2005) notes, his appeal was founded on his supposedly alluring but dangerous sexuality, and, as David Skal (1990) has argued, Lugosi's *Dracula* drew upon its frisson (Skal 1990, 85). It is therefore hardly surprising that, as we have seen, Universal's Spanish language *Dracula* was directed by George Melford, who was "perhaps best remembered as the director of Rudolph Valentino in *The Sheik*" (1921) (Skal 1990, 160).

Nor was it only male stars who were associated with the genre. As we have seen, the period was one in which the prestige pictures were usually associated with female audiences, given that women were seen as the key cultural decision makers in middle class families. Consequently, this period was one in which many of the top stars were female, and the status of the horror film was demonstrated by the way in which many key female stars were associated with the genre. For example, Mary Philbin was already a star when she appeared in *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Man Who Laughs*. She had previously worked with both Erich von Stroheim and D. W. Griffith, and was briefly seen as being on the same level as Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh and Mary Pickford. Alice Terry was an even bigger star when she made *The Magician*: she and her husband, Rex Ingram, were "one of the most celebrated director-actress teams of the 1920s" (Kenaga 2013, n.p.), a period in which they made twelve films together, including one of the biggest successes of the decade, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921).

Similarly, when Norma Talmadge starred in *De Luxe Annie*, she had already "climbed to the absolute top of motion pictures" and had established her own film company, *De Luxe Annie* being a production from this company (Basinger 2012, 146). Constance Binney was "one of Paramount's top stars" at the time that she was cast in *The Case of Becky* (1921) (Slide 2002, 23); and Mae Busch was "one of the screen's leading actresses" (Anon. 1946, 21) when she starred alongside Chaney in *The Unholy Three*, a film that was hardly seen as a comedown for her. As *Variety*'s review put it: "Well, Mae has just gone out and done it, an' how? It is certainly a far cry from Mae at the old St. Francis on 47th Street ... but Mae was a great little gal then and she is certainly a great little actress now. 'This picture more than proves it'" (Fred. 1925, 30). Similarly, when Renee Adoree appeared with Chaney in *The Blackbird*, the *Variety* review explicitly stressed her status as a major star who had "smashed it through to glory in 'The Big Parade'" (Sirk. 1926, 37). Nor was this film the last time that the two would appear together: Adoree was also cast alongside Chaney in *Mr. Wu*, for which she was praised both for her performance and for having "that sensuous appeal which always clicks"

(Ung 1927, 17). Indeed, as Anthony Slide notes, she was “promoted as a major screen beauty” (2002, 167). In the 1920s, Laura La Plante was one of Universal’s biggest stars, and “well on her way to becoming one of the most famous women in America” when she starred in *The Cat and the Canary* and *The Last Warning* (Thomas 1996, 14). Leila Hyams (*The Wizard*, 1927; *The Thirteenth Chair*, *The Phantom of Paris*, 1931; *Freaks*, 1932; and *Island of Lost Souls*, 1932) was described by the *New York Times* as the “‘Golden Girl’ of Movies in the 20’s and 30’s,” when she was famous for her “perfect pink, white and blond colouring” and “her wholesome charm” (Fraser 1977, 82). Alternatively, Lila Lee (*The Ghost Breaker*, 1922; *The Unholy Three*, 1930; *The Gorilla*, 1930; and *Murder Will Out*, 1930) was being developed by Paramount, during the 1920s, as a replacement for Gloria Swanson, a period in which she “won enormous popularity as the romantic companion on the screen of some of the most worshipped film stars of the era” (Anon. 1973, 48). She even starred with Valentino in *Blood and Sand* (1922) in the same year that she appeared in *The Ghost Breaker*. If her status was in decline during the late 1920s, she still made a successful transition into the sound era, with both *The Unholy Three* and *The Gorilla* being sound remakes of hits from earlier in the 1920s (1925 and 1927 respectively). Even Mary Pickford starred in a horror film, *Sparrows* (1925); and while this was after her career had reached its zenith, she was still a major star. Indeed, *Variety* disapproved of the film and described it as “one of the few duds put out by Pickford,” although it also conceded that her star power was so strong that her “name is more or less failure-proof” (Rush. 1926, 14).

Other female stars *built* their stardom on horror roles. Norma Shearer, for example, appeared in *He Who Gets Slapped*, *The Devil’s Circus* (1926) and *Tower of Lies*, the first of which made her into one of MGM’s biggest stars. Similarly, Joan Crawford made her breakthrough to top star status in Lon Chaney’s *The Unknown* (1927), while Martha Mansfield’s casting in Barrymore’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* also led to stardom: the film had much the same impact on Nita Naldi’s career, too. In contrast, the *Variety* review of Barrymore’s *Svengali* claimed that Barrymore is so impressive in the role that the audience “won’t go away remembering much of anybody else”: “Which isn’t the particular reaction desired as regards Marion Marsh whom Warners would like to build up, with the studio picking this picture as a choice launching point” (Sid. 1931, 22). In other words, this horror film had been chosen as a vehicle to enhance her career, even if the plan had failed for other reasons. Conversely, Jean Arthur’s career was launched through her roles in the Fu Manchu and Philo Vance films of the late 1920s and early 1930s; and Andree Layfayette was expected to achieve stardom through her appearance in *Trilby*, a role for which the studio imported her from France where, they claimed, that she was that nation’s most beautiful woman.

Many of these horror films not only featured female stars but offered female-centred narratives, too. In other words, these films were part of a long tradition of female-centred horror stories that goes back to the Gothic novel, a prominent feature of which was the investigating female who must struggle to uncover the secret histories of her mysterious social world (Ellis 1989). For example, *The Haunted Bedroom* (1919) centres on a “young newspaper girl” who investigates a supposedly haunted mansion and “clears up the mystery” (Anon. 1919, 45), while *The Bat* features a more elderly female investigator, Cornelia Van Gorder, who not only solves the mystery but “has the last word” at the end (Hall 1926c, 18).

Consequently, female stars often received top billing in the credits, such as: Norma Talmadge in *De Luxe Annie*, Enid Bennett in *The Haunted Bedroom*, Constance Binney in *The Case of Becky*, Carol Dempster in *One Exciting Night*, Mabel Ballin in *Jane Eyre*, Andree Lafayette in *Trilby*, Aileen Pringle in *The Mystic* (1925), Mary Pickford in *Sparrows*, Emily Fitzroy in *The Bat*, Alice Terry in *The Magician*, Laura La Plante in *The Cat and the Canary* and *The Last Warning*, Marian Nixon in *The Chinese Parrot*, and Helen Twelvetrees in *The Cat Creeps* (1930).

Many films were also based on novels or plays by female authors, or featured screenplays by women: *The Devil-Stone* (screenplay by Beatrice De Mille and Jeanie Macpherson); *Something Always Happens* (1928, adaptation and screenplay by Florence Ryerson); *Frankenstein* (based on a play by Peggy Webling, which was itself an adaptation from Mary Shelley); *The Mysterious Fu Manchu* (1929, screenplay co-written by Florence Ryerson); *Go Get It* (1920, screenplay by Marion Fairfax); *The Case of Becky* (1915, co-written by Margaret Turnbull); *Jane Eyre* (novel by Charlotte Bronte); *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (scenario by Clara S. Beranger); *The Bat* (based on a play co-written by Mary Roberts Rinehart, a play that was based on her novel, *The Circular Staircase*); *The Bishop Murder Case* (1929, Adaptation and Screenplay by Lenore Coffee); and *The Lodger* (1927, adapted from a novel by Marie Belloc Lowndes). Griffith even chose to mask his own name with a female one (Irene Sinclair) in the scriptwriting credits for *One Exciting Night*, presumably because this film (along with a number of other plays and films) was an explicit imitation of Mary Roberts Rinehart’s *The Bat*. As one publication put it: “For sheer blood-curdling inventiveness, it is going to snatch a lot of royalties away from Avery Hopwood and Mary Roberts Rinehart [the authors of *The Bat*] and put them back into the film industry” (Anon. 1922d, 4).

“Feminine Fans Seem to Get Some Sort of Emotional Kick Out of This”: Horror and the Female Audience

It should hardly be surprising, then, that these films were not primarily associated with male audiences, as is often claimed of horror films (Creed 1993; Clover 1993; Doane 1987; Williams 1984). On the contrary, there was a strong sense that, in general, the horror films of the silent and early sound periods were, if anything, targeted at women. When gender preferences are mentioned, it is usually in relation to the positive relationships between horror films and female audiences. For example, while *Variety*'s review of *Dracula* addressed concerns about how female audiences would respond to the film, it was also clear that the film's success was seen as *dependent* on female audiences: “Here was a picture whose screen fortunes must have caused much uncertainty as to the femme fan reaction. As it turns out all the signs are that the woman angle is favourable and that sets the picture for better than average money at the box office” (Rush. 1931a, 14).

By the release of *Frankenstein*, this association was even more explicit and *Variety* considered horror films to have an appeal specifically for women: “Feminine fans seem to get some sort of emotional kick out of this simulation of the bedtime ghost story done with all the literalness of the camera” (Rush. 1931c, 14). Similarly, an article on the boom in horror in the late 1920s interviewed crime writer S. S. Van Dine (the creator of Philo Vance) and quoted him as follows: “People ... get bloodier minded all the time. They used to be content with one really satisfying murder, but now they want two or three to the book. Even the nicest old ladies seem to enjoy wallowing in gore” (Van Dine, quoted in Donnell 1928). As a specialist in this kind of fiction, Van Dine is largely performing mock outrage here, but he also sees the female audience as being crucial. Certainly, women are not seen as the *sole* audience for these stories but “the nicest old ladies” are still used as a *crucial* audience that simultaneously represents *a* core audience *and* demonstrates the *reach* of these stories. Indeed, by the 1940s, Raymond Chandler was claiming (not entirely unproblematically) that mystery was largely a genre *for* old ladies, and that only the hard boiled novels were masculine enough to gain his approval. He therefore expresses disgust at the idea that “old ladies jostle each other at the mystery shelf to grab off some item of the same vintage with a title like *The Triple Murder Case*, or *Inspector Pinchbottle to the Rescue*” (Chandler 1980, 174). He also condemns those who criticised hard-boiled fiction, and dismisses them as “the flustered old ladies—of both sexes (or no sex) and almost all ages—who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms” (Chandler 1980, 188).

Alternatively, Mary Anne Doane (borrowing from Linda Williams) claims that women close their eyes when confronted by cinematic horrors

and that this response is a refusal of the image. She therefore likens this refusal to male responses to the “love story”: “the sign of maturity in the little boy, when confronted by the ‘love story,’ is the fact that he looks away” (Doane 1987, 96). Looking away is therefore read as a male rejection of a feminine genre (the love story) or a feminine rejection of a masculine genre (the horror film). However, during the silent and early sound period, film reviews clearly regarded “feminine” responses to horror as the *appropriate* responses, responses that demonstrated the effectiveness of a horror film, *not* a rejection of it. For example, the *New York Times* regarded it as being positive endorsement of the film that, during one screening of *The Phantom of the Opera*, “a woman behind us stifled a scream” (Hall 1925c, 15). Similarly, a review of *The Bishop Murder Case* confirmed that the filmmakers had “imbued it with the necessary atmosphere” so much so that “some of the female contingent of the audience ... were impelled to scream” (Hall 1930, 15).

Of course, this replicates ideas that women are more easily frightened than men, but it can also be read, as Rhona Berenstein (1996) has demonstrated, as playing with gendered identities in more complex ways. In other words, it still implies that male readers will be attracted by the promise that an effective horror film will frighten them, even if it simultaneously acts to console them that they will be *less* susceptible. In other words, these comments still entice the male viewer with the promise of sharing the pleasures of this fear, even as he might want to *perform* his insensitivity to it.

However, these screams were also associated with the female audience in another way. These films were associated with a thrill that was not only explicitly visceral but also linked to sexuality in various ways. For example, the casting of John Barrymore (and later Fredric March) in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was clearly an appeal to the female audience, given his reputation as a romantic lead. Yet this romantic appeal was not simply associated with handsome Dr. Jekyll, but also monstrous Mr. Hyde. Writing of the Sheldon Lewis production (released in the US in the same year as the Barrymore version), one reviewer explicitly stated that Sheldon Lewis was “a less sensual and less ferocious Mr. Hyde than the Barrymore exhibit” (Anon. 1920c, 107). Barrymore’s Mr. Hyde may have been monstrous and corrupting but he still promised a sexual thrill, a promise that, like many versions of *Dracula*, made him both repulsive *and* attractive.

As Studlar notes, Valentino’s appeal was also bound up with these issues: his physical beauty was associated with ethnicities that were taboo at the time. He was therefore associated with the pleasure and dangers of the “tango pirates and lounge lizards” of the jazz age, figures that were “stereotyped as immigrant, lower-class Italians and Jews who, it was presumed, had acquired a sufficient veneer of clothes and manners” to

seduce Anglo-Saxon women (Studlar 2005, 163). As Studlar puts it, for many social commentators, these figures (and the new social entertainments with which they were associated) were a “danger to America’s biological future”: “the nation’s dancing, pleasure-mad women were leading the country into ‘race-suicide’” (2005, 152). In this context, a figure such as Valentino evoked both the pleasures and the dangers of these “tango pirates,” and Studlar even describes him as having a “vampish sexual desirability” (2005, 152). It is therefore hardly surprising that Skelton stresses the association between Valentino and the Lugosi incarnation of Dracula.

Lon Chaney can also be understood in this context. While Barrymore’s Hyde can be seen as “a eugenicist’s nightmare” (Studlar 2005, 130), Lon Chaney was also supposed to evoke weird, physical responses in his audiences, responses that often had an erotic dimension. In some cases, Chaney’s appeal is conveyed through a metaphor of taste so that he “is characterized by a certain acid quality, a natural salinity, a bitter tang, that sweeps like a cleansing sea wind across the surface of the silver screen, saturated too long with an over-dose of sickly-sweet scenarios” (Ussher 1925, 22). This plays on well-established associations between taste, orality and sexuality (Lupton 2015): after all, *Dracula* literally feeds upon his victims. But elsewhere the bodily thrills that Chaney was supposed to elicit were conveyed even more pointedly. For example, one writer refutes claims that mystery is best conveyed through sound, and that silent film was a poor medium for the mystery story; and they use Chaney as evidence for their refutation: his work “gives lie to this assertion, for he makes such a palpable, menacing reality out of every shadowy movement that no audible ‘atmosphere’ is necessary to bring gasps of horror from the spectators” (Ussher 1925, 23). If Chaney induces “gasps” from the audience here, elsewhere the responses that he elicits are almost explicitly orgasmic: “His new releases clearly accentuate this peculiar quality of Chaney’s appeal. They form a gradual accumulation of horror upon horror; a rising crescendo of crime, culminating in a wild orgy of Black Magic” (Ussher 1927, 30). Although these references do not explicitly gender this spectator, and suggest that such responses would be experienced by *all* viewers, they are strongly suggestive of the feminine through the stereotypical passivity of the response—the body here responds with excitement to Chaney so that his actions manipulate the spectator’s body. Also, as with Valentino, Barrymore’s Hyde and Lugosi’s Dracula, the line between the pleasurable and the horrific is blurred, so that the thrills that Chaney was supposed to elicit suggested a sado-masochistic dynamic that was often associated with heterosexual femininity and male homosexuality at the time (Brown 2016). Reviews at the time even discussed Chaney’s films in terms of the “Beauty

and the Beast” story so that *Mockery* was declared to be a failure because this “beauty and the beast effect is entirely lost” (Abel. 1927, 23).

Despite this potential queering of reception, Studlar quotes various sources that suggest that Chaney was predominantly associated with male audiences at the time, and that women largely rejected his films. However, there are various reasons to question this conclusion. In addition to the observations above, reviewers frequently talked about Chaney’s “fans,”⁶ although this was a period in which fandom was largely associated with female audiences. As Anthony Slide notes, the fan magazines “were generally directed at a female readership” (Slide 2010, 4), while Henry Jenkins has discussed the long association between fandom, femininity and pathology (Jenkins 1992). Also, many of the writers of the fan magazines were female, and two of the most explicitly sexualized articles on Chaney mentioned above were published under the byline of Kathleen Ussher. Furthermore, Jenkins also notes that even when fans have been male, they have usually been understood as feminized figures (Jenkins 1992). Fans were fanatics and, in the 1920s, fandom was usually associated with the supposedly irrational, “pleasure-mad women” of the period (Stamp 2000).

Furthermore, while Studlar argues that exhibitors “frequently claimed that Chaney’s films were disliked by women,” her evidence bears closer examination (Studlar 2005, 208-9). In Studlar’s account, the first reference is to an exhibitor who slips between two terms, “sophisticated city audiences” (for whom the film is a “dandy”) and “women” (who “will stay away.”) This slippage does not necessary suggest that Chaney had little appeal to women but that, while he may appeal to women that were part of the “sophisticated city audiences,” he did not play well to women in this exhibitor’s region. The next couple of references suggest that various Chaney films were “liked by *most* of the men and boys,” but this does not mean that they were entirely rejected by women. On the contrary, both exhibitors concede that there were “a few women” who liked them, too; and one even acknowledges that *some* women described *The Blackbird* as “a good picture.” Finally, the last exhibitor that Studlar discusses returns to an earlier point: that Chaney may be popular in the urban centres where, as Gomery points out, Hollywood made most of its profits (Gomery 1992, 60), but that he “is slipping *here*.” It is within this context that this exhibitor addresses

⁶ Consequently, a review of *Mr. Wu* maintained that “Chaney fans” were too discriminating to “rave over” the film (Ung. 1927, 17), while a review of *West of Zanzibar* was rather less positive about these fans and claimed that the film “will satisfy Chaney fans who like their color regardless of the way in which it is daubed.” (Waly 1929a, 11). These negative associations with the term fan, can also be seen elsewhere and, in a review of *The Man Who Laughs*, it was claimed that the film would “appeal to the Lon Chaney mob” (Land. 1928, 14). Not only were fans often depicted as mobs but the term “mob” had long been used in a perjorative sense, in which the mob is imagined as one in which the members have lost both a sense of rationality and individuality.

women's response to Chaney, so that his point seems to be that Chaney may be popular (with both men and women) in the urban centres but that his popularity with the women in his own area *might* be starting to wane: "When women folk *start* to tell you they don't like him, better let him alone."

Elsewhere, as we have already shown, there are numerous articles on Chaney in the fan magazines, which strongly suggested that these publications believed he had a strong appeal to their largely female readership. Even as early as 1923, *Picture-Play* acknowledged this growing fascination in Chaney when it responded to one female fan, who had declared him to be her "favorite actor" (Anon. 1923b, 112). If the magazine found her declaration to be "rather unusual," and claimed that "most of the fans, especially the girls, got all thrilled only about the young and handsome matinee idols," it also noted that now "*everybody* recognizes [Chaney] as among the greatest character actors" (Anon. 1923b, 112, our italics). Implicitly, then, this fan's adoration of Chaney was not seen as *uncommon*, and her declaration was only "unusual" because the magazine rarely got "enthusiastic letters about the character actors." But Chaney was clearly seen as a special case, and the magazine promised this fan (and its readers more generally) that it would cater to his growing fan-base by carrying "a story on Mr. Chaney soon."

Conclusion

As we have seen, then, in the silent and early sound period, horror was not primarily associated with low-budget production, nor was it simply seen as a disreputable genre. Certainly there were some who objected to horror materials, but even then the real anxiety seems to have been bound up with cinema's status as a new medium, rather than with the genre itself. As Carl Laemmle commented in relation to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the "public still likes dripping red meat in its literature and on its stage, but not on its screen" (Laemmle quoted in Anon. 1923a, 440). His point was that the cinema was still required to meet different standards from established media such as literature and theatre, but this did not mean that his adaption of Victor Hugo's novel was anything but a high-budget and prestigious production. For most of the 1920s and early 1930s, then, horror was arguably received as a prestigious genre that was used to sell the cinema as an artistic medium and many horror films (and the figures associated with them) were overtly praised for exploring and/or demonstrating the medium's potential at a time when the industry was still eager to achieve cultural legitimacy. The genre also benefited from an association with middle class women—it not only gained prestige through this association but its

ability to attract these audiences also helped to enhance the reputation of cinema more generally.

The decline in the horror genre's status seems to have occurred in the late 1920s, when a boom in production made it less rare and distinctive, and horror films started to disappear from lists of the very best of the new films. However, this was still a period in which "horror" was associated with big-budgets, key directors and major stars. The genre's association with low-budget production today may be due to critical approaches to the 1930s and 1940s that focus on Universal at a time when the studio was going through major financial problems. As Peter Hutchings has argued, 1930s horror has often been misunderstood because "an understanding of 1930s horror tends to be based on one specific type of horror from the period, the horror films produced by Universal studios" and he argues that one gets a very different sense of the period when "one looks at horror films produced by other studios" (Hutchings 2004, 14). In other words, even in the 1930s, Universal was only one type of horror and Lionel Barrymore continued to play horror roles until the late 1930s, and often in horror films that were overtly modelled on the Lon Chaney films of the 1920s.⁷

Consequently, the assumption that horror was both disreputable and associated with low-budget filmmaking may be a self-sustaining fiction: focusing on low-budget filmmaking in a period tends to marginalize or misinterpret the big-budget productions of that period. As Jancovich (2017a) has demonstrated in relation to the 1940s, the focus on Universal's low-budget productions have led scholars to marginalise numerous big budget horror productions and to misread the horror films associated with Val Lewton, films that were not low-budget productions: they were specially designed to occupy the space between Universal's low-budget horror films and the big-budget horror films that followed the phenomenal success of David O. Selznick's *Rebecca* (1940), a film on which Lewton had worked as a script editor (Jancovich 2017a).

The focus on low-budget and disreputable horror films has therefore persisted for another reason: it has enabled scholars to privilege the genre; to distinguish it from Hollywood norms; and to present it, as we have seen, as "the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive" (Wood 1986, 84).

⁷ For discussion of how 1940s horror films figure in this discourse, see *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema: Traces of a Lost Decade*, edited by Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare, Charlie Ellbé, and Kristopher Woofert (Lexington, 2015).

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**The Affective Contours and Configurations of Dread:
Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Killing of a Sacred Deer***

Marcus Prasad

In the opening of *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, Gilles Deleuze suggests that movement and psychic processes are related parts of the same machine: “Movement, as physical reality in the external world, and the image, as psychic reality in consciousness, could no longer be opposed” (1986, xiv). As such, the experience of film not as thousands of still images creating an illusion of movement, but as a prosthesis for real movement in the world, endows the medium with an affective weight and preoccupation.¹ Cinema creates embodied experience *with* viewers and does not simply mirror it on screen. Of course, this lends itself to Deleuze’s overarching aim to taxonomize film, to classify it as a set of images and signs that uniquely qualify movement and time (1986, 2). Working within this phenomenological chasm, this essay seeks to explore film as an affective medium, a machine through which an embodiment of affect can be represented and consequently experienced across image and sound. While a sociological analysis of narrative is in many ways inextricable from how image and sound in film resonate with audiences, my exploration will focus on the specificities of movement and temporality, the logics of their cinematic representations, and their affective relations between characters and the film’s narrative arc, not to standardize manifestations of affect within an ideal viewer, but to explore how an affective bend reveals itself alongside the various temporal registers engaged in a film-viewing experience.

This attempt to index affect through an analysis of movement and time is in service of two particular sensations I would like to unravel; suspense and dread. An analysis as such can provide insight into the cultivation of what might be deemed horrific through specific technical arrangements and their

¹Deleuze’s qualification of “prosthesis” is in regard to his argument that technologies can be extensions of the body and human sensorium. My use of it here relates to the camera extending the ocular capacity which in turn influences how a viewing subject understands and affectively resonates with representations of movement in the visual field. This does not take into account the context of disability, which exceeds the scope of this essay. For further exploration on the relationship between Deleuze’s work and disability, see Margrit Schildrick’s (2009) “Prosthetic Performativity: Deleuzian Connections and Queer Corporealities,” in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, edited by Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 115-133).

interconnections, beyond genre and sociological inquiry. Through Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), I will outline the horror film's temporal construction of dread as a particular figuration of affect, against what I argue to be a competing temporality inherent to the cultivation of suspense. Referring to specific camera movements and sonic landscapes that enhance the film's representation of objects, spaces, and characters (also known as atmosphere), this essay suggests that Lanthimos' film puts into visual form the systematicity of dread as predicated upon affective practice—reliant on a logic of repetition and patterning to form its mode of expression.

Suspense and dread might colloquially be understood as those sensational impulses shared amongst films in genres like horror, action, or thrillers, which cast viewers into a space of heightened anticipation of what comes next. They enact a kind of mixture between pleasure and aversion in service of narrative linear progress. Though they incite particular and oftentimes varied reactions that might be coded as fear, excitement, anxiety, or depression, suspense and dread cannot be located as emotional expressions themselves—they are rather indicative of affective processes that stimulate a range of embodied responses. How, then, can we begin to identify and qualify the formation of these processes? Along which filmic, narrative, and experiential lines are we thrown into suspension or bogged down by dread? To think through these questions, I frame my analysis of suspense and dread as mobilizations of affective dimensions that are interrelated yet grounded by different temporal mechanisms yielding contesting forms of affective expressions. Though they appear to serve similar ends by virtue of the related genres they proliferate within, their respective domains of affect reveal complicated networks of feeling that variegate the expression of fear on film.

This paper ultimately aims to intervene in horror scholarship on affect by delving into its temporal constitution residing beyond the film's representational surface. Catherine Spooner suggests that much work on horror and affect has attempted to identify the contours of a collective experience or shared secret fears through the casting of certain monstrous figures on screen as metaphors of otherness (2007, 8). These antagonistic characters are often associated with threats to the heteropatriarchal order that viewers subconsciously hope to be quelled. Scholars like Isabel Pinedo have therefore entrusted the horror film with the capacity to give its audiences a space in which threatening feelings can be mastered outside of conscious articulation (1996, 2). Conceiving of a film viewing experience as a container in which unfavourable feelings like fear and disgust can be reconciled vicariously, other horror scholarship in relation to affect has grappled with the notion of such “negative

feelings” and why spectators choose to engage with them deliberately. Inherently centered on audience reaction and reception, Aaron Smuts argues that the draw toward a felt quality of badness, or rather what he calls a negative hedonic tone, is the result of a hedonic compensatory solution (2014, 7). In this affective operation, fear and disgust (negative affects) are compensated for by the pleasure of watching horror film over its perceived displeasure. Pleasure can be qualified by a variety of means, including the social and contextual conditions under which a viewer chooses to watch a film—with friends, with a partner, during a night out at a theatre, for example—but drawing back to Pinedo’s claims, Smuts suggests that the hedonic compensatory solution is a means to control and convert negative affects into more positive ones within the boundaries of the film viewing experience (2014, 7).

Rather than examine audience reception to suggest a unified and universal affective engagement amongst viewers of horror film, I redirect attention back to the screen and examine the temporal constituents of the affects of suspense and dread to reflect upon their unique compositions expressed through camera movement, framing, sound, and their contributions to the cultivation of atmosphere, specifically through *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. This of course bears relation to audience engagement, but my focus lies in how the medium of film as inherently temporal can reveal the constitutive contours of certain affects. The following will provide an account of suspense through affect and temporality in order to be compared and contrasted with dread, which will then be explored in relation to Lanthimos’ film. I will begin with an analysis of how these two affects are used in horror studies, then introduce a temporal framing which will become the prevailing analytical framework for the following scene analyses of movement and sound.

Maria Anastasova provides a general psychological account of suspense as a dual operation provoking fear and pleasure around the outcome of a situation, which results in a cleansing effect of purgation after exposure to a nervous expectation (2019, 7). Reliant on a sense of *what happens next*, this definition reveals an inherent temporal structure to the cultivation of suspense—a paradoxical build-up of pleasure and fear that weaves in and out of narrative progression until some kind of release is achieved. More specific to horror film, Pinedo suggests that terror, cultivated through an amassing of suspense, is a bounded experience formed through the “temporally and spatially finite nature of the film” (1996, 26). As an inherently bound form, cinema offers a contained experience that points to a sense of closure due to its durational frame (Pinedo 1996, 26). While Pinedo presents this understanding of temporal binding as a means for audiences to engage in a momentary fantasy, her

delineation of terror as proliferating between the film's beginning and end is important for a working definition of suspense through affect. Guided by narrative progression, suspense is linked to such a temporal confine. It works with the temporalities inside the film's boundaries to build pleasure, fear, and terror, culminating in a sensation of closure due to loose ends that inevitably become tied.

Pushing this definition further, what bolsters suspense outside of the linear frame of a narrative arc? Can its temporality be expressed or represented without reference to an overarching story line? Alanna Thain provokingly traces a theory of suspense that deviates from narrative logic by directing attention toward the "incorporated effects of living time at the movies" (2017, 4). Through temporality, she explains that the body's affective capacity to *live* suspense emerges from its ability to sense its own relation to time. Confronted with filmic representations of time that manifest at odds with that of our own bodily sensorium provides an experience of our own *otherness*—feeling the making of difference, to Thain, is the experience of suspense vis-à-vis temporality (2017, 4). The affective dimension of suspense is therefore located in the confrontation of temporalities that brush up against each other between the screen and the viewer.

This argument provides a sequestering of temporality that is key to my explorations of suspense and dread. There are several temporal figurations at play within the cultivation of suspense as an affective mechanism, including the duration or timespan of the film's narrative arc (whether it takes place over several days, weeks, months), cinematic techniques of expanding or minimizing senses of time within scenes to enhance dramatic impact (cutting, shot transitions, close-ups), and their relationship to the body's own experience of time. In this matrix of relations, the body's connection to time becomes indeterminate; pressed against the existence of several unique but interrelated durations and temporalities, the consistency of the self becomes other. Thain terms this process immediation or suspended (re)animation (2017, 12). In this way, the awareness of varying registers of temporality against the grain of our own temporal experience leads to aberrant sensations, but these sensations are not equated with alienation per se. Instead, they are a space of potential and reanimation—a felt field of relationality in which time is *suspended* and searching for somewhere new to land.

This line of thought directs Thain toward the role of affect in the temporal construction of suspense, which she argues is mapped in a similar space of indeterminacy. She argues that affect is a spreading out of feeling into nextness or emergence, as well as a means of tapping into durations above and

below our own (Thain 2017, 56). Against what we might call identifiable emotions, affect is more closely associated with a suspension of knowledge, a hesitation of action, or, perhaps in line with a more conventional view of suspense, “a visceral thrilling of the body” (Thain 2017, 67). Mapping affect as lodged between a layering of temporalities frames it as a sensation that does not always correlate to a definite emotion but retains a notion of ambivalence toward its future expression. I am specifically interested in the space of potential afforded by these competing temporalities in a film viewing experience, and where this sense of emergence can be directed dependent on the qualities of the heterogeneous temporalities at play. With the understanding that suspense does not follow a discreet trajectory toward a specific feeling but rather maintains and proliferates an indeterminate intensity, what other areas of feeling can this precarity bring us to?

Dread, as I would like to suggest, consists of a similarly indeterminate intensity that builds itself along a logic close to suspense. As a sensation that seemingly evades tangibility but remains omnipresent in many horror films, dread, I argue, can also be framed as a layering of competing temporalities against our own bodily rhythms that creates a suspended space of ambivalence. How dread differs from suspense however is in the length of these temporalities, the patterns they create, and the absence of what Anastasova calls the “cleansing effect” of purgation after exposure to nervous expectation (Anastasova 2019, 7). At this point, I will expand upon the specific uses of temporality in the cultivation of suspense compared to dread through different approaches to affect. As Thain squares affect with the space of indeterminacy afforded by the temporalities involved in creating suspense, I suggest that affect, too, can be read alongside the precarity of dread, its own temporalities, and the space of tension against linear narrative that emerges from their confrontations.

In the context of horror film, David Church constructs his definition of dread around Thomas Ligotti’s (2018 [2010]) assertion that humans are the only species to have a consciousness of our own mortality. Because of this, Ligotti argues that we need to delude ourselves from the knowledge of our imminent death through exercises of future-oriented thought, such as aligning oneself with political causes like environmentalism (in Church 2021, 224). Church connects this awareness of inevitable demise to the construction of dread-filled atmospheres in horror film, where tension arises from a reminder of this terminal notion through characters’ proximity to certain death (2021, 225). While this definition, like Anastasova’s on suspense, relies on narrative to create a sense of atmosphere, there is an underlying temporality to Church’s claim—that dread is contingent on our knowledge of death as imminent and always on

its way. By this logic, dread differs from suspense in its navigation and layering of temporalities by necessarily including one that denotes a certainty that is inescapable and irresolvable. A temporality of death not only refers to a tragic fate undergone by characters on screen, but also extends to viewers' own grappling with such an absolute fact. This in turn suggests that dread mobilizes temporality at a scale much larger than suspense; its state of indeterminacy that is later determined by a meeting of narrative expectation is not afforded in the same way. Dread has no resolution or determination within the suspended space it creates except death itself—on screen and in embodied reality.

Robert Spadoni (2014) further defines dread in horror film as expressed through a sense of atmosphere, which takes into consideration the spatiality of a film construed by several formal elements (153). Aspects like off-screen noises, smudges of movements, and blurry figures in unknown depths constitute a background of dread that primes a sense of anticipation unique from suspense (Spadoni 2014, 159). This background is ultimately indeterminate, a suspended space of ambivalence creating a landscape of anxious waiting that is unlocatable through a particular object; it is instead diffuse and spread out into what is known as atmosphere. Matt Hills further argues that anxiety and by extension dread is an “objectless affect” that creates affective residues rather than concrete affective responses like fear and disgust (2005, 28). These expressions are slow-building and persistent yet ephemeral—coalescing into a landscape of trepidation that washes over the film. Spadoni continues that atmospheres as such can “leak out of a film” (2014, 158), which I take to have a twofold meaning. First, he positions dread as an atmosphere in order to qualify its diffusiveness, its ambivalent character, and its ability to permeate through the screen by affective means towards audiences; and second, which I move forward with in my working definition of dread, the capacity to “leak out” suggests that dread extends beyond the durational borders of a film and consists of deeper and elongated temporalities, ones that bleed into the space of spectatorship. This conception of dread counters suspense primarily by its lack of closure brought forth by narrative logic. Instead, dread remains irresolute—informed partially by narrative and character action but ultimately existing as an untenable force that bleeds into and beyond the fabric of the film.

Thus far, I have suggested that both suspense and dread grapple with different sets of temporalities that interact amongst themselves and against the body to produce varied responses. As such, they also adhere to different processes of affective production. *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* primarily mobilizes the elongated temporality of dread, for example, as Barry Keoghan's character inflicts a curse on the Murphy family beyond comprehension or rational

explanation, resulting in certain death. To elucidate expanded temporality further before working more closely with Lanthimos's film, I turn to Margaret Wetherell's notion of affective practice to describe the temporal composition of dread, and the affective event to describe the temporal composition of suspense. Wetherell brings both affective practice and the affective event into her analysis of overall affective textures and activities of everyday life, but for the purposes of distinguishing between suspense and dread, I will separate the two, beginning with the affective event.

The event is framed as one of the differing durations that can figure affect, characterized by bursts or relatively short episodes that result in intense bodily pushes. While these shorter moments are components of a broader affective pattern, they signal trouble and disturbance within existing patterns (Wetherell 2012, 10-12). Framing the affective event as a disruption also resonates with Brian Massumi's (1995) delineation of affect, where its intensity is argued to be associated with nonlinear processes. Affective resonance and feedback, to Massumi, momentarily suspends the linear progress of past to future, throwing the experience of time into a state of suspense, potentially of disruption (1995, 86). As a suspension of linear temporality, the affective event is a form of disruption that aligns with suspense in film. Returning to Thain's work on suspense, there is resonance between her explanation of the technics of cinematic suspense and its "manner of event." In its figural form, suspense wavers between movement and stasis as its manner, deploying multiple disruptions to the continuity of linear temporality (Thain 2017, 52-53). Considering these analyses, suspense may be defined in temporal terms as momentary destabilizations to a linear sense of time, launching the felt or affective experience into suspension until an expectation is met. Its temporal durations are therefore short, and its affective resonance quelled by a meeting of expectation, reconnecting suspension back to linear temporality. As Massumi suggests, suspense is both distinguished from and interlinked with expectation, as superlinear and linear dimensions of the same image-event (1995, 87).

By contrast, affective practice, which I argue categorizes the formation of dread against suspense, engages with temporalities at a much larger and longer scale. Understanding affect through practice denies seeking out lines of causation, character types, and neat emotional categories in order to see affect as produced through activity, flow, assemblage, and relationality (Wetherell 2012, 4). Wetherell argues that affect is always "turned on and simmering" (2012, 12), that it can come in and out of focus, and its figurations have different durations. Through repetition, affective practice denotes the organization of those intensities that are in focus into particular rhythms and patterns that

persist (Wetherell 2012, 10). The notion of creating a pattern that consists of varying temporal durations into an expansive system provides a framework for thinking through how dread engages with time and affect. Patterning and repetition, as Wetherell further suggests, are types of affective practice that involve a semi-continuous set of background feelings that are long-lasting, moving in and out of focus and into more intense phases dominated by the body (2012, 10). I suggest that dread can be located in these long-lasting background feelings which are brought to the fore through a patterning and repetition of actions that crystallize affect and bring it into focus. This sense of foregrounding affect through repetition is visually evoked in Lanthimos's film by consistent shots of characters walking stoically from vantage points that are unusual for humans to hold—either impossibly high or uncomfortably low, denying the spectator any opportunity for an eyeline match. These alien moments are interspersed evenly across the overall sequence to create and perpetuate a particular formal pattern. Affective practice, then, as a process where routines become entangled with meaning-making in an ongoing capacity, also characterizes the cultivation of dread and its visual expression as reliant on consistent repetition.

The difference between suspense and dread can therefore be attributed to their engagement with temporalities at different scales and competing affective modalities. Suspense, put simply, mobilizes temporalities that are short-lived and relegated to the time frame of the film. They operate within these borders as an affective event that prods at and disturbs the temporalities of our bodies and of the film's dominant narrative arc. A sensation of suspension emerges from this disruption, as well as a production of an affective intensity that is later resolved by a meeting of expectation somewhere along the trajectory of the film's linear progression. Dread, by contrast, engages a sense of an expanded temporality through affective patterns that persist and repeat, extending to the world outside of the film's duration. Its primary preoccupation is a temporality of death—dread in terms of affect and temporality can therefore be partially defined as an awareness of one's own relation to death made possible by a character's inevitable demise, acting as an index or double of a long-lasting background feeling put in relief by affective practice.

Through repetition of a cycle in which this background feeling of death is made present and palpable, the affect of dread permeates the screen as an all-encompassing atmosphere of inescapability. Echoed and repeated throughout *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, not only along narrative lines, but through strategic techniques of spatial representation, tracking and framing character movement, and diegetic and non-diegetic sound, audiences are forcefully dragged along the

film's dread- and death-filled sequence that foregrounds this salient atmosphere. Returning to Church's idea of a "certain" temporality integral to the cultivation of dread across a narrative, I will now explore how the affective dimension of dread is created and represented in Lanthimos' film through a cyclical visual language of determination based on repetition. This process ultimately sustains a patterned system of affective practice that unearths and crystalizes the long-lasting and ever-present feeling of inevitable death.

Categorized as a psychological thriller and horror film, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* follows Steven (Colin Farrell), a successful surgeon, who takes a teenage boy, Martin (Barry Keoghan), under his wing for an unknown reason. It is later revealed that Martin is the son of a previous patient of Steven's who died due to negligence during a surgical operation. This inspires Martin to seek quiet revenge by enacting an inexplicable curse on Steven's family—his son Bob (Sunny Suljic), daughter Kim (Raffey Cassidy), and wife Anna (Nicole Kidman) will each begin to slowly die under this prerogative, first by paralysis, then refusal to eat, and finally bleeding of the eyes unless Steven chooses one of them to kill. Martin believes that familial sacrifice is the only way for Steven to make things right after allegedly killing Martin's father. Skeptical at first, Steven rejects Martin's cruel deal for justice, failing to relinquish his pride and acknowledge his fatal shortcomings. As symptoms begin to manifest within his children however, he spends the course of the film trying to find a way out to save his family. With no other options in sight and the tragic fate of his family along the horizon, he resorts to killing one of his family members at random to lift the curse.

Three aspects of this film are of particular interest for the following scene analyses and their representations of dread as an affective pattern. First is the narrative which follows the strict plotting of a Greek tragedy, making its audience aware of the fact that a main character's death is imminent and inescapable. Lanthimos's screenplay was in fact inspired by *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripides, in which Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter in order to appease Artemis after offending her (Wilkinson 2017). Second is the unique space-making of the film through unusual camera angles framing movement as forced, and third is the use of disjointed voiceover that carries viewers forward into new scenes. Accordingly, I will focus on select scenes in the film that employ visceral and strange camera techniques to track character movement and create an affective sense of dread through atmosphere, as well as a scene in which a voiceover of a phone conversation between Steven and Martin confuses linear temporality to force viewers into a more direct confrontation with dread.

Lanthimos pays close attention to the steady and structured movement of bodies through slow zooms, pans, and unusual camera angles to bolster a sense of feeling trapped, which I argue exposes a temporality indicative of an affective patterning of dread. The film begins with a jarring two-minute scene of a human chest held open by surgical clamps, revealing a beating heart. As the camera slowly zooms out, gloved hands poke and prod at the organ until the screen fades to black, showing the film's title in white text. The following scene reveals the surgeons taking off their surgical gloves and gown, disposing of them into the garbage in slow motion with a classical score echoing in the background, linking these three moments together. We then enter the film's first sequence of dialogue and character movement—a conversation between Steven and his anesthesiologist, Dr. Matthew Williams (Bill Camp) presumably after having left the operation room. They walk slowly and steadily down the hospital hallway at an exact matching pace, footwork mirrored uncannily to produce a sense of robotic, controlled movement. Centered in the frame, the camera dollies backward matching their pace and sits at the chest level as they speak—the audience is consequently dissuaded from forming a relationship with these characters, always kept at an awkward distance and height. They continue to walk slowly down the hallway, the lines of the wall receding into the background as the patterning of fluorescent lights and ceiling create a kind of tracking pace alongside their strides. They engage in a mundane conversation about watches, their preferred wrist straps, and water resistance—a starkly benign conversation following an open-heart surgery (figure 1).



Figure 1: Steven and Matthew walking down a hospital hallway.

A second hospital scene enforces this unusual framing of movement, when Steven walks along a similar corridor to discover that Martin has come to see him at work. This time, the camera follows him from behind with a high vantage point, emphasizing his arms swaying to the pace of his stoic walk. The viewer is offered an impossible perspective here, tracking his speed at a sightline of around two feet above his head as if we are forced to look down on him (figure 2).



Figure 2: Steven walking down a hospital hallway.

Scenes of Steven's movement throughout corridor spaces as such are interspersed evenly throughout the sequence of the entire film. Not only relegated to the space of the hospital, he is shown navigating indoor and outdoor spaces with a patterned logic of framing from behind, switching between a low or high vantage point (figures 3, 4, 5 and 6, next page). These scenes work to visually foreground a sense of structured and stilted movement that form a determinate pattern with the temporality of dread by its constant reappearance. Attention is given to rigid, programmatic, and seemingly unnatural forward motion here, plotted across the narrative layout to bolster an awareness of movement and time as forcibly stitched together in a way that does not suggest continuity or ease of progress, but a compulsory push toward an inevitable demise. Steven's movement along stretched paths or corridors are indexical traces of the film's prevailing temporal mechanism of dread—a reiterated representation of forward motion within an abstracted and uneasy sense of space barrelling toward Steven's fatal decision.



Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6: Steven walking in various settings with unusual camera tracking.

Gilles Deleuze argues that cinema is generally a system that reproduces movement, which symptomatically creates an impression of continuity through cuts. He calls these instances of reproduced movement “movement-images” to reconceive of a series of still frames as indexing actual movement in the real world, rather than images that have movement merely added to them (Deleuze 1986, 5). Of course, movement is inextricable from temporality, as a qualification of movement in a particular scene entails a set duration. In this way, these scenes of Steven walking throughout space—exemplifying movement toward a dreadful outcome—simultaneously expose a distinct temporal rhythm of dread. Deleuze further teases out the relationship between the movement-image and its relation to the temporal whole of a film. He suggests that the shot, construed by camera angle and vantage point, provides a dual point of view on what it represents—first, a translation of physical parts of a set which spreads out in a given space, and second, its subsequent impact on the whole of the film which is transformed in its given duration (Deleuze 1986, 20). Here, he connects space and duration through movement, both from the camera and the figure within its frame to suggest that movement equally reveals an underlying temporal construction to the film.

Again, the scenes I reference represent Steven walking amongst various settings including the hospital he works at, his children’s school, and the cityscape of Cincinnati, with or without other characters. Their cinematographic framing deliberately dwarfs the figures in a congested composition of orthogonal lines and skewed surfaces, made stranger by camera angles that position the viewer as crawling behind or hovering above ominously. This sense of strangeness in conjunction with the consistent pace at which he walks indicate a repeated and systematic temporality of dread that is carried through the film’s tragic narrative. Isolating movement in this way therefore reveals a temporality of dread that acts as the glue between these chosen movement-images. Their logic of repetition and determination in visually abstracted spaces which themselves are repeated throughout the film’s sequence point to an affective engagement with dread as a pattern. As I have previously qualified the affect of dread through affective practice and repetition, the foregrounding of movement visually exposes a patterned temporality that exacerbates the predetermined and inevitable outcome of the narrative.

Weaving in and out of the film’s sequence, these scenes work alongside the other scenes in the film to create an overall atmosphere of dread that leaks out from scenic and narrative bounds. The formation of an overarching temporal disposition as such can be attributed to how Deleuze conceives of the time-image in his later work on cinema. Integrally linked to the movement-

image, time, he argues, is represented indirectly in film through the piecing together of a series of movement-images (Deleuze 1986, 34). Movement-images are primary, assimilated into the shot, and turned towards objects—they are therefore self-contained. The relationship between movement-images, when they are placed in relation to each other to create a sequence or montage, is what reveals a “flow of time” or a time-image, which cannot be empirically located but exists in an indeterminate space between scenes (Deleuze 1986, 35, 27). In this way, the temporality of dread unique to this film is felt across and between a series of scenes that present a structured and specific form of consistent movement that is itself repeated many times. Deleuze’s spatial analysis of time positions the temporal construction of film as not exclusively located in concrete movement, but as supra-textual—a force that haunts movement and the suturing together of scenes to create a filmic sequence endowed with a sense of atmosphere. Steven’s dreadful walk therefore contributes to a wider atmosphere of dread that permeates not only the surrounding scenes and movement-images, but extends past the surface of the film itself to suggest that this suspended temporality expands beyond a narrative frame.

My analysis of these scenes does not seek to privilege them as stand-out moments, but rather as exemplary of the *types* of scenes that saturate the entirety of the film and emerge in consistent patterns. In this way, no scene is unique or more powerful than any other; each of them is subtly and quietly affective in its contribution to a system of increasing dread across the film’s length. These scenes’ constant reappearance reinforces a semblance of practice or patterning; in Wetherell’s terms, they are established reference points and the site at which repetition takes place and cannot help but do so again (2012, 20). This positions the formal construction of the film as a system itself, not only in which narrative is carried forward by character interaction and motive, but as an affective system in which patterns repeat to construct, build upon, and intensify dread.

Another mechanism through which a patterning makes itself present in this film is voiceover across some scenes in the narrative. With little stylistic intervention in the use of non-diegetic sound, most scenes only involve character dialogue, a classical score at the beginning and end of the film, and cacophonous strings at points of conflict and tension. The rest of the sonic landscape remains quiet and atmospheric. As such, moments in which voiceover are present are starkly highlighted and stand out as an unusual form of linkage between scenes. A first instance of voiceover occurs when Martin calls Steven on the phone late at night while he gets ready for bed to invite him over for dinner with his mother. He attempts to get out of it, but feels obliged to say yes when Martin mentions that his mother has not seen Steven since his father was

in the hospital under his care. At this point, an eerie score of strings keys the viewer into a sensation of guilt on behalf of Steven, realizing that he might have had something to do with the death. Their conversation on the phone carries forward into the following scene at daytime, where Steven walks to his car in the parking lot of the hospital. Martin becomes increasingly persistent in his insistence that Steven needs to come to dinner, his voice echoing scratchily from the other end of the phone. In the parking lot as Steven drives away and their phone conversation from the previous night ends, he sees Martin scurrying around parked cars as if to suggest Martin was following him.

The formal complexity of continuous dialogue as such works to connect separate scenes and build up a layering of temporalities, one from the present daytime moment and one from the night before. This confrontation of disjointed sound and image is jarring and at first produces a sense of alienation, but simultaneously creates a unique temporal engagement that viewers are forced to follow. Acting as a bridge between what we might understand as two movement-images, the dialogue between Martin and Steven becomes a conceptual connector outside of the visual index of movement—it positions itself in the realm of the time-image, which contributes to the construction of the temporality of dread. As Martin's presence in Steven's life becomes more suspicious and insidious in the narrative, the construction of the film itself breaks open temporally, allowing Martin to leak through the cracks of the scenic sequence and incorporate into the film's affective patterning. As a representational harbinger of dread itself, Martin comes into increasingly close confrontation with Steven's family by enacting a curse that remains logically unknown, but is hinted at by disruptive formal elements in the film's montage—he does not abide by the rules of the world depicted in the film, nor by the rules of how the film itself is composed.

Returning to the temporal layout of dread, we can recall that dread is engaged with temporalities that expand past the boundaries of the film's duration, unlike suspense which I have argued resolves itself within the length of the film. Of course, both of these affective procedures constitute the wider affective system of *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, but by different means and varying temporal registers. Where suspense can be located in specific moments like the revelation of Martin's curse, Bob suddenly losing mobility in his legs, or Steven shooting one of his children at random, these temporary bursts of excitation or suspension experience closure by completion of the act. While not resolved per se, these short-lived visceral thrillings differ from the temporalities of dread that undergird these more sensational instances. I have explored how particular scenes of movement make themselves *about* time through a collection of

movement-images that constitute an overall time-image. Across varied techniques of cinematographic estrangement and abstraction of space, the temporalities of dread are revealed as an interspersed logic that permeates each surrounding scene and overarching sequence. Forward motion through alienated space therefore indexes a sense of dragging forward, forcefully pulling viewers along a temporality we are required to come to terms with—an inevitable, fatal outcome for the main characters on screen. The sonic landscape of Martin's voiceovers also creates a sense of a dragging effect, in which a given scene is layered with dialogue from the previous. In this moment of temporal layering, we are momentarily thrust out of logical continuity into a complicated sense of time, which I have suggested is also the dislodged and diffuse space of dread. In this way, we are unwillingly pulled forward by these layered dialogues, forced into the next scene that confronts Steven's family with Martin's presence which itself indicates their imminent demise.

Inevitable fate as such directly engages a longer temporality that extends beyond the film's frame and into the realm of real experience, which identifies an affective engagement that does not resolve within the scope of the film itself. Death and the awareness of its inescapability points to a wider existential contestation. Enforced by Steven's multiple failed attempts to escape Martin's curse on his family, which are visually exacerbated by a skewed and uncomfortable cinematographic and visual language, an atmosphere of dread lingers beyond the striking of tragedy. With no prevailing resolution for characters and a twisted sense of justice awarded to the antagonist, dread leaks out of the film to the audience's own grappling with the imminent arrival of death as an absolute.

The temporalities of dread at play in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* are manifold and complex, creating a system of affect that pulls viewers along several temporal registers. They suspend us above the causal and linear linkage of scenes and drag us into a rhythm of cyclical repetition in which an impending outcome of death is just around the corner. Emerging consistently through a patterning of movement that repeats not only within given scenes but at the structural level of the film's sequence at large, the affective dimension of dread makes itself palpable as first a whisper which slowly grows into an overwhelming swath. In this essay, I have argued that the cultivation of dread in Lanthimos' film fits squarely with the process of affective practice, which privileges the over-determined figurations that emerge through repetition. As such, persistent and consistent camera movements, as well as jarring sonic techniques, over-determine a sense of pure unease in this film, suggesting that the affect of dread is one that requires careful and slow reiteration. Leaning into

dread as embedded in form speaks to Lanthimos' filmic expression of tragic inevitability, building from classical narrative structures based in myth—it is in this way that his film both constructs and performs dread. Though I have gestured toward a sense of a collective affective engagement in this horror film as one that grapples with an existential awareness of death, my focus on the internal mechanisms of movement and temporality and their adjacency to affective production have been primary. Ultimately, an affective approach seeks to intervene into existing scholarship by returning to representation rather than reifying affective experience into discrete categories and vying for a unified experience across diverse audiences. As such, the felt capacity of this affective exchange is open to a range of expressions. Through patterned engagements with movement and temporality, the affect of dread extends itself past the durational boundaries of the film by communicating an inevitable facticity of death. Transcending the screen in this way, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* activates a starting point of existential thought with no resolution—that a tragic fate is not exclusive to the characters we see on screen, but a definite outcome that will perturb our experience to no end.²

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The Uncanny Changes Hands: Promoting and Managing Hitchcock's *Psycho* on American Television

Alex Remington

What works on film does not necessarily work on television. This essay uses the tangled feature sale of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) to air on American broadcast television in late 1966 to explore the collision of television regulation, discourses about violence and the horror genre, and the relationship between film and television. Paying a hefty sum to acquire the film for broadcast, CBS encountered multiple problems shaping the film's arrival on television and ultimately sold the film without airing it. At a moment when the American film industry desperately needed television and television demanded more film product, CBS's attempts to promote a famously shocking and profitable film by highlighting its changes for television spoke volumes about the recursive relationship between cultural respectability and economic might within which horror often finds itself trapped. The perception of the horror genre as violent proved to be simultaneously alluring and unwise for CBS, and the problems surrounding *Psycho*'s transition shed light on the jagged corners of an integrated media landscape. *What* can be said *where* depends as much on industrial practices as it does on reception contexts, and this paper argues that practices like promotion and risk management are integral for understanding how horror was managed for television. Mixing analysis of regulatory policy with scholarly literature about media industries, as well as press coverage of *Psycho*'s sale to television, I highlight the industrial discourses surrounding CBS's management of the potentially volatile relationship between increasingly explicit horror films and their distribution on television. I also underscore where the relationship between television and film, particularly the intermedial space of film on television, produced particular forms of horror.

***Psycho* Makes the Move (or Return) to Television**

Before looking at how CBS navigated *Psycho*'s initial move to broadcast television, it is helpful to understand how Hitchcock's feature film was tied to television since its inception. Much has been said regarding Hitchcock's self-

financing of the film and foregoing of a director's fee for a stake in the film's negative, but less has been noted of *Psycho*'s discursive and visual associations with television. Stephen Rebello (1991) notes that the director aimed to reduce expenses associated with the film by planning it similarly to his big-budget films but shooting it quickly and inexpensively with his Shamley Productions unit like an episode of his TV series (26). From the outset, *Psycho* inhabited a peculiar position in the art-versus-commerce discourse that characterized—separated, really—television and film. Not quite a big-budget studio feature, nor solely a television episode, *Psycho* was an “experiment in solving movie-type problems with television solutions” (Rebello 1991, 189). Realism and speed were hallmarks of the production, and these and other industrial techniques associated with a televisual model helped to produce a distinctive visual language for the film. One interesting detail indicative of the television episode/feature film dynamic is the use of Edsels, Fairlanes, and Mercury models in the car lot Marion Crane visits after leaving Phoenix with stolen cash. Ford Motor Company was a sponsor of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and a decision was made to feature Ford cars within the film (Rebello 1991, 82). Here advertising enters the film frames of *Psycho*, further blurring the television/film boundaries and showing how tenuous the conception of film as an artistic medium free from commercial advertising restraints could be. Without forcefully overstating the connection, the point here is to highlight claims made by Jennifer Porst (2021) and Christopher Anderson (1994) that television and film were deeply connected rather than oppositional industries. *Psycho* shows just how deep this connection was; the film grew, quite literally, out of television, and the fingerprints of television are felt on this widely influential horror film.

Psycho's return to the television context in which it originated was documented over the course of a year by various newspapers and industrial trades. During the summer of 1966 it was announced that CBS had acquired the rights to the movie and would be airing the film during the following season (Adams 1966a). NBC had passed on the opportunity (Glaser 1966). The film was set to air on CBS stations and affiliates as the feature for “C.B.S. Friday Night at the Movies” on September 23, 1966, but CBS abruptly cancelled the airing that week (Gent 1966). Several trades reported that the murder of Valerie Jeanne Percy, daughter of Republican Senatorial candidate for Illinois Charles H. Percy, prompted multiple CBS affiliates to inform the network they would not show *Psycho* (*Broadcasting Magazine* 1966; Gent 1966; *Variety* 1966). Concerns about content, particularly the murder of Marion Crane, and the timing in regards to the Percy murder were raised by affiliates, and a decision was made by CBS to cancel the airing and postpone it until a later date. Several articles

appear towards the end of 1966 to discuss the cancellation and possible re-scheduling of the film. William H. Tankersley, then CBS vice president, offered that *Psycho* would be released to CBS broadcast stations and affiliates in the spring of 1967 (Hudson 1966). In a rather abrupt about-face, CBS announced mere weeks later that it would *not* air *Psycho* on any of its stations. The cancellation “was based on the network view that the movie was quite acceptable for the theatrical use but was not at all right to send to homes that tune in CBS” (Adams 1966b). Another article revealed that CBS reportedly paid \$800,000 to secure the broadcast rights, and “it seems in order to commend the network for its decision” to presumably maintain its status as a cultural authority and sell the rights (Molloy 1967). Several months later, *The New York Times* (1967) affirmed WABC-TV in New York was set to air *Psycho* on June 24, 1967.

On a conceptual register, thinking through horror’s assumption of different forms when moving from feature film to television in an increasingly integrated media environment is a study in how volatile cultural forms engage with industrial and regulatory frameworks. As the horror genre navigated the migration from film to television—and as television became an influential “author” for the horror genre—it moved from a filmic arena defined in contradistinction to the domestic space to a televisual arena primarily oriented towards the American family by advertisers and networks (Spigel 1992).¹ Involved in this transition were industrial forms and practices, like advertising and self-regulation, that created a unique discursive space within which the horror genre operated. Interestingly, though, *Psycho* did not quite change as much as would be expected in a “family” space. What these regulatory efforts hoped to achieve and what they realistically achieved at the reception level never quite matched. Nevertheless, conversations *around* the film’s move to television tell us much about how horror creators and distributors navigated the genre’s own perception by networks, critics, and television audiences. At stake here are questions of what horror is and is not, especially as television became an increasingly strategic economic space for Hollywood. A second goal of this case study is to think more deeply about “suitable” fare for television, particularly as the horror genre became welded in the public perception to violence. The question of acceptability—and the limits of such—is essential because television became so deeply intertwined with American domesticity by advertisers, trades, and networks that, regardless of whether the medium itself seamlessly equates

¹ The potential CBS showing of *Psycho* would not be the first time the film moved to television. The film appeared in November 1960 on Canadian pay-TV without the furor surrounding the film’s move to American television (*Broadcasting* 1961).

with the domestic, industrial practices like regulation and promotion reflected public discourses around acceptability and shaped the horror genre “at home.”

Scholarship that examines industrial and regulatory structures related to the film-television dynamic has been essential to understanding *Psycho*’s transition to television. Porst (2021) notes that Hollywood’s sale of feature films to television was ultimately about economics and strategic programming policies rather than an “aha” moment regarding television’s ascendance in midcentury America (2021, 44), and she looks at discursive and industrial sites essential to crafting feature film appearances on television like court cases, trade associations, policy documents, and shifting contexts around labor and rights. This analytical move reorients our understanding of genre beyond the screen to the diverse sites of genre “authorship” that are profoundly influential. In that vein, Kevin Heffernan (2004; 2014) is helpful for underscoring the broader historical contexts of integrated media distribution and exhibition related to the horror genre. Horror is as much an industrial form as it an aesthetic, psychoanalytic, ideological, or affective one, and Heffernan affirms this by highlighting where industrial practices like distribution and promotion shaped particular forms of horror. Deborah L. Jaramillo’s *The Television Code* (2018) is indispensable for triangulating industry, form, and television. In looking at the practices and discourses of television (self) regulation, Jaramillo provides a roadmap for understanding the twinned industrial and cultural forces shaping horror on television, and regulatory policy is equally informed by both.

A second useful body of literature is one loosely composed of horror television and *Psycho* scholarship. The scholarship on horror television is increasingly rich and varied, as evidenced by books like *TV Horror: Investigating the Dark Side of the Small Screen* (Jowett and Abbott 2013), and emerging analyses of television horror have done the heavy lifting to “break open” film-based conceptions of horror that hold the most influence over structuring academic approaches to the genre. *Psycho* becomes an interesting object here because it bridges academic work in both film and television studies due to its genesis—so to speak—in Hitchcock’s use of his television production unit Shamley Productions to produce the film. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (CBS 1955) necessarily becomes part of the conversation, and tracking *Psycho*’s move from film exhibition to television requires an understanding of television horror in midcentury America. Marc Jancovich (2018) broaches this conversation and emphasizes that any understanding of the horror genre on television begins with television’s social construction as a domestic medium. Hitchcock himself is a horror host in his eponymous television series, and Phillip Hutchison (2018) situates the roles of darkly comic horror hosts in containing generic horror

content on television. Jancovich and Hutchison's research is helpful for thinking through media specificity and the role of the horror host in horror's move from film to television. Last, but certainly of equal importance, Stephen Rebello's *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (1991) has been helpful for navigating the television-film-television trajectory of horror's most famous boy next door.

“A Very Adult Quality”

Psycho's move foregrounds CBS's attempts to manage potential risks arising from the ambivalence around filmic horror on television, particularly considering the genre's association with violence, as it navigated the regulatory policies of the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters' Television Code. Adopted in 1952 (and lasting until 1983), the Television Code was a form of self-regulation promulgated by television trade associations to protect television, then a fledgling medium, from threats of government intervention and to standardize content to sustain and enlarge viewership for the purposes of selling “eyeballs” to advertisers (Jaramillo 2018). As Deborah Jaramillo notes, “the Television Code deferred to democracy and capitalism—not morality—as ultimate authorities” (2018, 16). That does not mean morality was absent from the conversation, however. Defining suitable content for television, an effort designed to attract and capture television viewers with the promise of widely appealing and inoffensive programming, was an integral part of the Television Code. The Code flexed its morality-for-the-sake-of-commerce muscles by incorporating language that decried the use of horror for the sake of horror and “fraught sensory experiences” (Jaramillo 2018, 101). These elements might alienate viewers and, worse yet, alienate advertisers. Purveyors of television horror thus bore the responsibility of walking a tightrope with audiences for the sake of increased viewership and advertising revenue.

Present throughout much of the trade discourse surrounding *Psycho*'s move to television was an emphasis on censorship and editing, with much being said about the film serving as an important litmus test for how horrific feature films could be edited for television. During conversations about the postponement of the film, a CBS spokesman offered that the film was purchased with a “right to edit” and expressed reservations about whether *Psycho*, given its notable status as a feature film in the horror genre, could be

made palatable for television viewers (*Broadcasting Magazine* 1966, 68).² A similar sentiment is echoed with the suggestion that “it seems obvious now that the movie content does not meet the network’s standard for home viewing” (Molloy 1966). WABC-TV offers its own take on the editing controversy, noting that “the scene in which a woman is stabbed in a shower would be cut down somewhat ‘to show possibly three stabs instead of the entire 12’” (*The New York Times* 1967). This comment is rather revealing when it comes to the transmutation of *Psycho*: when it finally comes to air, it is not necessarily the shower scene *itself* which causes concern but the *number* of shots contained within said scene—its duration. What is never in question, however, is the need to edit the film. It was unfathomable to networks and advertisers that *Psycho* would make it to broadcast intact. The same CBS spokesman who expressed reservations about the film’s suitability for family viewing also remarked that the edited version of the film shown to CBS affiliates before its initial airing “took out the horror but kept the suspense” (*Broadcasting Magazine* 1966, 68). A nearly identical “shifting” of genre occurs when Tankersley, the same CBS executive defending the decision to reschedule the film in light of the Percy murder, opines that cancelling the broadcast airing of *Psycho* would be tantamount to ruling out a “good murder mystery” (Hudson 1966). Discursive slippages around the horror genre enabled CBS to capitalize on the ability to shift perception of horror programming to “suspense” or “mystery” programming, a strategy that would take center stage as a method to bring horror feature films to television. This ability to shift the generic positioning of television fare had previously been navigated by television series such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64), *The Outer Limits* (1963-65), and *Thriller* (1960-62), and each of these series walked a fine line between out-and-out “horror” themes and those related to science-fiction, mystery, or suspense. By the time *Psycho* was set to air in September 1966, these series had ended their original runs, but the practice of shifting or hybridizing generic content for television audiences persisted.

The need to edit *Psycho* for broadcast television “suitability” also speaks to an emerging media practice around the sale of features to television that depended on controversial content in film being standardized for imagined

² The reservations about *Psycho*’s telecast are interesting given the film’s famous emphasis on the cinematic experience. Filmgoers were warned that admittance after the start of the film would be barred to minimize “distraction” and preserve the unity of the filmgoing experience. *Psycho*, in other words, was promoted as an experience only available to moviegoers, which makes it a curious test for television distribution of modernized horror fare. It is thus worth noting the important role the horror genre plays in the contested spaces of television and film reception.

television audiences. This practice revolved around the regulatory centering of children and families as the imagined users of television, and this positioning worked to shore up economic imperatives for both film and television. In the late 1960s, Hollywood's motion picture Production Code was effectively abandoned to make the film industry more competitive with less inhibited features coming from European filmmakers. At the same time, the film industry had grown increasingly aware of the need to sell features to television as a form of economic viability, and the television industry was equally aware that it needed more programming to fill its airwaves (Heffernan 2004; Heffernan 2014). At this pivotal moment, it became clear that a conflict existed between the need for the American film industry to compete with other markets through less restricted content and the need for American features to sell through television, a market defined primarily in relation to the American home and family. Though the film Production Code may no longer have been dominant, television still depended upon its own self-regulation to protect its commercial interests.³ *Psycho*, especially in trade discourse, became a particularly compelling case study for how feature content would migrate to television in a newly liberated film environment, and this conflict was codified in the discursive relationship constructed between adult, child, and television. A group of Westinghouse stations, among the first to decline airing *Psycho*, cautioned that the new crop of feature films vying for market dominance in the late 1960s exuded a "very adult quality," and that a station policy review was necessary to ensure television programming did not create unusual or embarrassing conversations between adults and children in households (Gent 1966). It is possible that the potential broadcast of *Psycho* was closely watched by industry critics because it indicated how the conflicts between market imperatives for film and television industries would proceed, and this complicated dance between lurid filmic content and less-lurid television content was being navigated (though by no means solely) by Norman Bates, a character born out of television production strategies who went on to infamy in a feature film.

A final point to consider is how *Psycho* navigated the relationships among horror, advertising, and regulation. Mentions of advertising are curiously left out

³ Despite (and often because of) the self-regulation of the television industry promulgated by the Television Code, debates over programming—and violence in particular—were highly visible in the 1960s. Newton Minow's famous "Vast Wasteland" speech on 9 May, 1961 set the stage for continued debates over violence on television that resurfaced two years after *Psycho*'s sale to television when Senator John O. Pastore initiated "an inquiry into the effect of televised crime and violence and anti-social behavior by individuals" (Surgeon General 1972). The latter, perhaps unsurprisingly, centered the relationship between media content and children, reinforcing television's discursive construction as a domestic medium.

of trade discussions about *Psycho*'s distribution on television. Extant copies of *Psycho*'s original broadcast on WABC are difficult, if not impossible, to come by, so it becomes a matter of inference and imagination to ascertain sponsors' and advertisers' relationships to the televised film. One viable inference is that CBS was aware that furor over the shower scene would surface when *Psycho*'s transition to film was announced, so efforts were taken to ensure television audiences were aware the scene was being edited to minimize frightful aesthetics or lurid content. When the film's broadcast was first announced, it was explicitly mentioned in *The New York Times* that CBS executives believed the shower scene "could be suitably sheared a bit here and there without destroying the dramatic impact" (Adams 1966a). At the other end of this saga, WABC ensured audiences the shower scene would be edited down. What is at stake here is a fragile ecosystem where infamous generic fare must be balanced with viewership-generated advertising revenue. The TV Code was extremely important in staving off less standardized fare that might threaten television's economic system, and CBS had the unenviable task of attracting viewers while allaying fear through censorship. In an ironic twist, trailers for *Psycho* could not be shown on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episodes due to the TV Code. *Sponsor* (1960) offers that "the tease of the coming attraction in a theater is transformed into uncontrolled titillation and suggestiveness on the home screen." That *Psycho*—a film shot with a television crew using televisual techniques—could not be advertised on the very television show for which its "film" crew worked highlights the discursive problems the horror genre has encountered while navigating integrated media industries.

Branding the Horror Genre as Violent

Closely tied to television regulation is the relationship between violence and the horror genre, and *Psycho* had to carefully navigate this discursive branding of the genre. It is important to highlight how the term "horror" was used in connection with violence in trade discourse, and that this connection guaranteed that *Psycho*'s move to television would conflict with the aims of television regulation. Though violence occurs in any number of films or sets of films, including the "crime" and "action" genres,⁴ it is considered unusually threatening when viewed in conjunction with "horror." From the outset of its

⁴ These generic terms—including "horror"—should be used with a dose of caution as the concept of genre itself brings about a number of ontological and epistemological problems. Kendall Phillips (2018) discusses this in relation to the horror genre in *A Place of Darkness*.

move to broadcast television, *Psycho* is repeatedly discussed through the lens of murder using the famous shower scene. The same summer-1966 *New York Times* article featuring a CBS executive ruminating on how to trim the shower scene begins by describing the film as containing a “celebrated scene in which Janet Leigh is slashed by a knife wielder” (Adams 1966a). In later articles documenting its move, *Psycho* is described as a “1960 shocker about a brutal psychopath who murders several women” (Gent 1966; Glaser 1966; Adams 1966b). *Psycho*, however, does not feature the murder of multiple women. This misremembering is curious in that it speaks to the spectacle of violence welded to this particular film and this particular genre. Without putting too fine a point on this, it can be inferred that *Psycho* was constructed and received in the late 1960s public imaginary simply as a movie about murder. Regardless, descriptions around *Psycho* and its potential CBS showing elide a number of notable uncanny elements in the film, including categorical transgression, doubling, and Gothic family houses. This is not to suggest the film should be understood *outside* of the violence of its famous shower scene, but rather that contemporary accounts stressed this particular thematic over other qualities of the film that might be considered more subtle. Nevertheless, a film that had its first run in theaters nearly a decade before was being re-associated with violence—and generally *only* violence in the cultural and industry imaginary.

The real-life Percy murder that occurred days before the scheduled airing of *Psycho* brought the conversations about horror and violence into stark relief. CBS made the understandable decision to forego showing the film given the real-life horrific events occupying national headlines, and the airing of a film that had been recently remembered in newspapers as a film about a murderous stranger would surely have been questionable to many viewers (not to mention broadcasting stations and advertisers). The juxtaposition of these two events—the Percy murder and the airing of *Psycho*—reinforced the association between the horror genre and violence, and this association was something CBS would grapple with while it determined whether the film could make it to air. This can be seen in coverage of *Psycho*’s *imminent television debut* after the Percy murder, where CBS executives quickly moved to position their product as a mystery or suspense film. *Psycho* *is* a suspense and mystery film, but it seems the discursive trap in which the network found itself was promoting the telecast of *Psycho* through emphasis on its violent shower scene and then desperately trying to change the public narrative around its product after real-life violence intervened. Discussing the film’s airing on television through attention to its more fear-inducing scenes might have been unwise for a medium protected by self-regulatory language designed explicitly around warding off questionable subject

matter. The Percy murder ultimately pushed CBS to scramble for new press directions and underscored the jagged edges of American television, the horror genre, and discourses about media effects and violence.

Comedy, or at least the containment of fear through comedy, served as one method for feature films categorized as “horror” to gain distribution in the television industry. Scholarship on the development of horror hosts like Vampira and Zacherley emphasizes the ritual of comedic horror hosting that served to contain the spectacle of horror films as they were sold into television syndication, and this ritual often allowed rather progressive (or salacious, depending on the viewpoint) fare to enter homes via television (Hutchison 2018). Airing in syndication and often on unaffiliated, independent stations, these curated horror offerings were allowed more leeway in terms of content because the Television Code did not have to be followed as stringently. The intermedial position of horror films on television (including the liminal spaces of off-broadcast) thus created an ambivalent televisual space where comedy and fear intermingled. Jancovich (2018) notes that Hitchcock’s intros and outros for his television series serve to reinforce television viewers’ sense of existence in the same mundane realm as his macabre stories rather than distance them from it, but the director-horror host still provides a sense of familiarity and humor (though ghoulish) that contains these episodic narratives. *Psycho* has the same *lack* of distance characteristic of Hitchcock’s series and an ambivalent relationship to containment characteristic of horror films on television. Characters like the sheriff and his wife arguably provide attempts at humor through their exaggerated reactions, but this humor does little to allay the disconcerting thrust of the film’s narrative. Likewise, the psychiatrist’s Freudian analysis at the conclusion of the film is a semblance of containment that issues little relief. Narrative distance is collapsed in *Psycho*, and there is not enough containment humor to soothe viewers. *Psycho*, an uncanny media product transgressing the boundaries between television/film and generic horror/suspense, might have been destined to encounter problems in the television market. It was constructed as terrifyingly ordinary, positioned as spectacularly violent, and bereft of any substantive containment. No amount of public re-branding after the Percy murder would help CBS recoup its initial cost, and the film was quietly aired through a different network station almost a year after it first entered newspapers as a shiny offering for the 1966 September schedule.

Conclusion

Psycho's move to television speaks to how the intertwined natures of film and television exerted force on the horror genre. The regulatory goals for early decades of television differed from those of the motion picture industry, and the conflicting desires to safeguard the medium for commercial reasons yet capitalize on feature sales to television resulted in razor-sharp editing that kept (mostly) intact popular yet lurid film scenes and minimized their potential displeasure to an imagined homogenous television audience. In opposition to the view of film and television as distinct quarters producing siloed forms of generic fare, the case of *Psycho* shows how deeply imbricated these two industries were. The film industry needed television, and television needed film product on its airwaves. *Psycho*'s intermedial position as a feature film born from television—and making its way back to television—underscored the tricky waters of risk management, American cultural values, and promotion that formed an important part of Hollywood structures. After the initial brouhaha surrounding its release on broadcast television, programming controversies surrounding the film's exhibition on television continued to plague the film. In one instance, KGO-TV in San Francisco fielded a "barrage of phone calls from parents who did not wish their moppets to be confronted with such post-school Hitchcockian horror" after the station planned to air the film in its 3:30pm slot (*Variety* 1977). Beyond this, *Psycho* would go on to have multiple televisual afterlives, including the made-for-TV *Psycho IV* (1990) and the recent *Bates Motel* (2013-17), both of which press hard on the more lurid aspects of the original film.

Horror on film and, increasingly, horror on television are often conceived through medium-specific analyses, and *Psycho*'s shift from theatrical to television distribution blurs these boundaries. It might be helpful to set down the medium-specific lens and think about how (and where) horror interacted with a diverse set of industrial structures and practices that were often interdependent rather than individual. Television networks and advertisers depended on popular cinema that was re-shaped for television to lure viewers to the small screen, and the film industry became increasingly aware of the need to produce features that were cinematically distinct but capable of being distributed to television. The horror genre, which can be both popular and extreme in its orientation, is fertile soil for understanding how media industry practices like regulation, promotion, and risk management shaped media products navigating interconnected industries and where the industrial demands

of Hollywood, from television advertising to feature film sales, inscribed popular generic forms.

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A Theory of the Gag: Comedic Mechanisms in Exploitation Film Form

Kate J. Russell

In *The Corpse Grinders* (Ted V. Mikels, 1971), the nefarious owners of the Lotus Cat Food Company discuss their struggles over a lack of fresh ingredients. One of them, Landau, summons an employee, Willy, to the office with the implication that Willy will become the missing ingredient necessary to keep production going. Gripping the employee around the neck and shoulders in a gesture of false intimacy, Landau asks if he would finally like to see “the back room,” a space that Willy has previously been admonished for entering. As Willy and Landau continue their conversation, shock cuts to the “back room” are interspersed between the two men talking. These split-second inserts are jarring and abrupt, but they comedically augment the conversation about the employee’s new vocation in the back room and what actually occurs there, which is the titular corpse grinding. The blunt inserts of a meat grinder churning out minced matter with a bright red filter are moments of comedy in an exploitation film, playing with the simultaneous separation and conjoining of distinct and seemingly irreconcilable realities as a comedic procedure. But Ted V. Mikels’ shock cuts to the backroom are far from the only such comedic moments in exploitation films. Many exploitation directors, such as Mikels, Herschell Gordon Lewis, Frank Henenlotter, Russ Meyer, Doris Wishman, and John Waters, use comedy not just as a way of playing with or distracting from low budget aesthetics but as an intrinsic part of their films’ formal composition. These films do not provoke laughter simply because of their material paucity and technical ineptitude; rather, their directors, aware of the material limitations that comes with a lack of finance, deliberately employ a comedic mode that works through horrific and gross-out images.

In what follows, I advance a theory of the gag in low budget exploitation horror films that attends to the intersections of horror and disgust in relation to comedy, arguing that these gags operate through a complication of comedy’s incongruity thesis, which posits that comedy emerges through the juxtaposition

of incongruous elements or a surprising revelation.¹ Working through Alenka Zupančič's approach to comedy's processes as a short circuit between heterogeneous orders that illuminates their connection via the very gap between them, I argue that there is more at stake than just the incongruous thwarting of expectation (Zupančič 2008, 6). This particular concept of the gag develops from its position in comedy more generally as a self-contained unit of entertainment that arrests the spectator's attention and disrupts the forward trajectory of narrative, culminating in a punchline or visual joke that is accompanied by an uproarious burst of laughter. The gags I am examining here also have this capacity to interrupt narrative with outlandish spectacles, but the term "gag" has other meanings, meanings that I pursue in relation to moments of comedy in exploitation films. The term "gag" has its etymological roots in the sound made when choking, an onomatopoeic origin that has developed to mean to either choke or retch, and obsolete meanings include allusions to violence, as "gag" once referred to dealing a sharp blow to or wounding of another.² Intertwining these meanings of the "gag" in relation to its use in comedy to refer to a self-contained humorous situation or joke, I argue for taking seriously the potential for exploitation films that use revolting or horrific imagery to employ mechanisms that become comedic precisely through form rather than content.

Outlining two different kinds of gags, the horrific gag and the gross-out gag, I examine how the experience of laughter in exploitation cinema is dependent on and produced by the form of material images of rupture and transgression on screen. Exploitation films traffic in the sensational and scandalous, and in its classical period (1919-1959), as defined by Eric Schaefer, they lured their audiences through promises of salacious subject matter unavailable in mainstream cinema, even if they rarely come through on their promises of violence and titillation thanks to local censorship. Made cheaply and independently, exploitation films present "topics that censorship bodies and the organized industry's self-regulatory mechanisms prohibited," bringing to the screen "forbidden spectacles" (Schaefer 1999, 2). The films I discuss as exploitation came after the classical period had ended, when exploitation films were largely able to fulfill their pledge to expose the audience to sensational

¹ For examples of the incongruity thesis of comedy in philosophy, see Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 223; and James Beattie, *Essays: On Poetry and Music, As They Affect the Mind; On Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition; On the Usefulness of Classical Learning* (London: Printed for E. and C. Dilly, In The Poultry; And W. Creech, Edinburgh, 1779), 320, 321.

² See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "gag (v.1)" and "gag (v.2)" (source: *OED Online*, URLs in References list).

sights of sex and depravity, although they still share many of the hallmarks of the classical exploitation film, particularly low budget aesthetics. I am using the term “exploitation,” then, in what has come to be its more vernacular sense, in that these films exploited a particular subject matter and presented it in a sensationalist way, whether it’s the horror of pulverized and dismembered bodies or the revulsion of ingesting invertebrates and feces. While exploitation has always foregrounded its sensationalist aspects, what is less obvious is how a later generation of filmmakers working in an exploitation style also employ comedy as a deliberate strategy of additional pleasure. My approach is not concerned with *why* viewers laugh at such horrific and revolting imagery in terms that are specifically content-motivated. This theory of the gag offers an elaboration of the pleasures of transgressive texts by examining comedy as formal mechanism inherent in the shocking image and its construction.

Horror Comedy, and the Comedy of Horror

Horror and comedy are curious bedfellows in that they seek out the elicitation of divergent affective responses, as laughter is a “release” and entails an outward expansion of the body, while horror is constricting and elicits “feelings of pressure, heaviness, and claustrophobia” (Carroll 1999, 145). And yet these affective responses, bodily and visceral, have much in common. The involuntary shriek of terror at a jump scare or burst of laughter at a pratfall both seize the body immediately with vocal and corporeal discharges. Noel Carroll also illuminates how theories of comedy and horror often overlap, such as Freud’s contention that both jokes and the uncanny summon the repressed, while Jenstch’s unsettling automaton parallels Henri’s Bergson’s humorous human become mechanical (Carroll 1999, 146). Carroll is invested specifically in texts that are a confluence of horror and comedy, such as *Beetlejuice* (Tim Burton, 1988), and he reads comedy’s incongruity thesis as productive for thinking through its relationship with horror, because it involves the transgression of norms, subverts expectations, and disrupts usual categorizations (Carroll 1999, 154). It is through this disturbance that Carroll locates horror’s affinity with comedy, as horror is also invested, albeit with different objects, in the upsetting of strict demarcations and ideas of impurity and contamination (Carroll 1999, 154). When introduced to one another in a melding of genres, questions surrounding this confluence tend to focus on what each mode brings to the other: does comedy temper the existential threat of horror? Do we laugh to alleviate our fears? Do violent and transgressive images invite a more intense

hilarity because laughter offers a release.³ Such an approach is touched upon by Philip Brophy, who coined the term “horrorality” to account for how contemporary horror films in the late 1970s and 1980s explored ideas of “horror, textuality, morality, hilarity” (Brophy 1986, 3). The deliberate comedy of a film such as *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1982) is acknowledged as a crucial component of this era of horror, “especially if used as an undercutting agent to counter-balance its more horrific moments” (Brophy 1986, 12). Laughter is evoked as a mitigation strategy in a new kind of horror film that pummels its audience with violence and frights rather than thinking through how the film creates comedy formally.

While attention has been paid to horror and comedy as complementary modes, transgressive exploitation films are rarely discussed in terms of the humour that they produce, despite being replete with gags that both disgust and amuse. Perhaps this oversight is due to the additional questions that exploitation horror films raise about perceived superiority over a text that is assumed to be failing in its attempts at levity and fright. The exploitation film that acquires cult status might be read through the lens of Jeffrey Sconce’s paracinema, a reading strategy that entails a reverse elitism through the valorisation of films that are technically “bad,” with an ironic distance afforded by the spectator’s cultural capital (Sconce 1994, 382). Reflecting on how economies of cultural capital influenced this earlier study of the “paracinematic,” Sconce acknowledges that what is missing from the paracinematic approach are the “issues of pleasure, affect, and even obsession that attend a sincere passion for deviant cinema” (Sconce 2007, 8). In her study of alternative film cultures and their dissemination via VHS catalogues, Joan Hawkins also addresses the importance of affect. She argues, following Sconce, that the “operative criterion here is *affect*: the ability of a film to thrill, frighten, gross out, arouse, or otherwise directly engage the spectator’s body” (Hawkins 2000, 4). This emphasis on affect as well as the “desire [...] to see something ‘different’, something unlike contemporary Hollywood cinema” is the commonality between the highbrow art films and the lowbrow trash films that are indiscriminately catalogued alongside one another in catalogues such *Sinister Sinema* and *Psychotronic Video* (Hawkins 2000, 7). Yet the function of laughter specifically as a pleasurable affective response, particularly in a subset of transgressive cult films that deliberately use humour within the texts, is still notably absent from cult and exploitation film scholarship.

³ Such questions are important and are explored more fully in Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper’s edited collection, *The Laughing Dead: The Horror-Comedy Film from Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

Sconce's important work on the paracinematic was based on research into the content of fanzines and magazines such as *Psychotronic Video*, *Zontar*, and *Trashola* that specialized in elevating cultural detritus that shared no particular aesthetic or generic filiations beyond being neglected or outright disavowed by both mainstream and highbrow tastemakers. But the role of humour in a number of these texts is also overlooked, as evidenced by *Psychotronic Video*'s Michael J. Weldon's complaint in the foreword to the *Psychotronic Video Guide*—an encyclopedia of texts Weldon labels “psychotronic”—that he is “tired of too many horror comedies,” instead noting the importance of “Unwatchable and boring junk” to the psychotronic canon (Weldon 1996, x). There seems to be a reticence amongst scholars and fans alike to indulge in exploitation's appeals to comedy. I would conjecture that for scholars, it raises the thorny question of why fans enjoy laughing at bodily disfigurement with such gusto, and for fans, it risks devaluing the transgressive potential of horror to have it associated with a generic mode more accustomed to light-hearted fun. In response to these questions, I think about the gag as a formal mechanism that is not only invested in the objects of laughter but rather in comedy's processes and operations, and I think through transgression as a comedic formal movement that operates at the limit between an element and its radical other. The gag slips between seemingly irreconcilable elements, such as life and death, the base and the ideal, causing a revolted laugh that does not condescend to its objects, but rather acknowledges the innovative formal operations produced despite material, technical, and financial constraints.

A Brief History of Gagging

The gag has a long history in cinematic comedy, of course, particularly in relation to early silent slapstick comedies, erupting as a spectacle that disrupts the narrative and halts it in its tracks. While scholar Donald Crafton outlines a dialectical antagonism between gag and narrative, or the pie and the chase, in silent slapstick comedy (Crafton 2006, 355-364), Henry Jenkins notes that gags in early sound comedy had more diverse functions, sometimes contributing to narrative motivation or encapsulating themes (Jenkins 1992, 102). For Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, the gag may offer a digression from the main narrative, but the gag itself often functions as a narratively contained unit; it must have a punchline, or an ending (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 43). Although how I am conceiving of the gag in exploitation films is different to the traditional approach to the gag as a fundamental component of comedic writing and

performance, some of these tenets are crucial to developing a theory of the gag as a joke *and* a retch. For instance, Henry Jenkins argues that “Integrated or not, narrativized or not [...] gags retain an affective force apart from those functions; gags remain a source of audience fascination that competes directly with plot and character development” (Jenkins 1992, 104). It is this “affective force” that forms the basis of the effect of the two kinds of gag that I discuss, the horrific gag and the gross-out gag. The gag in traditional forms of comedy is often seen as the excuse for a narrative that stitches comedic ruptures together, a formula that is apparent in many exploitation films that create inventive narrative structures upon which to build spectacles of violence and disgust.

But these spectacles are not simply horrific and revolting, as filmmakers often deliberately play with humour in the production of these extravagant displays of gore and gross-out. As Donald Crafton argues, “Gags provide the opposite of epistemological comprehension by the spectator. They are atemporal bursts of violence and/or hedonism that are as ephemeral and as gratifying as the sight of someone’s pie-smitten face” (Crafton 2006, 363). Crafton’s description is evocative of exploitation films’ gags as it attends to the excess that erupts with an immediacy that momentarily visualizes and destabilizes the separation between distinct and oppositional elements through the transgression across and between them. I am not particularly concerned with how these gags function as a disruption to or augmentation of the narrative; rather, I want to think through how they travesty dialectics through their play with the seemingly incompatible as a comedic mechanism. Thus, my focus is not on the relationship between the gag and narrative, or in solidifying once and for all the ongoing debate about what exactly a gag is and its purpose in relation to narrative, but rather to extend the term to account for the rupture of comedy in unexpected places. The horrific gag and the gross-out gag incorporate many traits of the slapstick gag, but they are predicated on a specific confrontation between disgusting and horrific matter and the pleasures of comedy. The gag is a moment of surprise, a collision between two heterogeneous elements or orders that both wrenches them apart and sutures them together. An element of the unknown is crucial for the operation of the horrific gag and the gross-out gag, as they do not construct their comedy through obvious forms of wit or humour, even if traces of such forms emerge in an investigation of their mechanisms.

The theory of the gag as a comedic mechanism of horror and gross-out in exploitation is informed by Alenka Zupančič’s argument that “comedy thrives on all kinds of short circuits that establish an immediate connection between heterogeneous orders” (Zupančič 2008, 8). Zupančič reads the

structure of comedy through the work of thinkers who are invested in dualities and dialectics, including Hegel, Henri Bergson, and Jacques Lacan. She demonstrates how the comic engages with the concrete and universal, the living and the mechanical, and the organic and the symbolic, in ways that tell us something about the relationship between the two elements as a figuration of one that holds both in an unresolved tension. For instance, she complicates Bergson's thesis that comedy occurs when something "mechanical is encrusted on the living" (Bergson 1913, 37) by demonstrating how the mechanical is already an essential part of the living; when we behave automatically, we are perhaps most ourselves in "the inherent rigidity of our own 'living personality,'" and the social conformity Bergson believes laughter seeks out is founded upon rigid social codes and their "mechanical uniformity" rather the fluidity of the living subject (Zupančič 2008, 117, 113). Instead of viewing mechanism and liveliness as mutually exclusive, Zupančič engages with these concepts through their "inner connections and mutual implications" that work through comedy's play with dualities (Zupančič 2008, 122). Zupančič argues that "the first step of the comic is this splitting divergence of the One" while its second step "consists simply in the comedy playing and constructing, from that point on, with this duality in a specific way: showing us the inner connections and mutual implications of the two elements of the duality" (Zupančič 2008, 122). What is crucial to Zupančič's claim is that comedy does not simply illuminate dualities, or demonstrate contradiction within something, but that it holds contradiction and the divergence between heterogeneous elements as the very constitution of the comic. The duality is not resolved, but rather comedy operates within the gap that both splits apart and conjoins disparate elements and plays with contradictory elements that are already inherent within one another.

The Horrific Gag

In her consideration of comedy's mechanisms, Zupančič explores how comedy plays with dualities and oppositions at the very point of their paradoxical separation and conjunction, clarifying that "the immediacy that comedy thus puts forward is not that of a smooth imperceptible passing of one into another, but that of a material *cut* between them" (Zupančič 2008, 8). Film is a privileged medium for thinking through the gag that cuts between heterogeneous orders because of how editing is used to splice together radically incompatible elements in a way that also cements the relationship between them. The impossible elements of a gag can also occur within a frame, which I will work through later

in relation to the gross-out gag, but for now, the splice that both cuts and sutures is worth dwelling on. The perverse dialectic of the horrific gag operates through the spliced meat grinder frames inserted into the macabre conversation regarding replacement ingredients in *The Corpse Grinders*. The cross-cutting between the office conversation and the spliced meat grinder shots literalizes this material cut, a cut that in a very material way exposes the fundamental relationship between the two separate orders. The meat grinder shots are radically divorced from the unfolding narrative as a linear progression through space and time, but they also expose the dependence of the narrative upon the meat grinder as what occasions the unfolding horror. And yet the cut between these radically different spaces is also what sutures them together; the gag operates in this gap between the shots that reveals their inter-dependence upon one another.

There is a surface-level reading of these scenes that might attend to representation, particularly the representation of the simple-minded employee who is gullible and falls prey to Landau's grotesque machinations. If the viewer laughs at the employee, it might be argued that they have fallen into the trap of Henri Bergson's social corrective thesis, that laughter at absent-minded folks is designed to coerce conformity.⁴ In other words, if the viewer is laughing at the content of the scene, it is possible that they have aligned themselves with the villain and are laughing at the man too stupid to realize that he is agreeing to his own death because he is so accustomed to acquiescing to his employer's wishes. But the formal mechanism of the cut demonstrates an affinity with the operations of comedy as a mode that dabbles in the upsetting of structural norms, that plays with the relationship between oppositions in a way that reconfigures how they are perceived. The scene organizes the living subject and the dead object as distinct from one another, at the same time that the human being and the undifferentiated meat product are stitched together, demonstrating the fundamental inseparability of them from one another. The horrific gag often plays with this moment of rupture between a contained, living body and its sudden gory eruption through violence, a rupture between two opposed bodily states that come together in the brief shock cuts that disrupt linear temporality, that strike the spectator with the immediacy of comedy.

The detachment of the subject from its body is a recurring theme in comedy, as bodies behave in wayward ways that the subject seems unable to control, but in horror exploitation films, this detachment becomes actualized

⁴ Bergson argues that "Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed." (In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, translated by Cloudesly Brereton and Fred Rothwell, New York: MacMillan, 1913, 197).

through imaginative death scenes. In short comedic gags, such as when a person falls flat on their face, Zupančič notes how the ego may detach from its “It,” from its body. While the body is normally viewed as a coherent coincidence between itself and the ego, when someone trips up, their “collected” comportment is disrupted until they find their feet again (Zupančič 2008, 65). The coherent body undergoes a “comical decomposition” of its unity, which “confronts us directly with the question of the (missing) link between the two sides of the same reality that thus become visible again in the same “shot”—they are visible until the person “collects” herself again. We could say that the comic short circuit is a manifestation of the missing link which, in the very fact that it is missing, holds a given reality together, whereas Unity functions as a veiling of the missing link” (Zupančič 2008, 65). What is quite striking in this passage is how closely it resonates with the practice of splicing and suturing images together in cinema, where the gap between frames constitutes the very relationship between them. Editing creates meaning by structuring relationships between different shots and scenes and is usually designed to be as seamless as possible, to create coherence through discontinuity. However, the shock cuts in *The Corpse Grinders* aim for a deliberate disjoint between the scenes in the office and the meat grinder, a disjoint that nevertheless operates through a fundamental implied relationship between the two spaces. The shock cuts operate through a cleavage in both senses of the word as that which joins and that which rends apart, and comedy is what emerges in the impossible gap between the images.

The horrific gag works through primarily imagistic means, which chimes with Neale and Krutnik’s loose definition of the comedic gag as a “non-linguistic comic action” (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 51). Even when language is used, it is the image that does the comedic labour of demonstrating that the words have a double meaning, that the first level of language’s signification should not be taken at face value. In *The Corpse Grinders*, spliced images of horrific acts and insinuations gesture towards the disjoint between word and image, between language and visual representation, as characters deploy words with more sinister meanings, which are revealed by the graphic inserts. For example, when Landau explains to his boss that they “won’t be needing Caleb anymore,” that “the world is full of ingredients,” the delivery of these sentences is punctuated with splices of Landau’s accomplice attacking and strangling Caleb to death. There is often a split between “eyes and words” in comedic procedures for Zupančič, which not only demonstrates the divergence between what is heard and what is said, but in that deceptive words often betray a fundamental truth (Zupančič 2008, 81). The world is indeed full of cat food ingredients, if

one is willing to commit murder to source them, as demonstrated by the sharp inserts of strangulation. The cut between the conversation in the present and Landau's imagination of the murder also demonstrates the missing link between two distinct orders of temporality and spatiality and their relationship to one another, the missing link as an impossibility that also wrenches together the objective perception of the scene and Landau's subjective musings on it as a formal comedic mechanism.

The play with the slippery boundary between life and death is present in comedy proper, and as Zupančič points out, is often read as a lighthearted coping strategy for the inevitable demise of the individual human subject. However Zupančič complicates these theories of comedy that contend that comedy is immersed in the materiality of human existence because it is invested in "accepting the 'burden' of human finitude, its limitations and embarrassments, and finding joy in them" (Zupančič 2008, 46). Comedy is not just an amelioration of human finitude for Zupančič; rather, she examines how comedy exposes the leak in human finitude, a leak that discloses the inability to accept such finitude, hence the indestructibility of the comic body. Of course, these horror texts are also invested in the finitude of the human subject, but here it leads to the inevitable destruction at the hands of evil wrongdoers. And yet both *The Corpse Grinders* and *The Wizard of Gore* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1970) play with this finitude through temporal ruptures, through editing operations that oscillate between the living human and their post-death materiality as cat food and innards. The disjoint that occurs through the editing and its temporal realignment plays with finitude and its disavowal. In *The Corpse Grinders*, Willy's disavowal or inability to acknowledge his impending demise is intercut with the very materiality of his finitude; comedy emerges in the gap between these frames that demonstrates the intrusion of finitude into the denial of it.

The gags in *The Wizard of Gore* operate in a similar way to the gagging shock cuts in *The Corpse Grinders*, particularly via cuts that disrupt and suture realms of reality and fantasy. Montag the Magnificent is a magician who performs deadly stunts on stage in front of an audience, using hypnosis to lull the audience into observing and disavowing actual bodily harm and murder on the stage. Montag deploys typical magician tricks, such as sawing a person in half, except the veracity of his gory stunts is much more ambivalent, as a canny investigator uncovers when she learns that some of Montag's volunteers who left the theatre intact have subsequently dropped dead from horrific injuries. Lewis is perhaps best known for inaugurating the subgenre of "splatter horror" with excessive blood and animal guts intensifying the practical effects. The

intense gore of Lewis's oeuvre is explored by Kjetil Rødje in *Images of Blood in American Cinema*, a 2015 study which also avoids approaching low budget exploitation as films to be mocked for their lack of technical polish. I take up Rødje's assertion that these films deserve to be encountered through "a humorous or reparative approach" by examining the formal mechanisms that align with comedy's ruptures and its subsequent visceral spectatorial laughter (Rødje 2015, 72). Looking at how the gore effects in the film appear in a way that confuses reality and illusion, most often through cuts, demonstrates how they operate through comedy's simultaneous rupture and suture of heterogeneous realities in a way that is similar to shock splices in *The Corpse Grinders*.

When Montag performs his tricks, he asks a volunteer from the audience to come on stage to participate in the allegedly phony violence, and in various illusions he uses a chainsaw, a guillotine, a stake, a drill, and a sword to eviscerate his victim's body. Except, to the audience in the theatre, the body appears to remain completely unharmed. The magic scenes oscillate between images of bodily rupture, of eyeballs gouged out and guts disemboweled accompanied by guttural screams of terror and pain, and images of a quiet, contemplative audience observing the illusion with the woman's body intact, silent except for a light soundtrack of jingles. As scholars such as Linda Williams and Carol Clover have argued, the female body tends to bear the brunt of visceral violence in horror films (Williams 1991; Clover 1992), which renders laughter at the splatter film's gore effects potentially contentious as it presumes the laughter is directed against the victim as a subject. While not to dismiss these claims, I am interested in what happens when the violence dealt to a body is complicated through the formal processes of editing, particularly in these magic acts that play with the body's disintegration and reintegration. Here I find Eugenie Brinkema's radical formalism valuable in its attention to what happens when we treat violence, bodies and their viscera precisely as a problem of form, a form that in *The Wizard of Gore* is rendered comedic through the montage of divergent orders.⁵ Here, the impossible—actuality and illusion, life and death, the pristine body and its internal viscera—are jarringly cut, severed with an intensity that is augmented by the stark contrast in sound effects between the two orders. And yet, they are also sutured together at the same time, and the differentiation between the illusion and reality is never quite made clear throughout the film.

⁵ Brinkema asks, "what lines of thought are set loose by regarding horror as a deliverance *into* formality, not just for the aesthetic but for philosophy itself, that which intimately shares with horror the problem of how to think violence and ethics as nothing but problems of form?" Eugenie Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 24.

This disordering of levels of reality, then, has parallels with how Zupančič conceives of “comic duality” as not resulting from one element or order split into two parts that remain separated, but that it inheres in “the inconsistency of the One” (Zupančič 2008, 122). In other words, the formal operations of editing that create the inconsistency of a duality that is held in constant tension perform a comedic function in this gruesome text.

What is crucial to Zupančič’s claim is that comedy does not simply reveal dualities or contradictions, but that it is the gap between things that also constitutes their relationship; what is “most central to comedy” is “the function and operation of the copula” (Zupančič 2008, 213). In other words, comedy is the join that both demarcates separation and engenders fusion, a process that has correlations with montage and its operations of bringing together two separate images at the very point of the split between them. The comedy of *The Wizard of Gore*’s fracturing between reality and illusion is complicated even further in the final scenes of the film, after the mystery of Montag’s evil machinations have been uncovered and wrapped up. The reporter and her boyfriend celebrate their success but then start thinking about holes in the logic of what has occurred, when suddenly her boyfriend peels the skin off his face and reveals that he is, in fact, Montag! Montag cackles and asks her “what makes you think you know what reality is?” before disembowelling her with his bare hands. But the tables are soon turned on Montag, as during the attack in which Montag plays with her intestinal viscera, the reporter sits upright, and laughs right back at him. She sways back and forth, laughing, demanding that he look into her eyes, asking him if he thinks he is “the only one who deals in illusion?” She plucks a piece of her innards from her stomach and flicks it away, confounding Montag with her assertion that he is, in fact, her illusion. While editing has a privileged relationship to the “impossible missing link” as comedy as Zupančič defines it, she also demonstrates how “two mutually exclusive realities...to exist alongside each other, and, *moreover*, to be articulated within one and the same scene” (Zupančič 2008, 57). Here, fantasy and reality collide within the image, as the ruptured body reanimates to laugh back at its aggressor while still spilling its viscera, confusing any resolution at which the film had previously arrived. In one last twist of the knife, however, a final cut transitions from a close-up of Montag to a bewildered Montag on stage, who resumes his stage act—and presumably also his murder spree—all over again.

The Gross-Out Gag

The gag that jokes and chokes is also found in exploitation films that may ostensibly be called comedic, even if their transgressive subject matter precludes them from most discussions of mainstream comedy as a generic mode. Films such as *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972) and *The Worm Eaters* (Herb Robins, 1977) lay claim to a different comedic register, one that deliberately aims to provoke laughter through repulsive—often unsimulated—acts of disgust. The most infamous of all Waters' gags is the final scene of *Pink Flamingos*, when during a long take that stretches the limits of mediation, Divine voluntarily ingests a nugget of freshly excreted dog shit. The film centres on Divine's rivalry with a couple, Connie and Raymond, as they compete for the title of the filthiest person alive, an accolade that Divine assures is hers with this final act of depravity. Divine jokes and chokes throughout the scene, as she mugs and smiles between retches, between the gag reflex that wants to prevent her from swallowing. In a similar move, *The Worm Eaters* treats its viewers to extreme close-ups of chomping teeth and licking lips with wriggling worms spilling out from behind them, guaranteeing the shots' authenticity. The gross-out gag operates through a transgression within the frame rather than between frames and is particularly invested in the crossing of the body's boundary by a revolting object that ought to be rejected. The gag not only works through the cut that sutures, as the same image often contains opposing elements that demonstrate a fundamental accord between the reviled and the ideal in a way that demonstrates the perverse dialectical moves of Bataille's base materialism. Working through Zupančič's theoretical methodology in relation to Georges Bataille's concept of base materialism illuminates a similar comedic operation in the simultaneous cut and suture between the heterogeneous orders of the ideal and the material, of the seductive and repulsive, within the frame.

The Worm Eaters foregrounds the transgression between the body and its exterior emphatically through close-ups that insist upon the gross-out spectacle as a comedy of the limit. That the worm eating is supposed to be comedic is signalled early in the film at a scene that takes place at a spoiled, brattish child's birthday party. Once the birthday song has finished, the child stabs her birthday cake with the cutting knife, but instead of doling out slices as is customary, she grabs a handful of cake in her gloved hands, revealing a host of writhing worms at its centre. The crowd that had been gathered around her immediately scatters, and adults run in fast motion, Benny Hill-style, across the lawn, up trees, and on to the roof to escape the pulsating grotesquery while the child stands gleefully with her handful of worms. But the comedy occurs before the exaggerated responses of flailing bodies sped up as they run off in disgust. The moment in which the girl discovers the worms operates as a gag, as the supposedly

impossible are drawn together in the image of revolting invertebrates and delicious birthday cake. The film follows the town outcast, Herman Ungar (Herb Robins), and his refusal to comply with a nefarious real estate mogul who demands Herman's land deeds. Herman secretly feeds his enemies worms, which turns them into giant worm creatures and scuppers their attempts at stealing his land and destroying the local nature reserve. This plot serves as a vehicle for graphic and gratuitous images of these characters eating their meals with a healthy helping of worms shown via an uncomfortably close, inescapable framing. When a woman attempts to seduce Herman under the mistaken belief that he is secretly rich, he takes revenge by serving her spaghetti with a wriggly twist. She drops the noodles into her mouth with her hands before an extreme close-up of her lips smeared with bright red lipstick occupies most of the frame, with spaghetti strands mingled with live worms dripping from her oral cavity. The gross-out gag here operates at the limit between seductive, rouged lips and the undulating, repulsive creatures trying to escape from them.

Pink Flamingos is similarly replete with gross-out gags that involve the placement of grotesque and obscene objects where they do not belong—a steak for dinner stored in a crotch; a “bowel movement” sent in the mail; a son's flaccid penis in his mother's mouth; and of course, dog feces as a comestible. These gags work because they upset normative hierarchies of the body that privilege its upright comportment, that align the mouth with reason and disavow processes of excretion. But Georges Bataille complicates this hierarchy through his concept of base materialism, which is summarized by Benjamin Noys as such: “The ‘logic’ of base materialism is that whatever is elevated or ideal is actually dependent on base matter, and that this dependence means that the purity of the ideal is contaminated” (Noys 1998, 500). Bataille argues that, “Although within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high, there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as elevation” (Bataille 1985, 20). Although the body's material constitution is continually disavowed, it is what enables and upholds the prominence of the face and head as the seats of reason, thought, and idealism. Base materialism finds its most legible articulation in Bataille's essay on the big toe, a rumination on the function of this reviled part of the body, as it is what is responsible for the erect posture of the human. This upright comportment depends upon the foot to maintain this elevated posture: the big toe—grotesque and planted in filth—is responsible for upholding the bodily constitution that supports the conceits of idealism.

For Bataille, it is precisely because the big toe is so ignoble that it also possesses seductive qualities, that it is alluring because it is so repulsive, and the

impulse to hide its grotesquery imbues it with a secret seductiveness, a “sexual uneasiness” (Bataille 1985, 21). Reading the seductive aspects of the big toe as a direct result of its grotesquery, rather than in spite of it, illuminates the point at which the disgusting transforms into its opposite, into something alluring. And comedy is found where this limit between the revolting and the seductive are joined through their very divergence, through the visualization of the disgusting object’s capacity to already hold within it the potential for seduction—through their “impossible joint articulation,” to return to Zupančič’s theories of comedy. *Pink Flamingos*’ villains Connie and Raymond Marble explicitly play with the tension between seduction and repulsion in the toe, as they engage in “shrimping,” or erotic toe-sucking. The pair lie top to toe on a bed, rampantly sucking one another’s toes in a heightened frenzy, in an orientation that mimics this ebbing and flowing from the high to the low, from the head to the foot, from the mouth to the toe, through the point of their connection. Here, the buccal organ proclaims its baseness rather than its rationality, as the pair affirm that they love each other “more than [their] own filthiness” in between ramming this most ignoble bodily part into the oral orifice. Bataille points out that the ailments of the foot are comedic in a way that those of the head are not, but it is not just that baseness is inherently comedic, but rather becomes so through gags that play with its role in undergirding the ideal, its dialectical opposite (Bataille 1985, 22). The gross-out images in exploitation films often play with subverting the relationship between the ideal and the base, particularly through the mouth as an organ of reason that also ingests vile materials.

Base materialism demonstrates how the base and ideal are not separate categories that are strictly demarcated but come into being through contact with one another, through the base’s support of the ideal, which becomes comedic when this point of contact is visualized in gross-out gags. The ways that Waters reorganizes the human body are base materialism rendered as comedy; comedy emerges from the points at which the body’s hierarchical constitution is upended and reconfigured through unusual junctures between the ignoble and the ideal. The most provocative attempt at eliciting laughter through disgust comes to fruition in the final sequence of *Pink Flamingos*, when Divine affirms her filthiness by ingesting fleshly excreted dog feces. The coprophagia is preceded by shots of Divine tracing her tongue over her teeth and around her lips, raising her eyes skywards in a facsimile of orgasmic pleasure, smiling and jiggling in nervous anticipation. Divine then grins menacingly before daintily trotting over to a small dog that is defecating. In a single take, Divine squats behind the dog, scoops up the fresh excrement, and shovels it into her face.

Bringing new clarity to the phrase “a shit-eating grin,” Divine mugs for the camera, directly addressing the viewer with her unrelenting gaze as she smiles, grimaces, then partially retches, as the shaky handheld camera slowly zooms in on her excrement-encrusted teeth, guaranteeing the act’s veracity through the lack of cut and documentary-style aesthetics. The human constitution privileges the buccal at the expense of the anal, but here the two extremities meet through the image of the unimaginable ingestion of excrement. The separation between the buccal and anal is most prominent at the very moment they come into contact, in a formal mechanism of comedy within the frame.

Other gags in John Waters’s *Pink Flamingos* also play with the “back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse” that is the dialectical movement of base materialism, a dialectics without sublation (Bataille 1985, 21). In another iteration of bodily base materialism, Bataille describes how animal bodies, from the worm to the human, are composed of “a tube with two orifices, anal and buccal,” a constitution that connects the head and the brain to the anus and the adjacent genitals. Bataille returns again to upright comportment of humans: “Because of the erect posture, the anal region ceased to form a perturbation” (Bataille 1985, 89). In *Pink Flamingos*, however, the anal takes precedence once more at Divine’s birthday party during a performance by a singing anus. During the irreverent festivities, Divine is presented with an abundance of gifts, including narcotics, fake vomit, and a real pig’s head, before the entertainment begins. A woman performs a burlesque striptease with a giant snake, then a man gingerly wanders on to the stage, drops his underwear, and contorts himself into an upside-down, crouching position. With his posterior on full display, he begins his routine, pulling open his buttocks: a black, cavernous hole opens, as if his anus is singing, then it sails closed again, with a pink, fleshy protuberance circling the rim, distending his bowels, before the routine repeats over and again. Again, it is not simply that this performance visualizes such a connection between the anus and the mouth, but that its gag, its gross comedy, comes from the short circuit that positions the gaping anus as a mouth, as a debasement of the ideal, presenting base matter as the locus of idealism.

Conclusion

The singing anus scene also visualizes what the gag *does*, as the reverse shot shows the crowd of onlookers laughing in disbelief and giddy disgust. Part of the scene's comedy, then, also emerges through the gap between the image of bodily rupture and what it does to spectators ruptured through laughter. The cut that both separates and joins the anal spectacle and the buccal spectatorial response works through the ruptured image and the experience of beholding it, the tumultuous experience of giddy cachinnations. In the convergence of the effects of disgust and laughter upon the viewer, we understand the simultaneous choke and joke of the gag. These gags are not contained within the screen; rather, unless one is made of a particularly robust constitution, these images work upon the spectator, willingly or reluctantly, and communicate an uncontainable affect amongst an audience beset by disgust and, crucially, laughter. The horrific gag and the gross-out gag both operate in the movement between what it *is* and what it *does*, between the formal mechanism of the cut that sutures the impossible and the image that transgresses limits between heterogeneous elements within the frame, and the revolted laugh that the gag produces as it works upon the spectators' bodies. Zupančič's work on comedy's structure as opposed to its objects is useful in thinking through how comedy occurs through form and not just content, which works towards thinking through their effects and the pleasures inherent in transgressive texts. The pleasures in laughter at exploitation film transcend condescending or even affectionate ridiculing of poor special effects and recourse to shock tactics when attention is paid to how gore and gross-out effects often strategically deploy the comedic operation of playing with dualities. The horrific gag and the gross-out gag demonstrate the affinity between laughter, disgust, and horror as a formal as well as affective problem, a form that jokes and an affect that chokes, that gags its audiences with retching cachinnations.

Kate J. Russell is a PhD candidate in Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto where she is writing her dissertation on John Waters and humour in cult cinema. Her writing appears in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle* (University of Edinburgh Press, 2018) and is forthcoming in *Discourse* and *The Velvet Light Trap*. She is also a Co-Managing Editor at *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*.

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DOSSIER

Russian, Belarusian and Sakha Horror

Edited by Eva Ivanilova and Denis Saltykov

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Russian, Belarusian, and Sakha Horror

An Introductory Note

Eva Ivanilova

This dossier presents a report of the event that took place in a relatively recent but completely shattered past. In May 2021, Denis Saltykov and I—both PhD students in Film and Media Studies and the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh—curated a two-day horror panel at the Annual Russian Film Symposium *Representations and the Reel*. The first section screened Belarusian comedy slasher *Spice Boyz* (2020) and featured Adam Lowenstein as a respondent and Volha Isakava as the program notes writer. The second section, which involved Neepa Majumdar as keynote speaker, discussed the ethnic horror film *Ich-chi* (2021) by independent Indigenous Sakha filmmakers from the Russian Far East.

Inspired by the gradual restoration of the in-person mode after months of pandemic lockdown, we enthusiastically looked forward to the panel and the symposium in general. Adam and Denis looked even further, negotiating the publication of this dossier with the wonderful editorial team of *Monstrum*. We could not have imagined that the future as we had planned it would never come. A few months after the symposium, Denis Saltykov tragically passed away. Crushed by this personal loss, we faced the news in the following months of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine—a catastrophe of a different scale, which, among many things, ravaged the field of Slavic Studies as we knew it.¹ Nearly two years later, we are fortunate to be able to present the proceedings of the panel and symposium in this dossier on Russian, Belarusian, and Sakha horror.

This dossier and the initial horror panel bring together Slavic and non-Slavic film scholars to form a multifaceted perspective on multilingual horror films. The two first pieces written by Volha Isakava and Adam Lowenstein jointly introduce recent Belarusian movies as a distinct chapter of contemporary horror cinema. Overviewing the regional trends of the past decade, Isakava maps the local specifics of Belarusian horror as it is grounded in the country's political and social dynamics. The following piece by Lowenstein discusses *Spice*

¹ The more recent death of Volodya Padunov, who founded RFS in 1999 and was a mentor for generations of Slavic/Film scholars at Pitt, has looped the dark times for us at the University of Pittsburgh.

Boyz (Vladimir Zinkevich, 2020), a gory slasher film based on an actual event involving substance abuse at a bachelor party in Gomel in 2014. In his critical review, Lowenstein traces the relations of the film's Belarusian context to global politics, the matrix of cultural tastes, and genre influences.

In the next essay, Neepa Majumdar and I introduce Sakha Indigenous cinema, which—for different historical and aesthetic reasons—largely centers on the horror genre. Our essay places the film *Ich-chi* (Kostas Marsaan, 2021)—the first Sakha film to gain international distribution—within the context of Sakha identity and memory politics as they co-evolved with local cinema practices, audiences, and markets during the past three decades.

The translation block introduces relatively recent texts on horror cinema published in leading Russian journals and online media on film and visual culture, appearing here for the first time in English. These essays—varying from the historical excursus into the Soviet/Russian horror genre to the interview with the contemporary horror producer Vladislav Severtsev—were selected by Denis Saltykov and translated by Felix Helbing, a literary scholar at the University of Pittsburgh.

The decision to keep the dossier in accordance with Denis' initial plan is meant to respond to two horrendous events—his death and the Russo-Ukrainian war. First of all, we wish to honor the memory of our friend and colleague by bringing his last project to life. At the same time, by introducing horror films from Belarus and the Republic of Sakha, as well as pre-war critical discussions of the horror genre in Russia, we aim to share the ideas beyond the political restrictions and alienation that military aggression and hegemonic ambitions have fomented for more than a year. By avoiding a homogenizing framework for Russian, Belarusian, and Sakha horror films, we intend to accentuate the cultural and ethnic diversity of these regions, currently lying in the shadow of the Kremlin's campaign. We believe our intention to speak across the political regimes will make this dossier an invitation to a lively conversation rather than an obituary to my partner in work and life or a record of collective despair.

Eva Ivanilova is a PhD candidate in the interdisciplinary Film & Media Studies and Slavic Languages and Literatures Program. She is working at the intersections of Russian intellectual history, film theory, and political economy. Primarily, her research is focused on regional film practices in modern Russia that are included in a broader framework of geopolitical and

gocioeconomic demarcations. Her publications have appeared in *KinoKultura*, *Iskusstvo kino*, *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, several anthologies, and popular websites.

Denis Saltykov was a scholar of cinema and culture, with a focus on contemporary popular culture, cult film, horror film, and sociological theories of cinema. His publications appear in *Studies in the Fantastic*, *KinoKultura*, *New Literary Observer*, *Sociology of Power*, and *Iskusstvo Kino*, as well as the popular Russian websites *Kino-Teatr* and *Knife.Media*. He was trained in philosophy at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow) and in film studies and Slavic studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

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Horror Cinema in Belarus: An Unlikely Case Study

Volha Isakava

“Why do you need our legends coming from the dirty minds of the savages?”

— *Savage Hunt of King Stake*, 1980

“Belarus is not sexy.” This is the title of a short essay that is also part of the script for the award-winning play *Minsk 2011: A Reply to Kathy Acker* by the founder of Belarus Free Theatre (BFT), Natalya Kolyada. BFT, now based in London, is a theatre of resistance in exile, known for its provocative and politically charged performances. Kolyada continues: “A country’s sexiness is gas, oil, diamonds, access to seas and mountain ranges. Belarus is the only country in Europe that has no seas and no mountains. It is flat. It is attractive to no one, including its close neighbors [...] To attract attention to your country it wouldn’t hurt to have some mass killings. Like in Iraq, Rwanda, Libya, Tibet... It is so attractive to have a husband cut up his children, and roast them over the fire, and feed them piece by piece to his wife who has just given birth. And if she refuses, how about cutting her up across the fresh scars of a Caesarian and stuff those child pieces back into her womb, then sew it shut. Is that what the world expects? It does.” (my translation from original Russian).

Belarus briefly seized international attention in August 2020 as millions of people poured into the streets to peacefully protest the fraudulent election of the dictator who has ruled the country since 1994. Protests were subsequently brutally suppressed with ordinary people sentenced to months and years—and activists to decades—in prison. Since Kolyada’s piece appeared in 2011 many people in Belarus have been tortured and abused; a lot of people were imprisoned; a lot of people left; people died. This year (2023) the Nobel Prize went to a Belarusian activist, Ales’ Bialiatski, in absentia, since he is serving a ten-year prison sentence. If you follow deep into the back pages of international news, you will find out more about Belarus: an Eastern European country whose leadership is in cahoots with the Russian regime and complicit in the war

in Ukraine; a country where government—metaphorically speaking—cuts up and roasts its children over the fire.

I want to tell you about horror cinema in Belarus, my home country. But I don't want to tell you that Belarus *is* horror. It is easy to imagine the entirety of Belarusian cultural production having a single-minded impetus of showcasing life in a repressive totalitarian state, be it through the rosy lens of official propaganda or the dark lens of underground resistance. What I want to tell you is how horror cinema invites us to imagine Belarus in an “unlikely” way. Let me explain the choice of the word “unlikely.” One of the chief global cultural exports from Belarus is a post punk band *Molchat Doma* [Houses Are Silent]. A viral sensation with a meteoric rise to fame, the Minsk-based trio is the most listened to Russophone music group in the world today. For one of their first global appearances at a 2019 festival in Tallinn, Estonia, an arts digest publication wrote that “finding another world-class band from *so seemingly unlikely a country* brings even more of a pause for thought than seeing fighter planes at such close range” (Tyler 2019, my emphasis). The fighter planes in question are NATO forces, there to deter potential Russian aggression: their intrusive presence represents the dangers of having your home in imperial borderlands. In the public imagination Belarus is forever stuck between the Scilla of totalitarian regime at home and Charybdis of Russian colonialism that dates back centuries. Belarus is supposed to be voiceless like the silent houses: an unlikely home to anyone and an unlikely place for anything.

This essay presents a case study of three Belarusian horror films from a perspective of belonging, calling oneself Belarusian and calling Belarus home, but also, following Kolyada's inquiry, how this belonging is reconfigured by being “known” in the world. Belarusian horror films in this essay come from different eras and range from state-sponsored mainstream productions to underground cinema. What they all have in common is working with the notions of home and belonging in relationship to the hegemonic other. All three films have a basic premise of a foreign visitor coming to Belarus where horror ensues. All three films conceptualize “knowability” in the face of the other, and work with notions of omission, silence, and voicelessness. These themes of silence and omission are not unique to Belarusian horror: scholars who analyze cultural production by minoritized communities, including in postcolonial studies, identify employment of omissions and silences as a strategy to demarcate boundaries of what is knowable and accessible in the text to the cultural

outsider, and what is not meant to be known.¹ Through withholding knowledge and strategic deployment of omission, ranging from narrative and visual obfuscation to resisting normative prescription of what Belarusianness means, the films discussed below create different visions of home. More significantly, they also contemplate the stakes of such representation—what it takes and means to have one’s own voice. I want to tell you about an unlikely vision of belonging that speaks at the heart of Belarusian horror cinema.

In what follows I examine three films: *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh*, a 1980 Soviet mystery drama; *Masakra*, a horror comedy from 2004, before the dictatorship took a more violent and repressive turn; and *Sasha’s Hell*, an underground low budget production from 2019. Each of these films handles the themes of omission and belonging differently, representing an evolution of Belarusian Gothic horror as a vehicle for negotiating identity and home as complicated concepts. *The Hunt* follows traditional Gothic narrative tropes most faithfully and examines colonial erasure through visual techniques that create a world full of obfuscation and confusion, where truth remains hidden. *Masakra*, on the other hand, deconstructs Gothic tradition through carnivalesque means, affirming dissident tenets of Belarusian search for national identity, and championing colonial emancipation. Yet the film also points to the unresolved and silenced complexities of belonging in today’s Belarus that do not fit easily into familiar categories of nationhood and homeland. Finally, *Sasha’s Hell* is an experimental feature film that questions and brackets binary categorizations and meta-narratives of national identity and belonging. Instead the film centers everyday lives and spaces where national and social prescriptions, including those of the far reaching authoritarian regime, are no longer relevant or of interest to the filmmakers. Each film, working with the themes of voicelessness, suppression, and omission, gives us a complex vision of what it means to be Belarusian, what it means to belong, and to tell our stories in our own words.

¹ For an example of this scholarship see Clare Bradford’s “Reading Indigeneity: The Ethics of Interpretation and Representation.” Referencing the work by Patricia Linton (1999) Bradford writes: “...minority texts incorporate silences and omissions on certain topics and details, so constructing boundaries that alert cultural outsiders to their outsider position. In this way cultural outsiders are reminded that they are not entitled to understand all that there is to know of the worlds of these texts.” (Bradford 2010, 334)

“Why do you need our legends coming from the dirty minds of the savages?”: Gothic Horror in Soviet Belarus in Valery Rubinchik’s *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (1980)

The Savage Hunt of King Stakh (*Dzikie paliavanne karalia Stakha*) is a late Soviet film directed by Valery Rubinchik, shot at Belarus’ flagship studio Belarusfilm in 1980. It is an adaptation of an eponymous Gothic mystery novel published in Belarusian in 1964 by a celebrated Belarusian writer Uladzimer Karatkevich, who also wrote the script for the film. Set in the Belarusian provinces of the Russian empire at the turn of the 20th century, the film adopts a familiar trope of a metropolitan visitor coming to the backwater provinces at his own peril. The young folklorist, Andrei Belaretski (played by Boris Plotnikov), collects local legends and settles in the spooky mansion of Countess Yanouskaya (played by Elena Dimitrova), a fragile young woman in poor mental and physical health. It is revealed shortly after his arrival that Yanouskaya is expecting an imminent death from a century old curse of King Stakh. The curse is based on her forebearer’s betrayal of a fictional king, a champion for regional independence. Because of that betrayal the ghost of Stakh and his “savage hunt” haunts the entire region. No one in Yanouskaya’s family has died a natural death for generations, and she is the last of the line. The film is structured as a mystery-adventure like *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) by Arthur Conan Doyle including similar plot twists. In the end it is revealed that the ghostly hunt was staged by Yanouskaya’s legal guardian to drive her mad and to terrorize the people of the region so he could inherit her land with no consequence. *The Hunt* is much bleaker than *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: several secondary characters die before the truth is exposed, and the common people of the region bear the brunt of violence while the Russian imperial authorities look away.

The film presents a bleak world narratively and visually. It is shot in monochrome grey and brown colors to reflect the rainy autumn season on the Belarusian marshes. There are many long shots that linger on the foggy, empty countryside with sparse trees that mysteriously fall by themselves (figure 1, next page). Similarly morose are the inhabitants of that land, mostly impoverished peasants and their children who narrate the legend of King Stakh in tears. Yanouskaya’s mansion is equally depressing. Presented in traditional Gothic form, the mansion is expansive, cold, and dark, with gloomy portraits of ancestors. The labyrinthian house is visibly decaying and is ready to give in to the dried out branches, dead moss and other vegetation that have made an incursion into the house. The dialogue in the film revolves obsessively around

the cursed hostile land, the vengeful ancestors, and death as deliverance from this nightmarish existence.



Figure 1. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik, 1980)

As if the colonial critique was not clear enough, the film also has a negative emphasis on the word “savage.” The local nobility talks about the “savage minds” of the common folk, the imperial authorities about “savage customs” of revenge, and the peasants about the “savage hunt” as punishment for the sins of those who were supposed to be good stewards of the land. The hunt itself is staged as an eerie cavalcade of medieval knights straight out of the much mythologized Belarusian medieval state, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, before the Russian colonial conquest. They solemnly move through the marshes in search of revenge for their lost land, their eerie galloping heard off screen at various moments. In line with the Soviet understanding of colonial struggles the colonial critique in the film is coupled with class critique that presents Belarusian nobility as the true agents of exploitation and injustice. The guardian is murderous and treacherous, while the countess lacks any agency and is constantly paralyzed by fear. In a darkly funny twist Yanouskaya’s aunt is portrayed as downright crazy, carrying chickens with her like pets, sometimes on her head, and speaking in riddles. The imperial authorities are only interested

in stopping a possible revolutionary insurgency. The premonition of the revolution is in the air of the film and is presented as the true path to liberation in the region. Our visitor is eventually “radicalized,” arrested, and taken to Russia as a political prisoner. Liberated from the curse, Yanouskaya follows him like a dutiful wife.

Both characters in the end leave the provincially coded Belarus for the metropolitan Petersburg. Belarus appears in the film as a gloomy landscape filled with fog and bog, where things are expected to take a bad turn. The isolation of the characters is made palpable through long shots that emphasize small human frames set against vast, desolate landscapes.



Figure 2. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

People tend to suddenly disappear from view only to be found dead later: their slayings portrayed through jump cuts that add to the foreboding horror atmosphere. In fact, solving the mystery in the end comes a little unexpectedly, since our protagonist is perpetually confused and outsmarted. The story also does not build enough coherent clues or linear narrative to make the film a compelling detective story. Rather, *The Hunt* feels much more at home with a poetic foreboding atmosphere of the decaying nature and dwellings, the

expansive empty landscapes, and dialogue punctured by long silences. In this respect the film's vision aligns with the poetic masters of late Soviet cinema like Russian Andrei Tarkovsky and Armenian Sergei Parajanov. Judging by the tonal make-up of the film, the provincial lands of Belarus appear fraught, depressing, and haunted. Narratively, the film is a straightforward match for the Soviet colonial critique—the main Russian character from the metropolis is the agent of progress, rationality and, eventually, the revolution, whose mission is to carry the torch of enlightenment into backwater lands. Visually, however, things appear more complicated.

The camera work in the film features a consistent visual technique: almost every shot is partially obscured. Trees and vegetation obscure the view outside, and inside doorways, walls, and interior objects intrude on the frame. The technique is so persistent that at several points in the film it feels almost haptic. The viewer might experience a strong urge to reach into the screen and remove the obstruction: to brush away out-of-focus branches, or to move an object placed right in front of the camera (figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).



Figure 4. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

These obscured, partial views are usually presented at a moderately low angle as if the camera were peeping in on the action from the height of a tall child. The camera work, in short, destabilizes the assumptions of agency and perspective in the film. We never find out who is watching from the camera POV, and the film consciously teases the viewer about it. *The Hunt* features a little person character, the brother of the housekeeper hidden in the dungeons of the mansion, who initially is presumed to be a vengeful “little man” spirit haunting the countess. When the brother is discovered by the others, we quickly realize that it is not his perspective we see. In fact, we never find out whose obstructed perspective the camera adopts so rigorously in so many sequences in the film. I believe the film intentionally plays with the conventions of knowable and visible, erecting barriers to visibility and casting doubt on what is truly knowable in the story.

The camera work is analogous to an unreliable narrator, a literary device often employed in Gothic and neo-Gothic fiction. If we consider the film’s visuals, the colonial critique appears to be a much more nuanced endeavor: when the very knowability of the colonized land, its people and their stories is put into question. This potential knowability is not necessarily presented as

latent or imminent epistemology, but rather as intentionally obscured and silenced. To that point, early in the film there is a scene when our protagonist accidentally spies on the countess. He sees her naked and asleep, laid in the large pile of feathers with an old woman muttering some sort of incantations over her.



Figure 5. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

The scene is haunting, supernatural seeming, and never explained. Perhaps, this is just what the “savages” do; perhaps, someone wishes the countess harm or, maybe, healing; she might have consented to it, or not—it is impossible to find that answer in the world of the film. Again, while narratively, the film adopts a perspective of the enlightened metropolitan visitor who vanquishes “old ghosts,” visually the film contends that this privileged perspective is incomplete and obstructed, literally out of focus, unable to grasp the realities of the place and its people. The motifs of obfuscation and unknowability take over the film visually and narratively.

In the end, after the ruse is exposed, the local peasants burn the perpetrator’s house, which causes the imperial police to respond. Behind the bars of the police carriage’s window, our protagonist observes a shadowy

mounted figure from the hunt: unclear if it is a straw puppet, a person, or an actual ghost. The figure quickly disappears into the whiteness of a snowstorm.



Figures 6 and 7. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakb* (Rubinchik 1980).

A police officer happily intones that this is the first day of the 20th century, and he is excited to travel to Petersburg even if for police business. The film ends with a long shot that tracks across faces of the local children. They stare silently and emotionlessly at the panning camera and through the branches and twigs that grow from off screen space to obscure the frame. They are neither afraid of the close ghostly presence nor saddened by our visitor's departure. Suddenly, it is less clear if the ghostly cavalry truly exists, and if the children, whose plight of living in fear moved our visitor to action, are in the know about it.



Figure 8. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

It figures that our visitor never really knew that his view was always partial. A tiny fogged-up window of a police carriage is an excellent metaphor for his perspective and a coda to the film: he has always been just passing through in a fog. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* provides a lesson in omission as a “clap back” of the oppressed. On the one hand, it features an atmospheric Gothic horror story that is in line with the Soviet tradition of poetic art cinema and Soviet views on colonial emancipation. On the other hand, the film presents a vision of the world known only through deliberately curtailed perspective that boxes in both the viewer and the characters into an uncomfortable, stifling, and scary

world of the film that insists on embodying the effects of epistemological erasure. Its horror resides not in Belarusian landscapes or Belarusian legends, but how Belarus and its people are rendered invisible and unknowable.

“These people are scary—they just stare in silence”: Belarusian Gothic Reimagined in Andrei Kudzinenka’s *Masakra* (2010)

Masakra, directed by Andrei Kudzinenka in 2010, is billed as the first horror film of independent Belarus. The Belarusian cinema industry suffered significant setbacks following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its state-supported cinema. This was true of other national cinemas of the former Soviet republics, all of which suffered from the dramatic economic downturn during the 1990s with drastically reduced numbers of new releases. One of the strategies of survival for Belarusfilm was to offer grounds for Russian television and film productions in Belarus, similar to how Canada is a shooting ground for Hollywood. The Soviet-era architecture of Minsk serves as a backdrop for various Russian productions set in the Soviet era. Belarusfilm’s extensive facilities for shooting WWII films are well known across the former post-Soviet space. The pace of productions recently has picked up at Belarusfilm, however, the authoritarian regime that has been in place in Belarus since the mid-1990s has had a pronounced chilling effect on the arts, including cinema. This has led to a flourishing of the underground arts, but also to discrimination against, and the persecution and exile of the artists. Throughout the 2000s, but particularly after the protests of 2020, Poland and Lithuania have increasingly become the hubs for Belarusian culture in exile. This includes a television network, Belsat (founded in 2007), broadcasting from Poland, the European Humanities University exiled to Vilnius in 2004, and political entities such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia’s post-2020 government in exile based out of Lithuania. As Belarusian state censorship has increased over the years, Andrey Kudzinenka is now part of a network of independent Belarusian filmmakers through a project entitled “Bulbamovie:” an archive and a festival dedicated to Belarusian independent cinema based out of Poland. *Masakra* is not part of the list of Belarusfilm productions on the studio’s official website even though the film was produced by Belarusfilm.

Made thirty years after *The Hunt*, *Masakra* draws extensively on its Soviet antecedent to make a more light-hearted comedy-horror hybrid within the parameters of a similar Gothic story. *Masakra* and *The Hunt* have similar sensibilities, even though officially *Masakra* is based on Prosper Merimee’s short

story *Lokis* (1869) and “old Belarusian legends” with no mention of Karatkevich’s novella or the 1980 film. *Masakra* tells a story of a Petersburg visitor, Nikolai Kazantsev (played by Andrei Nazimau), who pretends to be a professor, but in reality is an aspiring artist with a troubled past. Nikolai’s intention is to sell off an extensive library of a local Belarusian count Pazurkevich (played by Dzmitry Miller) under pretenses of cataloging it for the university. The Petersburg fraudster falls in love with a local Polish-speaking noble woman, Anna (played by Maryia Kurdzianeovich), who is betrothed to a Belarusian count, but is ambivalent about her engagement. She is both drawn to and frightened by the count and his family curse—they are werebears (this is directly from the Merimee’s story). The ability to turn into a bear is presented as a power granted by the Belarusian lands to the Pazurkevich clan, who live unnaturally long lives and must wed their siblings to sustain power and pass it on to their heirs. Count Pazurkevich, who in traditional Gothic form appears tortured and brooding, desperately wants to get out of Belarus and the curse, and escape to Italy with Anna, who is not his sister and therefore represents the end of the cursed line. The Petersburg fraudster also wants to escape to Italy with Anna and the count’s money. Anna tries to escape Belarus and both men, but is compelled to return, since her flight triggers the proverbial *masakra* of the title—the massacre of everyone by the count-turned-bear. Much of the action in *Masakra* is spent establishing back stories and following a multi-day celebration of the Count’s and Anna’s engagement at the mansion. The party is filled with unsympathetic guests practically begging to be murdered in an homage to the *Masque of the Red Death*, Edgar Allan Poe’s short story (1842) and its 1964 cinematic adaptation directed by Roger Corman. The guests include a Russian general who has just participated in brutal suppression of Kastus’ Kalinouski’s rebellion, a perpetually drunk and giggling noble woman, and a handful of count’s neighbors. The party quickly turns deadly, and all guests are murdered one by one in supernatural fashion. Anna is driven mad and the count himself mysteriously disappears after being shot by Nikolai. The film ends with the post-masakra life at the mansion. Nikolai stays in the mansion to take care of Anna, who now only communes with the bear the count turned into, and we see the arrival of the count’s mother from abroad with a young son, who now carries on the family line and the curse.

Masakra and *The Hunt* share a narrative premise of an outsider-visitor entering an unfamiliar land, but treat this traditional Gothic set up very differently. *The Hunt* is told from the perspective of a Russian folklorist, who appears sympathetic and noble. *Masakra*, on the other hand, mocks its Russian visitor. Everything about Nikolai is ridiculous: he is a con artist but not through

any cunning of his own. In fact, most of his skills and ideas come from his servant, Grishka (played by Siarhei Ulasau), who, unlike his master, studied at the university. It is Grishka who knows how to stop the werebears: he has read up on the whole curse situation in the count's library. Nikolai himself is a walking cliché—he constantly recites Aleksandr Pushkin, Russia's most famous poet whose veneration has been extensively supported by the Russian state through the ages. Known in the Russian collective imagination as “our everything” [*nashe vse*], Pushkin, a romantic poet from the early 19th century, has become larger than life—his work enshrined in Russian public life and education as part of Russian national identity. Nikolai, who has few articulate words of his own, offers Pushkin as an unparalleled genius to the count, Anna, and anyone who would listen, eliciting a contemptuous response. Nikolai is oblivious to the fact that everyone around him is forced to speak Russian, let alone appreciate Russian poetry. One of the greatest accomplishments of *Masakra*, especially in comparison to *The Hunt*, is its use of linguistic diversity in the film. The Belarusian nobility and local people speak Belarusian, Anna's family speaks Polish, and only through the presence of imperial outsiders, such as Nikolai himself, does Russian become the language of the film. *The Hunt*, by contrast, is a Russophone film despite being an adaptation of a Belarusian-language novella.



Figure 9. *Masakra* (Kudzinienka, 2004)

Masakra amplifies the polyphony of Belarusian borderlands: not only does it feature characters who speak in their native language consistently, but it also features cross-linguistic dialogue. One of the most notable examples is a steamy romance between Nikolai's servant and the count's maid, whose

continuous sexual escapades provide great comic relief in the film. Thus, the mansion becomes much less of a foreboding space and more of a kinky backdrop to raunchy sex scenes, reminiscent of *Decameron* (figure 9, above).

Much of the film's comedy is derived from carnival elements, extending the conventional excesses of dark Gothic fantasy to subvert its more conservative tropes. Both *The Hunt* and *Masakra* feature a fragile young noblewoman on the brink of insanity, a victim of a tragic fate. Anna is also a victim of the irresistible, sexually charged allure of the forces of evil—the analogies to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in *Masakra* are particularly abundant. However, the film is adept at poking fun at these tired conventions. After Anna has lost her mind, Nikolai is still writing her letters filled with pathos and poetry. Yet immediately following his waxing poetic to catatonic Anna is the discussion on how to feed her: if you feed her porridge with jam “she will get it all over herself and ruin her dress.” This carnivalesque defamiliarization layers the Gothic tale of horror plot with ironic distance. At the same time, *Masakra* does not downplay the supernatural impetus behind its story as *The Hunt* does. In *The Hunt* the ghostly possie is discovered to be a ruse: the straw puppets mounted on horses and dressed as knights with animal skulls or skeletons. The ghosts turn out to be straw men, literally. Metaphorically they are the ghosts of a past that is no longer relevant or remembered. Empty of meaning and connection to the living, the legends become scary puppets. In *Masakra* there is no ambivalence about the stories that come out of “savage” minds: the supernatural is out there in the open for everyone to see—including in the local church where an icon of Saint George features him slaying a bear instead of a dragon. In *The Hunt* the supernatural as superstition exists on the periphery and is vanquished by the power of enlightenment coming from the imperial center. In *Masakra* the supernatural is vanquished through local solidarity and anticolonial insurgency. A curious side plot in the film features a local priest, who defends the locals from the werebear clan and, in general, speaks truth to power. He is the only character who actually makes it to Italy—we see him join the Garibaldi rebellion at the very end of the film. Garibaldi, a hero of Italian national independence, is a symbolic nod to Kastus' Kalinousky, a 19th century leader of a rebellion for Belarusian independence, who is sympathetically mentioned in the film. Like *The Hunt*, *Masakra* also explores themes of obfuscation through camera work. Instead of an obstructed frame, however, it uses the jump cut, mostly in the beginning to signify how out of place Nikolai is at the mansion. Russian visitors routinely experience spatial disorientation as the count and his butler seem to move about in imperceptible ways, always defying Nikolai's expectations of where they are. In short, Belarusians in

Masakra are adept at resisting colonial power and making the imperial visitors feel disoriented and confused.

Perhaps the most interesting parallel between these two incarnations of Belarusian Gothic horror is the portrayal of the Gothic mansion. The decaying mansion in *The Hunt* is overrun by desiccated vegetation, while the mansion in *Masakra* is overrun by straw that is oddly everywhere: it is the material of sculptures, interior objects and even a gate to the mansion. The straw even acts as an agent in a supernatural murder, crashing the Russian general between the closing walls of hay.



Figures 10 and 11. *Masakra* (Kudzinienka, 2004)

The introduction of straw in *Masakra* does not seem to be connected to the incursion of nature like in *The Hunt*, where the creeping vegetation symbolized decay and outmodedness. The prominence of straw is less self-explanatory. Everyday objects and architectural features made of straw are

fragile and flammable, falling apart like they are made of sand and serving as the fuel for the final *masakra*. I believe the straw objects represent the disconnect at the heart of our characters' struggle. Like the straw puppets of the ghostly hunt, they represent the failure of Belarusian landed gentry to be faithful stewards of the land. The Belarusian nobility like the count or his fiancée appear to have a tortured relationship to the land that surrounds them and people who live on it. The count exemplifies it particularly clearly: his desire to escape the curse is a desire to stop being who he is, which is both a bear and a Belarusian. The same can be said about Anna: not only she is ambivalent about her engagement, but her escape and return are not of her making. Instead, her descent into insanity is engineered by the local women. One of them approaches Anna in the church and urges her to return to the mansion because Anna is the only one able to set things right. The woman then utters the word “*masakra*” with a satisfying smirk.



Figure 12. *Masakra* (Kudzinienka, 2004)

The stage for the massacre is set and the wheels of the curse are in motion: the werebear family cannot escape the *masakra*. The locals, from the shrewd women in the church to the rebellious priest, seem to be very much in the know about the curse and the ways it can be used to their advantage, however obscure their intentions might be. We see the local nobility flailing again, having only partial insight into their environment and the people who inhabit it. A house built of straw cannot stand.

Masakra in many ways is a reimagining of *The Hunt* in a comedic and anti-colonial vein that valorizes a quest for national identity rather than communist international sensibilities. Kudzinienka himself defined *masakra* as a gestalt of Belarusian history—its one constant. Belarus has always been the

“territory of blood” (Kudzinienka 2010). It is no coincidence that in his first film, the controversial *Occupation Mysterium* (*Akupaŭsyya. Misteryi*) (2004), Kudzinienka’s focus was on untangling the ideas of Belarusianness from the Soviet myths that got the film promptly banned for a brief portrayal of a Nazi collaborator who “wants to shoot Belarusian movies, not Soviet and not German.” Throughout the Soviet era, WWII was officially regarded as the primary symbolic legacy of Belarusian history and the lynchpin in modern Belarusian identity. Publicly recognized as the “Partisan Republic” Belarus bore the brunt of the Nazi invasion and the Holocaust, forming a strong insurgent “partisan” movement. The Soviet authorities valorized WWII in an ideologically compromised way through the excision of various historical truths—from mass killings in Kurapaty, to acknowledgment of the Holocaust and persecution of the nation’s minorities. The authoritarian regime in Minsk today continues to use Soviet mythologization of WWII to its benefit (Marples 2014). To speak about Belarusian identity in Belarus today is fraught and dangerous. These kind of memory wars are not unique to Belarus and are subject of controversy in Ukraine as well. One of the prime examples is the debate around activities of OUN-UPA insurgent armies in Western Ukraine who allegedly fought for Ukrainian independence while also participating in the Holocaust, the genocide of Roma and Poles, and mass killings of communist Ukrainians during WWII. These controversies, in turn, are not merely for scholarly debates: they are actively used and reshaped by various political forces, most notably authoritarian regimes in Russia and Belarus. These regimes use memory wars to solidify domestic power and justify military aggression, as we witness in the current Russo-Ukrainian war, a humanitarian catastrophe of unspeakable proportions.

I do not believe *Masakra* is very convincing when it aims to conceptualize Belarusian identity or what it means to be Belarusian. Kudzinienka labeled *Masakra* as the first example of a new genre of the national “bulba” horror (*bulba* means potato, the Belarusian national vegetable), a name inspired by the Spaghetti Western or Kimchi Western. Like these genres, Bulba Horror presumes a level of genre mash up, playfulness and ironic appropriation coupled with local inflection of the genre. Public response to the film was largely negative because its many ambitious intentions did not come together: neither as a satisfying meta-genre horror film, nor as a sophisticated exploration of horror as a reflection of identity and belonging (Zhbankov and Rasinski 2010). *Masakra* presents its ideas like an assemblage or a kaleidoscope of disparate threads competing for one’s attention. A viewer might feel overwhelmed by everything she sees in this genre mash-up of comedy, horror, and romance;

archetypal Gothic characters; nationalist and anti-colonial struggles; insurgent priests in cahoots with Garibaldi; werebears pursuing their agenda; hot sex—the list goes on. If in *The Hunt* epistemological erasure is articulated through the metaphysics of the unknown and absence, in *Masakra* it is buried under the smorgasbord of abundant answers, none of which feels satisfying. In the last sequence of the film, we are transported to sunny, picture-perfect Italy, where our priest is recognized as a fighter in Garibaldi's army. He switches to Italian and is greeted by his Italian wife and child, or so it seems. The world of *Masakra* begins to feel like a distant dream.



Figures 13 and 14. *Masakra* (Kudzinienka, 2004)

Why?, one might ask; and Why not?, one might answer. Perhaps Belarusians are a lot like Italians or bears. What does it mean to be Belarusian? Herein lies the problem *Masakra* encounters: how to articulate “I do not know” in answer to that question. *Masakra*'s carnivalesque drive, its penchant for “everything,

everywhere, all at once,” so-to-speak, points to the fact that there are no ready answers to the voicelessness, oppression, and complexity of identity and belonging in Belarus. True to form, however, *Masakra* offers all possible answers and ultimately none. It would rather escape to Italy than say “I can’t tell you what’s it about.”

“I can’t tell you what’s it about: I am not interested in history”: “Terminal Cinema” and Underground Horror in Nikita Lavretski’s *Sasha’s Hell* (2019)

Nikita Lavretski’s film *Sasha’s Hell* (*Sashin ad*)—shot on a VHS tape with no funding, professional crew, or equipment—is labeled by the author as “*konchenoe kino*,” or terminal cinema. “Terminal” here reflects a Russian slang word *konchenyi*, which Lavretski correctly identifies as meaning “hopeless, fucked up, done for” (Lavretski 2021). It refers to cinema that has no ties to any entity, corporate or state; no professional network, or extensive fan support; no viral success. Lavretski labels his cinema “terminal” because: “we are [in Belarus] stuck in a dead-end, where we’ve got nothing to aspire to, nothing left to prove, and nothing left to lose. But this doesn’t mean nothing interesting can happen here” (Lavretski 2019). Art for art sake, of course, comes to mind, the freedom of authorial intent curtailed only by a complete lack of any resources whatsoever. Lavretski’s films are made with personal gadgets and with the help of friends and virtual international collaborators like Rei Koz, who wrote the script under a pseudonym. Very much like the other two films discussed in this study, *Sasha’s Hell* is not particularly scary; it treads onto horror territory only as it suits the film’s experimental cinema spirit. In short, it is another unlikely horror film from an unlikely place: its world premiere happened at the Moscow International Film Festival literally in the category of “Films That Were Not Here.”

Sasha’s Hell tells a story of a Brussels-based hip hop artist Olie, played by a musician who composed the songs in the film, Vlad Lullaby. Olie comes to Minsk to give a concert and to meet his collaborator, Sasha (played by Aleksei Svirsky), for the first time in real life. Sasha writes music for the artist and hosts him at his shared flat in Minsk. Music discussions and music references are abundant in the film, and Lavretski himself talks about various artists and songs that influenced him in the creation of *Sasha’s Hell* as emo-horror (Lavretski 2020a). The film uses English and Russian intermittently as the characters interact with Anglophone Olie, or with each other. The camera follows

characters around as they meet various people, talk about various topics, prepare for a concert, attend a concert, wander around aimlessly with the mumblecore charm of directionless young people. They meet a Goth Girl, a fan of Olie's, played by Volha Kavaliova, who turns out to be a professional photographer and shoots a music clip for the artist. The trio make the clip on a riverbank, off a bridge, in one of the most tender and heartfelt moments of the film. As friends bum around Minsk, strange occurrences begin to happen. Sasha goes to a secluded place that resembles a small closet, descending into an ominous and claustrophobic space. There, surrounded by candlelight, he cuts himself with a razor.

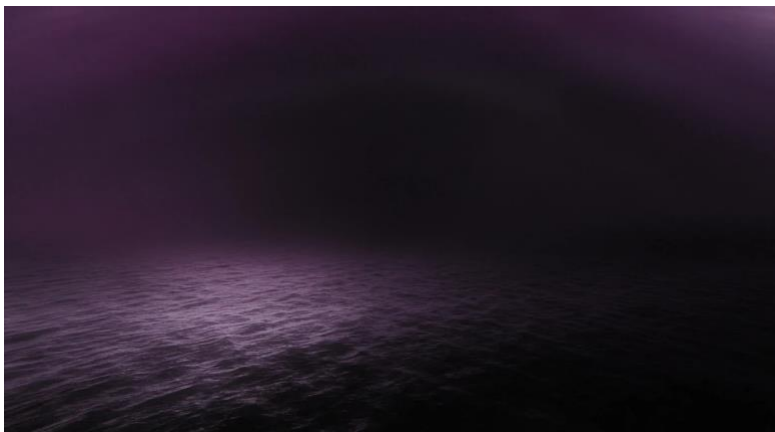


Figure 15. *Sasha's Hell* (Lavretski, 2019)

Sasha has a virtual call with a potential love interest, whom he rejects, but only after warning her about the demonic presence in her house. In the long end sequence Sasha walks around leaving objects in different places, drawing mysterious sigils in chalk on the pavement. He finally arrives in his closet, sets his body on fire, and transcends as a flickering digital presence into a dark foreboding space (figure 16, below). If this is Sasha's hell, it is reminiscent of one of the darkly fantastical Lynchian landscapes in *Twin Peaks the Return* (2015) (figures 17 and 18, below).



Figure 16.
Sasha's Hell
(Lavretski, 2019)



Figures 17 and 18.
Twin Peaks: The Return
(Lynch, 2017)

Lavretsky's work draws on Lynchian sensibilities in its more absurd moments, but also the earnestness of mumblecore cinema in its presentation of the everyday lives of Minsk twenty-somethings. The film features long, meandering dialogues about everything and nothing. At one point Sasha and Olie are interviewed by a journalist until their banter is interrupted by a stranger-than-fiction moment—a local dry cleaner calls after a customer about a forgotten jacket. The spontaneous, unrehearsed quality of the film is very appealing and deeply connected to the city of Minsk as it is known intimately by those who live there. The musical clip moment particularly underscores this impression—the casual everyday space of the riverbank right before the sunset, used by fishermen and strolling families, becomes the site of a musical performance that is disarming and jubilant. Olie waves his hands seemingly randomly on the bridge as Sasha and the Goth Girl shoot from afar, as music plays in the background.

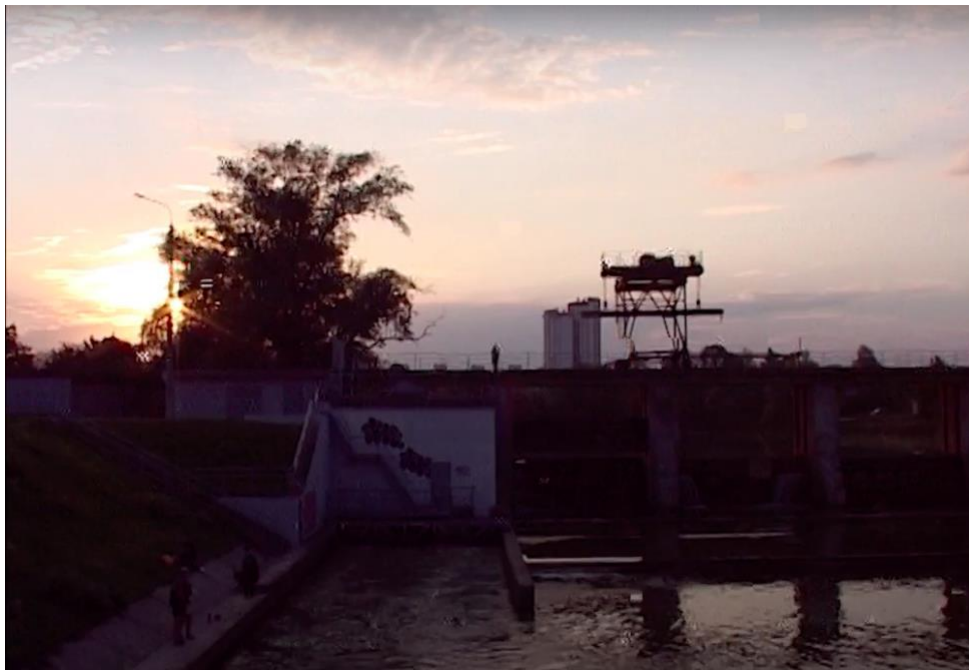


Figure 19. *Sasha's Hell* (Lavretski, 2019)

Belarus as a place to live is not something *The Hunt* or *Masakra* even begin to approach. In these films Belarus is a fantasy: a dark Gothic fantasy, or the cheeky fantasy of Bulba Horror. In *Sasha's Hell* Belarus is an intimate space of streets and recognizable locations, with real people who happen to pass by floating in and out of frame (figures 20 and 21, next page).



Figures 20 and 21. *Sasha's Hell* (Lavretski, 2019)

If *The Hunt* and *Masakra* work with and problematize Belarusian symbols and narratives of nationhood, *Sasha's Hell* plainly refuses to even factor them in. In the beginning of the film as Olie and Sasha ride a bus from Minsk airport, Olie asks about a WWII monument they see. Sasha responds that he is not interested in history, and he cannot tell Olie what the monument is. The film deliberately eschews most iconic Minsk locations such as the WWII stella in one of the central squares or the famous Red Cathedral in the center. Before the credits roll Olie sends Sasha a message in which he finally remembers the one Belarusian film he watched. It is, of course, one of the few internationally recognized films from Belarus: *Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*) (1985), a grueling, masterful WWII drama by Elem Klimov. “Not interested in history” becomes a radical position for a film already radical in its execution. Olie, the foreign visitor, asks about Belarus as it is represented in ready-made narratives and symbols. Turns out they are irrelevant for the locals he is trying to get to know better. At one point Olie begins to make fun of the Belarusian dictator, to which Sasha matter-of-factly replies that it is dangerous, and this is the only sentence uttered about living in a repressive authoritarian society. It is worth noting that the slogan of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s presidential campaign for the ill-fated 2020 presidential election was “This Country Is for Living” (*strana dlia zhizni*); the implication is that Belarus is not yet for living. Living in Belarus, according to *Sasha's Hell*, can happen in parallel to or outside of any kind of official or dissident discourse of what it means to be Belarusian. This suspicion towards any meta-narratives of identity construction and categorization was a common thread in Soviet underground art of the late Brezhnev era in the 1970s-1980s. Living in a dead-end of interminable socialism, known as Stagnation in the Soviet Union, the Soviet underground also had a cinema with a penchant for horror and the absurd, called necrorealism. In his groundbreaking study of the period and necrorealism specifically, Alexei Yurchak (2008) defines the trend through the lens of “politics of indistinction”—a desire to be outside the system altogether, outside its coercive norms and language that it universally imposed on daily life. These Soviet underground artists wished to be neither pro- nor anti-Soviet, but to be outside the Soviet framework altogether. Yurchak writes:

In a situation in which the sovereign state held exclusive control over what language and what actions were seen as legal and “political,” this alternative politics included, paradoxically, a refusal to see oneself in political terms. Instead of challenging the state by occupying an oppositional subject position, these people carved out a subject position that the state could not recognize in “political” terms and therefore could

not easily define, understand, and control. This was a challenge to the state's sovereign powers of defining and imposing political subjectivities. Therefore it should be recognized as subversive and political—acknowledging that it could exist only if it refused to identify itself as such.” (Yurchak 2008, 200)

I believe *Sasha's Hell* does tell us what it means to be Belarusian today as a lived experience. It is to be outside of any symbolic frameworks that define nationhood, community and belonging. Similar themes are evident in Lavretski's and other underground directors' work. For example, *Drama* (2019) features three underground filmmakers, Lavretski, Yuliya Shatun and Aleksei Svirsky (who plays Sasha), and replays the events in their lives over the span of one week (Lavretski 2019). The mysterious and terrifying space that is accessible through self-mutilation in *Sasha's Hell* is the ultimate bracketing of all outside world and all its categorical prescriptions. The foreign visitor trope, so familiar from the other two films, is decentered through a focus on Sasha and his mysterious comings and goings that exclude Olie altogether. After all, what is Sasha's hell in the film? Is it a mysterious portal to another dimension, or is it a weekend of forced socialization with your Brussels-based collaborator whom you never met in real life? Sasha's secrets remain hidden from Olie and the world; Sasha remains alone.



Figure 22. *Sasha's Hell* (Lavretski, 2019)

While Olie is as clueless as the foreign visitors in the other two films, he really has no objective to enlighten the “savages,” and very little preconceived notions about Belarus, its place in post-Soviet world, or its colonial history. His Belarusian friends do not give him any of that information but rather show him a good time—grounding their encounter in lived experiences, ephemeral and resistant to symbolic framing. Interestingly, Lavretski explains the film’s appeal through a specific list that demonstrates a certain inside knowledge of hyper-local and generationally specific social relations:

The film is good for all those, who did not have hope before the pandemic, so they did not lose hope in the pandemic; those who overdo it on baked goods and continue doing it; those who know their own sinfulness; all renters and those who still live with their parents; all Andreis and Nastyas. Film is not good for all those who like self-help, self-motivation, positive thinking; those who have more than two friends and five acquaintances; readers of the music forums, who do not trust their own friends’ music recommendations; all Stases and Sofias. (Lavretski 2020b)

The taxonomy of Nastyas and Sofias presented above feels a lot like Jorge Borges’ Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge in Borges’ 1942 short story “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” which recounts a heterogeneous classification of animals that lies outside of taxonomies we take to be objective reflections and categorizations of the world. The animals in the emporium are classified as “fabulous” or “have just broken a flower vase” or “suckling pigs.” Borges’ essay famously served as an inspiration to Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (1966). Foucault starts his book with this passage:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old definitions between the Same and the Other... In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one big leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark possibility of thinking *that*. (Foucault 1994, xvi)

This stark realization of the limitation of our knowledge is at the heart of *Sasha's Hell* and other Belarusian horror films. Going back to Natalya Kolyada's rumination on what it takes to be "known" in the world for an unlikely country such as Belarus, defined through lack of oil and diamonds, seas, and mountains, it seems that being known on one's own terms is the only way of being known. It reminds me of Sarah Ahmed writing on feminism as lifework: "We write ourselves into existence. We write, in company. And we write back against a world that in one way or another makes it hard for us to exist on our own terms" (Ahmed 2022). Belarusian horror cinema is one of the ways we, Belarusians, write ourselves into existence, on our own terms.

I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of a brilliant colleague, Denis Saltykov, who introduced me to many great horror films, including some in this paper. I miss talking movies with you, Denis.

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Born Under a Bad Sign: *Spice Boyz* and Belarusian Horror

Adam Lowenstein

Author's Note: The following text was delivered as a response to a screening of *Spice Boyz* (Vladimir Zinkevich, 2020) held at the University of Pittsburgh's annual Russian Film Symposium in May 2021. I have left the text in its original form, which means that two shattering events that have occurred in the interim go unaddressed here: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the passing of Denis Saltykov. The former raises a host of geopolitical issues that will have to remain beyond the scope of this brief response, although Belarus's initial support of the Russian invasion suggests a number of retrospective extensions to the interpretation of *Spice Boyz* offered here. The latter is a source of profound personal sadness. Denis was a remarkable PhD student in the Film and Media Studies Program as well as the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. When he invited me to respond to this screening of *Spice Boyz* that he had organized along with a number of connected symposium events concerning Russian horror, it was a true pleasure to accept his generous invitation. I had been lucky to teach Denis in a graduate seminar on the horror film, so I already knew him as one of the best, brightest, and kindest young scholars that I have ever had the chance to meet. He had already produced important published work on the horror film in a Russian context¹, and I knew his programming for this symposium would be even more significant. After the symposium concluded, I connected Denis with editor Kristopher Woofert and the wonderful horror studies community at *Monstrum* in the hopes that a published record of Denis's efforts could be made more widely available. Denis was hard at work on this project when he died suddenly and unexpectedly. The personal loss for those who knew him, as well as the professional loss of a voice that would have doubtlessly transformed our understanding of global horror studies, cannot be replaced. But I am grateful to Denis's wife, the scholar Eva Ivanilova, for her strength and resolve to make this dossier a reality and to honor Denis in the process. In the short time I knew Denis, he had already taught me so much. I am deeply saddened by the loss of all those future conversations with him that are no longer possible. But I know that the publication of this dossier would have made him proud, and that the dossier's contents will allow us all to learn from him for many years to come. I would like to dedicate my own text here to the memory of Denis Saltykov.

¹ Denis Saltykov, 2019, "The Living Dead in Post-Soviet Cultural Consumption," *Studies in the Fantastic* 7 (Summer/Fall): 89-104.

Even though *Spice Boyz* (Vladimir Zinkevich, 2020) is bookended by the songs “Run Through the Jungle” by Creedence Clearwater Revival and “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” by Bob Dylan, the lyrics that kept reverberating for me as I watched it are from Albert King’s blues standard “Born Under a Bad Sign,” written by William Bell and Booker T. Jones. That song includes these lines:

Born under a bad sign
 Been down since I began to crawl
 If it wasn’t for bad luck, I wouldn’t have no luck at all

I feel like these lines could serve quite nicely as an epigraph for *Spice Boyz*. The film is organized as a comprehensive catalog of bad luck, from full moons and black cats and desecrated icons to botched wedding rituals and tainted drugs. Nearly everyone in *Spice Boyz* seems to be in the wrong place, at the wrong time, doing the wrong thing. And since the film is unusually insistent on foregrounding its basis in a real-life 2014 incident that occurred in the Belarusian city of Gomel, it also seems to suggest that to be born in Belarus today is to be born under a bad sign.

Perhaps some of the film’s horror, which is extensive and disturbing even when tempered with a black sense of humor clearly indebted to Quentin Tarantino, can be traced to the fact that the whole superstitious concept of being born under a bad sign carries some strong empirical evidence in the Belarusian context. From the devastating destruction of World War II, to the deadly postwar Stalinist state violence, to the radiation of Chernobyl that impacted Belarus inordinately, to the brutally repressive authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus has absorbed more than its share of sociopolitical misery. But no matter how much bad luck is visited upon the cast of beautiful young people that populates *Spice Boyz*, even the opportunity to be in their unlucky position must seem like a cruel joke to most average Belarusians. After all, these young people are able to gather 500 euros quite effortlessly for a lavish bachelor party in a country where that sum would be a sizable chunk of most people’s annual income.

Yet there are also poignant dimensions to the premise of *Spice Boyz*. Most of these young people seem trapped and isolated, as distant from the far-off glamour of Moscow as they are from the consumerist plenty of the US; the film makes a point of noting how even the ketchup for hot dogs, however sexily these hot dogs are marketed, is diluted in Belarus. This sense of dead-ended lives in a dead-ended place collides with a desperate desire to celebrate what should be a shining high point in the collective experience of these characters—

the wedding of two close friends. This collision between unyielding dead ends and unquenchable desire results in a doomed pressure cooker situation, shot through with bad ideas and worse luck.

But “poignant” is probably not the adjective most viewers would use to describe *Spice Boys*. “Outrageous” or “cruel” might be closer to the mark, and the film’s horror is perhaps most usefully understood in relation not just to Tarantino in a general sense, but to Tarantino’s protégé Eli Roth in a more specific sense. Roth’s most well-known film is 2006’s *Hostel*, where Eastern Europe is deployed as the setting for a group of mostly American young tourists to experience the sort of bad luck endured by the protagonists of *Spice Boys*. In *Hostel*, the Americans fall prey to the promise of sexy good times in Bratislava, Slovakia that turns out to be a trap: the Americans are being used as game for an illicit international hunting club where the most exquisite pleasure you can pay for is human torture and murder. Not insignificantly, Americans are the most desirable and expensive victims for the moneyed, international clientele of this hunting club.

The Gomel of *Spice Boys* and the Bratislava of *Hostel* are not simply interchangeable locales, but they share a relation to Eastern Europe’s role in the global imaginary of horror cinema. These are places where life is cheap, times are desperate, and the opportunities for horror are plentiful. *Spice Boys* strikes me as a sort of Belarusian reply to the American imagination of Eastern Europe in *Hostel*. If Eastern Europe is dangerous for Americans in *Hostel* because it is so easy and inexpensive to access, then Eastern Europe is dangerous for Eastern Europeans in *Spice Boys* precisely because better places like America or Moscow are so impossibly expensive and inaccessible. Part of the drug trafficking crisis in Belarus stems from the fact that spice and related narcotics are so cheap to buy, offering youth especially an affordable artificial “dream” of better things. Cinema, of course, traffics in dreams as well, and the dream of Eastern Europe that lures the Americans in *Hostel* is fascinatingly complemented by the dreams of elsewhere that galvanize the horrific hyperreality of Belarus we see depicted in *Spice Boys*.

Hostel was at the heart of contemporary US critical debates expressing alarm that horror had devolved into “torture porn.” I have written elsewhere about how categories such as torture porn, or the recent New French Extremity, or the even more recent “elevated horror” are all misbegotten and ultimately condescending terms because they assume that horror must be one easily

defined thing rather than many difficult to define things.² *Hostel* and *Spice Boys* may not be your cup of tea, but there is certainly a place in the vocabulary of horror for them. Accepting that for starters seems to me a much more critically productive reaction to these films than the expression of morally incensed disdain or panic about how such films are beyond the pale in some way, whether that means morally below the horror norm in the cases of torture porn and the New French Extremity or morally above the horror norm in elevated horror examples like *Get Out* (2017) and *The Shape of Water* (2017). Horror is capacious and complex enough to house all kinds of highs and lows, to the point where the very act of distinguishing between high and low comes to feel largely beside the point.

For example, one of *Spice Boys*'s most outrageous scenes involves the gory removal of a character's eyes, brutally cut out of his head with a knife by his own friends under the influence of the drug they have ingested. The escalating accumulation of horrors here certainly seems to qualify as torturous and extreme. Not only are the eyes removed, but they are then placed in the microwave, where they explode with a sickeningly bloody pop. And as if this weren't enough, the character who absorbs this punishment, the heartlessly nicknamed Lambada, is already coded as a victim by suffering from cerebral palsy. This spectacular display of cruelty may strike some as contemptibly vulgar bad taste or even textbook "torture porn," lowbrow horror in all of the worst ways.

And yet this sequence can also be linked to horror's most highbrow iconography of confrontational images, descended directly from Surrealism. The eye sliced by a razor that opens Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's 1929 Surrealist masterwork *Un Chien andalou* is an unavoidable evocation here, as is Buñuel's long and infamous line of morally compromised disabled characters. Buñuel refuses to let conventional feelings of sympathy and pity for the disabled dull the ferocity of his Surrealist attack on bourgeois society's hypocritical belief systems.

Of course, one's willingness to place *Spice Boys* in the orbit of Buñuel, or Tarantino, or Roth, or others is completely dependent on your reaction to the quality of the film, and it is these reactions that I am very eager to turn to now in our discussion.

² See, for example, Adam Lowenstein, 2011, "Spectacle Horror and *Hostel*: Why 'Torture Porn' Does Not Exist." *Critical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (April): 42-60.

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The Specter of Opacity: Sakha Indigenous Voice in the Ethnic Horror Film *Ich-chi* (2021)

Eva Ivanilova and Neepe Majumdar

The phenomenal vitality of Sakha cinema in its home region—the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) located in Eastern Siberia—and a series of recent festival acknowledgments has aroused significant scholarly interest in Sakha films. This local cinema emerged within the context of the politico-economic restructuring of the region in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the breakup of the USSR, as well as the cultural policies largely aiming at shaping Sakha national identity¹. Over the ensuing decades, Sakha cultural and memory politics have co-evolved with local film practices, audiences, and markets, so that by the 2020s, Sakha cinema had gained status as the only full-fledged regional film industry within Russia, operating with its own autonomous distribution system.

Although Sakha cinema includes a diverse array of genres, horror films have played a particularly influential role in its development as an independent industry and Indigenous mediascape. Early supernatural thrillers such as *Maappa* (Aleksei Romanov, 1986), *Summer Homestead* (Anatolii Vasiliev, 1992), *Night Maiden* (1999), and the first locally popular film *Cursed Land* (Ellei Ivanov, 1996) were the first to speak to the local audience about the relationship between the Sakha and their landscape in their Indigenous language (Mészáros 2022). In 2006, *The Blair Witch Project* parody *Path of Death* accelerated Sakha’s commercial “kinoboom,”—a term coined by Sardana Savvina, the region’s main promoter of cinema (Savvina 2022)—by earning approximately \$76,000 over its \$20,000 budget, which was the largest domestic box office return in Sakha to date.

Early Sakha horror films demonstrate low production quality and amateur aesthetics. However, there is a difference between micro-budget horror

¹ The scholarship on cultural identity and Indigeneity in contemporary Sakha cinema includes Caroline Damiens 2014 study “A Cinema of One’s Own Building / Reconstructing Siberian Indigenous Peoples’ Identity in Recent Cinema: Examples from Sakha (Yakutia) Republic and the Republic of Khakassia,” in *InterDisciplines* 5, pp. 161–187; Vladislav V. Levochkin’s 2016 study “National Film Industry of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia): The Dynamics and Main Priorities of the Region’s Cultural Policy” in *Observatory of Culture* 1, pp. 146–152; Vlad Strukov’s 2018 essay “Theorizing the Hyperlocal: The Cinema of Sakha (Yakutia) and Global Contexts” in *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, pp. 217–239; Eva Ivanilova’s 2019 article “Uzhas belogo lista: Istoriia Yakutskogo horrora” in *Iskusstvo Kino*; and Adelaide McGinity-Peebles’ 2022 essay “Cinema, Ethnicity, and Nation-Building in the Sakha Republic (Russia) and Kazakhstan” for the *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Communication*.

films produced within a long-standing film industry and films made by enthusiasts who are remote from the federal film networks. As the early Sakha cinema grew together with the local audience's interest in their own cinema, the naive form of certain films came to enhance their aura of authenticity. Within a few years, these early Sakha films became fertile soil for the rapid development of technical skills and visual styles. In 2020, Dmitrii Davydov's *Scarecrow*—an art horror film centered on a female healer—was the first Sakha film to win the Grand Prize at the Kinotavr Film Festival in Sochi and also won the Special Prize at the Tromsø International Film Festival. In 2021, Kostas Marsaan's ethnic horror film *Ich-chi* became the first Sakha film to be distributed globally. Before its US premiere in 2021, the film was screened at the Russian Film Symposium in Pittsburgh, where producer Marianna Siegen and director Kostas Marsaan introduced it as a statement expressing a specifically Indigenous point of view. Relying on this film as the primary case study and drawing on the concepts of Indigenous “refusal” (Simpson 2014) and opacity (Glissant 1997) as forms of narrative and the visual withholding of local knowledge, this essay discusses the political and epistemological meanings produced by a resistant construction of Indigenous identity in contemporary Sakha cinema.

Sakha Filmmaking and the Turn to Horror

Before the early 1990s, there was neither a distinct Soviet horror tradition nor a Sakha national cinema. Although there are many reasons for these absences, ideological motivations outweigh other causes for the underdevelopment of the Soviet horror genre, while the lack of a Sakha national cinema is to a greater extent grounded in the USSR's territorial structure and the status of “nationality” as the main administrative mechanism. According to the 1926 All-Union census, lower-class rural populations of the former Russian Empire struggled to identify their national belonging. People defined themselves through religion, place of birth, clan, or tribe, while local elites benefited from manipulations of the records. Seeking a category through which to decolonize and grant political agency to scattered peoples, the Soviet state promoted nationality (understood as a nation based on ethnic unity) as “a fundamental marker of identity” (Hirsh 2014, 145). Some Soviet nationalities were “built out” of cultures with distinct arts and literatures, long histories of political resistance, and signs of bourgeois nationalism, but others were granted to nomadic peoples who did not have their own recorded histories and were barely accounted for even by metropolitan ethnography. To break with the

Tsarist past and eventually equalize them on the Marxist timeline, the Soviet regime divided its subjects into “mature” and “backward” nations. This instrumental hierarchy was institutionalized in the organization of the Soviet film industry, which served as one of the key platforms for national border-making. The Belarusian, Georgian, Ukrainian, and other more nationally advanced and geopolitically critical (and therefore in need of more regulation) republics had been developing full-fledged film companies with constant financial and human resources support from Moscow since the 1920s. However, the “backward” national republics and non-autonomous regions within the Russian Soviet Republic had only newsreel studios at best. These studios produced ethnographic documentaries, educational films, and chronicles of industrialization, while fictional cinema in native languages remained outside their purview².

The only film institution in the Yakut ASSR was a branch office of the East-Siberian newsreel studio located in the neighboring Irkutsk region. During the 1972 anniversary of the Yakut ASSR, the studio released the documentary film *Speak, Yakutia!* (Valerii Khomenko, Tamara Chirkova) to explicitly address the Soviet Sakha “self.” The film was a typical example of the Soviet documentary mode, conveying a modernizing agenda through an explanatory voiceover and the juxtaposition of the prosperous present to the ostensibly primitive past. In one of the sequences, a simple cut transforms the pastoral pans of the Lena River into the panoramas of the Vilyuy hydroelectric power station. “For centuries,”—a narrator comments in Russian—“the shores of the Lena served as a prison for Russians and Yakuts, Georgians, and Tatars. But today, the united brotherly nations are conquering the forces of nature.”

Though attempting to appeal to the Sakha people, this TV-documentary remarkably overlooked two fundamental elements of their culture: the Sakha’s oral tradition and their environmental consciousness. First, the discourse of the industrial modernization of the vast Northern lands and of the scientific alteration of natural conditions contradicted Indigenous knowledge of nature and the myth-ritual complex focused on the coexistence of hunters and farmers with their environment. Second, the absence of a native language essentially

² In 1970, the chief secretary of Tatarstan Regional Committee of the Communist Party addressed this situation as “an important problem” on the opening pages of the July issue of *Iskusstvo kino*, saying that “[t]here are almost no fiction films about life of Tatars, Bashkirs, Buryats, Dagestanians, Komi, Mari, Tuvans, Udmurts and many other people of autonomous republics of Russian Federation. Apparently, our cinema does not pay enough attention to such an important matter as the heyday of once backward national outskirts of tsarist Russia reached due to Leninist national policy of the Communist Party” (Tabeev 1970, 1).

distorted the representation of Sakha culture, for which the idea of language as a non-human agent is one of the central aspects (Ferguson 2016). While the imperative exclamation *Speak, Yakutia!* contained the Sakha verb “kespe” in the original title, the film expected its audience to respond in the Soviet parlance of a Russia unified in ideology and language.

Overlooking the fundamental elements of Sakha's traditional worldview, Soviet cultural politics utilized Sakha identity as an empty signifier. In 1986, a student of The All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), Aleksei Romanov, made the first cinematic attempt to fill this semantic void. His graduate project, a short supernatural film called *Maappa*, was the first film in the Sakha language by a Sakha director.³ Based on a 1944 story written in Sakha, *Maappa* follows a young traveler who is lost in a blizzard but is rescued by a young woman living in the woods. While she is performing traditional rituals over his feverish body, he dreams of their wedding. However, his dream anticipates a union of a different kind. As soon as he is awake, the protagonist learns that his rescuer is the wandering soul of a young woman who killed herself after losing her entire family in a leprosy pandemic. Now, she wants the protagonist to reinstate the natural order of things by giving her body a proper burial.

At first, the dusty palette of the “Svema” film stock, used for most USSR films since the 1960s, makes *Maappa* look like a single fragment from some endless Soviet movie. However, the film's formal accomplishments effectively calibrate its auratic specificities. Opening with the singing of a traditional melody and meditative voiceover that synchronizes with the diegetic sound of the whistling wind, the film evokes a harmony between nature and memory. Resonating with the noises of ghostly non-human dimensions, the Sakha language appears as an intermediary between individual and collective, culture and environment, past and present. Thus, the blurred borders between topoi and temporalities represent the Sakha belief in equality between human and non-human agents. Since all meaningful events happen on the borders of the Upper, Middle, and Lower Worlds that constitute the universe in Sakha cosmological beliefs (pertaining to spirits, humans, and demons, respectively), only the Sakha language can serve as an intermediating system. No one among

³ In 1986 (early perestroika era), the censorship austerity ceased to be a general situation for USSR's filmmakers. Moreover, since *Maappa* was a student project with no claim to a wide distribution, any censorship (state and industrial) could be omitted. Particularly on the topic of censorship in relation to the student projects in VGIK in 1986, Kazakh director Rashid Nugmanov noted: ‘We did not care about ideology at all. We were absolutely free and the approval of our professors was more important for us than the approval of the authorities [; ...] in the filmmakers' union in Moscow in 1986 we were witnesses that something was happening’ (Isaacs 2016, 146).

the supernatural worlds speaks Russian, and even if the language is spoken among humans, it is limited to one dimension and thus cannot impact reality where it matters. As we will see below, Romanov's film set up a long-standing genre tradition in Sakha cinema that relies on both horror and folk storytelling.

The Death of the Soviet Union and the Birth of Sakha National Cinema

Several years after Romanov's graduation, the Soviet empire of nations also made its way to the grave. Symptomatically, it split along the seams that had been holding it together, and national identity replaced socialist state networks as the primary political and cultural basis for social organization and collective action. In 1992, soon after signing the new Sakha constitution, the president of the republic endorsed another ethnopolitical document to establish the first national film company, Sakhafilm, aimed at "developing and preserving the traditional cultures of the native inhabitants of Yakutia" and "promoting those cultures through film and video" (Nikolaev 1992).

In fact, one of the official reasons to establish the first national film studio was to support Aleksei Romanov in finishing his first feature film, *Middle World* (1993), written by Romanov and his wife Ekaterina Romanova, a PhD candidate in anthropology (in the film's credits, both are listed under traditional Sakha pseudonyms). The production, which started at the Sverdlovsk film studio in 1989, froze due to the country's collapse in 1991 and was in need of additional funding. In 1992, the newly created Sakhafilm, where Romanov took the position of art director, organized local fundraising to support the production. Thus, Sakha national cinema emerged as a private initiative supported by the state, while its first independent feature film came out due to direct investment of the republic's population.

While *Middle World* displayed and explained Sakha folklore, Romanov's student film *Maappa* embodied it. In genre terms, the film is considered the first cinematic *tiibelte*—Sakha traditional ghost stories about wandering people's souls (*iiör*) or spirits of objects and places (*ich-chi*). During the Soviet era, Sakha writers converted this traditional oral genre into folk novellas to represent the folklore and culture in the literary mode. Making the first feature film in his Indigenous language, Romanov adapted Soviet literary *tiibelte* to the screen. In all the significant 1990s *tiibelte*—*Summer Homestead* (Anatolii Vasiliev, 1992), *Cursed Land* (Ellei Ivanov, 1996), and *Night Maiden* (Gennadii Bagynanov,

1999)⁴—local spirits or restless ghosts are portrayed as disturbing but harmless forces that eventually elevate the people who meet them. Since these ghosts and spirits share a logos with the people, they are ultimately not so much antagonists as they are emerging forces opposed to the values brought on the Sakha people by Western modernity and Russia's colonial presence. Instead of attacking the Middle world, the monsters of the early *tübelte* come to remind characters of the interdependency between human and non-human (or dehumanized) subjects. Commenting on the impending release of *Ich-chi* in 2021, director Ellei Ivanov, 1992 explained,

My intention to create *Cursed Land* was earthly and pragmatical. I did not seek to frighten the audience or, moreover, to plunge them into horror. I wanted to warn them against sudden moves in relation to fate, land, and nature. Look before you leap! At that time in the 1990s, people rushed to seize land, run away from their native places to unknown lands, knowing absolutely nothing about them, being unaware of the past and the secrets of these lands. The elements of horror that I used in my film were to make people experience a particular sensibility and respect for the land at the level of a fear. I hope that the new thriller *Ich-chi* preaches the same eternal truths, but unlike *Cursed Land* do so in a more vibrant and powerful way. (Danilova 2021)

In Kostas Marsaan's genealogy of Sakha cinema, the early horror films managed to bring to screen the essence of the ancient *tübelte* by constructing an alternative sense of time: “In contrast to the linear time of the West and cyclical time of the East, the Northern time is frozen: past, present, and future coexist on the same plane and influence each other” (Marsaan 2019). Continuing the cultural processes of translating Sakha myths and beliefs into the language of contemporary media, the *tübelte* attempt to subvert colonial temporality by blurring the time borders and insisting on a plurality of agents in contrast to the all-pervasive code of colonial epistemologies that assume only one modern and civilized agent.

⁴ *Summer Homestead* (1992) was one of the last projects of “Severfilm,” a private studio organized by Aleksei Romanov after his return to Yakutsk from Moscow film school. The same year his studio was reorganized into the state owned “Sakhafilm,” where Romanov acquired the leading administrative positions. *Night Maiden* (1999) is a later “Sakhafilm” project. *Cursed Land* (1996) was produced independently, even though there were no clear demarcation lines between independent and commercial/industrial cinema. As the exhibition networks had not yet developed in Yakutia in the 1990s, all three films reached local audiences through broadcasting on the republican TV. Only *Cursed Land* (1996) acquired a cult status and initiated the wave of mass filmmaking in the early 2000s.

On a textual level, *Maappa* and the further *tiibelte* proposed two ways of blasting out the borders of colonial epistemologies embedded in the Soviet cinematic tradition. The first is the subversion of the colonial hierarchy of languages by appointing Indigenous language, previously restricted to the private sphere, as the primary indexical and referential system within which an event can happen. The second is a new type of “looking” relation. As bell hooks (2007) asserts, “In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ always politicizes ‘looking’ relations—one learns to look a certain way to resist” (hooks 511). In Sakha horror films, facing the Other’s gaze becomes one of the most fundamental tropes. This gaze can belong to nature, supernatural entities, or the image of the past looking back to the person. In every instance, the Other is considered an organic part of the collective identity. On the one hand, this optical juncture represents a re-appropriation of the triumphalist Soviet gaze, which projected itself into every space it looked at. However, the Soviet gaze becomes subverted as soon as its object begins to look back. Although many of these concerns can be seen in 2021 film *Ich-chi*, even if it doesn’t intentionally lay bare these kinds of locally specific meanings explicitly.

***Ich-Chi*’s International Distribution and Critical Reception in Russian and Sakha Media**

From the early stages of *Ich-Chi*’s production, the film crew consulted with various experts in Sakha traditional culture—from local historians to shamans. At the beginning of the shoot, director Kostas Marsaan invited a shaman to conduct the ritual of asking for permission. The frenzied dance with a tambourine performed at the filming location at night resulted in an immersive collective experience, which, as the director has commented, bemused even the Sakha crew members but completely bewildered their colleagues from Moscow (Marsaan 2021). In the later production stages, the film changed its title from the initial *The Eyes of Night* to the more enigmatic *Ich-chi*. Refusing any direct explanation, *Ich-chi*’s authors focused on reaching external audiences by cultivating a sense of intrigue rooted in the film’s Sakha origins, which has become one of the essential aspects of the Marsaan-Siegen creative collaboration since the 2016 neo-noir mystery drama *My Killer*, Marsaan’s debut feature film. While some critics dismiss this approach as a marketing strategy (and it has indeed been effective in this capacity), it reveals a deliberate aesthetic and epistemological method. As Indigenous artists are fully integrated into

global cultural production, Marsaan and Siegen explore the overlapping of different traditions and points of view along the borders of cultures. The focus on the plurality of points of view automatically makes any sort of narrative or interpretative stability inadequate to the subject. Within this logic, uncertainty and vagueness in *Ich-chi*'s poetics, production, and promotional strategies function as a more appropriate expressive language for traditional Sakha culture. The concept of ich-chi, which Marsaan defines as a natural power enabling diplomacy between different worlds (2021), becomes a metaphor for his engagements with intercultural dialogue: "I am very interested in how people outside Sakha culture will perceive and understand the film. It's curious what interpretations their imagination will draw. We wanted to touch a mystery that should remain a mystery" (2021). Remarkably, in contrast to the other two Sakha films produced in 2020—Dmitrii Davydov's supernaturally-tinged social drama *Scarecrow*, which received the main prize at the Kinotavr Film Festival, and Stepan Burnashev's body-horror film *Black Snow*, which won the main award at the 'Window to Europe' film festival in Vyborg—*Ich-Chi* participated only in international venues, including the 53rd Sitges Film Festival and the 23rd Shanghai Film Festival. In May 2021, the film was released on 180 screens throughout Russia's largest cities. Also given a limited international release in the US and Europe and later release on three Russian streaming services, *Ich-chi* received an unprecedentedly wide distribution for a Sakha film.

In the context of the increasing interest in Sakha cinema within Russian festival circuits, *Ich-chi* received a warm critical response, reaching a 75% rating on the review-aggregation website Kritikanstvo. In contrast to Sakha and Russian horror films, the line between Russian and Sakha film criticism is harder to draw. Most Sakha Internet media operate in Russian, while in general, Sakha film journalists tend to promote every new locally produced film. Most Russian reviews of *Ich-chi* compared the film to Moscow and Saint Petersburg genre cinema. Notably, many critics favored *Ich-chi* for its visual poetry, experimental sense of time, and intentionally vague story, as opposed to Russian ethnic horror films by Sviatoslav Podgaevskii, known for indulging in CGI, jump scares, and narrative exposition. Numerous reviews by genre-focused critics compared Sakha and Russian ethnic horror trends by drawing on discussions of "elevated horror" in English film criticism. While Podgaevskii's films, explicitly orientated towards James Wan's style, were criticized for their conservatism, *Ich-chi* was likened to experimental genre films by A24 and slow-burn thrillers by Lee Chang-dong. In general, most reviews of *Ich-chi* featured thoroughly articulated evaluations of global horror trends alongside underdeveloped accounts of center-periphery dynamics within the Russian context. Summarizing *Ich-chi*'s

reception, critic Anton Dolin concluded that while some of his colleagues admire this peculiar film, others “rightfully accuse the authors of two contradictory sins: the exploitation of ethnographic material and the unwillingness to explain it” (Dolin 2021). While this overview accurately captures the general picture of reactions, it also overlooks the intentionality of the contradiction. Displaying ethnographic details without much explanation, *Ich-chi* hijacks the ethnographic spectacle to assert the right to visual sovereignty as we explain below.

***Ich-Chi's* Aesthetics of Refusal and Audiovisual Opacity**

Like many earlier túbelte, *Ich-chi* has the simplicity of a fairy tale, taking us to the isolated world of a couple and their two sons, the younger of whom lives with them and helps with their farm. When the older son, who lives in the city, visits unannounced with his Russian wife and young son, things begin to fall off kilter and the narrative enters the horror mode until its surprise ending. While this summary might suggest a simple opposition between the city and the country or even between Russian and Sakha identities, the film obfuscates such binaries through its narrative structure, shot compositions, language dynamics, and its complex web of “looking” relations.

Ich-chi is set up as a viewing experience that strongly resists any urge towards seeking easy access to Indigenous Sakha or local ways of knowing. The film’s visual and narrative complexity and its ambiguity about ultimate causes can be read as a form of Indigenous refusal (to explain, to perform, to make things easy). This concept is borrowed from Audra Simpson who contrasts “refusal” with “recognition,” writing that Indigenous refusal can be deployed

as a political and ethical stance that stands in stark contrast to the desire to have one’s distinctiveness as a culture, as a people, recognized. Refusal comes with the requirement of having one’s political sovereignty acknowledged and upheld, and raises the question of legitimacy for those who are usually in the position of recognizing: What is their authority to do so? Where does it come from? (11).

In a recent discussion of the films of Sky Hopinka, the Indigenous US filmmaker, Diana Florez Ruiz (2022) pairs Simpson’s concept of refusal with the idea of “visual sovereignty,” drawing from the work of Jolene Rickard. Ruiz writes that “Rickard coined the phrase ‘visual sovereignty’ as part of the wider

Indigenous-led project to create specific analyses and expressions of self-determination” and that it is a way to “protect, reimagine, and affirm Indigenous philosophies and cultural practices” (2022, 20). Our argument with regard to the audiovisual and narrative ambiguities of *Ich-chi*, and its particularities in the context of global horror, is that its formal language of refusal asserts a visual sovereignty, retaining access to certain forms of knowledge for the local viewer alone.

Furthermore, *Ich-chi* asserts a refusal whose visual and narrative forms might be more strongly indicated by the metaphor of opacity. Drawing on Édouard Glissant’s provocation in his *Poetics of Relations* regarding “the right to opacity” (Blas 2016, 194), Zach Blas suggests that opacity “exposes the limits of schemas of visibility, representation, and identity that prevent sufficient understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples” (2016, 149). The goal of opacity as an aesthetic and epistemological method would be to offer the viewer the experience of uncertainty and cultural inaccessibility. To put it differently, if anything is certain about the viewing experience of *Ich-chi*, it is that this is not a film that offers access to a touristic gaze curious about cultural practices and storytelling among the Sakha. Rather, the outsider viewer is invited or even enticed into the world of the film where its careful cultural opacity foregrounds the inaccessibility of locally accessible meanings. This is a productive opacity and one that works well with the horror genre, but it also raises the stakes for political meanings in Indigenous productions that are aimed at both local audiences and success with audiences at international festivals. While it may be argued that Indigenous refusal here dovetails easily and perhaps conveniently with art cinema’s tendency towards narrative ambiguity, the use of the horror idiom here works against ambiguity towards trauma and ritual explanations that might be available to some but not all viewers. *Ich-chi*’s ambiguity is to be found as much in its storytelling as in its audiovisual style.

The film’s shots are composed in very precise ways to convey suggestive connections and to enhance the general feeling of tension, uncertainty, and spatiotemporal dysphoria or unease, accompanied by an effectively minimalist sound design, where silences and distinct diegetic sounds are sometimes supplemented by single long-held notes whose status as music is ambiguous in relation to machinic and other diegetic noises. The shot compositions and editing do much of the work of storytelling, often through methods of doubling, mirroring, and cross-cutting, but more precisely, they convey ambiguous connections and correlations that materialize the spirit world for us without producing certainty about what is happening. At one level, this is a family story with a familiar binary of a bad son from the city, Timir, and a good son, Aisen,

who lives with his parents and helps them with the work around the farm. Although the film is structured along several visual, narrative, and thematic binaries, as Maxim Bey-Rozet points out in his program notes on the film for the Russian Film Symposium of 2021, in a world where nothing is at it appears to be, these binaries are not so simple, and the film complicates all but the good brother-bad brother dynamic of fairy tales that is in keeping with the folkloristic feel the film conveys. But this very binary also works to destabilize other binaries that an outsider viewer might expect in an Indigenous film, such as between cultural insiders and outsiders. With the bad brother trying to persuade his father to sell their family property, and the film ending with the entire family destroyed, it is as Bey-Rozet writes, “difficult not to see in *Ich-chi*’s dual conflicts an expression of anxieties about the erasure of the past” (2021) and more broadly, of cultural erasure and the loss of Indigenous knowledge and storytelling of the kind we witness in the film. But the film also asks us to consider who is the true outsider, the true disruptive force, as we see oppositions that do not align in expected ways: city/country oppositions don’t align with the Russian/Sakha binary as the brother’s Russian wife, Liza, is a sympathetic figure while it is the son, Timir, and his doting mother who are pivotal to the destabilization that overtakes the family. Similarly, there is no straightforward modernity/tradition opposition along a temporal axis. An example is the way modernity and tradition are recast as communism versus superstition, when the mother talks about why their family has chosen to remain in a place that even the “shamans avoid,” saying that her grandfather was a communist and didn’t believe in superstitions. There is no simple alignment of superstition, tradition, the past, and the older generation here, even as the narrative of this film belies the Communist grandfather’s disdain for what he called superstition, revalidating claims to Indigenous forms of knowing and storytelling that exceed norms of rationality and modernity.

Although most of the film, or at least its horror elements, can be understood as being from the point of view of the younger son, Aisen, it is the figure of the mother who splits the visual and narrative arc of the film and destabilizes boundaries between outsider/insider and past/present. One-third of the way into the film, a pivotal doubled or mirrored image inaugurates the crisis and split in the family. As the mother reaches the end of her bedtime story about Ich-chi, which she explains to her grandson as a benevolent guardian spirit, she begins to sing about Ich-chi in the Sakha language, at which point, the image splits in two in an uncanny visual mirroring with no clear distinction between “real” and “mirrored” image (figure 1).



Figure 1. Visual mirroring in *Ich-chi* (Marsaan, 2021)

Appropriately, at least in terms of subtitles, this is the moment in the story when the mother sings “Let no one else know of our strength. Let our secret be kept forever.” Although the language is translated for us, the secrets and local cultural practices the film draws upon are merely suggested, not explained, in the remainder of the film.

The combination of an uncertain doubled image and the inscrutable text of the song also inaugurates an aesthetics of opacity as the film proceeds to create a narrative of uncertain knowledge and a visual language that favors barrier framings and other forms of visual obstruction. The aesthetics of opacity extend beyond narrative structure to shot compositions and a pattern of doubled and mirrored images and events. There is a strong visual pattern of partially obscured framings (figures 2 and 3, next page) alternating with shots of Aisen looking or attempting to look (figures 4 and 5, next page). Even though this kind of gaze may invite viewers into Aisen’s subjectivity, objects and landscapes remain inscrutable. Shots of the landscape are sparse and sparingly used and almost as elemental as river, forest, house, barn, farmland, sky, water, fire, soil and is very much in keeping with Sakha environmental consciousness discussed earlier. Signs and portents are repeated in ways that are suggestive but are not explained, such as a black sludge in the water, sightings of a white wolf, or the suddenly bare birch trees with an animal skull on a branch.



Figures 2 and 3.
Barred framing in
Ich-chi (Marsaan,
2021)



Figures 4 and 5.
Aisen looking
in *Ich-chi*
(Marsaan, 2021)

The doubled image of the mother thirty minutes into the film presages her role in both the past and the present, the two temporalities becoming increasingly braided in the final half hour of the film. It is not by accident that modern technologies such as the tractor and car are brought into the fold of the haunting as the hint of an individualized traumatically abusive family secret merges with older, more collective mythologies of place. The aesthetics of opacity blur the boundary between subjective and objective, contributing to the general feeling of uncertainty and aimlessness that takes over the film after the first thirty minutes. From this point on, much of the film is taken up in wanderings by Aisen, Liza, and the mother, sometimes looping back to their original places, with the exact relation of the events of the past to the characters in the present remaining obscured. In a sense, the story ends early in the film with Aisen falling asleep and, as we understand later, mysteriously dying on the couch. During their wanderings, time and space both become “out of joint.” The present is haunted by the past, but the division between past and present is porous. There are various repeated images and tropes that together produce an impression of a network of meanings that lie just outside understanding. These include the trope of Aisen frequently finding himself back at the tractor or the car, or conversely, the tractor and car turning up at various places, or the skull motif, both animal and human. Even the Ich-chi bedtime story is repeated with its technological double as we see it being shown as an animated feature on television at the very moment when Aisen falls asleep on the couch. At this pivotal turning point in the film, the image of the creature eating all other creatures is an apt way to understand the film’s narrative and temporal structure with its multiple forms of looping upon itself.

Doubled images and events lie at the heart of the film’s structural opacity, which can be linked also to a careful confusion of distinctions between subjective and objective, person and mirror image, and most crucially, causation and correlation at several narrative pivot points. A good example of the confusion of causation and correlation occurs right before the scene of the mother’s Ich-chi bedtime story. Aisen is forced to walk home from quite a distance because his tractor runs out of gas, seemingly a clear case of causation. This walk is accompanied by some of the signs and portents mentioned above. But the forced abandonment of the tractor is also strongly correlated to his brother Timir’s violent treatment of his Russian wife and his lies about Aisen to their father. Aisen forgets to complete filling the tractor with gas as he is interrupted when he notices Liza crying, and drops what he is doing to speak to her. Timir comes upon them, accuses Aisen of groping her, and Aisen storms off in the tractor that has no gas. One might say that this is the original sin that

unleashes the rest of the movie. Later when their father has a stroke in the middle of the night, Aisen blames Timir for trying to get his father to sell their property, while Timir blames Aisen for “groping his wife.” The mother is key to this split as she is the only one in the family who refuses to see Timir for what he is. The confusion of causation and correlation and the mother’s pivotal role contribute to the film’s horror sensibility. Although the mother is shown to be the primary keeper of Sakha traditions embodied in the Ich-chi toy horse that her grandson finds and that the film also ends with, the film also imbues her function with ambiguity given her uncertain ethical position and the way in which the concept of ich-chi is rendered suggestively multivalent, but not transparent.

The doubling and mirroring of events also includes Aisen’s two walks home, both times from stalled vehicles, the tractor and the car, and both times accompanied by increasingly disorienting signs along the way. The vehicles, in turn, show up in different places in unexplained and uncanny ways, infusing both landscape and modern technologies with

supernatural power. Another moment of strong correlation occurs in the synchrony and crosscutting between the father’s death and Timir being run over by Aisen. This is more than a simple case of cross cutting to suggest simultaneity of action, but rather is a strongly suggested correlation between the two events, separated by space but not in time. An uncanny doubled appearance of Timir in front of the car gesturing to Aisen to back up, even though the real Timir is actually under the car, directly causes Aisen to back up the car and run over his brother. Paralleling such cases of doubled sightings, such as when Liza sees her son or his double disappear into the greenhouse, are actual mirror images. Mirrors appear early in the film, when reality and mirror images are not yet confused, although Liza and Timir’s estrangement can be understood through parallel mirror images (figures 6 and 7).



Figures 6 and 7. *Ich-Chi* (Marsaan, 2021)

Over the course of the film, the mirror as an object becomes increasingly uncanny. At the moment of realization that he has run over his brother, Aisen's image is mirrored in the car (figure 8).



Figure 8. *Ich-Chi* (Marsaan, 2021)

Aisen's lurid reflection recalls his brother's doubled image that caused his death, but after the turning point in the film when both Timir and the father have died, a mirror now becomes an explicitly uncanny object in which Liza sees her dead father-in-law sitting upright in the mirror, which is crosscut back and forth with the prone father in the bed behind her. The false mirror image propels her to pack up and leave, leading to the next stage of the unfolding crisis.

The precise ways in which *Ich-chi* both participates in global horror and maintains opacity are illustrated in the mirror as a classically uncanny site, and yet also as a form of looking that invites speculation about its specific local meanings, to which the outside viewer is refused entry. Even if we are tempted to understand these ways of seeing false mirrored and reflected images as Sakha folk tale experiences, because they aren't confined to Sakha characters, they bely any straightforward understanding of the moral universe of the film—especially since everyone in the film dies. Mirrors, as we all know, are multivalent objects, especially in horror films, and their use here opens up a strong desire for meaning that the film ultimately refuses. Whether such meaning does reside in local knowledge or not is something that remains opaque to the outside viewer. A broader kind of visual mirroring also extends more to shot compositions over

the course of the film, and in retrospect, connects actions seemingly separated in time and space, such as the boy, Michil, digging in the ground and Aisen digging to find the skull. The final doubling occurs at the end of the film when Aisen sees himself dead on the couch and this becomes the moment when the various repetitions become crystalized in the doubled image of the main character.



Figures 9 and 10. *Ich-Chi* (Marsaan, 2021)

Conclusion

One might say that *Ich-chi* is a bleak film because there are no survivors, but this is so only if one thinks in an anthropocentric way. In fact, the land has survived and the spirit of the horseman, which is the last image in the film, offers a visual point of confluence between human and natural worlds. Through its aesthetics of opacity, the film offers us an oblique look into the Sakha world, one which does not fully explain to the outsider viewer what the figure of ich-chi signifies or what the ritual practice at the beginning and end of the film is. Shrouding those in mystery works for the horror genre but is also a refusal to be “native informants” for the outside world. As an Indigenous film, *Ich-chi* works to strip us of our habits of seeing, preserving a certain opacity towards the cultural practices of locals, which is a way of preventing their commercialization or integration into dominant modes of seeing and understanding the Other. While the film draws on global horror tropes (such as mirrors and portents) to reach international audiences, its reception has also been framed by its status as an Indigenous horror film, which comes with its own burden of representation and expectations of authenticity or cultural purity—burdens and expectations that the film resists through its aesthetics of opacity.⁵ This film opens a door, offers an invitation, but gives us only tantalizing glimpses of a way of viewing the intimacy of humans and their natural environment, the entanglement of family and mythology, past and present, refusing the burden of further cultural explanations. In the current context of token gestures towards Indigenous dispossession, such as in land acknowledgements, a politics of refusal and opacity offers one way to maintain an invitation to outsider viewers while also letting “our secrets be kept forever.”

While Western monsters represent the Other suppressed by a privileged class (Wood 1979, 14) that must be expelled, the Sakha monsters predominantly embody the state of being the Other. In contrast to most US, European, and Canadian horror films (especially those in the mainstream), *tübelte* tend to authorize monstrosity rather than expel it to restore the status quo of secular time. Thus, in contrast to Frantz Fanon's (2008 [1952]) understanding of the negative self-image shared by colonized subjects as a universal side-effect of

⁵ Shohat and Stam (2014) explain the burden of representation borne disproportionately by those who are non-White as follows: “[W]ithin hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community. Representations of dominant groups, on the other hand, are seen not as allegorical but as ‘naturally’ diverse, examples of the ungeneralizable variety of life itself” (183).

colonialism, Sakha “negativity” appears in their films as a way of constructing sovereign agency rather than as a self-deprecating stance.

Nation-building and identity commodification function to subject marginalized groups to the broader systems of capital. It remains an open question whether an identity-focused culture can meaningfully oppose the colonial mindset in its current neoliberal manifestation. Is the category of national cinema even relevant anymore, except to those who are (self-)limited to their national identities? What Sakha filmmakers learned from the Soviet film infrastructure and its symbolic regime is that the only sustainable way to exert one’s power is to do so collectively. The second part of this lesson is that each collective must define its own terms of collectivity. The contemporary Sakha film industry functions as a network of horizontal connections between state-owned and private studios, professionally trained and self-taught filmmakers, and local audiences. Working as a profit-based industry, Sakha film production appropriates Western production and distribution models. However, the selectiveness of this appropriation has allowed Sakha filmmakers to develop a kind of visual sovereignty.

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The Girl Spells Trouble¹

Yulia Toman

The man eyes that were always roaming here and there like the eyes of tigers, those searchlight eyes, needed to be shielded from the power of us—of our shapely or skinny or fat legs, of our graceful or knobbly or sausage arms, of our peachy or blotchy skins, of our entwining curls of shining hair or our coarse unruly pelts or our straw-like wispy braids, it did not matter.

— *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood

If in cinema as a whole women's voices have long been historically unfairly underrepresented, then in the horror-genre they have simply been silent. Why have there been no great female horror creators? The answer is simple: only a few have produced any truly cult films. Yes, there have been Ida Lupino's *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953), Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001), and Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000), but the rest have gotten lost in the backstreets of the genre and been erased from audience memory. This dovetailed with the cisgender, patriarchal logic of the world. With each passing decade, however, female directors increasingly demonstrated their ability to work with any material, no matter how bloody or macabre it may be, even if it remained difficult to discuss any relatively clear general trends until the 2010s. Critics have deservedly called the outgoing decade a horror renaissance: deviating from stylistic canon—the slowing down of temporality, minimal reliance on jumpscare—films of the “new wave” have widened the spectrum of plot-constituting themes. Horror now is no longer the vampire floating into the bedroom, but a return to repressed psychological trauma. While Hollywood is reshaping comics and franchises (*Wonder Woman*, *Ocean's Eight*, *Ghostbusters*) to meet the new gender demand, a new generation of authors, whether consciously or not, is trying to move away from the male gaze in their films. And while the holy trinity of the founders of elevated horror seems to consist exclusively of men (Jordan Peele, Ari Aster, Robert Eggers), it is worth recognizing that they, too, are increasingly choosing the psychological and emotional states of women as the starting points for their films.

¹ The original text in Russian was published in *Seans* [Seance] 79, *Femmes 2 Femmes* (15 July), pp. 159-169. <https://seance.ru/articles/fem-horror/> upon the release of Julia Ducournau's *Titane*.

Close examination of traumatic experience has changed onscreen subject-object relations both in general and in horror films specifically, where the female image more often than not has been exploited either as victim (final girl) or as the monstrous incarnation of threat. Now everything has flipped upside down: we accompany *Midsommar*'s (Ari Aster, 2019) Dani through her nightmare of sorrow and victorious exit from a toxic relationship; we engage in a class war with our own subpersonality alongside Adelaide in *Us* [Jordan Peele, 2019]; together with Sophia, hoping to resurrect her dead child, we resolve to perform diabolical rituals in *A Dark Song* (Liam Gavin, 2016). The heroine's complicity defines the films of Oz Perkins, Robert Eggers, Lukas Feigelfeld, Carlo Mirabella-Davis, and many others. These films also feature male characters, but they determine nothing.

Female directors have pushed even further. Speaking of her debut feature film *The Babadook* (2014), Jennifer Kent notes that she doesn't simply wish to scare viewers, but also to touch their hearts. It seems to be true—Kent's films aim to work with the emotional intelligence of the audience. Post-horror stories have become new fairy tales for women. Therapists have also flocked to fairy tale therapy, seeking to describe the repressed traumas of their patients through allegory and self-identification. Fairy tales have become a radical and effective means of discussing painful experiences. So what tropes are being explored by the creators of films in this genre which, at first glance, seems the least friendly to their aims?

Sexuality and the Body

Literally from the very start of puberty, a girl's body ceases to belong entirely to her. It must be properly looked after, lest it become unattractive; it should be guarded to ensure that the act of deflowering can be given as a gift to a worthy candidate; immodest displays of sexuality are simultaneously not worth it, lest one appear easy. The entire practice of terrorizing women as they mature is built on principles of objectification passed down from generation to generation.

Iranian director Ana Lily Amirpour is challenging these attitudes. The title of her film is eloquent in itself: *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). At nightfall, a delicate silhouette with a bloody but noble vision appears on the (almost Pasolinian) streets of the supposedly criminal Bad City. This is a young vampire on a skateboard (the actress Sheila Vand, by the way, is dubbed in these scenes by the director herself) and, in a fluttering chador, seeks out victims,

leading a parasitic lifestyle feeding off men. Silently, she takes the life of her lover's drug-addict father and a druglord pimp. She gives the jewelry taken off the bodies to a sex worker so that she can leave her trade behind. Amirpour's righteous anger looks too romantic when juxtaposed with another elegant metaphor of vampirism, Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016). The coming-of-age story of veterinary student Justine, who goes from guiltless vegetarian to insatiable cannibal, forms the center of the film. The college campus, with its vicious hazing rituals for newcomers, is, in essence, the banal hell of puberty. As for the meat... To be born into a female body in itself means to take top billing in body horror personified: first menstrual bleeding, loss of virginity, then pregnancy and childbirth. Generally speaking, *Raw*—which, during the course of filming, according to rumors, many people suffered nausea—is nothing more than a metaphor for the transformation of a girl into a woman, with its inevitable aggravation of the sense of one's own physicality.

“I didn’t want to glamorise anything, especially with the girls’ bodies,” Ducournau says. “A body is a body. In every movie we see, women have to be beautiful and fit or whatever the hell, and they have to fit a certain box, and no: women fart, poop, pee, burp.”²

The Crisis of Motherhood

One important image of the Middle Ages is that of the horned demonic womb. The Christian custom of trembling at the capacity of a woman to conceive was also adopted by the classics of horror. But history has long been aware of an efficient method for controlling and subjugating the unknown (that is to say, threatening)—its sacralization. For thousands of years, social and religious institutions have elevated motherhood to a cult, and reproduction was deemed to be practically a woman's only function. The number of countries where a complete or partial abortion ban reigns only increases year by year. Forced, unwanted motherhood (especially in extreme cases, such as in instances of rape) turns into a traumatic ordeal that spans years.

This turns out to be a defining theme for Australian director Jennifer Kent (a former actress and assistant to Lars von Trier). In 2005, she directed a black-and-white short film titled “The Monster” and, nine years later, the fleshed-out feature-length version of it, *The Babadook*. Both films tell the story

² In an interview with Alex Godfrey for *The Guardian* published March 30, 2017 (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/30/raw-director-julia-ducournau-cannibalism-is-part-of-humanity>).

of the strange, unbearable relationship between single mother Amelia and her six-year-old son Sam (who, in a twist of fate, was born on the same day his father died). A terrible creature that lives in the closet inserts itself into the relationship, trying to take over Amelia's body and mind and to steal her child from her. Anthropologist and psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes in her book on female archetypes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* [1989], that the evil entities repressing the heroine are often the shadow sides of her own personality.³ While ostensibly struggling with evil, the woman is in actuality trying to defeat her own repressed desires and fears as represented in the images. The finale of *The Babadook*, as well as “The Monster,” supports this theory—Amelia defeats the dark entity but rather than banishing it she locks it in the basement, even managing to befriend it.

The blessing of motherhood is also called into question in the Austrian horror film *Goodnight Mommy* (2014) directed by Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala. Confrontation between twin brothers and their mother Susanna, who has returned home after undergoing plastic surgery, gradually escalates into an act of execution which they commit against her. Here, as in *The Babadook*, it is unclear who the real monster is right up until the end. Is it the distant, irritated mother? The children with their set of torture implements? Or some invisible evil spawned by someone among them? Likely, all three answers are correct.

Lucile Hadzihalilovic, in her slow burn film *Evolution* (2015), places minimalistic families (single mothers and their sickly sons) on an untamed island. The whereabouts of the fathers remains unknown. The women themselves do not possess the qualities typical of respectable mothers—their care is limited to the cold-blooded transfer of their children to the staff of a hospital that looks more like a penitentiary. It's a bit Kharmsian⁴: “Poisoning children—it's cruel. But something must be done with them.”

The anthology film *XX* (2017), which includes four horror shorts shot by women, begins with “The Box” by Jovanka Vukovic. More precisely, it begins with the overheard thoughts of the main character: “It's quite difficult to spend time in the city with two children ...” It ends with the simultaneous deaths of these children and a husband, as if by the woman's wish. The final film of the anthology is Karyn Kusama's “Her Only Living Son.” The protagonist Cora is a single mother who has been hiding her son from his father—either an actor or Satan—for eighteen years, suffering nightmares about her pregnancy over

³ First published in 1989, Clarissa Pinkola Estés *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* was a long-running *New York Times* bestseller. It was later published in a 2008 revised edition with the new subtitle *Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman*.

⁴ That is, evoking the work of absurdist Russian artist, writer, and thinker Daniil Kharms (1905-1942).

and over. It would not do to take these films as a childfree manifesto, arguing that these directors are coming out against the horrors of motherhood. It is of course not motherhood itself that disquiets, but rather the social pressure with which it is associated. With each tick of the clock, women are being deprived of their right to their own bodies and the capacity to make informed choices.

Sisterhood

The theme of motherhood in women's post-horror is dichotomous. Every mother was once a little girl and, therefore, someone's daughter. And now, for female directors, the Freudian Electra Complex, the figure of the father, and relationships with men on the whole play a much smaller role than the transfer of female experience within the family and communication amongst each other. In the deeply profound Russian meta-horror *The Imagined Wolf* ([Valeriya Gai Germanika with Yuliya Vysotskaya], 2019), mother and daughter spend a third of the film wandering through a forest at night, ostensibly searching for a path home but in fact looking for each other. The women—whether quarreling friends, rivals, or two of the closest people to each other—are confronted with an invisible force, a wolf, a threat that appeared so that they could establish the connection with each other only possible between a mother and daughter.

Lured by the same vague pretext, the heroines of Natalie Erika James' *Relic* (2020), a mother and daughter, return to the old family home somewhere out in the backcountry. They come in search of grandma who is, however, right in front of them. The connection between these three relatives has obviously long been lost, but that is not the only issue. There is also dementia and old age. Using the genre framework, James hyperbolizes the illness, turning the grandmother into a monster, then a mummy, but she is absolutely right in that caring for a person with dementia (a charge that most often falls on the shoulders of women) completely changes one's way of life. In this house, there no longer exists truth, logic, rationality, no tomorrow or yesterday.

Both films rhyme in a surprising way: each with a phantom behind the wall trying to devour the heroines and a magic frame, shot from above, where people spanning three generations lie on a bed, merging into one common body. A wonderful illustration of continuity and cyclicity so important to a feminine nature.

— *Translated by Felix Helbing*

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Fear, Russian Style: What's Wrong With Russian Horror?¹

Dmitrii Sokolov

During the 2010s, Russian cinema experienced a renaissance of horror, a genre that has long been considered unimportant, unworthy of serious attention from viewers and critics alike. Though domestic horror films (*Trackman* [Igor Shavlak, 2007], *SSD* [Vadim Shmeliov, 2008], *The Phobos* [Oleg Asadulin, 2010]) were released from time to time throughout the 2000s, they remained largely isolated (and rarely successful) experiments. In recent years, however, notable changes have occurred which are not only quantitative but qualitative. These days there are often as many horror films coming out in one year as there used to be in three or four—and the stream shows no signs of petering out.

Even more importantly, some Russian horror films (*The Bride* [Sviatoslav Podgaevskiy, 2017], *Sputnik* [Egor Abramenko, 2020]) have achieved significant success in international markets. Lastly, horror is increasingly making inroads into the TV sphere (*Don't Be Afraid*, *Call Center* [both 2020]) and a global breakthrough turned out to be possible there, too. Most recently, the Russian series *To the Lake* (2019), which appeared on Netflix, was greeted with laudatory reviews from Stephen King.

Even so, a significant portion of the horror films shot in Russia still lags behind other genres in terms of box office success and cannot compete with international products. Moreover, while in foreign cinema horror has become quite the respectable genre within which well-formulated social commentary is possible, in Russia horror films, it seems, remain in the category of the pure entertainment product, and not a particularly high quality one at that. What are the reasons for this dismissive attitude toward horror films, and what prevented the formation of a Russian school of horror?

¹ The original text in Russian was published on 31 October 2020 in *Kino-Teatr* (<https://www.kino-teatr.ru/blog/y2020/10-31/1446/>).

Reason One: History

Horror as a genre was practically absent in Soviet cinema, although quite a few films that were highly popular both domestically and abroad were produced in adjacent genres: from spy thrillers and action films to widely recognized masterpieces of drama and science fiction. The reason for this strange gap lay in ideology. The concept of Socialist Realism that reigned supreme over Soviet art oriented itself toward rationalism and considered any element of the supernatural or display of violence outside specific contexts (such as wartime) to be signifiers of the ideologically alien and even hostile.

With the advent of Perestroika and decline in censorship, Soviet filmmakers began to experiment, now and again creating strange genre hybrids where science fiction, horror, action, and even fantasy intertwined in the most bizarre ways. It all looked, to put it mildly, peculiar, and could easily have become its own special category of cult cinema. One need only remember *Curse of Snakes Valley* (Marek Piestrak, 1988), a Soviet-Polish venture in the spirit of the *Indiana Jones* franchise, or *The Werewolf Hour* (Igor Shevchenko, 1990), in which an elderly journalist transforms into a bloodthirsty werewolf. And while some films from the turn of the 1980s into the 1990s turned out really to be quite impressive—like *Contact* (Albert S. Mkrtchian, 1992) or *Mr. Designer* (Oleg Tepstov, 1987)—they were exceptions within the murky stream of Perestroika and post-Soviet trash.

All of this largely shaped the perception of horror as a deliberately low-brow genre intended for the margins and held up the formation of any kind of notable horror tradition in Russian cinema. As a result, throughout the 1990s Russian horror films emerged as if into a void. There was no stable cultural environment surrounding them from which they could draw inspiration just as there was no tradition on which they could lean. The significance (and mastery) of those spheres of mass consciousness that could become a source of plots for horror would be determined much later.

Reason Two: Finance

Far and away the most significant source of financial support for film in Russia continues to be the Cinema Fund and the Ministry of Culture, behind each of which stands the state. While strict criteria for the selection of projects to support do not exist and some horror films even receive state funds, it is difficult to imagine these institutions harboring sympathy for horror films and

thrillers. In some ways, this is understandable. Horror is, in principle, a risky genre that flirts with potentially taboo themes—lots of private investors even hesitate to get involved. In many European countries (from the UK to Sweden), however, government agencies often assist filmmakers with budgets to create their genre films, among which horror projects are not uncommon.

In Russia, horror projects have only begun to receive active financial support in recent years. This has yielded some notable results. Along with an increase in the number of domestic horror films at the box office, domestic TV projects have appeared, as well as an entire channel dedicated to horror. One important nuance is that we are speaking only of private investment; the Cinema Fund, as recently disclosed data demonstrates, on the whole primarily funds unprofitable projects.

Reason Three: Culture

The prejudice against horror that exists in Russia to this day is somewhat reminiscent of the condescending attitude (occasionally bordering on contempt) towards American comedies, which are perceived as a set of low-brow gags built, in the main, around physiology. In the same vein, horror films are imagined as a set of clichés that can be combined however one desires, so long as they are chock-full of creepy music, jumpscars, and spectacular shots of some appropriate location—from the solitary hut in a dark forest to underground passages on an abandoned subway line.

The error of this view consists at the very least in the fact that even outwardly straightforward genre films are formed, first, from a large set of templates and, second, that these templates must be combined in such a way that they complement each other as much as possible. Absent this, the plot transforms into a disjointed morass of different concepts: the examples of *Deadly Still* (Anton Zenkovich, 2018) and, to a lesser extent, *SSD* speak for themselves. The main challenge is not even correctly assembling a film according to genre patterns but in adapting foreign examples to local flavor.

This seems to be the recipe for the success of the few projects that have attracted attention outside Russia. *Sputnik* sets the typical sci-fi horror plot about infection by an alien organism in a specifically Soviet context, resonating with the theme of space exploration strongly associated with the name of Russia both at home and abroad. A little earlier *The Bride*, which became a hit in Latin America, used a custom characteristic of pre-revolutionary Russia as the basis

for a standard mystical folk-horror piece on the clash between modern people and ancient, sinister traditions.

Notably, the recently released *Superdeep* (Arseny Siuhin, 2020) also attempts, consciously or not, to build body horror into the urban legend popular in the West about the "well to hell" dug by Soviet engineers. This rule also works in reverse. It is worth recalling that, for example, the slasher film—youth horror that experienced its golden age in the 1980s—originated in a purely American cultural environment, and its popularity abroad almost never reached the same heights it achieved in the domestic market. Similarly, many Russian projects that fall under the broadest possible interpretation of horror—like *Gogol* [Egor Baranov, 2017] or the new version of *Viy* (Oleg Stepchenko, 2014)—made an impression in Russia but went practically unnoticed internationally.

For all its numerous problems, Russian horror undoubtedly has potential. It is even possible to outline two fundamental directions its development may take in the coming years based on what is currently happening in the genre. It is important to remember here that in Russia there are two very different but equally significant strata of horror stories that can be adapted not just for local consumption, but internationally as well.

The first stratum is the pre-revolutionary tradition, of which Gogol can be taken as the key author. His stories entered the Soviet literary canon as romantic variations on a folkloric theme due to ideological reasons, but their colossal horror potential still cut through the omnipresent Soviet "nationality." It is hardly a coincidence that the most famous Soviet folk horror film *Viy* (1967) exploited the Gogolian legacy. And although the first efforts to rediscover Russian horror classics at the start of the 1990s were often clumsy, by the 2010s many authors had once again begun paying close attention to this classic heritage, rethinking it in a modern mode.

The second stratum is the tradition of Soviet urban legends that arose and proliferated en masse during the twilight years of the USSR, laying the groundwork for all sorts of stories depicting the intersection of dark humor, the realities of Stagnation, and the specific imagery of the Uncanny, which appeared more readily in the child than the adult imagination. This heritage only began to see development in the mid-2010s (the *Queen of Spades* diptych [2016, 2019]), but its potential is far from depleted, as evidenced by the recent announcement of Aleksei Ivanov's horror series *Kitchenblock* (2021), where the theme of a Young Pioneer camp is juxtaposed with vampirism.²

² Many of the films mentioned in this article are available to stream online for free at Soviet & Russian Movies Online: <https://sovietmoviesonline.com/>.

Generally speaking, Russian horror remains in a state of infancy, although the speed with which it is developing—especially in comparison to previous decades—cannot help but make an impression. It is unlikely that horror films in Russia will become a platform for deep social criticism or pronouncements on the outrage du jour, but the potential is there to create a quality product in Russia, however irregularly. The extent to which it will be made use of—only time will tell.

— *Translated by Felix Helbing*

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The Dead Among Us: Russian Films on the Zombie Apocalypse¹

Olga Artemeva

Over the course of recent decades—the same years when horror in Russian cinema became a more or less independent aesthetic structure—any discussion of the genre has boiled down to a conversation on the legitimacy of certain plots in the context of specifically Russian discourse. One successful vector of development in recent years has been horror transformed into an ostensibly folkloric tradition and involving a layer of semi-mythological plots and creatures. The aesthetics of horror slightly more oriented towards reality have developed on the whole less successfully. The protagonists of such works exist in an artificial, airless space where there is simply nowhere for true horror to be born. From this point of view, the genre of the so-called post-apocalypse (the causes of said apocalypse are not so important) represents the ideal field for creative reflection on the features of modern Russian society. It is in this context that Pavel Kostomarov's *To the Lake* (2019),² for whom this work would become a feature-length debut, became an unqualified phenomenon, though the trend had been mapped out some years before. In the Russian TV series *The Counted* (2018-19) (the project's working title had been *Infection*), by Artem Aksenenko, symptoms of West Nile virus are discovered in an unprecedented form in Northern Karelia. Having driven the virologist protagonists out into the Karelian landscape, the authors close the action on a semi-mythological space where time has stopped and the typical laws of life and death no longer apply.

The zombie-based apocalypse has proven to be a workable construct in short-form as well. In 2016, Rob Savage directed the 12-minute "Dawn of the Deaf," a nod to Romero's classic films not only in its title, but also in its penetrating look into human nature which, it would appear, began to putrefy long before the flesh started to rot.³ That same year, Vasili Sigarev directed "Z," a short film about a zombie apocalypse in the form of an advertisement for a

¹ The original text in Russian was published in 2019 in *Iskusstvo Kino* 5-6, pp. 140-45 (<https://fantlab.ru/edition257436>).

² A post-apocalyptic television series with the first season available on Netflix in the US and Canada.

³ "Dawn of the Deaf" is currently streamable online from *Alter* on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/cziqkD7iO-g>) and on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/335024788>).

Moscow apartment complex called Zilart.⁴ Sigarev addresses post-apocalyptic aesthetics employing the black humor characteristic of him. Nikolai Baskov reprises his habitual role as a symbol of the inescapable horror of modern Russian society, except that his arc is resolved with such all-consuming self-irony on the part of all participants in the episode that, generally speaking, it is obvious: he is a highly formal symbol of horror here. Sure, Baskov and the rest of "Z" are without a doubt bad here, but the director refuses to say what is good. The official shelter takes the form of Vasili's artsy apartment juxtaposed with a world on fire, but this world on fire remains for Sigarev familiar and legible. The Moscow City towers are smoking, the military and police operate according to the formulations "ma'am" and "no need to think," zombies are clambering naked or in sweatpants and only a stubborn mother (played by Yana Troyanova) buoyed by pure enthusiasm unsullied with self-awareness—the kids have school tomorrow!—will demolish all the barriers between her and her goal. The brush strokes here are of course rough, but the runtime and the advertisement framework do not require more. There appears at the same time in "Z" one of the most striking features of Sigarev's work—the self-identification of the Russian mentality as a chronic inability to be shocked by anything. Therefore, when the heroine at one point is greeted by a person engulfed in flames, her reaction is only natural: well, things happen.

An almost direct parallel can be drawn with another black-and-white comedy short on a similar topic, Ivan Plechev's "Dark Night" (2017).⁵ Like Sigarev's short, "Dark Night" makes use of an advertising premise. It was shot as part of the experimental media laboratory of Yandex.Taxi. Accordingly, the apocalypse overtakes the protagonists as they are in a taxi, riding along on a dark road at night in the Moscow suburbs. Vitalii Khaev, who, since the time of *Playing the Victim* (Kirill Serebrennikov, 2006), has been performing in roles as a symbol of collective ideological disillusionment, essentially does the same thing here. This time, he is a taxi driver wizened by experience who performs the heroic act of tearing into zombie-infested Moscow not for some sacred purpose, but solely because the very act of movement—even absent a particular destination—is in itself already symbolic. The film's final frames are revealing: a panorama of the freeway, shot from above, over which the distant lights of Moscow City loom, dividing the two worlds as starkly as possible.

Pavel Kostomarov's film *To the Lake* also begins, in a sense, with the resolution of a formal problem: adapting Yana Wagner's famous novel into a

⁴ "Z" is currently streamable online on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/214057590>).

⁵ "Dark Night" is currently available from *Bridge of Arts* on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/eo2rF0O01YA>).

TV series. At some point, the authors decided to make a feature-length film that could serve as the prologue to a future television project. Interestingly, of all the national "horror" traditions that exist, Kostomarov's film (whether intentionally or not) draws most strongly on that of Spanish horror. This is not, perhaps, all that surprising. The gold standard of Spanish horror arose some time ago as a reaction against the system of prohibitions and restrictions that endured to the final years of the Franco dictatorship. In the American tradition, horror is born at the moment of deviation from the generally accepted norm. In Spanish horror, it already exists on the periphery of the standard image of the world. For Russian horror such a balance of power is also at its most organic. When the so-called hero of a Russian horror film is suddenly accosted by something, the so-called viewer shrugs their shoulders. In this manner, the dream (Is it a dream? A fantasy? A premonition?) of a heroine (played by Viktoria Isakova) that begins the film seems not so much like an homage to the genre tradition but rather a statement of a fundamentally different kind of approach: the horror of the central megapolis in which modernity and the primitive, heathen genesis cannot accommodate any sort of rebirth, a horror that is always with you.

The calamity in *To The Lake* descends upon a world already hostile and ready to snap at any moment. Formally, this is announced in the exposition with the presentation of the protagonists, two families that seem to mirror each other. On the one hand, there is Sergei (Kirill Käro, lead actor of *To The Lake*, who has recently firmly embodied the "self-reflective middle class"), who left his wife and son for his psychologist (and her teenage son on the Autism spectrum). On the other, there is Leonya (Aleksandr Robak), the "master of life," for whom, according to the astute observation of his daughter from his first marriage, everything is just the same except that he has swapped the psychologist's office for a strip club. For some time, they all heatedly squabble in various configurations while the director chooses a special angle for each character, filming some from the top-down and examining others more closely.

Once upon a time in the (2007) film *[Rec]* by Spanish horror masters Jaume Balaguero and Paco Plaza, a group of firefighters, accompanied by a female reporter and her cameraman, arrive to a call at an apartment block. Someone appears to have gotten sick.

In the scene after which the action goes off the rails and straight into hell, the firefighters enter a room and discover an old granny, smiling strangely. Kostomarov pulls a similar trick in *To the Lake*, substituting the apartment block for a school (inspiring rather obvious associations), the firefighters for the military, and the old woman for a little girl huddled in a corner. Her smile in the next frame becomes a formal anchor denoting that the protagonists' reality has

finally transformed into something macabre, although it is clear that the rupture occurred much earlier (and certainly before the incident on the playground at the beginning of the film). It has simply always been there.

Together with *[Rec]* (and *Dawn of the Dead*, though the Zack Snyder version more than George Romero's), Kostomarov's film also has that moment when the pace, having accelerated, grabs the viewer by the throat and releases them only at that moment when there is a chance to breathe, to grab a little respite and stop believing. To maintain this pace, Kostomarov somewhere along the way sacrifices the accuracy of his characters' motivations. Sergei, Káro's hero, heads to quarantined Moscow to save his ex-wife and son just as soon as his wise father, with whom his relationship leaves much to be desired, alights on him with a judgmental finger. The moment, however, fades into the background when the protagonist finds himself in the capital anyway (characteristically, he's required in some sense to represent a piece of meat) which suddenly turns out to be exactly what many imagine it to be in the depths of the collective consciousness. That is, a frightening space, free of fools, majestic and ominous at the same time, where the optimistic city lights still penetrate the smoke but it is already completely impossible to differentiate strangers from familiar faces and to guess from which corner the next danger will appear. Meanwhile, helicopters circle the city and the nearest suburbs, shot completely Coppola-style, conscripted to exert control over the world, control which has long been lost.

It is interesting that at the moment when the action in the second half of the film finally moves from the capital to the Moscow region, the authors avoid the canons of social horror which are exceedingly obvious for the Russian genre. Easily half the residents of the megapolises will happily believe that one need only drive a few hundred kilometers past the Moscow Ring Road for true darkness and the macabre to assert themselves (this belief was once exploited to varying degrees of success by Denis Neymand's debut film *Junk* [2006]). Instead, Kostomarov chooses existential horror: it starts from the moment when, loaded into cars, the heroes drive out onto a street illuminated only by their painfully fiery headlights.

The motif of the road is perhaps fundamental to the post-apocalyptic genre, whether it involves zombies, epidemics, or something else. Romero arrived at this point in his sociological search through genre and his main classic. Starting in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) with the heroes' attempts to barricade and isolate themselves from a hostile world, he would eventually come in *Diary of the Dead* (2007) to an attempt at salvation through movement. It is

unimportant where, towards which illusory somewhere that might be less horrible, unimportant which nonexistent goal to strive towards.

The goal here is the movement itself, and the best contemporary examples of the genre (such as Colm McCarthy's *The Girl With All The Gifts* (2016), or *Ravenous* (1999), the piercing film by Canadian director Robin Aubert which, by a strange coincidence, passed the Russian box office by) employ it in different ways.

Kostomarov films his road with a stunning top-down shot. Later, you realize that no other angle would be possible for this story. This whole long episode turns out to be frightening not solely because the heroes are not alone on their path. True, sticky, painfully familiar horror grows from understanding: the characters have moved from the habitual space of mundane relationships—finance and trade, sociality, romance—into the space of primitive, fundamental concepts. And yes, there is no way back. In the most literal sense, the way back is cut off to them and fatal. In this context, the film's finale takes on an entirely different meaning which, at first glance, one might easily suspect of religious rhetoric that would be alien to this story. It rhymes the motif of the road that might lack a destination with the words of a prayer (spoken by those it is most difficult to imagine as having religious sentiment) that might not have an addressee. This is no conscious choice here. The protagonists of *To the Lake* continue to move forward without thinking about where they might arrive and pray without thinking about whether they will be answered. And what if, after everything, there is still no response? Well, things happen.

— *Translated by Felix Helbing*

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“Ideas can be found in your nightmares”:

**An Interview with Vladislav Severtsev,
Chief Producer of Russian Horror¹**

Marat Shabaev

Horror films are trending again. They’re receiving Oscar nominations, becoming hits at the box office, and amassing rave reviews from critics. But that’s all in the West, so what's happening here in Russia? We decided to look into the issue and turned to domestic horror producer Vladislav Severtsev. His studio 10/09 released the highest-grossing Russian horror film *The Bride* (2017). It drew the attention of Netflix and can now be seen on the streaming service. Among the producer’s immediate plans for the future are putting together the supernatural series *America*, searching for screenwriters for a horror almanac about women, and even a vertical web project.

Marat Shabaev: At the end of May, 10/09 studio announced a screenwriting competition for a horror almanac film on women. Why this anthology format as opposed to a feature-length film?

Vladislav Severtsev: The shorter format is a perfect fit for horror. It’s easier to handle. A feature-length film is a very complex thing in terms of script and implementation. These days, theatrical distribution is showing weak signs of life, so the almanac is a safer investment. Moreover, it's uncharted territory. No one has ever done this in Russia.

MS: Why did you choose this particular angle? Your previous films also told women's stories (*The Bride*, *Quiet Comes the Dawn* [2019]).

Vladislav Severtsev: Director Kristina Manzhula pushed me to do this. Kristina is the first female horror director I’ve come across in Russia. I produced her short “I love Eve.” In 2020, she received a prize from the Guild of Film Scholars and Film Critics at Kinotavr. I enjoyed the collaboration, so I wanted to look into the female perspective on the genre.

¹ The original text in Russian was published 24 June, 2021, in *Lumos* (<https://lumos.art/>).

MS: Is it in principle important to you that the directors and screenwriters of this upcoming femme-almanac be women?

Vladislav Severtsev: If the stories for the femme-almanac were filmed or written by women, that would be ideal. At worst, it could be just the protagonist.

MS: In an interview with the site HorrorZone, you lamented that screenwriters are rather weak in Russia. What do you see as the ideal proposal for the horror genre?

Vladislav Severtsev: I would like to see a new approach, and not just the classic scary story about ghosts, the living dead, or a cursed house. A story capable of hooking a sophisticated viewer that also remains interesting to a wider audience. An extremely vague request, but for me the main thing is an original idea. Even rough language isn't especially important, because that can be "cured" through connecting with professional screenwriters.

The genre is undergoing quite a strong transformation. It's beginning to move towards what is called elevated horror or post-horror. (Read more about changes to the genre in our other articles—editor's note.) Unfortunately, the Russian viewer isn't ready for that yet. You can look at *Hereditary* (2018) or *Midsommar* (2019) as examples. These made pennies at the Russian box office in comparison to their showing worldwide.

MS: Where can we look for inspiration? These days, many Russian screenwriters, directors, and writers are oriented towards Western models.

Vladislav Severtsev: The issue of borrowing is multifaceted. It's like in music. Rock and roll isn't a Russian invention, either. When it arrived in the USSR in the 50s and 60s, there was a phase of copying. These are growing pains—you've got to learn to imitate if the feeling doesn't come from within. On the other hand, it's sad to see how many Russian screenwriters are still stuck in the era of early Stephen King or Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). Absolutely brilliant works, but times have changed already.

On the issue of referring to Russian genre samples. One of the projects we currently have in the works is *The Bride's* prequel series, historical horror. I just re-read Aleksei Tolstoy, a brilliant example of Russian Gothic.

MS: So then where do we go to find ideas?

Vladislav Severtsev: You can find ideas in your innermost nightmares. Sometimes I have dreams that make me think, “Damn, this would be a great horror movie if it could be filmed.”

Of course, we also have to try to keep up with the times as much as possible and look at what is happening abroad. If I had a 100% reliable recipe, I'd already be somewhere in the Bahamas sitting in a jacuzzi with some Playboy playmates. Everyone is just trying to find this formula through trial and error.

MS: International horror films of the last decade have concentrated on the inner worlds of their characters and their fears. Would it be possible to film something like that in Russia?

Vladislav Severtsev: Yes. And I'm sure a similar trend could work for us. The main thing in this genre is to sniff out the trigger that will produce a purely physiological reaction. We are fairly simple biological machines, we have certain buttons. It's just very difficult to reach them. It's easier to do when you understand where the lever is. Take films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or *Paranormal Activity* (2007), shoestring projects that ingeniously flipped the trigger and made a killing at the box office. You need to scare yourself, then everything will definitely work.

MS: And what personally scares you?

Vladislav Severtsev: I was really struck by the film *The Dark and the Wicked* (2020). At first glance, it doesn't seem to be doing anything fundamentally new. But closer to the finale, there are some scenes that gave me goosebumps. This happens pretty rarely. It's difficult for whatever is happening onscreen to scare me.

Hereditary also got me. I went to the pre-premiere showing, fell asleep for the first twenty minutes and thought, “I think I'll head out.” But when that girl's head got torn off by the pole, I woke up instantly.

There's nothing else to recall, because mainstream horror movies don't scare me. Commercial horror has become a big glossy machine. It's good because it

attracts a mass audience to the genre. But on the other hand, this kind of approach simplifies it too much.

MS: So that means the new Pennywise from *It* doesn't scare you?

Vladislav Severtsev: Not the new one, not the old one. I've never had a problem with clowns. If we can talk about other film adaptations of King, then I think *Children of the Corn* (1984) is really scary.

MS: You've got several interesting projects in the works right now. We've heard about the *America* series.

Vladislav Severtsev: Yes, it's an adaptation of an Anatolii Umansky story of the same name from the series "The Most Terrible Book." The beauty of it is that it's partly based on true events. It's about the early period of colonization of Alaska by Russians, about their relationship with the Americans, the British, and the local Indians. It was a potent mix. The British supplied the Indians with weapons so they could launch raids against the Russians. This whole story is real. But later on it acquires a mystical coloring. I highly recommend reading.

I translated the story into English and started showing it to potential Western partners. Everyone was delighted. If you need references, then conceptually and visually it's close to the first season of *The Terror*. *America* is my passion project, very big and costly. Right now we're just developing the script. I hope that by the end of 2022 we'll have something concrete, like filming a pilot episode.

MS: And what about the upcoming horror film *Good Luck, Nightingale!*?

Vladislav Severtsev: The plot is pretty simple. It's a chamber film, so the action takes place in one location. There are only four characters: the mother, a former nurse; her daughter, who is getting off methadone; and two Christian missionaries who accidentally wind up in the house. And the fifth character is a monster. If everything works out, it won't be a digital model, but animatronic. And it'll be made by the same people who worked on John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982). I can't say more!

Damien LeVeck, director of the horror film *The Cleansing Hour* (2019), which was pretty good, will be shooting the film. For the moment, the fate of the project depends on whether or not we'll be able to get rebates (government

payments that cover part of the production budget—editor's note) in Russia. If so, then filming will begin in Moscow in October. In the worst case scenario that filming must be done in America, then I'll be one of the co-investors and co-producers. (After the interview, preliminary approval of the rebates was received—editor's note).

MS: You did the web series *Don't Be Afraid* (2020). Have you ever thought about making a horror movie for TikTok?

Vladislav Severtsev: We're currently developing a similar project, a short vertical story in cooperation with Mail.ru. I'm not sure how all this will turn out, we'll see.

MS: Do you get the feeling that Russian horror is breaking out of its genre slum?

Vladislav Severtsev: The problem is that there's still a slum at all. Big directors and screenwriters don't want to work in horror. Some are just not interested, while others think it's a low-brow genre.

The box office figures for Russian horror films don't work in our favor, either. After the success of *Queen of Spades* (2015) and *The Bride* (2017), things went downhill. There's a wonderful Russian proverb: don't blame the mirror if your face is crooked. I understand perfectly well that the person who has paid money for a ticket goes to the movie theater the way they'd go to a store. They should get the quantity and quality of adrenaline that any American film might offer.

At the moment, we're unable to provide that. But if you don't make bad movies, you can't make any better ones either. I have to laugh at myself a little because I'm in a situation like the one where "the mice cried, pricked themselves, but kept devouring the cactus anyway." But if I don't eat this cactus, it won't be possible to elevate the industry of the genre. Sooner or later, it'll happen. I think it needs another five or so years to reach a good level.

MS: But supernatural Russian series streaming on online platforms—like *The Swamp* (2021-), *The Vampires of Midland* (2021), and *Kitchenblock*—have found their audience. And they're pretty well-made. Why is this not the case with feature-length films?

Vladislav Severtsev: These are slightly different things. It's one thing to sit on the couch at home with a beer to watch content at your convenience. It's quite another to go to the movie theater. Today that's a real event. Completely different levels of expectation.

MS: Lots of American directors and screenwriters are not at all shy about working with horror. Do you think we can expect Nikita Mikhalkov or Andrei Zvyagintsev to suddenly start working in this genre?

Vladislav Severtsev: I was just reading in the news that Nikita Mikhalkov's TriTe studio is planning to shoot a horror film about a confrontation between a Russian submarine and a kraken. I was absolutely delighted. Zvyagintsev could handle horror, but I couldn't say how interested in that he is.

In America, well-known directors can take on horror and it seems normal because there's a functioning industry there. We won't be seeing interesting intersections of famous directors with the genre here anytime soon. Of course, there will be attempts to repeat the success of Egor Abramenko's *Sputnik* (2020). But pure horror isn't worth holding your breath for.

MS: Can you recommend some recent horror films that will help viewers understand the beauty of the genre?

James Wan, with *The Conjuring* franchise, has done a big thing, turning horror into a high-quality mainstream product. There aren't any revelations, but the craftsmanship is absolute. There's also *Hereditary*, which I already mentioned. *Mandy* (2017) is a totally shameless project, and therefore excellent. *The Lighthouse* (2019), even though it's not the genre in its purest form.

MS: Do you think contemporary festival horror will soon give way to something new?

Vladislav Severtsev: It's more than likely to happen. At some point, the circuit will be saturated. But human fears aren't going to disappear and so long as those exist, so will the genre in one or another form. We've already talked about physiology. If you hit a person on the head with a hammer for a long time, then by the end of the week it won't hurt them quite as much as it did on the first day. We need to look for new methods and stimuli.

MS: Maybe the new form is already here, but it's just gone unnoticed? Take video games, for example, even if they're not movies. I'm practically never scared by films, but when I started playing *Resident Evil 7*, I felt true horror and panic.

Vladislav Severtsev: Unfortunately, I'm so busy that I can't spend time on this. Even though I once bought a Playstation 4 and really tried to play. I'm sure that horror is in great demand in the video game industry and can take on other forms even more interesting than in film. Simply because it's an interactive experience. In film, you're led along certain paths, but here there's much more of the unknown.

— *Translated by Felix Helbing*

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Horror Reverie

Horror Reverie 2:

An Online Symposium Celebrating 50 Years of *The Exorcist*

INTRODUCTION

Exorcising *The Exorcist*

Marcus Prasad

The Exorcist, to me, has always been a reference point for the more contemporary horror films I work on—its iconography has transcended its 1973 inception and has practically inaugurated an entire subgenre of films that engage with its vault of visual cues. The whites of Pazuzu's eyes, a horizontal body rising slowly above a bed, bodily contortions, guttural growls, and the silhouette of a figure in a trench coat have become symbols that not only work to place the film in proximity to a well-established canon of horror, but also have become the markers of an expansive and ever-growing dialogue, from *The Evil Dead* (1981) to *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014), and most recently, *Evil Dead Rise* (2023), to name a few.

On March 11, 2023, the second Horror Reverie symposium,¹ organized by Stacey Abbott, Mark Jancovich, Lorna Piatti-Farnell, Gary D. Rhodes, and Kristopher Woofert, devoted three panels to discussion and analysis of *The Exorcist* and its legacy. I felt at home amongst the participants and the presentations they shared, each expressing a passion for the film and horror generally that I too have fostered from a young age. Over the past few months,

¹ Recordings of the full online symposium are viewable in this issue of *Monstrum*. Complete transcripts follow in the Appendix to the issue.

having reflected on the symposium and rewatched the film for the first time since I was eight years old, I was able to travel backward in time and reconnect with some of my early confrontations with the genre, and what it was that continuously drew me back to horror. Collapsing the space between my childhood and my present self as such was like my own personal archaeological dig—not necessarily one that unleashed a malevolent entity like Pazuzu, but instead revealed a kind of map leading to some of the motivations behind my gravitation to horror and its formative relationship to my sense of self.

In 2004, my parents and I moved from a house in the suburbs of Richmond, British Columbia to an apartment in the city's centre. I distinctly remember this upheaval as marked by a new routine of taking an elevator multiple times a day, with the accompanying fear that it would break down while I was in it. It seemed like from the day we moved in I started having dreams that the elevator's buttons were mixed up, or that it would stop suddenly, and I'd have to pry the doors open between floors. When I reflect on this time, I partly attribute the anxiety to mourning the loss of my early childhood home and being launched into a newer, shinier urban space. But this period was also characterized by a new cable subscription my dad had purchased, which included an AMC channel that broadcasted a 24/7 schedule of classic horror films.

I would spend most of my Sundays watching the unending marathon which seemed to always include Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) in the morning, and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) or Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) in the afternoons. In the early evenings, as if aligned with my bedtime, *The Exorcist* was scheduled, and I would watch with excited anticipation that would quickly turn to paranoia as my own bedroom transformed into the potential site for demonic possession. Where were my parents in this equation? They were right there with me, just as fascinated by these films' domestic disturbances as I was. The only thing I wish they could have protected me from was my childhood proclivity to blur the lines between fact and fiction, or at least offer a reassurance that discerning the two would become easier as I got older.

The Exorcist moved me the first time I watched it. As a fourth grader, I couldn't yet deeply connect with the dreadful atmosphere building of Kubrick, or resonate with Carpenter's targeted teens (I don't think anyone had it out for me just yet). What I could draw from was instead a wealth of symbols and familiar iconography from a Catholic upbringing, and a gay identity that was bubbling underneath the surface. It was like Friedkin honed into the contradictions I was unknowingly grappling with, which at the time registered

as pure fear. With contemplation, a bit of hindsight, and more life experience, however, I now see how this film marked a moment of identification for a confused gay boy who perhaps felt more connected to a chaotic demon than a well-behaved, repentant Catholic. Of course, now that I'm an adult, it's quite easy to slap on justifications for the unshakeable distress this film instilled in me and to connect it to sources of power and influence, which I think is one of the main things we do as horror scholars. But what I want to think through instead, via my own experience and alongside the *Horror Reverie* presentations, is how this film's excesses and intriguing monstrosity marked a key moment in the development of my queer identity.

What I was most reactive to, as a child and still today, is the grotesqueness of Friedkin's representation of demonic possession; in all of its bloodiness, oozing, and secretions mixed with a specific form of violence through which the film (not unlike much religious iconography) seems to revel in its own infliction and reception of pain. When Pazuzu comes to inhabit the body of Regan, we are met with a synthesis of two complete opposites that fold into each other—the pure, benevolent, and innocent child infected by the perverse, profane, and destructive demon. The two exacerbate each other and make the desecrations of Regan's body and selfhood all the more intriguing and unbearable. Through this operation, *The Exorcist* turns the act of looking into an evocation of a kind of crisis of faith and moral sensibility. If we see what happens to Regan as a tragic, religious anomaly that should be expelled, we're on the right side of God. If we however find ourselves pulled by some kind of drive toward the visual extremities of possession, we become blasphemers.

This ambivalent moral stance is a significant part of the fascinating critical territory taken up by the contributors to the Horror Reverie 2 symposium. Amy C. Chambers opens the symposium noting that *The Exorcist* evoked extremely visceral responses from viewers, with many collapsing, fainting, or becoming ill upon viewing the film's body horror and, significantly, the moments in which Regan was put under distress and pain from doctors. This failure of science to resolve the issue at hand not only exposes the gritty underbelly of medical practice, but simultaneously rejects a deification of science at large, positioning it as that which can neither encompass nor comprehend the full range of human and earthly experience. This notion, as Steven Choe suggests in his presentation, legitimizes the sacred in the film—presenting demonic possession as that which terrorizes its victim to an extent beyond what humans are capable of fixing. In this way, Pazuzu's incarnation within Regan begins to crystallize the threat of both an epistemological and ontological impossibility: a manifestation of Hell that had only been conceived

of as possible after life, beyond flesh, past the threshold of the earthly. As it becomes literalized through the child's body, it threatens order, rationality, and ultimately, the hegemonic construction of not just science, but religion.

Linda (LMK) Sheppard states in her presentation that the exorcism becomes an excuse to display aberrant female behaviour, which becomes perversely appealing. And this, to me, connects to a quote from filmmaker Alexandre O. Philippe's conversation with actress Eileen Dietz in the second panel, noting that fear is a gateway to self-knowledge, forcing us into thinking about our choices. Witnessing the deviant disposition and behaviour of Regan's possessed body is intriguing for its transgression of normative social conduct, which becomes a vehicle through which a cathartic expression of our own unfavourable urges can play out. Another way to look at this, is that it contorts the boundary between fear and pleasure and makes them almost indiscernible, forcing them to become an affect bound by contradiction. The possessed body of Regan crystallizes this contradiction both narratively and visually. She becomes an integrally irrational figure, not only for her uncanny wavering between vulgar demon and struggling, pleading twelve-year-old girl, but as an irreconcilable subjectivity that oscillates between an object of perverse pleasure from watching the progressive desecration of her body and soul, and a fear or aversion to such destruction suggesting that if we look away, we are not part of her profanation by unholy means.

But to look is to participate, and if you make it through an entire viewing of *The Exorcist* without throwing up, crying, or shutting it off entirely, you're not necessarily a bad Catholic, but are more likely to be exactly the kind of person of faith that the Catholic authorities who supported and advised on the film felt *The Exorcist* might speak to. I do think, though, there is something unique to the representation of evil in this film against the pre-approved backdrop of Catholicism. As Simon Brown notes in his presentation in panel three on *The Exorcist's* sequels, the particular framing of evil raises a central question, which I think can be transposed back onto the original: does *The Exorcist* confront evil or simply show it in a literal form? I think it does both in an attempt to level the field of contestation, to suggest that the neutralization of evil via science, religion, or the power of family love are equally valiant pursuits, none of which will necessarily prevail against the unknown. Aside from the conflicted form of looking that this film encourages, one of its more harrowing aspects is the bittersweet ending in which Regan is freed at the cost of Father Karras's life—a life that is already plagued by guilt over his mother's lonely death leading him to a crisis of faith. Yes, the young girl is redeemed and Pazuzu is seemingly exorcised, but this is only made possible through what could be read as the

suicide of a key representative of the Church. In this way, the film's narrative conceit around the battle between good and evil is left somewhat unsatisfied, without the feeling that the greater good has saved the day.

As an eight-year-old, this was a revelation for me. The notion that Catholicism was fallible and susceptible to ulterior forces went against what I was taught, and shook my sense of abstract, ecclesiastical security and absolutism. Not necessarily in a hopeless way, but toward a direction that made me question what deviance might actually entail. If I'm drawn to grotesque and potentially perverse things, I should at least be able to explore why. It also allowed me to begin to be more critical of the institutionalization of religion and what it deems normal. I already knew I was a little bit different from the other boys in my grade, and my strange attraction to the grotesqueness of *The Exorcist* perhaps punctuated that fact. It encouraged me to experience my own form of alterity cathartically when I didn't have the tools or resources to express it otherwise, and drove me toward other films that have similarly perverse, abject, or destructive characters set against Catholic imagery and narrative—my two favourites from around this era of my life are Francis Lawrence's *Constantine* (2005) and Rupert Wainwright's *Stigmata* (1999).

It is fascinating for me to consider my early engagement with horror as one that articulated my relationship to myself, and later my scholarly interests as I grew up. Horror films have always given me a way to add complexity to my feelings of fear, to combine them with pleasure and desire, and to connect them to critical academic inquiry. I continue to do this today in my own work, which thinks through queerness as a representational strategy across contemporary horror films. Unsurprisingly, I'm mostly drawn toward those films that arguably have unhappy endings—James Wan's *Insidious* (2010), David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014), and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018), to name a few. These films bring me back to my eight-year-old self, watching *The Exorcist* for the first time, and the incomparable feeling of my stomach folding into itself as Regan urinates on the carpet and menacingly declares "you're gonna die up there." These are structuring moments for me that are a combination of hatred and love, disgust and pleasure, endearment and disavowal, that unsurprisingly are also constitutive binaries of my always-changing sense of self, where there's no happy ending or ending at all per se, just constant movement. It's clear from the presentations at this second *Horror Reverie* that Friedkin's film has had an impact on the participants and attendees; their captivating research speaks to an afterlife of the film that persists 50 years after its release. It was an honour to share a space with scholars who are so evidently passionate about horror, and to reflect

on how *The Exorcist* has specifically left its mark on me, its audience, and its paratexts.

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Horror Reverie Symposia: <https://www.monstrum-society.ca/horror-reverie-symposia.html>.

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**A Different Kind of Something:
The Human Drive Towards Self-Obliteration
in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* and *Annihilation***

Tristan Boisvert-Larouche

In his directorial debut *Ex Machina* (2015) and his second film *Annihilation* (2018), Alex Garland explores the relationship between destruction and creation—the movement toward human extinction and a transformation into something else. In both films, Garland explores the line between humanity's evolution and its extinction, between its next step and its last, presenting characters whose drive towards self-obliteration leads to the creation of something entirely beyond the human. This momentum toward self-obliteration recalls Freud's discussions of the death drive, where part of the human psyche seeks relief from the tensions of life in the inertia of an inorganic state. In *Ex Machina* this takes the form of tech CEO and mad-scientist Nathan's creation of an android called Ava. In the latter film, the titular "annihilation" and subsequent becoming-other-than-human are precipitated not by terrestrial artificial intelligence, but by the alien "Shimmer," an ever-expanding impact site where a meteor fell to Earth. The team of scientists who explore the site—cellular biology professor Lena, expedition leader Dr. Ventress, paramedic Anya, geomorphologist Cassie, and physicist Josie—experience the complete destruction of their original, material selves. Meanwhile Lena, the only member who escapes, only does so as a completely different, nonhuman being. As these summaries suggest, *Ex Machina* and *Annihilation* vary widely in both story and scope, and yet at their core they are both meditations on this human drive towards self-obliteration and its almost apocalyptic implications.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and throughout his career, Freud would try to make sense of what he described as a dynamic dance of drives: "One group of instincts [life drives] rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group [death drives] jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey" (Freud 1955a, 41). While in some ways at odds, death and life instincts share more than first might appear, as Freud believed that the tendency of mental life is "to reduce, to keep constant, or to remove internal tension" (1955a, 55-56). In the case of the death drive, he

conjectures that one is propelled backward toward a quietness reserved for inorganic matter or a primordial state before life began. The possibility of a death drive first began to reveal itself to Freud in studies of dreams. He had observed that the “dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (1955a, 13). The unconscious repetition of these horrific experiences seemed incompatible with instinctive pleasure-seeking and the life-drives alone.

Death, dreams, sex and their entanglement share a prominent place in Garland’s work, which is populated by characters who unconsciously seek a kind of self-obliteration. In *Annihilation*, Lena, the protagonist and the latest addition to the expedition party venturing into the Shimmer, is plagued by dreams and flashbacks which force her to relive her past mistakes and their consequences, unconsciously repeating her traumatic experiences. A year prior to the events of the film, Lena cheated on her husband Kane with her colleague Daniel. Kane later discovered the affair, and as a result, volunteered to join one of the earlier groups sent to investigate the Shimmer, a mission from which they never returned. Lena has never managed to get over the disappearance of her husband, as shown when she declines an invitation to a garden party, instead seeking refuge in the past: “I’m going to paint our bed . . . the bedroom” (0:04:45-0:04:50). Even though a year has elapsed since Kane left for the Shimmer, Lena remains unable to separate herself from the remnants of her relationship. The act of repainting the bedroom, a site of sexual intimacy, is a complicated gesture. Her stumbling use of the term “our” and the very nature of repainting as a covering-over suggests that she is at once pushing forward and living in a past coloured with sexual guilt. Later that day, her husband mysteriously comes back, gravely ill, eventually leading Lena to enter the Shimmer in order to find a way to help him. As she penetrates the area’s glimmering wall, an act itself carrying sexual connotations, we are met with the memory of her affair with Daniel. This flashback, like all the others, takes place in the married couple’s bedroom, a simultaneously erotic and self-destructive reminder of the past. At the end of the film, in a parallel setpiece loaded with metaphorical significance, Lena and dr. Ventress meet again beneath the lighthouse, in a cave formed by the meteor impact that originally gave birth to the Shimmer. They exchange a few sentences before Dr. Ventress vaporises into a shimmering fractal cloud. As Lena looks inside the cloud, it absorbs a drop of her blood, metamorphosing the cloud into an alien mimic—a being whose only directive seems to be the imitation of Lena, its mother. Lena fights with the alien entity, eventually handing it an unpinned phosphorus grenade which

explodes in its hands, setting them both on fire. After this, the mimic sets everything ablaze around it, as if compelled to do so. As in the bedroom dreamscape and its conflicted imagery, it is as if the Shimmer were reflecting Lena's own drive for destruction, to burn it all down.

Yet, paradoxically, even in those self-destructive moments, the seeds of pleasure-seeking and the need for attachment, are perceptible. After all, we have learned of the supposed aims of her affair. What ends in destruction started as a need for sexual fulfilment but also intimacy. In one of her flashbacks, after having slept with Daniel, she tells him that it was a mistake, to which he responds, "You spend more time away from your husband than with him. You can't talk to him about work and he won't talk to you about his. And there is a clear physical and intellectual connection between us." Eventually Lena reveals that Kane discovered their affair and asks Daniel to leave, prompting him to say, "You know it's not me you hate. It's yourself." She responds that she hates him, too (1:08:50-1:10:20). Even though she knows that Kane has found out about their affair, Lena continues to meet with Daniel. Her drive towards the intimacy that she has lost in her marriage has the opposite effect of eroding her relationship with Kane even further. Thus, if the lighthouse carries with it broader implications of borders and unknown expanses that lead to annihilation, the bedroom becomes for Lena, in a sense, a more personal, intimate symbol of the concurrence and mutual implication of the drives. Most of the memories elicited by the Shimmer take place within the confines of her bedroom; her unconscious compulsively revisits the birthplace of her transgression and by the same token, of her trauma. In the same way that the mimic's creation is followed by destruction at the lighthouse, Lena's affair with Daniel is followed by the destruction of her marriage and her eventual entry into the shimmer; the cyclical relationship of the drives causes a constant series of undoings.

In *Ex Machina*, this dance between compulsive creation and destruction, sex and death is evidenced in the actions of another scientist. Nathan is the founder of Bluebook, the most popular search engine in *Ex Machina*'s fictional universe, and also the secret creator of Ava, an incredibly advanced android and seductive femme fatale of sorts. Shortly after meeting Ava, Caleb, the man tasked with establishing the android Ava's consciousness, questions the need for attributing highly sexualized qualities to an artificial intelligence. Nathan retorts: "And to answer your real question, you bet she can fuck" (0:46:50-0:47:05). Nathan's blunt response is in part prompted by the fact that (unbeknownst to Caleb) Ava has been designed to mirror Caleb's pornographic preferences, collected by Nathan from Caleb's Bluebook searches. More

importantly, perhaps, Nathan seems to be projecting his own reduction of androids to mere sexual objects. Nathan seems to want to surround himself with such creations. We learn that the initial prototype for Ava wasn't designed to mimic human sexuality. And later on in the film, Nathan's housekeeper Kyoko, whom we learn is also an android, begins to undress herself in front of Caleb, unprompted, hinting that her programming renders her at least in part a sexbot. Nathan's compulsion to create and recreate new prototypes seems inspired by a desire for sexual fulfilment, domination and, concurrently, destruction. He is in some ways a negative image of Lena's simultaneous drive towards destruction as well as intimacy and connection. We learn that Nathan has obsessively updated his line of androids, ostensibly in an attempt to produce an improved version; yet even though Ava passes the test, affirming her acquisition of consciousness, Nathan is still bent on destroying her, as he had her predecessors. Similar to *Annihilation's* mimic, Ava represents a creation born of erotic and destructive impulses which goes on to incite further annihilation—of both the creation as well as the creator and their world.

It is noteworthy that Nathan's repeated destruction of his creations reflect his own self-destructive impulses; Nathan's alcoholism keeps him in a cyclical dynamic that alternates between drinking and health-focused sobriety. When they first meet, Nathan explains to Caleb that “[w]hen [he] has a heavy night, [he] compensate[s] the next morning” (0:06:35-0:06:45). The conflicting movement towards health and life together with destruction that we see in his drinking habits is externalised in Nathan's compulsive creation of androids. He creates something that will outlast his material form—that will extend his life and legacy—but will simultaneously be goaded to destroy him and the world at large. In this way, both Nathan's replicated androids and Lena's alien mimic are versions of the “double”—the very emblem of the paradoxical drives at work. As Freud (1919) says, drawing from Otto Rank's definition, “From having been an assurance of immortality, it [the double] becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (1955b, 235). In the case of both Lena and Nathan, their efforts to create new paths for themselves are part of a process during which their organisms' every intrinsic characteristic is annihilated, where everything that makes someone *someone* on a human scale is obliterated. It is the ultimate act of simultaneous destruction and creation. In the wake of the death drive comes a new, ahuman state of being—in *Ex Machina*, the birth of the hard drive (or more accurately “wet ware” as Ava's fluid brain is described), and in *Annihilation*, an entity so radically other than human that it may no longer be earthly.

When Caleb questions Nathan about his motivations, the latter answers, “the arrival of strong artificial intelligence has been inevitable for decades.” He

does not “see Ava as a decision, just [as] an evolution.” He describes how “Ava doesn’t exist in isolation any more than [Caleb] or [himself]. She’s part of a continuum,” and he finishes with the speculation that “[o]ne day the AI’s are gonna look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons in the plains of Africa. An upright ape, living in the dust, with crude language and tools. All set for extinction” (1:04:30-1:06:45). Despite his paradoxical use of the term “evolution,” Nathan knows that the creation of Ava or her successors is going to lead to his own destruction and, potentially, of all humanity’s, yet he proceeds with it nonetheless. He sees his place as part of a middle and not an end, but his speculation about eventual extinction suggests otherwise. In short, his terms, like his motives, are conflicted. The creation of Ava represents the planned obsolescence of himself, and by extension of the human, purposefully done with the knowledge that it is, in some way, an act of self-replacement. As he tries to drag Ava back to her cell after her escape from his odd combination of home, lab, and prison, Nathan stabs himself by walking backwards into a knife held by Kyoko. It is an act of suicide: he stabs himself both physically, by walking backwards into the blade, and speculatively, by creating the android holding it.

While Nathan’s self-obliteration happens by means of human-created advanced technology, in *Annihilation*, this process goes beyond humanity’s abilities and conventional material understanding. In the film’s final act, Lena joins Dr. Ventress inside the cave underneath the lighthouse where the two have a short discussion about the Shimmer, before the latter disintegrates into a torrent of energy coming from inside her body, her last words being: “It’s inside of me now [. . .] It’s unlike us. It’s *not* like us. I don’t know what it wants. Or if it wants. But it will grow, until it encompasses everything. Our bodies and our minds will be fragmented into their smallest parts until not one part remains. Annihilation” (1:32:00-1:32:55). While the vaporisation of Dr. Ventress’s body seems to be the manifestation of this annihilation, it began a long time before this moment; for her and anyone who penetrates the confines of the Shimmer, there is no longer an “I” or even an “us.” Earlier when Lena, after entering the anomaly, studies her blood cells under a microscope, she observes the same kind of shimmering cells that would emerge from Dr. Ventress’s dematerialization to form the alien mimic. Later on, the group discovers that the bear that killed their team member, Cassie, could speak with her voice as if it had absorbed part of her. In another scene, when only Lena and Josie are left, the latter disappears into a flower bush, willingly letting herself be taken by the Shimmer. Every member of the team begins a process of self-obliteration when they breach the barrier of the Shimmer and journey towards its centre, linking

their will to discover to a simultaneous will to be assimilated. They press onward even as the mutations become more extreme as they march forward, and they mutate into other forms. In the end, only Lena will complete the process, the others simply assimilating into the shimmering anomaly. In the film's climactic scene, after fighting the alien mimic without success, Lena puts an unpinned phosphorus grenade in its hands. At that moment, the mimic ceases to imitate her. As the grenade is about to explode, the mimic and Lena become identical, physically and in their "smallest parts," as Ventress notes above; for that short moment, their cells are the same, they are the same being. Moments before the explosion, Lena leaves the lighthouse, the mimic staying behind. The grenade detonates and the mimic begins the destruction of everything around it. Lena leaves the remainder of her humanity behind in the lighthouse in the form of the mimic she created, and which will destroy itself and everything around it.

The aftermath of the self-obliteration of Nathan in *Ex Machina* and Lena in *Annihilation* is something radically other than the human. Neither dead nor alive in relation to the human conception of those ideas, they or their creations are something beyond human forms and drives—indeed, beyond the human entirely. The android Ava is both inorganic and self-perpetual; she represents the obsolescence of humanity. Leaving Nathan's corpse behind, leaving the human behind, she is an entirely nonhuman being. In the same way, Lena leaves her humanity behind in the burning lighthouse, materially having become something else entirely (though still superficially resembling her human form). When she is finally reunited with Kane, she asks him if he truly is Kane, to which he replies, "I don't think so" (1:47:00-1:47:30). He then asks the same question, which she does not answer, possibly uncertain of the answer herself. They hug, and their irises glitter; they have become a different kind of something. They have gone past the distinction between organic and inorganic, for the Shimmer does not seem to follow our understanding of reality. It creates trees made of glass, plants with human genetic material; it deconstructs the most basic structure of a living being to create another one, a being never seen before, a being that is ahuman.

In some ways, these films could be said to portray the so-called "next stage of human evolution" as an extension of us, as something in which part of us remains; even Nathan considers his androids as part of humanity's continuum. And in both films, the radically other, ahuman forms represented by Ava and the new Lena still at least resemble the human. Yet, I would argue that Garland's work resists portraying these new forms as evolved or hybrid; rather, the films portray these beings as a cut or break from prior forms, as humanity's end point in a sense. While Lena and Nathan's drive towards self-

obliteration is a human one, an intrinsic quality of their humanity, it disappears as they reach this new state drastically disconnected from the human. While they retain human appearances, Ava and Lena are, in that regard, a lot more similar to the alien creature in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), than they are to us. Garland's films suggest that as humans strive towards ideas of a more advanced human state, the line between evolution and extinction is getting nearer since, to become something else entirely, we might need to disappear completely.¹

Tristan Boisvert-Larouche is a Visual Arts student at Dawson College. He is interested in the intersections between visual arts, performance arts, music and literature and their use as an introspective exploration of the human condition. He aims to create art that explores queer identity, mental illness and class inequality through the combination of storytelling and social activism. He aspires to create a video game from scratch, from the coding to the art, story and music.

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BOOK REVIEW

Meta in Film and Television Series

By David Roche
Edinburgh University Press
2022

376 pp., \$125 USD (h/c)

While the term “meta” (short for metatext/metatextuality or metafiction) has become increasingly mainstreamed, invoked in outlets from trade journals to fanblogs, its definition can be as difficult to pin down as its use within various forms of media. Is it merely breaking the fourth wall, a deeper look at the political or industrial

undercurrents of artistic creation, or an exercise in narcissism? These elements have been examined by scholars such as Patricia Waugh (1984), Linda Hutcheon (1980, 1991), Robert Stam (1992), and Christian Metz (1991), among others, but much of the work around metafiction has focused on the literary side. David Roche, in his length study, *Meta in Film and Television* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), is explicitly positioned to address that lack through both synthesizing the earlier work around metatext and developing some of his own positions and vocabulary for its use in both the aforementioned mediums in an erudite and broad study.

Reaching back to the silent film era, Roche begins with a thorough review of the literature around metatextuality and its various definitions, threading a careful needle in elucidating the differences between reflexivity more generally and “meta” specifically, and insisting that the terms are not necessarily synonymous. That is, for Roche, reflexivity represents the “zero degree” of meta, in that the constructedness of the text is being foregrounded, without which the meta element would not exist. Meta, in Roche’s terms, is not only the emphasis on the text as text, but “a discourse that engages analytically with the aspect of the root term that is being emphasized” (15). Following this, Roche maps out the types, problems, and most importantly for his study, the history of the term and practice within the visual arts. He also touches on the concept of whether—and how—meta translates to media from various cultures,

pointing out an area for further work on metatext within media studies outside of the Western context.

Having set the scene, so to speak, the second—and longest—part of the book regards what Roche amusingly calls the “aboutness of meta.” Broadly categorized, this section examines “movies about movies” (e.g., the “making-of” type of film), movies about watching movies (spectatorship), texts about the mediums themselves, and the meta-ness of adaptations and remakes, genre, seriality, history, and politics. Roche employs an impressive array of film texts in particular, from *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) to *Fellini’s Roma* (1972) to not only dig deeply into meta strategies themselves, but investigate how they are employed, on both large and small scales within these texts. This two-pronged approach is essential in situating Roche’s book as a template for future meta-based studies across mediums and globally focused. (The conclusion even offers some directions regarding further study for areas Roche does not cover, particularly the inherent meta-ness of the documentary form.) Most importantly, Roche’s deep focus on the numerous and multifaceted meanings that metatexts offer undermines assertions that meta is merely a clever ploy, a game for engaged viewers, rather asserting that its use has political dimensions beyond a viewer’s awareness of themselves as spectator, or a filmmaker’s deconstruction of narrative or production tropes. This is particularly clear in Roche’s discussion of the BBC’s 1964 docudrama—historiographic metafiction—*Culloden*. Its framing as a documentary that couldn’t possibly exist (the Battle of Culloden occurred in 1745) allows it, through the distancing techniques of meta, to “remind us that the events we read in the pages of history books affected the lives of ordinary people at least as much, if not more so, than those of the men who instigated them and whose social status enabled them to escape the consequences of their actions” (235). This awareness, and its focus on the structures of both narrative creation and power, can thus take on a political dimension through its self-aware perspective through performance, dialogue, and camerawork.

If there is one critique of Roche’s work (rather, one that Roche does not point out himself), it is that the “Film” portion of the title receives much more attention than “Television Series.” Roche’s analyses of meta in film is extensive, reaching back to the silent era and across multiple genres, proving through volume (amongst other elements) the extent of its use within the visual mediums and easily making the case against the idea that it represents a “recent” fad or one symptomatic of genre or narrative exhaustion. His discussion of television offers some expected entries (*Community* [2009-2015], *Twin Peaks* [1990-1991, 2017], *The Prisoner* [1967-1968]) and some unexpected surprises

(*This Is Us* [2016-2022]), with brief mentions of “meta” episodes in other series (e.g., “The French Mistake” from *Supernatural* [2005-2020]). Even limiting his study’s focus to US and UK media offers a significant amount of television material, much of which Roche touches on but does not fully explore. The caveat to this critique, however, is that Roche’s goal is not so much to offer an encyclopedic account as it is to provide a theoretical framework for continuing scholarship in both television and film to fill in these gaps.

The depth and breadth of Roche’s analysis of meta, the work around it, and the work that embodies it makes *Meta in Film and Television Series* a valuable work as both a study and a foundational text for future research. Roche’s command of a massive body of both the literature around metatext and the film and television series that employ it is impressive and an excellent resource for historical, production, and textual scholars in both film and television disciplines. Roche correctly asserts that material around metatext in the visual mediums lags behind the work around its presence in literature. Yet, as he writes in his conclusion, the meta-phenomenon “invites us to disentangle the strands and formulate its theoretical propositions about creation and reception, its forms and its medium, its aesthetic and political potential, and, more profoundly, about its relation to the world” (283). I would argue that Roche’s work is inviting us to do the same.

— Erin Giannini

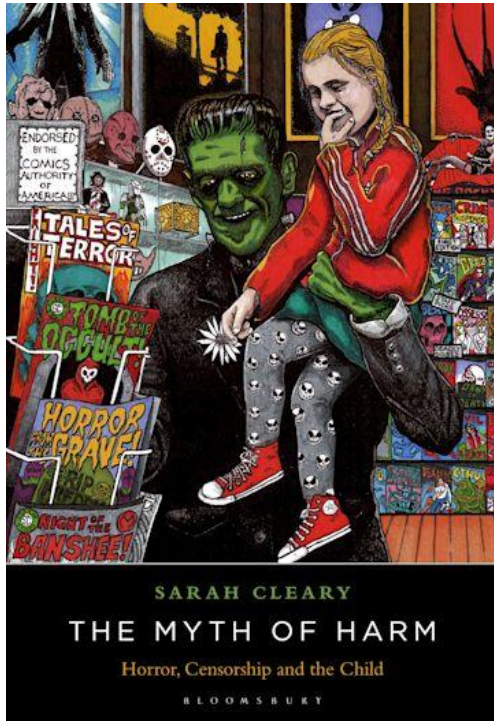
Erin Giannini, PhD, is an independent scholar. She served as an editor and contributor at PopMatters, and written numerous articles about topics from corporate culture in genre television to production-level shifts and their effects on television texts. She is also the author of *Supernatural: A History of Television’s Unearthly Road Trip* (Rowman & Littlefield 2021), and *The Good Place* (Wayne State UP/TV Milestones 2022), and co-editor of the book series “B-TV: Television Under the Critical Radar” for Bloomsbury.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Myth of Harm: Horror, Censorship and the Child

By Sarah Cleary
Bloomsbury Academic
2022

296 pp., \$150 USD (h/c)

No matter what generation, there is likely a particular moral panic that defined—and possibly circumscribed—one’s childhood. Video games in the 1990s, the Satanic Panic 1980s, or the furor over horror comics in the 1950s—each offered concerned parents or civic leaders wringing their hands on the newspaper’s front page or as a talking head on cable news networks. If said panic goes far enough into the social consciousness, it may warrant a Senate Subcommittee, pressure on various industries, and either the material being banned or, at “best,” slapped with warning labels that can be easily ignored by purchasers. While none of these “solutions” seemed to enact much lasting or credible change, the one trait all shared, as Sarah Cleary elucidates in this in this compelling study, is invoking the “myth of harm.” That is, the idea of “art as a corruptive form of imitation and influence” (2) aimed at young and/or vulnerable populations. Using narrative analysis and an abundance of historical research, Cleary examines the persistence of this “myth of harm” from the pre-Hays code films of the 1930s to the furor over video games in the late 1990s and beyond, ending with a case study of the so-called “Slenderman” murder in 2014, as these harm narratives gained new footing and proliferation on the Internet.

As an academic, an industry professional, and a horror fan, Cleary seems well-positioned to address this issue. She writes with knowledge and authority on the material in question, harnessing a fan’s knowledge, particularly in the discussion of film, to trace the ways in which horror media have served as scapegoats in depressingly similar ways across the decades, and to highlight the way in which the Gothic is descriptive of both the texts themselves and the

narratives of harm built around them. That is, “both the narratives of harm and the mechanisms in which these narratives are told equally invoke the monstrous tale that somehow horror fiction is capable of harming children” (21), using the same images and narratives of the horror stories to scare parents, educators, and legislators. Starting with the Depression-era films of the 1930s, Cleary seeks to puncture this myth of harm—and the problematic discipline of media effects research (the idea that viewer/reader consumption of violent or coarse images, words, or actions lead to violence in their consumers)—in a variety of ways. Rather than Cleary’s textual analyses, it is secondary material (newspaper columns, psychological research) that provides the through-line of this book. This includes the various reports from multiple disciplines (psychology, sociology, media effects) that have sought to “prove” harm, most of which conclude, despite their own findings, that the potential is there and preventative action necessary. While the final chapter of the book is dedicated to a case study of the quasi-public forum creepypasta and the Slenderman killings, Cleary weaves in various high-profile cases in the US and UK, such as the murder of three-year-old James Bulger in England or the Columbine massacre in Littleton, Colorado, viewed almost exclusively through the “effects” lens; ie, that the violence was caused by the media that the killers consumed. Cleary elucidates how these “media effects” findings are subsequently interpreted and amplified by both politicians and the media, which, at best, seek to impose moral meaning on chaotic or horrific real-world events at worst, or used by particular figures (Mary Whitehouse, the conservative crusader who spent decades fighting against what she viewed as moral and social decay in the United Kingdom perpetrated by the media, is one example Cleary invokes) to forward their own political or social ambitions through an invocation that absolves the prevailing power structure of responsibility once performative restrictions have been enacted.

Cleary’s study, however, is not merely an historical overview of these campaigns. The book asks vital questions about what—and who—these campaigns really represented and were really trying to protect. While Cleary is writing from the United Kingdom, where class dynamics are more entrenched, this history clearly shows class bias on both sides of the Atlantic, with “vulnerability” or “weak-mindedness” that would make individuals susceptible to what they view as pernicious and dangerous images tied directly into economics and education. This not only suggesting that working class or economically disadvantaged parents are unconcerned with their children’s media consumption but that these parents are equally vulnerable because they do not

share the resources or opportunities of those who purport to study, or legislate, media's effects.

Cleary also highlights the paradox these panics expose between fear *for* children and fear *of* them resting between the Romantic/Victorian view of childhood as purity and innocence and the continued recycling of the idea these same children are consuming higher quantities of violent and disturbing media than ever before. Each chapter covers a different era (1930s, 1950s etc) and the supposedly harmful media that characterized it: films, comic books, slashers. Merely by providing a timeline of these panics exposes how neither the arguments nor the view of children as both innocent and easily manipulated into violence change regardless of era. On this point, she writes: "Such protean definitions of the child who paradoxically needs protection yet still have the potential to threaten the moral fabric of society are perpetuated throughout the myth of harm as it travels from one generation to the next" (16). Essentially, Cleary argues, the blinkered view of childhood as well as the desire to blame media, and horror media in particular, can cloud the actual social and economic structures that can lead to violence, whether an individual has watched *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or not.

Cleary's long view of the history of this myth not only offers an erudite response to the dubious nature of media effects research, but takes on a political dimension by succinctly pointing out the root of these issues: fear, particularly of change. Despite, as per example, the children/teens of the 1950s viewed as a potential delinquent for reading horror comics, as adults, they pinpointed a similar boogeyman in the slasher films their children consumed. As she writes in her conclusion: "Where fear lies, there will always be opportunists all too eager to exploit this fear" (250). While the current boogeymen in this decade's culture wars are critical race theory, drag performers, and the trans community, the rhetoric is eerily similar (if far more toxic). Her quoting of Mary Whitehouse, who sold herself as a crusader for moral order and protector of the UK's children was chilling when first uttered in 1984 and is even more so now, when she proclaimed that despite the lack of credible research on media effects, we must "get away from this silly business of having to prove things" (qtd. in Cleary 176). It is no stretch to apply this continued invocation of the myth of harm to the right-wing's vilifying rhetoric around drag story hours or the very presence of the trans community. Yet unlike comic books, "video nasties," or Internet creepypasta, it is the myth's continued persistence despite actual evidence that is what is capable of doing real harm to actual people. Cleary's precise and well-researched work does not touch on, nor can it solve

that problem; rather, it offers a template for more work in this area and serves as an accessible read for those outside academia.

— Erin Giannini

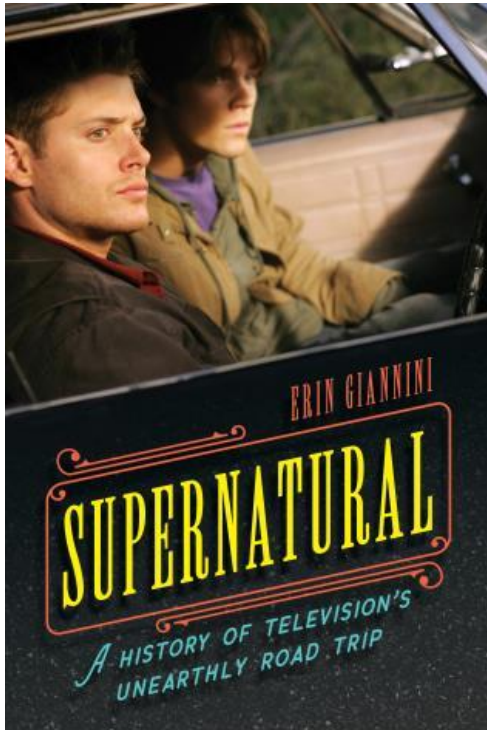
Erin Giannini, PhD, is an independent scholar. She served as an editor and contributor at PopMatters, and written numerous articles about topics from corporate culture in genre television to production-level shifts and their effects on television texts. She is also the author of *Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Road Trip* (Rowman & Littlefield 2021), and *The Good Place* [TV Milestones], and co-editor of the book series B-TV: Television Under the Critical Radar for Bloomsbury.

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BOOK REVIEW

Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Road Trip

By Erin Giannini
Rowman & Littlefield
2021

238pp., \$34 USD (h/c)

In 2005, *Supernatural* debuted on American television network the WB. The series, about the demon-hunting Winchester family, would ultimately last for 15 seasons (327 episodes), spinning off a web series (*The Ghostfacers*, 2010-11) and a prequel series (*The Winchesters*, 2022- present). As brothers Sam (Jared

Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) criss-crossed the country in the early years of the series, the narrative grew more complex, with monster-of-the-week adventures supporting an increasingly complex series narrative arc. In the fourth season, the brothers encountered a prophet named Chuck (Rob Benedict) who was writing a series of pulp novels foretold to become the Winchester Gospels. Chuck apologized for making the brothers live the bad writing in some of the early episodes and set the stage for what creator Eric Kripke envisioned as the fifth and final season of the series. Unsurprisingly, the CW network, which picked up the series after the dissolution of the WB, was keen to capitalize on their marquee property, and *Supernatural* carried on for another decade. Subsequent showrunners continued to expand the series mythology.

Supernatural has also become the subject of a growing body of scholarship. A sizable portion of that work to date has been in the realm of fan studies, but critical engagement with the series has appeared steadily in academic journals and edited volumes. Working with such a large body of broadcast material, home video extras, fan materials, and industry publications is a monumental task, one which Erin Giannini undertook to produce *Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Roadtrip* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). Giannini's book is a work of significant and sustained academic scholarship, but it is important to emphasize that it is accessible to a wide range of readers,

particularly readers who want to better understand the production history of the series and the television landscape during this tumultuous time in network history. In the spirit of *Supernatural*'s unself-conscious reflexivity, I wish to make clear that the community of scholars who study the series is, to date, still relatively small. Giannini and I became acquainted after we each contributed to an edited collection, *Death in Supernatural: Critical Essays* (2019). We've also participated in discussion panels together at scholarly conferences. For over a decade, I have argued vehemently that *Supernatural* broke the fourth wall only once—in a post-credits scene in “Yellow Fever” (4.6), in which actor Jensen Ackles lip-syncs to the song “Eye of the Tiger” in character as Dean Winchester as the crew can be heard laughing and applauding off-screen. I bring attention to this not to continue to grind this axe, but to bury it. Not in Giannini's neck, but in the ground, which I will then duly salt when I return to this topic later in this review.

Unlike previous volumes of criticism which have been collections of essays organized around themes such as Death or the Gothic, Giannini's book is a single-author monograph which examines the series in its historical and industrial contexts. Bringing her prodigious knowledge of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the larger Whedonverse and the complexities of cult television studies to bear on the subject of *Supernatural*, Giannini gives readers a nuanced understanding of what she describes as “a series that addresses class, masculinity, body and economic horror, and engages with God and the Devil, a corporatized hell and a bureaucratic heaven” (xv). In Part One, Giannini explores the development of the series, following series creator and original showrunner Eric Kripke's original conception of the plot and characters. Weaving together the evolution of television genres such as soap operas, detective shows, and anthology series, in addition to the more obvious horror and fantasy programs to which the show is most commonly compared, Giannini gives the reader a solid understanding of *Supernatural*'s colorful and creative ancestors. She also breaks the series down into four eras based on the changes each showrunner brought to the table and the direction the overarching mythology subsequently took, before she moves into a more detailed exploration of *Supernatural* as both serial television and cultural phenomenon.

In Part Two, Giannini turns her attention from the longer arc of television history to *Supernatural*'s more immediate predecessors, primarily the horror series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the class-conscious blue-collar sitcom *Roseanne* (1988-1997). From there, she examines *Supernatural*'s engagement with folklore and religion. If there is a weakness to the book, it is here. A more critical stance toward Kripke's assertion that the series writers “have to be as authentic

as possible when it comes to the urban legends and myths that are presented,” (71) could have better surfaced problematic appropriation of figures such as La Llorona, the Wendigo, and Djinnns. That said, this is a complicated subject, and Giannini does a commendable job indicating that there are problematic representations and appropriations throughout the series, opening a door for future engagement while also directing readers to existing scholarly work. Likewise, there is simply not room in a volume covering such an extensive amount of material to critique Kripke’s reliance on the fraught and problematic term “Judeo-Christian,” a topic which religious historians such as Gene Zubovich (2016) have shown to be deeply entangled in modern language in ways that obscure the insidiously ideological work the term does in American culture. These examples illustrate what a sprawling and complicated subject *Supernatural* proves to be, and are not meant to undermine the overall value of this work or diminish the ease with which Giannini makes the complicated, contradictory theological storyline intelligible for readers who are not familiar with the series.

In the introduction, Giannini writes, “With nearly every season of the show featuring a fourth-wall-breaking episode...” (xvi) As I read that sentence, I broke out an extra-large packet of page flags and uncapped my favorite highlighter, ready for a(n) intellectual fight. Yet, by the time I read chapter 6, to which that introductory sentence refers, I felt as though my entire perspective on the series had been upended to a surprising degree. Using some key episodes and plot developments as case studies, Giannini demonstrates how the series uses, and sometimes subverts, metatextuality and fourth wall breaks in deceptively complex ways. Until reading Giannini’s take on the subject, I had not realized how limiting my appreciation was of the latitude the series takes regarding position and perspective within the layers of story-space. For example, regarding the episode “Changing Channels” (5.8), I had previously argued that Sam and Dean’s acknowledgement of the camera was not a traditional fourth wall break, because the audience they addressed was diegetic—that of the Trickster (Richard Speight) who had thrown them into an alternate reality in which they must play television roles in order to survive. Giannini’s analysis points to how many opportunities there are for viewers to, essentially, see themselves inside these layers of (un)reality the Trickster places between the characters of Sam and Dean and the roles he forces them to play.

Giannini’s discussion of the multi-layered worldbuilding and its narrative functions is a compelling case for re-evaluating the terms and technique we apply to analysis of non-traditional series. However, I believe the volume would be stronger overall had Giannini made explicit early in the text the larger context

of terminology such as *metatextuality* and operationalized the terms as she is using them, which would also strengthen her discussion of how the show challenges conventional usages and why it matters. Ultimately, how Giannini uses this terminology will become evident to readers who read the entire volume, but due to the interdisciplinary nature of media studies and for accessibility to new scholars, this could pose a minor challenge. The final chapter in this section takes on the sociopolitical landscape of the show. While Giannini addresses class and gender issues throughout the book, here she takes a closer look at themes such as militarism, corporate capitalism, and organized religion in American culture.

In Part Three, Giannini tackles a number of topics which not only further contextualize the series but also give readers a broader view of the media landscape over the fifteen years that the series was broadcast on network television. The first chapter explores network changes and the emergence of new technologies such as streaming platforms, both in relation to series production and distribution and in terms of how these shifts became part of the narrative itself. A chapter on fan activism is followed by a strong conclusion chapter and a brief overview of what the author describes as “a highly subjective list of 30 must-see episodes.” A comprehensive list of all 327 episodes would have filled too much space, and plot summaries of same are more suitable for an encyclopedia. What Giannini cheekily ends with is a roadmap not merely of the show, but, to a certain degree, to her perspective on the series itself.

Throughout the volume, Giannini demonstrates myriad ways in which *Supernatural* wears its horror tropes on its sleeve while also slyly engaging in narrative and stylistic experimentation with roots in soap operas, comedy, crime procedurals, and everything in between. This volume is, first and foremost, about the series, but it is in a larger sense about the series as phenomenon. Embedding that discussion into an overview of the history of television and the changing media landscape demonstrates what a vital and engaging topic *Supernatural* is, what it can help us to learn about TV production and genre history, and how much more there is to explore on the topic. *Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Roadtrip* is an important contribution to the literature on television fantasy and horror, as well as a window into the upheavals in the early 21st century television industry.

Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Roadtrip will be a valuable addition to college and university library collections and will be useful for undergraduate and graduate teaching and research. It has scholarly value in a wide range of areas, including, but not limited to, Media and Television Studies, Fan Studies, and in the areas of Philosophy and Religion. It will also, of course,

appeal to fans of *Supernatural* interested in a deeper understanding of the series itself and genre television more broadly.

— Rebecca Stone Gordon

Rebecca Stone Gordon is an artist and anthropologist in Washington, DC, who has published scholarly articles on topics such as *Supernatural*, eco-horror, mummy films, and Shirley Jackson. She is currently writing a book about the *Scooby-Doo* franchise.

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Horror Reverie 2:
An Online Symposium Celebrating 50 Years of *The Exorcist*

TRANSCRIPT

Panel 1 – Historical and Other Contexts

11 March 2023

(duration 54:43)

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

audience, *The Exorcist*, Catholicism, demon, Eileen Dietz, evil, faith, horror film, William Friedkin, Father Karas, *Leap of Faith*, Regan MacNeil, Alexandre O. Philippe, possession, sequels, “Tubular Bells”

00:03

Kristopher [Kris] Woofter

Hi everybody.

00:06

Welcome to this celebration of 50 years of William Friedkin’s influential horror film *The Exorcist*, released the day after Christmas 1973 and spawning several sequels and prequels, a Netflix streaming series, and a slew of imitators including my guilty favorite, the 1990 parody *Repossessed* with Linda Blair and Leslie Nielsen. Masterful film. I’m Kris Woofter editor of *Monstrum* and one of the organizers of this event along with Stacey Abbott, Lorna Piatti-Farnell, Mark Jancovich—hello, Spain!—and Gary Rhodes, who unfortunately couldn’t be here today. Horror Reverie was Gary’s idea and we’ll miss him today. Hopefully, he’s doing well. I want to thank Stacey, Lorna and Mark and Gary for their part in bringing this symposium to you today, as well as our graduate research assistant, Marcus Prasad, who’s running the Zoom and the tech today.

As with last year, today’s symposium features a variety of voices from academics and critics, to actors and industry creators. We have a terrific lineup of speakers for you today, including our featured guest, actress Eileen Dietz, whose face is

iconic in the film as the demon Pazuzu. And in the second session—they'll both be in the second session—but Alexandre O. Philippe, whose film *Leap of Faith* is a terrific account of Friedkin's philosophy and goals in creating *The Exorcist*. Today's symposium is being recorded, as you probably just noticed, and will later be published in *Monstrum*. Our sixth issue, issue one, 6.1, in June of 2023. So June of this year, along with an accompanying transcript, and an original framing text by Marcus Prasad, who's running the symposium. So we'll, we'll have you on our on our mailing list. So, we'll let you know when that is published. You can revisit the the sessions and read the transcripts if you want more of a textual experience. This second iteration of horror reverie is sponsored by the Collective for Research on Epistemologies and Ontologies of Embodied Risk or CORERISC, the Montreal Monstrum society and the journal *Monstrum*. And McGill University's Moving Image Research Lab with funding support from the Fonds de recherche du Quebec. Special thanks to Alanna Thain and Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare for their support. Mario is co-coordinator of the Montreal Monstrum society with me.

Before we begin, and because we're recording today's symposium, we'll just ask that everybody in the audience, keep cameras off and keep yourselves muted, so you can sneeze or stumble or drop things, so you won't interrupt the sessions. And also if you have questions for the speakers, if you could send them as a direct message to the chair of the panel. That would be great. Our chairs today are Stacey Abbott for panel one.

03:52

And I don't know if Stacey is going to pop on jus—well you'll, she'll be on in a moment anyway. There she is. And Anna Bogutskaya for Panel 2—Anna we'll be conducting a discussion with Eileen and Alexandre. And Lorna Piatti-Farnell for panel three—there's Lorna. Stacy, Anna and Lorna will introduce themselves and their panelists before each panel and there will be time for Q&A afterward. There will also be a short 10-minute break between panels two and three. So that would be from 12:50 to 1pm, Eastern time, I guess. 5:50 to 6pm, UK. Yeah. And much earlier in on the West Coast. Okay, so I'm, that's all I

have to say. And I'm looking forward to hearing what the panelists have to say thank you.

04:54

Stacey Abbott

Thank you. Thanks, Kris. Thanks for that introduction. As Kris says, I'm Stacey Abbott, and I'm really privileged to be able to chair this panel on historical and other contexts. So I'm looking forward to discussing the film with our great panelists. So I'm going to introduce each of the speakers, they're going to do their presentations, and then we'll save questions for the end. So I'm going to move straight along and introduce our first speaker. Amy C. Chambers is a senior lecturer in Film and Media Studies in the Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research examines intersections of entertainment media, and the public understanding of science. And she has published on medical horror in *The Exorcist* and representations of women scientists in film and TV. And she's currently co-authoring a monograph called *Reading Science Fiction: Sociality, Publics and Pleasures*. And she'll be talking to us today about "Somewhere Between Science and Superstition: Religious Outrage, Horrific Science and *The Exorcist*." So I'm gonna hand over to Amy, thank you.

06:00

Amy C. Chambers

Thank you very much for that kind introduction, Stacy. So if you just bear with me for a moment while I just do the Zoom dance, right? So I'm just going to put on a timer so that I vaguely keep to our agreed 10 minute slot. And we are go. Okay. Hello. So, I'm going to be talking to you about some research that I did, working with the Catholic Church, the United States Communion of Catholic Bishops, specifically, part of a project where I was looking at the intersections between the religious groups that had been part of the censorship of Hollywood between 1936 and 1968. And the representations of science that came after the end of censorship. So I was really interested in looking at how religious groups, especially the Catholic Church, negotiated representations of science, once they had lost any sort of control over the types of images that

were being produced. So the US Catholic Church are part of a group of religious groups who are involved in censoring, essentially, Hollywood cinema from the early 1930s, through to officially 1968, although their system had very much begun to break down in the light in the late 1950s. And into the 60s with films like Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which was released without sort of the full agreement of the production code administration.

So *The Exorcist* is coming out in the early 1970s, well after the end of the production code, and so when I went to do my research, I was really looking at very specifically science fiction, and science based narratives, not expecting to look at *The Exorcist* at all. And there's a brilliant archive at the Catholic University of America, which as a British person sounds terribly made up. But the Catholic University of America and it's got an amazing archive of materials from the US Catholic Church. So between 1930 and the early 1970s, and then sporadically, up until the early 2000s, the Catholic Church had screenings that lay Catholics and priests would attend and write reviews of the films that were coming out of Hollywood, and provide a rating of these particular films, and in part, rating them as to whether they were appropriate for a Catholic viewership. But a lot of the studios were aware of these particular ratings. And once you've got sort of past censorship, and into a rating system, the one to four rating of the church could impact upon viewership, and on, in cinemas. And so there was still an attempt to negotiate with the US Catholic Church and some Protestant Lutheran churches in order to get a good rating for a film and to get that religious audience.

09:22

So on the right hand side of my screen, you can see a cartoon from a Christian magazine, which sort of gives you an indication of what they thought of the film industry in the earlier era. And the idea that the Catholic Church has a responsibility to save their youth and their communion from the evil images and ideas being sent out by Hollywood. So it was about sort of protecting particular issues and ideas that related to Catholicism. So there were—and if you look at the work of David A. Kirby, he's done some excellent work on issues like evolution, and how the Catholic and Protestant churches engaged with those

particular issues on screen during the era of censorship. Here, I'm looking more afterwards. So I was going at the archive, looking at these materials. And I'd be looking at files where I got one piece of paper, or just a few little bits and pieces, a couple of clippings. And the archivist told me that I had to look at *The Exorcist*. And I was like, well, there's not going to be anything there for me in terms of science. But I've been here for three weeks, and I've looked at all of these files. So I really should just look at *The Exorcist* piece. And the first thing that I pulled out of this huge box of materials was a letter between the Vatican and the US Catholic Church, about *The Exorcist* and how it was going to present religious ritual versus scientific research. And so from this sort of like first piece of paper, I realized that there's really interesting going on with the exorcist in terms of how science and religion became part of the story of this film. And as the trailer says, somewhere between science and superstition lies *The Exorcist*.

11:20

So we've got this period of Hollywood, where we're sort of negotiating science on screen and thinking about how the Catholic Church responding to a film like *The Exorcist*. So I went in thinking it was all going to be really negative and reactionary. And there was I found a distinction between the way that it was being reported and the way that has historically been written about—as here Peter Biskind talks around how people responded to the film—but in reality, I found that the relationship between the filmmakers *The Exorcist*, the Vatican, the US Catholic Church was actually much more collaborative and complex.

11:55

So whereas on the one hand, newspapers are reporting, people fainting, and vomiting, and all sorts of massive reactions to the film, there were reports of breakdowns, suicides, possessions, spontaneous abortion—there was a particular set of reports on that—and also a clear narrative created by the media around religious communities outrage and alarm. And there were definitely religious groups, especially those who were connected to more evangelical leaders like Billy Graham, who were very much against this particular film—Billy Graham said that the devil was quite literally in the film itself. So the devil was embedded into the texture and reality of the films as they were being

distributed. And so the sort of like popular response was that there was this very visceral response to the representation of religion, and to how the film presented possession. And this has ended up being an interesting area of research for me in terms of thinking about how science became part of this particular narrative. So alongside this very explicit set of reports and narratives around sort of the evil of *The Exorcist*, and how *The Exorcist* was driving people to the churches and raising the number of exorcisms that were being requested, once you start to look into the documentation on the materials from the Catholic Church, the story is a bit more complex. In terms of how Friedkin as the director engaged with religious groups, but also how those groups were engaged with thinking through how this film might not necessarily be a negative thing.

14:05

So what I found with my research, so after having found all of this material at the Catholic archives, I arranged a second visit to go back to the Catholic American ... Catholic University of America in DC, and then also to go and look at the Friedkin archives that got released at the Oscars archives. And so I got to go over and be the first Brits, if not one of the first academics, to go and look at that newly curated collection. And the first thing that I pulled out the Billy Friedkin papers were very detailed drawings of the human body. And I found research papers and research that had been done on the representation of science in this particular film, which I really had not anticipated. So it turned out that the filmmakers had as much of a commitment to representing and exploring Catholic ritual as they did to contemporary scientific procedures. So part of this is that they had technical advisors, and if you look at the credits for *The Exorcist*, you'll see that there is a mixture of religious advisors from the US communion of Catholic Bishops, as well as medical advisors. So this particular film did get given a rating of quality. But there's then recognized as being problematic in terms of its representation of Catholicism, but at the same time in the correspondence that was not made publicly available, the Catholic priests who were involved with censoring and engaging with Hollywood actually recognize the film as as the lead, here, Thomas Stein puts strong propaganda for Christ. And the film itself has gone from being one that has been associated with Catholic rage and fears to being one that has become part of the way that

Catholic ... Catholics engage with film. So I have sort of lots of evidence of Catholic churches, then using *The Exorcist* as a way of opening up discussions about representation of Catholicism.

16:15

So we talk about anxieties around the medical content, whereas around the religious content, whereas in fact, it was the medical content where the most reports were from. So looking at the studio materials, a lot of the anxieties and actual reports of people leaving the cinema and fainting that were reported back to the studios were concerning the medical scenes that were part of this particular film. So you have then a representation of science that is balanced against the religious contents. So the priests have got to harm a child, Regan, in order to save her from Pazuzu. But the doctors, equally, in order to ... to diagnose what's happening on with this child are equally putting her through moments of pain and distress. So one of the interesting things about *The Exorcist* is it's the very first time that MRI is seen on screen. It had been the ... some images of MRIs had featured in *Nature* magazine. But it wasn't until *The Exorcist* that you had a public image of MRI. And the technology at the time was still very speculative had not become the standard practice. And so Friedkin had purposely researched into new and emergent science practices, as opposed to purely sort of balancing against older ritual. The lumbar treatments, the injections, which we're not going to show because they're quite squeamishly, horrible. I'm sure if you've seen the film, then you will remember them. But it was a very graphic representation of this particular procedure, which has later been used by medical professionals in training, but also in terms of public understanding of science, of why people fear these particular images.

18:14

So what I was interested in here was thinking about how science and religion work together. So it's not only Regan, who's probed and and morally ..., but rather the trust in science and medicine as well. So where medicine fails to work out what's happening with Regan, where medicine fails to cure, ritual and science do come in. So although a lot of the discussions around the exorcist are framed around faith and ritual, my interest within here was how it rejected the

1970s tendency to deify and make science the great fixer. I'm interested in the way the reception of the film has changed with Catholics as well as the scientific community. And thinking about the fact that the Catholic Church rather than simply demonizing and vilifying *The Exorcist* we're really interested in engaging with the studios, and with the filmmaker ... in terms of making the film, an interesting engagement between the apparent fight between science and religion. So if you're interested in reading the full paper, which is lengthy, you can see it here [<https://doi.org/10.1177/09526951211004465>] and it is free and open access. And if you're interested in finding out anything about me, you can access my websites through this particular QR. I'm sorry, that was two minutes over.

19:38

Stacey Abbott

Thank you very much. Thank you, Amy. 10 minutes is a challenge I know for all of us, but thank you very much for a really interesting page ... paper. So thank you. If you have any questions, do reserve them for the end. I'm going to now move straight along to our second presenter. Steve Cho is Associate Professor of critical Studies in the School of cinema at San Francisco State University. He is the author of numerous books, which I won't list all here for time, except his most directly relevant. He's the author of *Refocus: The Films of William Friedkin*. [<https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-refocus-the-films-of-william-friedkin.html>] And he's going to be presenting to us today about positioning of film within its historical context of 1973. So I'm just going to hand straight over to Steve, thank you.

20:23

Steve Choe

Great. Thank you so much. Hope everyone can hear me. I just want to ... I'm excited to be here. And I wanted to thank Robert singer and Gary Rhodes, for their continued support of my work on Friedkin, who I became interested in when I was a child. *The Exorcist* but then also *Sorcerer*, actually. So I wanted to place the film in historical context, and I have a text here that will last 10 minutes and I'm going to share my screen.

So as we know audiences stood in line for hours to watch *The Exorcist* only to later faint fall ill or experienced convulsions during the screening. Some of these traumatized viewers perhaps inexplicably expressed the compulsion to enter ... reenter the theater to finish watching the film and see what happens to the innocent Regan. Yeah, while *The Exorcist* was terrorizing audiences, Americans also observed a series of events that compelled many to think cynically about the norms of morality and the role of America in the world. Early in 1973, the Paris Peace Accords, which were signed, and which ended US involvement in the Vietnam War, and confirmed for some tens of thousands of Americans lives were squandered during the two decade-long conflict. The oil embargo of 1973 was a calculated strategic move by members of OPEC to retaliate against nations that were supportive of Israel, including the US during the Yom Kippur War of October. The most significant news in the second half of 1973, however, was the ongoing Watergate scandal. On November 17, during a press conference given in response to the impeachment proceedings that were already underway, Nixon remarked that "people have got to know whether or not their parent their president is a crook. Well, I'm not a crook." While he repeatedly denied the veracity of the charges against him specifically around his alleged use of power and obstruction of justice, Nixon's acknowledgement of the nevertheless ... of them nevertheless inflamed the judgment of the public. *The Exorcist* premiered in US theaters on December 26 1973, offsetting the spirits of the holiday season with his dark and somber tone. It opened to only 30 theaters, but it quickly became a bonafide blockbuster within weeks, first by word of mouth and then through the media attention given to the incredible success of the film. In an interview in 1974, where he comments on the loss of control experienced by the young female protagonists in *The Exorcist* Freidkin remarks that quote, I think a large part of our entertainment today is a result of the national nervous breakdown since the three assassinations and the Vietnam War. I think we're coming out of another kind of seizure with the Nixon administration.

Earlier in the summer of 1973, the Senate Watergate Committee began holding hearings on the events that took place in the Watergate building that year, the previous year. These hearings were televised on PBS for two weeks playing to a moralizing jury made up of millions of Americans watching from their living rooms. On October 20, a day after we now refer to as the Saturday ... Saturday Night Massacre, The country was gripped by the shocking news that the President fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox. Cox had subpoenaed hundreds of hours of phone conversations Nixon personally recorded from the Oval Office between himself and administration officials, family and friends. These tapes revealed a particularly unprecedented unpresidential side of Nixon, showing him speaking like a gang leader replete with profanity and tough guy talk. They would all but confirmed the testimony provided by the White House council, then extensive cover up of illegal activities had taken place. Nixon would go on to discredit his investigators by undermining faith in the investigative process, testing the limits of executive authority and inducing fundamental questions about what can be believed in the news media during those exceptional times.

24:45

When I interviewed Friedkin in 2017, he read he reiterated the importance of the “mystery of faith” that is central to this and its other films. This mystery is articulated over the course of *The Exorcist* through a series of epistemological failures to conclusively identify the source of Regan's increasingly horrifying condition. In doing so, it delineates a line of critical thinking that isolates held belief, particularly belief in that which is scientifically impossible might be possible at all. Medical discourses are showcased throughout the film that subject Regan to increasingly invasive medical techniques, from relatively routine somatic investigations to hypnosis, psychiatric evaluation, and the violent procedure of cerebral angiography—and this is just following up on the great presentation that we just heard. Doctors, radiologists, psychiatrists identify her condition as connected to a disorder of the nerves, hyperactivity weak performance in math, the result of cerebral vascular displacement, a somnambular form of possession and so on. These discourses set out to make visible the invisible condition that Regan embodies.

26:10

Here a critical logic is delineated through the film's narrative trajectory. First, the depiction of a series of attempts to explain her condition scientifically followed by the understanding that it can be only explained by recourse to the supernatural, a logic of exception that is crucial for building credence to the meaning of what the spectator sees and hears. Significantly, perhaps, this supernatural understanding is suggested by the detective Kinderman, who investigates the murder of Burke Dennings, and is a lover of cinema. At the ending of *The Exorcist*, we are left with the prospect that Ricans condition can be accounted for only by taking seriously the reality of spirits in the world. In an increasingly secular historical moment, several years following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Friedkin's film a test to the return of 16th century occult practice into everyday social life of an ancient nonhuman, unformed force that has been repressed and returns to the modern world. And by allowing for the possibility of that which is exceptional to scientific legitimization. In the authentic representation of the highly improbable, *The Exorcist* reevaluates the meaning of exorcism in the cinema and raises the question of whether its sounds and images can be believed as true. Manipulations of voice, soundtrack image and mechanical effects attest to the power to compel viewers to emotionally invest in the spectacle.

27:39

The problem of Catholic faith, whose logic so interests Friedkin, parallels the problem of the spectator's own faith in what is depicted on screen. Another line of thinking I'd like to delineate here revolves around the representation of virtue within popular cinema. In her essay "Melodrama Revised" [in *Refiguring Film Genres*, edited by Nick Browne], Linda Williams pays particular attention to the spectacle of pathos in melodrama's framing of the injured body as an image that compels sympathetic judgment. "The key function of victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode, for if virtue is not obvious suffering, often depicted as the literal suffering of an agonized body is." The agonized body at once solicits the recognition of suffering by beset victim and assigns the body that bears the signs of agony with virtue, interiority, humanity.

These signs of suffering compel a longing for return to a state of incorruptibility, to a time before the violence occurred.

28:45

In many ways the most commercially successful of Friedkin's films also seems to make the most explicit the basic features of the melodramatic mode: the victimization of Regan and the debasement of her innocence, Regan scarred and injured body as evidence of demonic possession, the profound regrets of Karras, the heroic exorcist who arrives to recover the girl's virtue. Her bedroom functions as a kind of metaphoric space for dichotomies between inside and outside the body, good and evil, here and there are played out. Meanwhile, practices such as the throwing of Holy Water, the reciting of the sacraments of floating bed cracking walls, the sign of the cross, point back to the legitimizing of the sacred in an ostensibly post-sacred age, where moral sentiment provides the meaning for accessing virtue. By the final exorcism sequence, modern melodrama is radicalized in *The Exorcist* and becomes, in effect re-sacralized. And ironically, it turns out to be constitutive for the appearance of earthly ... for unearthly evil in the world.

29:57

On the other hand, while the film's fantastic visual and auditory elements seem to lift it above the secular melodrama of American politics, they nevertheless reiterate its most violent tendencies through its reframing within Political Theology poli- ... political theology and justification of unchecked sovereign power. This problem, of course, is made particularly acute in that the innocent body of Regan also possesses its moral opposite. Virtue and villainy, innocence and utter defilement are forced to coexist. By embodying contradictory forces that both victimizes and is victimized—determinations that themselves are made possible by the popular melodramatic mode, the possessed Regan places this mode fundamental to American popular cinema into a horrifying moral crisis. In order that she may be saved, Karras violently assaults her revolting and sympathetic body.

31:00

In turn, the power of this film inheres in its capacity to induce the possibility of disbelief for the modern film spectator, showing that the mystery that the director mentioned is key to understanding his film is relevant not only for appreciating characters crisis of faith within the narrative, but also perhaps the issue of faith more generally. Through this, *The Exorcist* delineates a path toward ... the toward the critical consideration of anxieties that constitute the precondition for faith in a cinema image and others in the world, and the relationship to the justification of violence. At a moment when America was perceived twice to have lost its moral righteousness in the world, when it was not clear whether the President could be deemed a crook, when the press had lost the faith of American citizens, *The Exorcist* will continue to remain relevant and timely. It will continue to hold out for the comfort afforded by traditional morality, even to hopes that are most unearthly, and exceptional to our modern times.

Thank you.

31:59

Stacey Abbott

Thank you very much, Steve. That was great. I really enjoyed that. Thank you for a great paper and I look forward to talking about it more in the questions. I'm going to move on to our third speaker. So I'm pleased to introduce Linda Shepherd. Linda is an independent scholar and author of *Faith Horror: Cinematic Visions of Satanism, Paganism and Witchcraft* [<https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/faith-horror/>]. Her rich- ... her research focuses on the connection between the supernatural spiritualism and horror cinema. And as she is the founder and chief researcher for the internationally successful podcast, *Hallowed Histories* [<https://hallowed-histories.org/>], and she's gonna be speaking to us today with the paper "What an Excellent Day for *The Exorcist*: A Classical Horror for a Contemporary World." So thank you, Linda.

32:50

LMK [Linda] Sheppard

Thank you, Stacy. So I'm gonna go ahead and share my screen and get started with my PowerPoints. I'm just gonna go back well, to too far. Okay, so, here we go. Um, so my paper again is "What a Fine Day for *The Exorcist*: A Classical Horror for a Contemporary World."

33:15

Okay, so, um, in the penultimate scene for *The Exorcist* father, Damien Karras, who up until this moment has been conducting a failed exorcism on a pre-pubescent teenager now begins to fear the death of the child to save her body and so he thus demands that the indwelt demon leave the girl and enter him instead. Once possessed, according to the dominant reading of the film, two things occur: Regan appears to be freed of evil and effect returned to a state of innocence. And second, Karras appears to be compelled to attack the girl as he had to theoretically is turned from an evangelizer to an evil-doer. As he fluctuates from priest to possessed, he resist the temptation to commit one mortal sin while committing another. Ostensibly under the influence of evil he is compelled to throw himself out the window and down the stairs a suicidal act that has already proven deadly. Well, this popular reading suggests that the film ends with evil vanquishing good, a common trip to the faith horror cycle of the 1960s and 1970s films including *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen*. William Peter Blatty who penned both the novel and the adaptive screenplay, however, had an altogether different thematic intention for both this scene in particular and for the film overall. According to an interview with Mark Kermode, the writer wanted to make a work that offered a positive statement about God and His relationship to humanity. He was as deeply concerned that the film's ultimate message regarding good overcoming evil might be misconstrued in the above way. He suggested in the same interview, "Billy [William Friedkin, the film's director] rehearsed every move of that ending, because we were aware that it could be misinterpreted, and we rehearsed everything that was happening so it could not possibly be." For Blatty, Karras invites the demon to possess him to save the child's soul. Once released, the priest then jumps out the window to destroy the demon that is now living within him in a similar act of benevolent control. In this way, rather than ending, suggesting the triumph of darkness. The conclusion evokes Christ-like symbolism, as Karras sacrifices himself to

repair the rupture of sin. Friedkin likewise maintains that the film should be read as proselytizing not only for the church, but also for the innate goodness and efficacy of faith. While the intention- ... intentionality of the artist admittedly is not equal to that meaning of the work, this presentation will consider in relationship to both the criticism published within the popular press and the debates forwarded within current academic discourse. Indeed, it will be suggested through both a textual and an extratextual reading of the film, that first and foremost, *The Exorcist* reiterates the power of good over evil, something that might be said for the genre as a whole, up until the release of *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968.

36:28

This foundation is also furthered and foregrounded in the primary image for the promotion of the film. While some argue that the film poster offers a reversal, with the representative of good—the priest, in darkness—and the locus of evil—the apartment in which the demon dwells—as being bathed in light, this image might also be read, however, more straightforwardly: a man under the shadow of sin must overcome the lure of the light of Satan, Lucifer as the shining one, the light bearer. In fact, it is only when one considers the conclusion and the promotion of *The Exorcist* that equally exert the effective power of Christianity and its icons to overcome evil, the dichotomous theme that resonates throughout this text, that *The Exorcist* might better be interpreted not as a new Hollywood faith horror that reverses the tenets of good versus evil, with the latter proving efficacious over the former, but instead a classical horror, that presents Christianity both as good and efficacious and evil as that which must be defeated. Indeed, while academic debate regards this text as either presenting faith as a sociocultural signifier, it equally is relevant to read the film as dealing with the issues of faith as just *that*: issues of faith.

37:49

In *Film Quarterly*'s contemporaneous review of *The Exorcist* Michael Dempsey pans the film as being both reactionary and revolting, an exploitation film. Dempsey writes, “the movie ruthlessly manipulates the most primitive fears of the audience. Those who want to return to that old time religion can have their

beleaguered beliefs shored up by this circus of horrors.” This tendency to read the film from the shamelessly manipulating public angst was likewise noted by British film critic Mark Kermode, who comments: “for the first time in a mainstream movie audiences witnessed the graphic desecration of everything that is considered a wholesome and good: the home the family, the church and most shockingly, the child.” The above critiques seem to fall in line with theories forwarded by academics who, on the one hand, and read the film as engaging with the loss of grand narratives in the Leotardian sense. Andrew Tudor in *Monsters and Mad Scientists* argues that in *The Exorcist*, possession is a signifier for what amounts to a cultural paranoia, but out of the failure of contemporaneous sociopolitical institutions to offer stability—something that was just mentioned in the previous paper. Mark Jancovich, “Post-Fordism, Postmodernism and Paranoia: The Dominance of the Horror Genre in Contemporary Culture”—and Mark is actually probably here today—ties this paranoia to late-20th-century post-Fordist ideology, which fueled a distrust of authority in general. For Jancovich, like Tudor, the possession theme thus presents a potentially useful way of representing the resultant instability of consciousness and identity. While paranoia and institutional failure rests on one side of the academic debate, feminist discourse fear of intrusion and bodily objection make up the other. Barbara Creed asserts in *The Monstrous Feminine* that *The Exorcist* ... in *The Exorcist* “possession becomes an excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant female behavior, which is depicted as depraved, monstrous and perversely appealing.” In the middle ground, in terms of academic discourse, rests with ... theorists including Robin Wood and Vivian Sobchak, both of whom adopt a psychoanalytical framework, which they interpolate into the contemporaneous cultural climate, thus developing what has come to be known as the “evil child” cycle. Robin Wood in “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” suggests that the Antichrist and the child monster are all shown as products of the family, whether the family itself is regarded as guilty or innocent, while Sobchack argues, coincident with the bourgeois society's negative response to the youth movements and drug culture the late 1960s and early 1970s, generic emphasis was on the child not as a terrorized victim, but instead as being in possession of and victimizing their households.

40:46

While each of the aforementioned academic debates likewise touch upon the importance of evil possession, not one suggests this conflict is primarily spiritual. In other words, while these arguments establish possession as a social signifier, what they fail to do is discuss the struggle in terms of religion and spiritual affiliation. The thematic concern in religion is one that I have explored in *Faith Horror: Visions of Satanism, Paganism and Witchcraft*. Herein I locate a thread common to many late 1960s and 1970s supernatural horror texts, in which an ironic maneuver, equally establish and then reverse the classical horror conflict of the sacred and the profane—a cultural trend that I've linked to significant paradigmatic shifts and across the religious spectrum, including popular culture's adoption of alternative faith. So you have Mick Jagger and "Sympathy for the Devil," The Beatles' embrace of Hinduism, for example. And then increasing acceptance of atheism—and think here of *Time* magazine's issue "Is God Dead?—the rise of the religious right under televangelism and the Ministry of Billy Graham, and Catholic reforms promised by the Second Vatican Council.

42:10

What characterizes faith horror narratives is both their conflict and their resolution. In traditional horrors, those produced up until *Rosemary's Baby*—and which I consider *The Exorcist* to be one—the battle is between good and evil. And the result of this confrontation is that through faith in God, and the tools that symbolize Christianity—the cross, holy water, prayer—become efficacious and thus good wins the day. In faith horror, however, the battle is between faith and the lack thereof. Significantly, it is the protagonists that lack belief, while those figured as antagonists hold firm to a higher power. So, ni- ... Chris MacNeil's struggles within *The Exorcist*. The higher power and what might be regarded as traditional reversal is not the Holy Trinity, but instead the devil and the powers of darkness. So the believers believe in "evil," quote-unquote. However, this is not true, obviously, in *The Exorcist*. Following indicators located in contemporaneous reception, and considering the creative input of the [aside: thank you] of the filmmakers, they suggest that religion was a key element. But both the popular secular and Christian press a like share this view of conflict of

The Exorcist between good and evil, where good is traditionally Christian and evil demonic forces. However, this reading is not one often forwarded within academic debate. Indeed, if the modern horror film articulates the invasion of the everyday by malevolent supernatural forces, which channeled into the secular world can and will destroy everybody with whom they come in contact, and while we and under the guise of docile domesticity are offered up as unwilling prey of graphically presented horrors, then *The Exorcist* is a film in which good triumphs over evil under the hands of the Catholic Church, its representatives and its icons. It stands alone as a classical horror made for our contemporary world. And it being so popular and critically successful—remember that *The Exorcist*, received nine nomination Academy Award nominations—*The Exorcist* marks a crucial transition in the modern horror movie and when the—obviously as made manifest by this conference—has endured, and ... remained significant after even after 50 years. So thank you very much for listening. And I will now stop sharing my screen. Okay.

44:37

Stacey Abbott

Thank you very much, Linda, and thank you to all three of our panelists. We have a few minutes for questions. So if I can ask each of our panelists to put their cameras back on and if anyone has any questions, you can put it in the chat or message me. But I'm going to start with chair's prerogative, and I really enjoyed your papers and I think they all will really dovetail really nicely. And I suppose one of the questions I had, as I was listening to the three of you, which Steve started touched on a bit was, I was in this relationship between the kind of the supernatural on the spiritual on the scientific and the kind of secular lack of faith. I was thinking a lot of father Karras's crisis of faith, and we're and the kind of Psychology of him as a psychologist and a priest. And I wondered if any of you had thoughts about the way in which his characters integrate like is his care narrative trajectory in this and what his role is in this kind of battle between science and the supernatural. And Amy has put her hand up and wants to jump in first. Yeah, thank you.

45:46

He, for me, he's a fascinating character, because he brings together the sides and when you look at the sort of documentation is often described as a psychologist-priest or a scientist-priest. So you've started off getting these connections between the two, the death of his mother as the sort of point where religion can't save him, and neither neither neither, neither can science and then his sort of issues. So as a character, who's very much of that period of the 1970s, in that post-classical non-censorship cinema, where you could have these complex characters where a priest could question their faith, but also do that through not only religion, society, but through science, and I'll let someone else come in.

46:29

Stacey Abbott

Yes, thank you. Would anyone else like to jump in with thoughts on Father Karras?

46:34

Steve Choe

Well, I think that he becomes even more sympathetic by, you know, knocking down his sacred status in a certain way, as a priest; you know, he looks like a movie star. He, he jogs, you know, he's got kind of issues that we all kind of go through as everyday, you know, Americans or something. So, in the book, as we know, I mean, he was originally cast by Blatty as a as a psychologist-priest. So I think, you know, that's part of the characterization in the film, as well.

47:13

Stacey Abbott

Thank you.

47:16

LMK Sheppard

I often thought about this film relationship. So I was looking at, obviously, *The Exorcist* as being kind of like, classic film, in many ways, a classic horror film, if you can argue that. And so I look at it a lot of ways in terms of like the Gothic and Gothic structures. And so you have this idea of the science versus the

supernatural that plays such a big part. And what's kind of interesting about *The Exorcist*, when looking at it from that framework, is the fact that in the original Gothic, they were really sort of condemning Catholicism, you know what I mean? It was basically a condemnation of that. So you have the evil nuns and the evil priests and *The Monk* and stuff. And it's interesting, that Karras, although he definitely has issues, and I think the film it generally has issues where science can only go so far. And if you completely believe in science, and you know, you're kind of, then you're doomed in some ways. You're almost like, you know, the Frankenstein, Frankenstein in that way. But also, I think that the point is that Karras, you know, he has to rely upon his belief. And so it kind of presents faith as being something that is a positive mechanism. It's interesting. It's configured in terms of Catholicism.

48:33

Stacey Abbott

Excellent. Thank you all for really great question a great answers. I've got a question from Kris Woofert to all of you, and I'll just read it out. He says Steve Choe's book discusses Friedkin's interest in Catholicism, and in particular, a unique visit to see the Shroud of Turin and the overwhelmingly moving spectacle of the experience as akin to the cinematic form. Would any of you like to comment on the exorcist as an ode to the power of the cinematic?

49:08

Any thoughts?

49:13

LMK Shepard

Do you want to go ahead. So Friedkin talks about this idea, and I think it's something that he mentions it in the in the, in the documentary, of the idea that he wanted to make the battle of good versus evil cinematics. So he has these scenes of darkness kind of conjoined with, with, with with scenes of of light to kind of make the visual the kind of battle between good and evil. I also kind of talked about the original promotional poster taken from the Greek the Greek

painting, which also plays with this idea of shadow and light and the kind of interesting, interesting way.

49:57

Thank you Steve, Amy, did you want to jump in?

50:03

Steve Choe

Sure I yeah, I started the introduction to the book with this account of Friedkin when he was in the 2000s, when he was employed as an opera director. He was, he sought out a visit to the Shroud of Turin, I guess at that time, you had to make appointments. And he was completely moved and broke down in tears. He and his wife are kind of given this private showing. And so you know, the Shroud of Turin as a kind of material that attests to the reality of Christ Christ's body. I likened it to the experience of for Friedkin of cinema and the way in which he said, he told me that, you know, this is a story about man's inhumanity against man. You know, and it's told through this, this medium that records the past. And so, you know, this issue of authenticity, I think is so crucial. As Amy chambers really pointed out, you know, the extent to which that he made sure that audiences could believe in what they were seeing by using the most sophisticated and up-to-date medical techniques, but also, you know, in his other films, like, in *The French Connection*, he made sure that the cocaine was real, you know, or the heroin was real. So, yeah, I'll just, I'll just stop there.

51:43

Okay. Thank you. Kris, we're now at the end of the session, I've got a couple of questions that have come through, but I don't know if we want to reserve those for later or just or you have our because we have our kind of five minute break now. What are your thoughts?

52:02

Kris Woofter

Maybe we could do one more?

52:05

Stacey Abbott

We can do one more question and then just roll right into the next and roll right into the next. Okay. The question is from Andy Thomas. And he says that Amy had mentioned the portrayal and failure of modern medicine to do anything other than harm Regan, and I'm having a hard time thinking of other films that are so bold. I wonder if she has any other examples or counter examples that the efficacy of science against religion so directly?

52:34

Amy C. Chambers

I love a nice, easy question. I don't think there's one that does it quite so explicitly. And I think that's what really got me was that sort of, like explicitness and I'd always have been grown up in Anglo Catholic, which is a very British thing, Anglo Catholic household. And it was, I'd always sort of been put off it because it was gonna be terrifying. And it was when I later sort of started researching the film and got an archivist going, now you have to look at the box, look at *The Exorcist* box, it's the best box in the archive. And then suddenly realizing that actually, this for me was not a movie about religion. It was a movie about science. And but I can't think of personally off the top of my head that does it quite so explicitly. But through the whole process. It's the research for me that was so exciting that he worked with psychologists, he were Friekin I'm talking about, he had worked with psychologists worked with doctors. He had consultants from the best hospitals on the East Coast, and some in LA consulting on the film. I mean, it was a level that I have not seen before. And there are very few films that have this level of balance in terms of their, their sort of filmmakers engaging with the scientific research. So I've done some work looking at the idea of filmmakers, of archivists, of knowledge about science. Kubrick had a very similar approach, I guess, you could maybe see something like *A Clockwork Orange*. But again, it's not as explicit in the same way as science and religion take on very different roles in Kubrick's world. Whereas the freaking and *The Exorcist*, it was so explicit, but embedded right through the process, from the very early research to the book through to the research in the film. That was a longer answer than last time. Sorry.

54:22

Stacey Abbott

That was great. Thank you. Thank you. Okay, well, I want to say thank you very much. So to our speakers for an excellent panel. And with this brings this first panel to an end. So thank you, so I will hand over to Kris to initiate the next panel. So, thank you very much.

Horror Reverie

<https://www.monstrum-society.ca/horror-reverie-symposia.html>

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Horror Reverie 2:
An Online Symposium Celebrating 50 Years of *The Exorcist*

TRANSCRIPT

Panel 2 – Interviews with Eileen Dietz and Alexandre O. Philippe

11 March 2023

(duration 54:45)

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

audience, *The Exorcist*, Catholicism, demon, Eileen Dietz, evil, faith, horror film, William Friedkin, Father Karas, *Leap of Faith*, Regan MacNeil, Alexandre O. Philippe, possession, sequels, “Tubular Bells”

Kristopher (Kris) Woofert

Thanks, Stacey. Thanks to all the panelists for the first round. And we're gonna go ahead and roll right into panel two, there's a break between two and three so you can leave your screen then, or any time since you're not on camera. I'll introduce Anna Bogutskaya who will be having a discussion with Eileen Dietz and filmmaker Alexandre Philippe.

Oh, hi. Hi, Eileen!

Anna Bogutskaya

Thank you so much, Kris. I'm gonna start right away. First of all, thank you so much, Stacey, for asking me to moderate this panel. I'm a big fan of *The Exorcist*. I'm really, really excited to talk to the both of you about the film and your different experiences with it. So as an introduction, I'm Anna Bogutskaya. I'm the host of The Final Girls podcast and a writer, and film critic, and I'll be your moderator for this session. I'm going to be starting off by asking our special guests Eileen and Alexandre about their relationship with *The Exorcist* before handing it over to the audience for any questions, and, you know, put them in the chat. I'll try to get through as many of them as possible towards the tail end

of the session. So to begin, Eileen, I wanted to start with you and ask you about your relationship with horror before making *The Exorcist*.

56:26 (Approx. 2 minutes in)

Eileen Dietz

Well, I guess there were a couple of things. My mother did take me to see Swedish films, like Ingmar Bergmann films, and they weren't horror, but they were definitely thrillers. We can go into that later. But I am of the opinion that there is a huge difference between horror today, and what they call a thriller. So anyway, I saw many of those films, so when I got to meet Max, and he was like, Oh, my God. And then I just happened to see the original *Psycho*, of course, which totally freaked me out. And I saw a film with Susan Strasberg called *Scream of Fear* that I still remember. So, I just liked doing horror films, I mean, watching horror films, and then *The Exorcist* came along and the rest of it is history. I only shoot horror films.

Anna Bogutskaya

And I'll definitely be asking you more about the actual experience of making the film and what that meant for you afterwards. But Alexandre, to continue, what is your relationship with the film as a viewer?

Alexandre Philippe

Well, first of all, I want to say thank you for having me. It's a real honor and a pleasure to be to be here with you both today. I actually have a bit of a different relationship with *The Exorcist*. I grew up in Switzerland as a massive horror fan when I was very much a kid, I was watching all the horror films I could find. But there were two films that I actually waited a long time to watch. The first one is *The Exorcist*, the other is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The reason I waited so long for *The Exorcist* was because my mom had actually told me how traumatized she had been by the experience. She went to watch the film with with my dad when it came out in theaters, and she was up for a week, she literally couldn't sleep, she had to leave the lights on. And, you know, as much as I was sort of craving the experience of watching horror films as a kid, I was just too

afraid to actually confront it and to go through the experience. And so, I think I watched it in my 20s or something, I don't have an exact sort of recollection of it, and it didn't scare me as much as I initially thought. But, you know, it's one of those films that I got to appreciate over time. And I think that the process that I went through, in the making of leap of faith and obviously working with William so closely and to get to pick his brain for such a long period of time, really changed things for me in a very profound way. I mean, to prepare for what turned out to be six days of interviews with him on the film, I took *The Exorcist* with me. I went to this beautiful little vineyard in Sebastopol, California, and I had to sort of build a routine that would counterbalance the intensity of the film. So, I had this desk with a beautiful view on a vineyard, I woke up at 5:30 in the morning, drove by the Potter School where of course, Hitchcock shot the iconic scene from *The Birds*, went on a long beach walk, got my latte, got home, and watched *The Exorcist*. I did that every day for 30 days. It's this sort of sense that you have to decant the film in a way, and everyday new things started coming. And now, of course, after going through this for 30 days, there's no question in my mind that it's an absolute masterpiece of cinema.

Anna Bogutskaya

I think we can all agree on that. Eileen, to come back to you and to the actual making of *The Exorcist*--I'm wondering, I always want to know about the actual shooting of a film that becomes so influential and so huge. Why do they consider it to be a masterpiece? Can you tell us a little bit of what the actual experience of filming was like?

Eileen Dietz

Well, of course none of us knew *The Exorcist* was going to become /*The Exorcist*/. That was my first big studio film. I had shot some things on what they call PBS, which is a couple of driving movies and stuff like that. So this was my first big studio film, and as I mentioned, I had seen Max von Sydow on film, so that that first day was like, a little kid in a candy store. Like, wow, look what's going on here! But I guess everybody really has to understand that when you're on the other side of the camera, it's not scary, because some of it was arduous. I think most people know that, besides playing the demon Pazuzu which, of

course is the highlight and has become the icon of the entire film, which is really exciting to me. I was also what I like to call the demon the possesses Regan. And that's when I was made up to look exactly like her actually. And some of that was arduous, because I got to do what they call the most terrifying shots in the film, which was most of the levitation. We both did that, but the vomiting scene, and the masturbation scene, and the death scene at the end. So, I did all that kind of stuff. And it was fun, particularly the vomiting scene was a little rough. Dick Smith, of course, the genius of this film, and you want to put right up on top what made this film so thrilling, you got to put Deke Smith right in number one, because I am going to digress a minute. But instead of making a demon like this demon thing, you know, with red eyes, and horns and stuff like that, which we did on makeup tests, what he chose to do, as you all saw, was scratches and things like that, which made Regan so identifiable to the audience. And, you know, I like to say that, that was the fantastic part of *The Exorcist*, because you need people in films, I believe, horror and everything else, that you need to identify with the characters that you're watching, and either hate them or love them. But you do have to have a feeling about them to make the film work. With *The Exorcist*, all the parents that watch it, religious or not, thought that this could happen to their kid, you know, which was the beauty of the hand on the doorknob. That could be my kid that turns into the demon! And all the children that saw it, and some of them were five years old that I met at conventions. They were afraid they were going to turn into this demon and the beauty of that was, like I said, because you could identify with this child that just had worse and worse scratches on her face. So, making the film was you know, it was a three-and-a-half-hour make up. And what they did is they situated a TV so that they you see them in the mirror. And so you can watch TV while the makeup was going on. And Linda wanted to watch *I Love Lucy* at six in the morning. I wanted to watch the news, but she didn't like that. Also taking off the makeup when you just wanted to go home, that was an hour and a half process, because they had to take each little prosthetic off, which I wish I'd kept. But you know, piece by piece. So, a lot of times I got there and they put all the makeup on, and I did shoot, because that's, that's what movie making is like. But they paid me to be there. Oh, I got there at 630 in the morning, but they never use me all day. So what! you got paid.

Anna Bogutskaya

And I mean, you mentioned it at the start that, you know, Pazuzu has become one of the many scary images and one of the iconic images of the film. When did you start noticing how, how iconic it had become?

Eileen Dietz

Actually, believe it or not, it's been in the last five or six years, you know, that suddenly Pazuzu is appearing on the record. I don't know, I think Warner Brothers suddenly embraced this whole thing or knew what was going on. And so the face of Pazuzu is now on the record album that came out. And now they're advertising and things like that. So, I mean, I'm, I'm stunned by it, and very happy about it. But they have made Pazuzu based on *The Exorcist*. So yeah. But all our lives, as actors, or anybody really has been made different by the advent of social media.

1:06:57 (Approx. 10 minutes in)

Anna Bogutskaya

Oh, absolutely. And I'll touch on that a little bit later. But Alexandre wanted to move on to you and ask you, you know about your perception of the film, obviously, it comes from a different angle. So, what do you think about the cultural position of *The Exorcist*? You know, do you think it's considered a work of art? Do you think it's consideration as a piece of art is impacted by it being a horror film?

Alexandre Philippe

Well, to continue my thought earlier, you know, as I said, it is an essential masterpiece of cinema, you know. But I think the thing for me is that it is, and I think we can absolutely make the argument that it is a masterpiece, because it is a horror film, not in spite of the fact that it is a horror film. And I think that's a really important sort of distinction to make. And, you know, I think, many of the films that I make are about horror films. I mean, I've made a film about *Psycho*, about *Alien*, about *The Exorcist*. I mean, if someone's zombies, you know, there's more stuff coming up in the future as well. But I think, for me,

what is so important about horror movies is their social function, in a sense of sort of rites of passage, and I compare them often to, you know, there's sort of the modern equivalent to fairy tales hundreds of years ago that were, you know, before they started getting really sort of diluted or Disney-fied, is this idea that you have to sort of go through that story, and you're gonna come out a different person, it is a kind of a sort of coming of age. But for me, what I think makes horror films or horror cinema or horror stories generally so important is this idea that it deals with an extraordinarily important emotion, which is fear. And, you know, I think that fear is the gateway to self-knowledge. And let me explain what I mean by this, right? So, fear, if you think about it on a micro and macro level, largely dictates what we will or won't do, and therefore what we end up doing or not doing. So, fear, you could absolutely say regulates our lives every single day. And I think this idea of this ritual, if you will, the ritual of storytelling of going through a book or going through, you know, a horror movie experience, and looking into the dark mirror and facing those fears, is an extraordinary way to confront the inner demons to start having or gaining perhaps a better understanding about what we're afraid of and why we're afraid of it, to start having this sort of conversation with ourselves. So, on that level alone, I would say *The Exorcist* is a masterpiece because it is a horror film. But I would then add the other layer of it, which is what makes *The Exorcist* even greater than is the fact that at its core, it is a story about love. It's a heartbreaking story of, you know, four characters, I mean, structurally, and actually I tried to have that conversation with Friedkin and he disagrees with me on this. But I think structurally what's so really fascinating to me about the story is that it's not a protagonist driven piece. It is not an ensemble piece, but you have four characters at the center of it. Yeah, you can absolutely make the argument that Regan is the protagonist in the sense that she triggers the action of the story. But it is just as much a story about Father Merrin and Chris and Father Karras as it is about the possession. So that particular kind of narrative is quite unique. I mean, I can't think really of, of a, of a book or a story that is not an ensemble piece that has these sort of four distinct perspectives. And that makes you feel what is happening on such a profound level. So, you know, that's just kind of scratching the surface. I think there's so many other reasons for the greatness of it.

Anna Bogutskaya

Yeah, absolutely. And we could be here all day just talking about why all the things that make a great film, but you mentioned briefly your film *Leap of Faith*, which focuses very much on William Friedkin and his artistic process. I've seen your previous films made about other horror films and the different approaches for each one. What made you decide to focus the one you made on *The Exorcist* on Friedkin as an artist, and about that process of making the film, and all the choices that went into it? And the way, you know, for anyone who has not seen *Leap of Faith*, it is structured very much as a long conversation with Friedkin from going into the creative decisions, or artistic influences and kind of magical occurrences that happened for some of the things that have made this is such an iconic film and a horror masterpiece. So, a long-winded way of asking you what led you to giving *Leap of Faith* that structure to focus it entirely and Friedkin?

Alexandre Philippe

The whole thing was actually a magical occurrence. And it's actually kind of ironic that *The Exorcist* as Friedkin describes it is about the mysteries of faith. Because I was not at all planning on making a film on *The Exorcist*, that was not at all my intent. I was at the Sundance Film Festival for the Spanish premiere of *78/52*, the film that I made on the cycle shower scene. And I it was just one of those things where I was having lunch with Gary Sherman. And we picked one of you know, 40 restaurants that we could have picked to go on the port. We started having lunch, and then about halfway through lunch, a voice behind me calls Alex and turn around and it's Friedkin! I was just like, "what's happening." He called me to stay and he said, "Yeah, I've heard so much about your film and I want to tell you some stories about Hitch." So we talked about Hitchcock for a while, and he took my phone and gave me his email address, and said please send me your film right away. So I send them the film, and two hours later, I get this sort of gushing email about *78/52*. And he says, next time you're in LA, I want to buy you lunch. Great. And, you know, I mean, at the time, I was actually thinking, great, this is an opportunity for me to interview him for

Memory, which is the film that I made on Ridley Scott's *Alien*, which was in production at the time. So I thought, perfect, this is what's going to happen. So three weeks later, I'm in LA, and we're having lunch. I tried to talk to him about alien, but he moved the conversation towards *The Exorcist*. And he basically said, at one point, he said, you know, sort of telling you about his archives, and he said, if you wanted to have access to all this, you know, my archives and everything that I've got, I give you access. I sort of had this double take and asked, "what do you mean," and he said, well, you know, read my autobiography and think about it, and if you find an angle, just let me know. So for me, what sort of immediately came to mind because I mean, I'm also very intuitive in sort of the way that I structure my films, and it comes to me very quickly. But much has been said, and written, and many documentaries that have been made about the making of the film. So I didn't want to get into, you know, the makeup or techniques or any of that, that sort of, you know, the making of the film. I was really interested in picking his brain about how he conceived and worked on the expresses through art, through music, through classical cinema, through philosophy, and the way he sort of views the world. And so basically, I told him, I said, Look, I'd like to do something similar to you know, the using sort of *Hitchcock/Truffaut* as a model, where, you know, we would have a series of interviews over a number of days, but instead of going chronologically, through your entire filmography, I just want to focus on *The Exorcist*. And I want to crack open every scene every shot every technique every moment. And he responded very positively to that. He said, "how many days do you need?" So we started with three, and then it became four and became five became six. So the first day and a half, we literally just focused on the prologue and interacted. So, I mean, that's how granular we, you know, we got with this. And, for me, it was certainly a transformational sort of experience as a cinephile and a massive geek to be able to do this deep dive with him.

1:16:48 (Approx. 20 minutes in)

Anna Bogutskaya

And can I ask you, how did that process of doing this six-day long interview and *Leap of Faith* go? How did that change your view of the film itself and of him as a filmmaker?

Alexandre Philippe

Oh, I mean, completely. There's a lot to unpack, but as I said, first of all, there was this sort of 30 days of watching *The Exorcist* every day, which transformed my life. And I think that's true, you know, of every great film. I think movie watching is movie rewatching and the more you rewatch a great film, the more you're going to find stuff. But secondly, to be able to do this sort of deep dive with Friedkin, specifically through the lens of art and music and classic cinema, was really mind opening, to talk about certain shots or certain moments, to talk about some of his influences, I think was really profound. But to me the moment that really makes my film was on day four of our interviews. We, we were sort of taking a 10-minute break, and then he just out of the blue, he says "have I told you about the Kyoto zen gardens?" And I said no. So he said okay, roll. So we're rolling cameras and he launches into this extraordinarily profound and moving monologue about his experience from you know, 30 years ago of going to the theaters and gardens and being so moved by it. I mean, to the point where he started tearing up, which, you know, I had certainly never seen. And it was such an extraordinary sort of moment that I thought, first of all, on the spot, I realized, okay, this is the way I have to end the film. Secondly, you know, I have to find a way to go to Kyoto, we had not budgeted Kyoto, but we had to go to Kyoto. There was just there was no way around it. And I'm really glad we did. And so, so for me without sort of giving it away, I'm hoping, you know, people who haven't seen *Leap of Faith* will go and watch it. It's on Shutter and Amazon. I think that scene is a new way to look at not just *The Exorcist*, but its filmography and the way that the film starts is really about what I call Friedkin's "sacred stones." There are *The Exorcist* stones, there are the stones from the Kyoto zen garden, and the obelisk from Kubrick's *2001*. And I think understanding the personal meaning of those stones for Friedkin is a way you can start filtering *The Exorcist* and some of these other films through and get a very different take on his work.

Anna Bogutskaya

Like a skeleton key for understanding his work on a deeper level.

Alexandre Philippe

That's the way I see it, yeah.

Anna Bogutskaya

And Eileen, you mentioned that aside from playing Pazuzu, you were also doubling for possessed Regan, especially for some of the more gruesome scenes. And I wanted to ask you, if you could talk a little bit about that work and sharing that role with Linda Blair. What was that like for you?

Eileen Dietz

Well she was 12, and 12 years old in 1973 is very different than 12 year olds today. Matter of fact, I think that if you cast a 12-year-old today, she probably would have done all those demonic scenes. But her mom used to chase me, you know, "What's Eileen doing?" But Linda and I were friends at the time, we're not anymore. And as far as doing those scenes, you know, it was part of my contract. I love to work, so every day was a new adventure. You know, like, I can't wait to see what's gonna happen today, and especially shooting the Pazuzu scenes, which was actually the very last day of shooting just one of the mysteries of life, that they decided to do this makeup test. And we actually shot the very last day when I was supposed to shoot a commercial at the same time. So that was really cool.

Anna Bogutskaya

And I did want to ask you kind of do you remember your reaction when you saw the finished thing for the first time?

Eileen Dietz

We saw it in a big movie theater in New York City, which is where we shot and people weren't overwhelmed at the time. Really, one of the scariest scenes is when Ellen Burstyn went up to the attic. And the shock value of it. I mean, everybody loved it with the sound, but a lot of what happened with that film happened after, like I said, none of us knew that *The Exorcist* was going to become *The Exorcist*. Although they did a lot of things that really hadn't been done before. the set was totally closed to the press. So nobody knew what was

going on. And when they opened the film, they wouldn't let people in during the show, so they really built it up. I mean, the PR on this film is amazing. And we weren't allowed to take anything out of the film. We couldn't take pictures, it was all totally NDA. I actually snuck some away, I don't know how. So some of it was arduous, the vomiting scenes were probably the most difficult to do. They put a thing in my mouth that had little holes on it and then they actually pumped the green soup through tubes that they hid under the makeup and then down my back. So it was arduous because you couldn't talk that much, and I liked to talk, and then you couldn't smoke. And obviously you couldn't eat. So yeah, that was a little difficult but it was fun. Everything that I did. I thought was great fun. And I do have another story, when Ellen Burstyn and the doctor come barging into the room and first see the demon for the first time, they decided that it would be scary for the actors if they concocted this mix of raw meat and raw eggs and stuff like that for this incredible smell. And so when they first brought it out, it felt like everybody reacted to it. By the third track we just got sick.

Anna Bogutskaya

And, Alexander, you wanted to comment?

Alexandre Philippe

Yeah, I just had a quick question for Eileen, because I'm very interested in, you know, you were talking about the audience reactions at the time, Eileen, I would love to know, because like *The Exorcist*, and those sort of rare movies that become so visceral for an audience again, like *Psycho* or *Alien* for me, I'm very curious, because I did not get to live them in the theater when they came out. I would love to know, how did that manifest itself in the audience? Were people very vocal? Were there a lot of screams? Were people getting nauseous? What was your sense of the audience pulse within the theater when the film came out 50 years ago now.

1:26:45 (Approx. 30 minutes in)

Eileen Dietz

I only saw it with an audience once at the premiere screening. So I saw it with the whole cast and crew. And it's an interesting question, because I've never seen it with an audience. I've seen it at home, of course. A slightly different audience, other than cast and crew, which is totally different.

Anna Bogutskaya

And a slightly different spin actually on Alexander's question is, you know, you mentioned social media, and how that changed a lot for actors and for fans as well. When did you start noticing from the audience that *The Exorcist* became */The Exorcist/*?

Eileen Dietz

That's a good question. I mean, like I said, on social media it's easy, you know, I have 5000 friends on Facebook and stuff like that. And everybody came on and talked about how incredibly exciting or scary the film was. And then when I started doing conventions in 2000, and of course, conventions, that was the other way that we knew what was happening with the film. And they really only started 10 or 15 years later, so then you get a total impression about how people felt. You get one question, like all the time, which is, "do you know that film changed my life?" Yeah, I'm kind of aware. I mean, you kind of want to say that. But you know, the fans are so great. And they're so exciting. And I've been in the UK a couple of times doing conventions, which are kind of great that I got to go over there. I think I've been there like six times. But that's really where you get the audience reaction. Now, people are just, you know, mesmerized by this. And a lot of the fans, they wanted to catch the image of Pazuzu. And in the original film, there's only one shot. People left the theater and they went, "did you see it? Did you see that face?" So the people that had VCRs at the time tried to capture the image and they couldn't do and then they got DVDs and all of a sudden they did stop motion and caught the image. So an answer to your question, that's really the way that we recognized how scared the film was. And also a Korean Magazine ran and put my face on the cover. And then books came out. And that's when I became aware of it.

Anna Bogutskaya

And Alexandre, it's really interesting watching *Leap of Faith* and thinking about *The Exorcist*, not just as a horror masterwork. But as a film that contains a lot of what Friedkin calls the grace notes, these little moments that perhaps don't have that much to do with the plot of the film, but kind of give insight into something more profound than what the film is about. And I was wondering, what do you think are some of *The Exorcist's* grace notes?

Alexandre Philippe

So, in the end, we're talking about the grace notes. He refers to *Citizen Kane*, there's obviously a lot in relationship to this, but he talks very specifically about that little moment when Chris walks, and you see the fall leaves and you see those two nuns and she notices them wearing the Halloween masks, it's these very contained, very small moments. And it's not necessarily the kind of moment that you think about when you think about *The Exorcist*, but it's the grace notes. You know, he talks also about this extraordinary moment, when, in the opening prologue, Father Merrin is walking through this market, and there were these this extraordinary shafts of sunlight piercing through the tents that he had noticed, and he felt that we had to shoot. And so that became a grace note and I think there's many more, but I think that's part of the beauty of *The Exorcist*. We've talked about the horror of *The Exorcist*, but I think every great horror film has not just beauty, but poetry. I mean, there is a sort of a poetry to horror. And I think it's really important to the design of a film like this, to give us those moments, the way that *The Exorcist* sort of builds? Also, you have the sort of tender moments between the mother and the daughter, which are extremely important. And that goes back to what I was trying to say earlier. Is that, beyond the poetry, this is a film about love. It's a film about grief, it's a film about guilt. It's a profoundly human movie, and it is a movie that is driven by complex characters. I mean, if you were to only focus on the arc of Father Karras alone and the guilt that he feels towards his mother, it's absolutely heartbreaking. The sacrifice that he makes for a little girl that he never gets to really meet. I mean, he only meets Regan as Pazuzu. He never gets to meet Regan as Regan, and yet he commits. What an extraordinary moment that is. You can talk about Chris and what she goes through as a mother, you know, that moment when she meets up with Karras in the park and she is utterly not

just heartbroken, but in complete despair. She doesn't know what to do. I mean, who can't relate to this, right? I'm not a parent, but I'm sure every parent can relate to this. And, in fact, every son or every daughter can relate to what Father Karras is going through with their parents. I left Europe to go to the United States and, you know, my parents were very happy about that. But my mom still lives in France, and I know how difficult it was then for her to let me go. So those are the sort of profoundly human emotions that we all feel. And I think it's one of the reasons why *The Exorcist* is such a masterpiece and why it's unforgettable. Because it moves us all.

Eileen Dietz

Yeah. And we talk about building Friedkin all the time, but there would have been no *The Exorcist* since without the screenplay. So we really need to give kudos to Peter Blatty. We became really close up before he passed a few years ago. The book is amazing. It's amazing. And the book concentrates a lot more on when they really separated the film, in my opinion, into the spiritual, the medical and the horror. In the book, you really don't know whether she really has been possessed by a demon, or if she's having huge medical problems. She needs a therapist, but you really don't know. So many people from *The Exorcist* have passed now, and I miss my correspondence with Bladdy. He wrote me a note and he said, I don't know if I said this before, but my favorite scenes in *The Exorcist* were the ones you did. And I just went, wow, you know, that was one of the best compliments I've ever had in my entire life. So you guys should also see the book or read my book. And I wrote a book called *Exorcising my Demons*. And the first part is how I became an actor, a little flat chested buck-toothed girl from New York that everybody laughed at, because I really came out of the era where we had Twiggy and people like that. But there were a lot of people like Brigitte Bardot and Jane Russell that were really big and busty, and they said "you can't be an actress, you're too little!" So I talk all about *The Exorcist* from somebody who was part of it. And I tried to find the funny parts as well, because a lot of people know about the hard things. So in my book, I tried to find things that kind of also made me laugh, because everybody had to keep the mood light. And people just do practical jokes all the time. Like, you walk in the bathroom, you see an arm sticking out of the toilet. And, you know,

just kind of stuff like that. The dummy used for the head turning was so real that sometimes I'd come in in the morning, and go "Hi, Linda. Oh." So I have to go back and give Kudos to Peter Blatty again, because my opinion is if there's no script, there's no movie. I don't care who the actors are, you know, the special effects or cinematography, if you don't have a script, you don't have a movie. And by the way, people a lot of times talk about the curse of *The Exorcist* that you can't make another film. But it's like, hey, guys, you haven't come up with the script yet! You know, one that would work with the film.

1:39:13 (Approx. 43 minutes in)

Alexandre Philippe

I'm glad you mentioned that about Blatty, actually, since I made *Leap of Faith*, you know, I've been corresponding quite a bit with his son, Michael. And he's wonderful. I got to meet him when I drove down from northern Washington down to San Francisco about a week ago. And we finally get to meet in person, we went to a diner and he brought me some books, autographed books, like *Psycho* with a signature from Janet Leigh. It's just incredible stuff. I mean, he's just a lovely, lovely man.

Eileen Dietz

He's totally livid about this new *Exorcist* film that's coming out, you know, he's just like, it's got to be piece of crap. He's so angry about it. We have to just wait and see, I guess.

Anna Bogutskaya

I'm conscious of time and of the fact that I've heard the both of you, but I wanted to ask anyone watching, if you have any questions for Eileen or Alexandre, please put them in the chat. And we'll go through them. We've still got a few minutes before we have to wrap up.

Eileen Dietz

Let me just take the moment here if I could. If you guys would like any mementos from *The Exorcist* and stuff like that, I do sell them. Like this Pazuzu statue. I do a lot of cameos, and I go, Hey, Zuzu Can you do me a favor? What

do you want, I'm busy. What are you doing? Possessing people, what do you think? So that's what my cameos are like. And this is the book I was talking about, you really find everything you want to know about me and about following your dreams. Which I think is so important because people just want to negate your dreams a lot. And it's not only if you want to be an actor, if you want to open a wardrobe shop for you know, anything you want to do with your life even being on that you got to follow your dreams. I have a sister who is an author, and she said, if you drop a dream, it breaks. And I always liked that. So that's my little commercial. And if you want to find out more about it, I invite you to go on my Facebook page. And you can send me a private message, and I'll give you kind of details. And yes, I can send things to you.

Anna Bogutskaya

And Eileen, I've got a question for you from Steven Choe. Thank you so much for your first-hand. Comments. Your presence here is thrilling. What are your observations of what Friedkin was like on set? He seems like he would have been a director who was decisive and knows what he wants. Demanding. Perhaps he was constantly pushing the envelope in *The Exorcist*. Was he self aware?

Eileen Dietz

I found him to be, you know, when directing, at least my impression of it was that he wasn't terribly social. He wasn't one of those directors that fooled around with the cast, you know, it was really all about the shooting, and Owen Roizman, he just passed, but he worked closely with Billy Friedkin and he would tell Billy about shots that would work and shots that wouldn't work. And then they'd go see dailies and sometimes he'd yell "who shot that? That won't cut together." He was really, like I said, really quite serious. But he kind of left me alone, except when we shot the masturbation scene, which is actually very, very funny how he directed that. You really have to read my book to find out about it. But it was very funny. And eventually he cleared everybody out. So I think that answers your question. And we were very behind in the schedule, and whenever we were behind, he lost money. And so there was there was a seriousness, at least for me. He also brought a priest every day to bless the set.

Anna Bogutskaya

I'm not surprised I probably would have done the same thing if I was making a film about demonic possession! We are very close to needing to wrap up. So if there are any last questions, please put them in the chat. Otherwise we will have to wrap up here. And I just want to thank Eileen and Alexandre, for your time today and for your insights and your perspectives on the film. And I guess I'm gonna hand back over to Stacy or Kris for the rest of the sessions.

Alexandre Philippe

Thank you so much.

Eileen Dietz

Thank you! Kris, can I go back to bed?

Kristopher Woofter

You can go back to bed, get some sleep.

1:45:45 (Approx. 50 minutes in)

Eileen Dietz

Hey, guys, you were great. I gotta watch the movie again because I didn't know about all stuff that they used in the movie, particularly what Alexandre was saying. Because you know, all of you approach the film in a different way than an actor. So, I've learned a lot. I'm glad I came on early. So goodbye everybody, have a great day! Well, I'm sure they're coming out with a new film to celebrate the 50th anniversary. Can they do that? I'm sure they're releasing the film. So everybody, go see it. And if you do write to my Facebook page, I feel like a commercial, you can ask me one or two questions, and mention this Zoom, and I'll be glad to talk to you about it. You know, just go on longer. That's fine with me.

Alexandre Philippe

Bye, thank you so much. It means so much. Thanks.

Kristopher Woofter

Thank you. So I've put Eileen's merchandise page of her website in the chat, if you want to check it out. There's some fun stuff in there. And also Alexandre was coming in from Thessaloniki for a film festival he's at, so this is why he was sort of popping in and popping out. We have a we have a break until 1PM just for people to stretch their legs, so we'll be back then. Thank you.

Horror Reverie

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TRANSCRIPT

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Lorna Piatti-Farnell

All right, everyone, the time has come for our next panel on the sequels and sequelizations of *The Exorcist* and everything that came after. I'm Lorna Piatti-Farnell, I'll be chairing the session for you today. We're going to follow the more traditional structure, we will hear all three papers in succession. And then we will leave the Q&A session for the end. We've got three fantastic speakers lined up for this panel. I'm super excited, going to try to curb my enthusiasm does you know me know how excited I get. Ee're really looking forward to hearing them speak so without further ado, let's get started. Our first speaker today is Simon Brown. I'll give a little bit of an introduction for all three speakers. When the time comes. He is a horror scholar and Associate Professor of Film and Television at Kingston University in the UK is published really widely, and recent publications include *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television* that was published in 2018. And *Creepshow* in 2019, as part of the Devil's Advocate series. He's currently researching a monograph on British horror author, James Herbert. And his presentation today is entitled *The Exorcist Sequels: Navigating The Exorcist's Legacy across Cinematic Horror*. So Simon, over to you.

Simon Brown

Okay, first things first, share screen. Can everybody see that? Okay? Yes. Good. Okay, so, as I'm sure everybody knows, there are four official sequels to *The Exorcist*. They are in order of release: *The Exorcist 2: The Heretic*, directed by John Boorman in 1977, *The Exorcist III* written and directed by Blatty in 1990, *Exorcist: The Beginning* directed by Renny Harlin in 2004, and *Dominion*, directed by Paul Schrader and released in 2005. For those who haven't seen them, I've looked across the reviews and critical opinions. And, you know, if you're deciding which one to watch, basically they sort of break down like this. The bad one, the good one, the mainstream silly CGI one, and the serious, boring artsy one. And what I want to do here is to briefly, in 10 minutes, raise a series of hopefully interesting observations, which I think show how these films point to the importance and to the challenge of the idea of the legacy of *The Exorcist*. So, the first thing to note about these four films is the fact that each of them to a lesser and to a greater degree exist in different versions. John Boorman's original cut was 117 minutes, and immediately after the film's premiere, he cut it down to 110 minutes, and then cut it later down to 97 minutes. In comparison to the other versions, this is very much Boorman tinkering with the film, rearranging the deck chairs on his cinematic *Titanic*. In contrast, *Exorcist II* exists in two overlapping but very different versions, with Jason Miller unavailable to Blatty because of poor health, Blatty's idea of having the mysterious patient in isolation in the hospital be Father Karras and the Gemini killer was solved basically by pretending that Brad Dourif looked like Jason Miller. And Blatty even shot an opening scene in a morgue, which took place after the end of *The Exorcist*, in which Miller was replaced by Dourif. But when he delivered the final film, the head of Morgan Creek productions demanded it be reshot that an exorcism had to be added, and that Dourif be replaced by Jason Miller since A: Miller's faces Karis was too iconic and B: He brought with him that crucial brand recognition. As a compromise, Blatty shot new scenes with Miller and reshot Dourif's scenes, creating a hybrid creature who was part Gemini killer, Dourif, and part Karras, Jason Miller, which I think works very, very well, and he also involved Nicole Williamson in a rather perfunctory exorcism at the end. Then, you have the case of *Dominion*. Paul Schrader shot the entire film based on a script by William Wisher Jr. that was rewritten by Caleb Carr. Typical for

Schrader, the film was a thoughtful examination of the nature of guilt, and utterly devoid of anything scary. So, Morgan Creek gave the entire project to Renny Harlin plus 40 odd million dollars, to recast, rescript, and do the film entirely again. This to me says a lot about the legacy of *The Exorcist* because all these sequels and their different versions are in a process of negotiation between the original and their own independent identity. What these films show is a branded product, *The Exorcist* franchise, trying to figure out exactly what its brand really is. The original film, for example is a careful negotiation between a serious examination of the nature of good and evil within a specifically Jesuit framework. At the same time, it's also a shocking, intensive special effects laden horror film. And what we see in the sequels is them trying to find their own identity and position themselves somewhere on this spectrum of serious theological musing, and terrifying balls-out horror spectacle. And as Alex said, in the earlier panel, the original is a masterpiece because it's a horror film, not in spite of that, and these films are negotiating that fundamental truth. So, for instance, both *The Heretic* and *Dominion* in very different ways, focus their attention primarily on religious considerations. While the original is about evil infecting Regan, *The Heretic* posits that she is in fact one of a number of people around the world who are positioned by God to be definite forces for good and so can't be repossessed by Pazuzu. *Dominion* on the other hand, deals with guilt, a crisis of faith and the notion of sin, an idea to which Schrader returns over and over again. Stellan Skarsgård's father Merrin is forced during World War II to point out 10 people in his village to be shot by Nazis, and as a result has lost his faith. Working as an archaeologist he uncovers a Christian church in Africa built over a temple to a pagan god. A young crippled boy, an outcast is gradually healed, presumably by force emanating from the church. But in the nice reversal of the original, his healing is the result of his possession. And at the end, he confronts Merrin, and shows him that if he had refused to select these 10 villagers, the entire village would have been shot by the Germans. So Merrin is previously convinced that there is no God because the Nazi commandant says, God is not here today, father, and he's convinced that evil lies in the hearts of men. But by the end he realizes that evil is a force and then good can find it. And he sort of walks off into the distance, like Ethan Edwards in *The Searcher*, a kind of lone warrior out of time. The same debate underscores *Exorcist III*, in

which George C. Scott also believes not in God but in human evil. “I believe in injustice,” he says, “inhumanity and torture and anger and hate. I believe in murder. I believe in pain and cruelty and infidelity.” You have to do it in the George C. Scott voice. As a cop investigating a religiously affiliated serial killer, his detective kingdom and is worn down by the horrors he sees around him every day and he too has lost his faith. In the original version, he simply shoots the Gemini killer saying pray for me, Damien. While in the more hopeful released version, Karras is able to assert himself over the demon enough to give Scott the opportunity to defeat the evil and shoot him. In the director’s version, Kinderman is only able to commit murder and hope for redemption at the end. But in the release version Karras, as he does in the first film, and as the demon does for Merrin, *Dominion* is able to show that good can triumph over evil and that the battle is worth fighting. In all these cases, horror takes a backseat to meditation. Only the beginning really sells itself as a horror film wearing its badge on its sleeve by marshalling as many tropes as horror as Harlin the director can think of. There’s body horror as Brick Top from *Snatch*, face erupts into boils and eventually melts into goo. Evil crows hark back to *The Birds*, a bait and switch over who’s actually possessed draws from the whodunit horrors of *Scream*. A dust storm wanders in from the set of *The Mummy*, and there’s even a *Psycho* shower scene followed by a full-on CGI exorcism at the end. The beginning is constructed as a horror film. Indeed, the beginning hits the heights of absurdity by suggesting that the church Merrin finds is not guarding a pagan temple, but rather is built on the actual spot where Lucifer landed when he fell from heaven, rendering the theological, literal. So, in the sequels, the balance of horror visuals and spiritual debate is largely separated out, whereas in the original, the two are linked.

1:57:05 (Approx. 9 minutes in)

The other key aspect is that unlike *The Exorcist*, these films must negotiate their relationship to the brand, but also to their own place in their own cinematic universes. So, *The Heretic* connects much more strongly to John Boorman’s mid to late 70s, hyperbolic fantasy visuals, and indeed to a period of Richard Burton’s career, where he focused on playing tortured individuals with a tendency to intone to the camera. I’m thinking of *Equus*, and *The Medusa Touch*

here. That's the context of that film. *Dominion*, I've said is a Paul Schrader films through and through and makes much more sense when considered alongside works like *First Reformed* and *Taxi Driver* than *The Exorcist*. While the beginning is inextricably tied to the prevailing trends of mainstream horror in 2004, where there was a reliance on CGI and a clear distinction between us and them, the monster. So films like *Resident Evil Apocalypse*, *The Grudge*, and *Alien vs. Predator*, there's no space for pontificating, or doubt. And so my primary observation is that these films exist in relation not to the original per se, but to the legacy of the original, to its public perception, its legend, and a judge as such by both audiences and by the studios, where in fact, they also circulate within another perhaps richer context, which is their own relationship to author and to genre. This is of course interesting, because it's precisely where the success of the original finds its nexus, in the focal point of Friedkin's auteur obsession, Blatty's theological preoccupation, and the horror genre as it existed in its early incarnation in the early 70s. In the sequels to the preoccupations of Blatty, Boorman, and Schrader, who see *The Exorcist* as an opportunity to explore their own themes, exist in opposition to the film genre status, and the genre expectations of *The Exorcist*'s legacy as horror. But Boorman didn't even like the original and set out to make something more hopeful, and he himself said he failed because it didn't give the audience what they wanted. Blatty's own sequel, *Legion*, was ordered into reshoots, because it had to have an exorcism. *Dominion* was way too dull and serious and was remade in its entirety as an action-horror hybrid. While the beginning does connect to the generic elements of the original, albeit muted by CGI 2004 context, but it doesn't connect to the serious themes of the original. So, to conclude, ultimately, what these films do in the light of the legacy of *The Exorcist*, is pose a very serious question: what is a horror film? They question the very nature of what a horror film is and what it's for. Is it about confronting evil, thinking seriously about what it is? Or is it about showing evil in a very kind of literal form? Schrader's film and even Boorman's flawed extravaganza deal with lofty important ideas of evil and good. Blatty's film is perhaps the most successful in feeling like a horror film and creating a horror mood, even if it's story line is wordy and ponderous, like *Dominion*, and also it's largely a supernatural police procedural. While Harlin's film ticks all the boxes stylistically, but feels featherlite in comparison. Due to its scale, its

intensity, and its reputation, *The Exorcist* is not only a horror film, but an undeniable classic, as Alex said. The sequels represent a snapshot of his shifting genre, popular and niche, serious and silly, authentic and inauthentic. It represents the genre exploring its own post-American nightmare identity. Thank you.

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

That was perfectly timed, Simon. Thank you. Thank you for absolutely fascinating presentation. I'm sure it will generate a lot of discussion in a question time. We will now move on to our second speaker for the panel. Stella Marie Gaynor, who's a Senior Lecturer in media culture and communication at Liverpool John Moores University, and is author of *Rethinking Horror in the New Economies of Television*. Her research and publications explore horror, television, and digital media industries, true crime, and podcasting, and she is also—very exciting—cohost of a now the podcast starts which is absolutely, spectacularly made. Her presentation today is titled “The Exorcist TV Series: Demons and Demographics.” Stella, over to you.

2:01:48 (Approx. 14 minutes in)

Stella Marie Gaynor

Thank you. Alright, so my research into horror and TV horror in particular, takes the approach of looking at the industrial, the larger industrial forces and the political economies that work to produce this kind of content. So, as we've already heard, there's been lots of controversy about the original film and free to air channel Fox capitalized on this notoriety, and developed it for serialization on its network. So the 1973 film became a cultural reference point ensured by its controversies and urban legends. So therefore, a television property in the same vein, and with the same name, *The Exorcist* on Fox was a good strategic move at the time in the mid 2010s. So when this series was announced as greenlit the cultural reference points regarding the original film were used in the trade and entertainment press to promote this upcoming series. Now these reference points are terrible pawns. I do apologize, I didn't write them, these TV critics did. So. Hibbard Entertainment Weekly cried, “Here's some head turning news. One of the scariest tales of all time he's been made into a TV series at Fox,” and

even the Fox CEO Gary Newman turned to the bad puns, and he told the potential advertisers that the up fronts in New York that “this show is going to turn heads.” Well done on the bad puns. But it had to be made clear what this serialized *Exorcist* was going to be, or more importantly, what it was not going to be. It was not going to be a remake. Fox pushed really hard with the phrase “modern reinvention,” after very early plans to retell the original story had been met with outrage from the intended series creator Jeremy Slater. Slater told variety that when Fox approached him regarding *The Exorcist*, being retold for television, he said, “I don't want to do that, and you shouldn't either. That sounds terrible. The idea of a remake is suicide. You're never going to tell the story better, you're only going to tell it longer.” Alfonso Herrera who plays his father Tomas in the series was also well aware of the perceived risk of daring to develop such a sacred horror artifact. Speaking to Deadline, Herrera said that the 1973 film sorry, was the Holy Grail of horror, and that developing it for TV was a huge responsibility. *The Exorcist* TV series, then was not to be a remake, it was not to be a reboot, it was to be an addition to the canon of *The Exorcist*. And this is made clear with the big reveal of season one. So, spoilers sorry. In episode 5, *Through my Most Grievous Faults*, Gina Davis's character, Angela Rance, reveals that she is in fact Regan, all grown up and facing once again, a demon possession this time as it inhabits one of her daughters. So this confirms to us then that this series is a direct follow on from the 1973 film and not really paying attention to any of the other sequels that Simon was just talking about. So as the series was not harming the film, critics declared *The Exorcist* on Fox as safe for the film fans. *The Exorcist* for TV had a lot of expectations to live up to give them the almost mythic status of the 1973 film. When the series premiered on Fox in 2016, on the whole internet with a positive reaction in the trade press, and critics generally agree that it has the potential to live up to the legacy. We've such a reputation to uphold, though, *The Exorcist* TV show had to walk a very thin line between being clearly linked to the 1972 film and being canon, but also that being his own text that's developed for and to work on television. So there are many clear links and markers and motifs throughout the series that reminders of the film and reminders that we are definitely in Friedkin's universe. In episode one, *And Let my Cry Come Unto Thee*, Father Marcus prepares to go and help with the Rance family, he does a little bit of research and we see

newspaper clippings that cover the events in Georgetown in the 70s, and the MacNeil family and its appointed moved by their series creator Jeremy Slater. So he told variety that it was important to let everyone know that this is a continuation of an existing story and not intended to replace it. So again, this constant hammering home that this is not a remake, you can all calm down, we're not remaking the original film. So speaking about remakes, I need to point to Dr. Laura Mee's work on remakes, where fans and critics have this really strong power to decide what is culturally devalued, and *The Exorcist* series could have very easily been shunned entirely by simply just even daring to go near this sacred classic. So with *The Exorcist* property, the 1973 film holds such a position in horror. It's controversial, it's iconic, and for some, perhaps untouchable, and there was a real risk that fans and critics would be, as Laura Mee says, entirely intolerant to further sequels, particularly after *Exorcist III*. However, *The Exorcist* pilot firmly positions itself as canon, notably with the title card, and the strangely reassuring and comforting use of Tubular Bells. As the pilot comes to a close, we know we're in the same universe as the 1973 film when Casey Rance reveals to be possessed and Tomas is walking away to the tune of Tubular Bells. Together with the parallel montage of Farther Marcus as you can see here, readying his exorcism kit, both men are shocked with an unstable sort of documentary feeling this moment, and it gives the sequence a sense of urgency and importantly for television, a sense of realness. Speaking Variety again, series creator Jeremy Slater said that they didn't intend to use Tubular Bells, it wasn't really on the cards for them when they were developing the series, but Fox really pushed for it, and the team tried it over the end of the pilot, and then in the sequence just described, and they realized that it worked. However, we're only treated to 43 seconds of Tubular Bells due to the expense of the license, and so the iconic score is used sparingly throughout the series. In fact, after this sequence in episode one, we don't hear Tubular Bells again until the closing moments of the first episode of season two, where the slow zoom in on Andy's house, where it appears the second series central possession, will take place.

So there's plenty of homages to the 1973 film throughout both seasons, most notable in season one. Chris MacNeil again she you know, she turns up, she rocks up at the Rance family home and as she emerges from the taxi, she stands

outside the house in the hat and the long coat, as you can see on the image on the right, and she's caught in the spotlight from the window above. Clearly in a direct nod to the film poster. Later when Chris MacNeil meets her death, it's just as Burke met his death in the film, and Angela/Regan, the grownup version, she snaps him with his neck and leaves it to fall down the stairs, and Chris lays at the bottom of the stairs with a head turn backwards. So I've done lots of work on TV horror, and how it's developed its visuals, its violence, its gore, you know, getting more gory, more violent as the years have gone on. But despite *The Exorcist* arriving on Fox at the height of the TV horror surge in the 2010s, the show didn't really lean into delivering all of this gory violence every week. Like other TV shows, at the time, were just all about the violence and the gore and this kind of arms race of violence on TV at the time, and neither did it succumb to their traditions of network television drama doing an off the week structure. So for instance, in *Hannibal*, there was a murder tableau of the week. In *The Exorcist* TV show, they didn't do that. Instead, the series makes use of the narrative space afforded by two seasons with 10 episodes each and explores the powers of the demons and the space that they inhabit, in the possessed minds of those unfortunate to be dealing with them. So this occurs in a hallucinogenic visions and almost dreamlike sequences throughout the series that possess the transport into another plane of reality. And father Tomas pictured here he is blessed, or cursed because it really doesn't look like fun, with the ability to join the possessed in the disturbing demonic world. So young Casey is the focus of the demon in season one, and we switch between the real world and the world constructed by the demon in her mind. While in reality, she has been strapped to a bed in a psych ward, in her head, she's coming down to breakfast in her family home, and she watches her mother break eggs into a bowl, eggs that contain dead, bloodied baby birds. Later, Father Tomas engages with the demons in Casey's possessed dreamscape and encounters taunts from the demons as it shows Tomas, his own mother, who teases Tomas telling him that he was unwanted. And as the camera pans around the cruel mother, we see the back of her head blown off from a self-inflicted gunshot. So these examples show that the detailed gory shots expected of contemporary TV horror are there, and of course, echo back to the bloody, harrowing, visceral shocks of the 1973 film. But when these moments appear, the camera does not linger on them.

The glimpses of gore are fleeting and the TV series. Now this might appear as part of the limitations of being on network. But in *The Exorcist* TV series, the flashes of bloody wounds or monstrous visions burst out of the rest of the atmospheric texture in really sharp jolts. So because this series is not a bloodbath, when these images do appear, they do so with a startling flourish. Series creator Slater said that he wanted to be careful with these scare scenes and that the series would not be *Waterworld*, horror, and cats jumping out of closets because this would be as you said, numbing for the audience. So Fox scheduled the access for 9pm on Friday nights and the pilot delivered 2.9 million. For a Friday night, that's okay for the relatively low bar set for Friday night figures. With each episode however, the numbers steadily dropped. questions were asked as to why would you put the show on at nine o'clock on a Friday, a slot that for other channels and other shows has been regarded as quite the death knell, Fox CEO Gary Newman said they hoped to tap into a movie going crowd who didn't want to go to the movies. But the season two finale was down 33% from the finale of season one. So despite the warm reviews and the notoriety around the property, the series, I don't think, ever really got the traction that it really definitely deserved. My explanation for this would be with Fox as the network pitch to a younger demographic, *The Exorcist* with all of its baggage, the younger edgier branding of Fox, I think might sort of deterred legions of potential *Exorcist* viewers, who themselves were old enough perhaps to remember the 1973 film when it was part of the national conversation. So in short, the fact that it was on Fox might have been a little bit off-putting. The series was canceled after two seasons, but larger forces were at work that led to the axing of the show. It wasn't just the low ratings. Journalists later knew that the writing was on the wall for *The Exorcist* when Disney came in and acquired 21st Century Fox. Speaking to Deadline about possible season three of *The Exorcist*, he was unsure if the merger meant good things for the show or bad. So *The Exorcist*, is not really on brand for Disney, Fox CEOs Dana Walden and Gary Newman were busy prepping this new Fox, which after the Disney merger was built on a roster of broad screen procedurals and multicam sitcoms. So this prep intimacy saw a wave of cancellations, which included *the Exorcist*, the final episodes of season two saw Father Bennett fully integrated with the demon and had gone completely wild by this point, and the story into

an all-out war between Father Marcus, Father Tomas, and a highly corrupt Catholic Church. The end of season two has an incredibly dark ending, in which Father Marcus shoots that season's good guy hero in the head. And that good guy hero was a beautifully warm and loving character, and this priest has just shot him in the face, not really fitting with Disney. So where *The Exorcist* TV series was heading was some way outside the now Disney-owned TV network. So sadly, *The Exorcist* was canceled. And like other *Exorcist* properties, it's left to become the stuff of legend. Thank you. And if you want more about *The Exorcist*, and TV horror, read my book!

2:14:18 (Approx. 26 minutes in)

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

Looking forward to doing that, Stella! Oh, absolutely. Fantastic. Thank you for a stimulating paper. And we will now move on to our third and final presenter for this panel. Michael Lee is a professor of musicology at the University of Oklahoma. His most recent book *Music and the Horror Films of Val Lewton* with Edinburgh University Press. He is a lifelong horror fan and researcher on horror film music. He's also founding editor of *Horror Studies and Interdisciplinary Journal*, which I'm sure we all know. And Mike, I'm just going to hand over to you to fully introduce your paper and take it away. Thank you.

Michael Lee

Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to get to share some thoughts on the music in this film, since there is very little of it. And that makes this a sort of surprising topic. The reason there is a little of it is complicated and I'll get into, but it nevertheless managed to sell a considerable number of soundtrack albums. In fact, it was among horror films, the best-selling out soundtrack album, and to the best of my knowledge still is. The reason for this as the effectiveness of the choices that were made, and I'm going to focus at the end of my talk primarily on the choice, Tubular Bells. But first, just a little bit about the music, because quite a lot of it was planned. Originally, film composer Bernard Herrmann was contacted by Friedkin to discuss the possibility of his supplying the score. He watched the film, declared it “shit” according to Friedkin, and an acrimonious exchange followed, which ended in no collaboration. I imagine that there's

another side of the story, but I didn't delve into it. Suffice to say that Hermann used to working under the studio system, but as an independent and prestigious composer was ill-suited to the sort of new Hollywood vision in which a protean young director had a vision and he expected to be listened to. Herman was not always a good listener. Next, Lalo Schifrin a very distinguished composer was contracted to write a score for the film, and he did so. The entire film exists, and Warner Brothers has released it on CD. This score also was heard by audiences in a pre-release trailer that did not run very many times because, according to legend, it nauseated audiences. Lalo Schifrin was disappointed when the entire score was rejected, film music historians love to view this as second only to Alex North's is rejected score for *2001* in that kind of world of holy grail scores that we don't get to hear with their films. Friedkin chose after throwing Lalo Schifrin's reels of music outside the window, much like poor Father Karras must throw himself outside the window. It was the decision that a temp track would be used. For the temp track, Friedkin selected primarily avantgarde music, mostly by Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki. Some of it can still be heard in the film. For example, the first time you'll hear some Penderecki is when Max von Sydow's character finds the small demonic figurine in Iraq. You can hear just a few seconds of Penderecki at that point. Why so few seconds when many, many minutes of music had been rerecorded by an orchestra contracted by Warner Brothers? The reason for this is that the temp track itself got rejected. Friedkin felt there was simply too much music and that it was competing with the dialogue but worse with the beautifully imagined and realized sound effects created for the film. As most of the music was cut in the name partly of realism, but partly of competing with the rest of the sound of the sound world of the film, I turn now to some of the music that didn't make it into the film. First David Borden, a very early life synthesizer performance practitioner was contracted by Friedkin and he produced music for the film, three minutes of which can actually be heard mostly as back strike ground music for taxi rides taken by Chris MacNeil. The part of the music that everybody remembers and that I'll focus on now is *Tubular Bells*. Prog rock specialist Mike Oldfield's solo album in which he plays all the instruments and compose the two tracks, each one filling in the entire side of an LP. That album, the first release by Virgin Records, and maybe you could say the foundation upon which

the entire Virgin empire was built, was already available and had been picked up at a record store by the sound department to look for what Friedkin hoped to be a lullaby.

Why a lullaby? There are no infants in this film. And here's where I start to get to my analysis of *Tubular Bells* and it's placed within *The Exorcist*. Regan enjoys a kind of liminal status between childhood and adolescence at age 12. We see her for example, frequently tucked into bed and kissed goodnight by her doting mother, activities that seem a little unusual to still be unfolding at the age of 12. But we also find Regan later proposing a love interest for her mother. And so showing a kind of precocious sense of human relations and human sexuality. That sense of Regan, though as childlike is crucial to Friedkin's choice of music. He wants a lullaby because part of *The Exorcist's* wonder is that it's a film about childhood corrupted. And now I want to turn my attention briefly to prog rock. Prog rock is defined, I feel by primarily two important elements. One is the use of asymmetrical meters. Most music in the Western world is in some subdivision of two, we call this duple meter, or three, triple meter. But in the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, a topic very much relevant to this film, only triple meter was allowed until late in the 14th, or perhaps even the 15th century, would you find the Catholic Church embracing the idea that the profane duple meter could also be used in churches. So when you start to introduce twos adjacent to threes, you are literally taking music into the metric world of a crisis in the Catholic Church in which a profane world starts to find its way into the sacred world of religious music. I'll come back to that duple and triple division in just a moment. I want to say something also about timbre. Prog rock is also I think definitionally willing to explore the timbral possibilities outside of the traditional rock band, the electric guitar, bass, keyboards, possibly synthesizers, certainly drums, to bring in other sorts of timbres into that world. In the case of *Tubular Bells*, we hear the tinkling sounds of many different sorts of bells that remind me very much of the sound world of childhood in the early 1970s. Specifically, as embodied in the toys produced by Fisher Price for small children to play with. The Fisher Price sound world is full of tinkling timbres and small repetitious returns. I can't help but feel that in a certain sense, *Tubular Bells* provides this repetition of world of faint tinkling bells, very much familiar to the sound world

of every parent as their child plays. Of course, with play also comes danger of injuries and these sorts of things. And so Fisher Price has to create these tools of children with much care. That timbral world allows us to start to consider ways in which this music fits the theme of childhood corrupted. For example, the first time we hear the music in the film itself, is as Chris MacNeil is returning home after working on the film within the film. As she walks, she passes a group of trick-or-treating children, children literally transformed their faces by masks into the monstrous and the supernatural. And that is the only time within the film proper that we're hearing Tubular Bells. The other time is, of course during the final credits. Let's get back now to twos and threes. If the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages believed that three was sacred and two was profane, the fascinating thing about choosing prog rock is you're going to find a lot of threes adjacent to a lot of twos. Let's listen just briefly to the tune as it's heard at the beginning of the film of Tubular Bells. Let me share my screen just briefly, but we'll listen to a few seconds of it.

2:23:57 (Approx. 36 minutes in)

So I'll stop my sharing now and just say, do you notice the 121212312121231212123. So we have a unit of seven, followed by a unit of seven, followed by a unit of nine, two plus two plus two plus three. That's the asymmetrical meter that Oldfield uses in Tubular Bells at the beginning, it'll change later. And eventually it will also have a superposition of five, two and then three in the piano, creating a kind of chaotic 23 against 25 sequence. They'll take the entire side of an album to play through. We never get that far in *The Exorcist*, but what we do get is this collision of profane twos and sacred threes, adding up to the number 23. In the temp track, there is music by George Crumb, American avantgarde composer from his piece called *The Black Angels*. It presents a collision of good and evil in the context of the Vietnam War. And it is full of numerology, the number of 23 is the number chosen by George Crumb. George Crum uses 23 Is the paradigmatic number of evil. Why? Because the number two and the number three, form a ratio of 0.666. And now we see how there's a real magic to this choice of juxtaposing twos and threes. When the piano comes in in Tubular Bells, it's exclusively playing a two immediately followed by a 3, 666 over and over and over again. Now, I don't

think any of this was meant to be heard by the original audience, and I'm not positive it was heard by Friedkin. But I do believe when great art is made, great accidents happen. And I think *Tubular Bells* is more than just a great accident. It's a well-chosen lullaby. It's also a very well-chosen piece for conjuring the numerology of medieval Catholicism, and its fascination also with the profane. Thanks so much for listening.

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

Thank you so much, Mike, for an absolutely fascinating paper, I wanted to hear more, much, much, much more. Hopefully, we'll get to address it a little bit. And now we're going to open the floor for questions. So if you have any, please send them to me as a direct message and I will read them out to our presenters. In the meantime, we already have a question. I also have a couple of questions on my own, but give you guys a chance. First. We do have a question from Kristopher, for Simon. And it says that this is a thought that comes out of thinking about the parallels between *Exorcist III* and the original and the kind of charming, almost parodic elements of the detective narrative in the original. So here's the question from Kris: In terms of negotiating genre, there are ways also that the original film resists certain narrative conventions that the sequels either tried to pick up or entirely abandon. Do you have any other thoughts this?

Simon Brown

That's a really good question. I'm tempted to say who cares, can we listen to Michael for another 10 minutes? The interesting thing about the *The Exorcist III* detective narrative, I think is, and this doesn't get picked up as much as it should, is that of course it's coming in this kind of cluster. And following on from this will be *The Silence of the Lambs*, which gets sort of picked up as this kind of granddaddy of this merging of horror and police procedural that that will get, you know, become so very, very prevalent. And rewatching, *The Exorcist III*, the Blatty original version of *Legion*, as it's called, which is an incredibly ponderously slow film, in many, many ways. I think. I think one of the things it does really interestingly is it takes this rather perfunctory, delightfully sort of bumbling kind of character from the original film played by Lee J. Cobb, and turn him into this sort of incredibly tortured figure. And if you watch the two films back to the

back, as I did, you know, I watched all the sequels very close together, I did it so you don't have to do. What leaps out at you is the transformation of the kingdom and character. He's completely different. There's flashes of Lee J. Cobb in there, but the character has been totally rewritten. And I am still working my way through this. But it seems to me to be very emblematic. And this is the underpinning of what I'm trying to say, in a shift in the genre that's kind of starting to happen around that that sort of time. Did that answer the question or was that woeful?

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

You get a thumbs up from Kristopher, leaving satisfied with the answer, and we can move on. Thank you for that. Simon. We now have a question for Mike from Steve. Steve Choe says: Wonderful talk, thank you. I wonder what your thoughts are on how the intro to Tubular Bells has become so emblematic as it is heard very briefly and only once in the narrative.

Michael Lee

One of the things that music does is it speaks to us at a nonverbal level, and it becomes sort of like a trademark in that regard. Trademarks sometimes have verbiage within them but sometimes they're just a symbol. And symbols can be very powerful mnemonics and they can capture imaginations. And so what I would say is that, just as the, you know, the shark motive and jaws becomes quickly emblematic, and you can't hear but two seconds of music without being transported into that world, or Harry Potter's magical theme by John Williams, which immediately transports you into the world of magic. I can't help but think the Tubular Bells is effective music, and it becomes the sort of a trademark. And I think Stella's point about the television program is really helpful to my thinking as well, that Fox may have been doing more than just, you know, trying to brand their show, they may have also accidentally lent it a little more of a demonic flair. I think it's I think it's because it's a nonverbal branding thing. But that's just one guy's opinion.

2:30:57 (Approx. 42 minutes in)

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

Thank you, Mike. We do have further questions in the chat. But I wonder if before we I address that, I might ask Stella a question as well. I'm gonna get in there as the Chair and be cheeky. And just for rank. Stella, you were talking about this television sequence that I haven't yet seen and I realized I'd been missing out! Because during your presentation, I could keep going oh, that's really interesting. That's really cool. So we'll go back to it. And you were talking about that moment when, you know, the daughter is actually tied up in a psych ward and instead in her head, she's living this sort of demonic fantasy, and the priest enters that fantasy and visits that world. That made me think a little bit about the contrast between the religious and the spiritual, that, Amy was talking about in our paper earlier in the day, and I wonder if perhaps, you could tell us a little bit more if there is a focus on that friction as well, like in the TV adaptation too? Or if that's something that perhaps only comes in as a glimpse, and it's not really focused on as much as it wasn't the original.

Stella Marie Gaynor

That sequence that I mentioned, sort of roughly in the story, grown-up Regan, when she figures out something's wrong with her daughter, she goes to see a priest and says, "Can you help me? I think my daughter is possessed." And the priest is saying, "Well, is it depression?" She's like, "No, I know, depression. And I also know fucking demons, you know, so please, please come." And then there's a nice switch where it's the other daughter that's possessed, and she's seeing her daughter be a moody teenager, she thinks she's possessed, but it turns out to be the other daughter, who's much more angelic. She's the good one, she's always doing homework, she's always coming home on time, and then suddenly, she's possessed. And when she she's not getting any help from the Church for a while, so they do have to go down the route of talking to the doctors and see if this is a mental illness problem. So they take it to various doctors and she's in a psych ward, and she's being wheeled around on wheelchairs and strapped to beds while she's thrashing around and doing all that kind of stuff. And it intercuts all the time by placing was in this demonic dreamscape to see what Casey Rance is going through. And eventually it gets to the point where Angela, or grown up Regan MacNeil, she decides, I want no more to do with this medicalization of trying to fix my daughter. And essentially,

she sort of kidnaps her own daughter out of the hospital, they sneak her out, because she starts to talk a little bit about her own experiences of being prodded and poked by the doctors back in 1973, and she wants to get a daughter out of that. She takes it upon herself to say, we need to do this through the church, through the police, through an exorcism. And yeah, she pulls a daughter out of that particular horrific situation, to just go and deal with the demons and the spirits in there, and the priests and the crucifixes and, and all the stuff that we love.

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

Much less horrific, obviously. How very interesting, thank you, Stella. We have one more question for Simon from Mario: Could you talk about the different versions of the first film, two that were released in 1999 and 2000, as the version the author Blatty prefers?

Simon Brown

Yes, I spotted that one. So that was nice to actually get a chance to think about and prepare an answer. Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? Because there's lots of stuff in the version you've never seen. There's more stuff with the doctors, there's the spider walk, etc, etc. But I think rewatching the documentaries you know, the scene that Blatty talks about as being the scene that made him and Friedkin fall out is that quiet moment of reflection between Karras and Merrin on the stairs, where Karras asks, "Why this girl?" And Merrin sort of says, "I think it's because it's there to make us despair." And that question from Mario really made me think about that. I think this notion of despair is really interesting, and the idea of being made to despair and resisting the notion of despair, is a thread that then feeds very much through the sequels. And I'm thinking particularly about *Dominion*, which I kind of made fun of, and it's not entertaining, but it's very interesting. And it's a film about the idea of overcoming despair, the idea of learning that, no, we don't have to just lay back and take it, we can fight back, and there is a way of fighting and there is a way of winning. Even if you can't win, the fight becomes everything. And there's something about that crucial scene in the original film that renegotiates some of your feeling about what comes before and what comes after. And I think that's a very, very important

thread that then lends its way through. It's there in *The Heretic*, because that is a film about the absence of despair in a way. Ironically, for a film that's quite despairing to watch. It's kind of hopeful, I mean, at the end, Richard Burton's character and Linda Blair's character go off together, at least in the original version. And the ending is fundamentally hopeful. So yeah, I think that reinserted scene, that quiet dialogue moment is far more important than all of the other stuff that gets reinserted, and is the crucial part of this sort of negotiation of the legacy across this spectrum of theology to horror. Hopefully, that's a good answer the question.

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

Very interesting. Thank you, Simon. I do we do have a little, a little bit a little bit more time. Just I think we can squeeze in one more question. And I wonder if I could ask Mike about something you said at the beginning, the fact that there was this spectacular and very lengthy sound score recorded for the film, and then, you know, it was believed to be to overpowering and then put to one side. And I was surprised to hear that, because so many other films, within and outside of the horror genre from that era, from especially the early 70s and then later a decade later in the early 80s, made the virtue of very overbearing and overpowering sound scores, that's what they became known for. So what was what was the thing, like the that search for realism and making it feel very emotional, that, you know, sometimes music creates a little bit of distance. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about that about what it was that made them walk away from a fully composed and recorded sound score?

Michael Lee

So what I know mostly comes to me, just for those of you want to read it for yourself, from George Parks essay, in the journal *Film Score*. And if you want to read a really nice, I think, terrific, interpretive analysis that really focuses on the use of the song *Rambling Man* in the film, I recommend the work of Claire Sisco King, and her essay "Ramblin' Men and Piano Men." Both of these sources tell me that Friedkin's objection to the, well, Hermann he just objected to interpersonally and no music was composed, but the Lalo Schiffrin, kept saying to Schiffrin, "less, less, less! I want chamber music. I want it to coexist with the

sound effects and the dialogue. And I don't want to bury them.” And so Shifffrin just went and turned down a dial for the master sound, reducing the sound and said, “There, now it's chamber music,” but Friedkin said “No, all these brasses, all this percussion, people are going to want to hear it. And it just it's just noise. It's not adding anything that the story.” Eventually Friedkin claimed that his rejection of music was built on realism, his desire to create a realistic movie. I personally want to say, when you have a dream sequence and the main character is a movie star and a Catholic priest of faith that doesn't feel like you know, *The Bicycle Thieves* to me. But in any event, it is at least a more realistic film. And so as a result, he just he just did not want music interpreting the action. He wanted the cold light of day and the audience interpreting the action. Then, you know, John Carpenter's *Halloween*, that score which Carpenter of course created himself has the same prog rock asymmetric rhythms now only on the piano. I haven't done any numerological analysis, I don't have anything to add there. But I will say that, that there of course, it's much louder, much brighter, and that's a film that's deeply manipulative in terms of creating jump scares and these sorts of things, which *The Exorcist* is largely not. The main jump scare is in the attic, and it's just poor old Carl, and there's nothing really to it. And so, as a result, I feel like *Halloween* is influenced musically, but it heaps music on because in the end, it's a film less invested in realism than *The Exorcist*. I love both, don't get me wrong. I'm just saying that that's why I think the music had to be jettisoned over the course of Friedkin's evolving thinking about reality and the film. Did I answer your question?

2:41:23 (Approx. 52 minutes in)

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

You absolutely did, thank you.

Simon Brown

Can I just jump in for a second? Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt but I just found this out today, so this was fascinating to me. I did not realize that Peter Gabriel left Genesis during The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway tour, partly because he was invited to Hollywood by William Friedkin, and this is the quote from Gabriel, “to help freaking develop a new Hollywood.”

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

That's fascinating! I feel that there's a paper in there somewhere, Simon. Sounds like interesting information and to be elaborated upon. All right, do we have any other questions for our speakers? If we don't I think we have about a five-minute break now. And then we will come back for the closing remarks with Kristopher.

Kristopher Woofter

Yeah, I think I can just do them now. Thank you everybody for coming today, it's a pleasure to be able to do this sort of work and reach out to so many people in all the different time zones and I'd just like to close by thanking our wonderful speakers. It was super fascinating hearing you talk and hearing this film being featured on its 50th birthday. And I'd like to also thank the the co-organizers, Stacy, Lorna, Mark and Gary, as well as Alanna Thain and Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare for being also part of this sponsorship here with the CORÉRISC Montreal Monstrum Society Moving Image Research Lab, and the FRQSC who gave us our funding. And once again, I'll just mention this symposium will be published in *Monstrum* in June online, the videos and with a framing introduction and transcripts for increased accessibility. I am putting a link there to the journal for future reference. Also, you can sign up for updates on future events on the Eventbrite page or on the Monstrum Society website, which is also where the journal is. We're creating a mailing list so if you want updates on future events or the journal or Montreal Monstrum Society lectures, there are two coming up one in April and one in May, the one in April is by Marcus Prasad, who was our wonderful tech person today. And also I just wanted to mention, last thing, if you haven't already, check out Steve Choe's book on Friedkin [*The Films of William Friedkin*]; it's with the ReFocus series [Edinburgh University Press]. I'm gonna put a link to that in here too. It's coming out in in a very affordable paperback sometime this year, so please check that out as well, it's a great book. And I think that's it for us! Thank you so much, everyone.

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