Framing the Void: Trauma, Historical Erasure and the Excesses of Horror

By

Katherine Elizabeth Guerra

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Abstract

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The first chapter of this dissertation focuses on how film can picture the unrepresentable, the marginalized, or historically neglected of cultural and collective traumatic rupture, using the films *Inglourious Basterds* (2009 Tarantino), *El Espinazo del Diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone* 2001 Del Toro), and *El Laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth,* 2006 Del Toro) as case studies. I analyze how both *Laberinto* and *Basterds* represent violent historical events through fantastical narratives and modes of visual excess. Both spectacularize absences that structure any effort to represent the traumatic event (the unspeakable or that which remains unspoken) to make visible the elisions (official and institutional) and gaps that punctuate the historical record. I show how these films mobilize historical inaccuracies and the fantastic in service of articulating reimagined and un(der)represented experience.

Chapter two sustains my focus on absences by analyzing recent developments in the horror film regarding the increasingly ephemeral (and increasingly irrelevant) "monster." In the 2010s, the monster has been emptied of meaning; the genre's lethal slasher/creature instead stands as a placeholder *around which* meaning is made. I contend that as terror, trauma, travel, time, and the nation-state have become more dispersive and diffuse concepts, the monster itself has become increasingly arbitrary. In films such as *It Follows* and *The Cabin in the Woods,* the monster is too much and not enough. They are "ephemeral monsters" that function as generic markers on a path that leads to the unmarked site of failed collective memory and language.

Where the first half of my dissertation constructs a broader theory of picturing the unspeakable and producing memory, the second half of my dissertation focuses on narrower case studies which demonstrate how horror films of the twenty-first century may still engage with preexisting classical archetypes and tropes while leveraging the specularity of the monster and bodily violence to create and mark the voids around which meaning must be made. Chapter three analyzes the relatively new figure of the resistant (millennial) mother. I contend that in contemporary or "millennial" horror films, anxiety and disgust arise not from horror of the consuming, overly possessive mother that populated twentieth-century horror films, but from the elusive and reluctant "resistant" mother who refuses to mother and is inappropriately "complete" apart from her child. Here, the mother's ephemerality transforms her into a dispersive figure of horror.

I then turn to New Black Horror films such as *Get Out* and *Candyman* (2021), that have begun to test the limitations of the form. That is, New Black Horror films are increasingly

excessive, self-referential, and violent in ways that destabilize and undermine the institutions they represent onscreen. Grounding my analyses in Afropessimism, I argue that formal excess, circumscribed omniscience, and increasing bodily violence in New Black horror create a staging ground for the production of Black subjectivity through the destruction of the institutions that ordinarily impose and shore up a system of looks organized around White supremacy.

"History is ultimately, an inventory of ghosts."
Guillermo del Toro[1]

Introduction

This dissertation elucidates the ways in which horror films of the twenty-first century have developed a visual language of spectacular absence, of un-reality, to represent an unspeakable collective experience of trauma which simultaneously does and does not exist to give expression to a moment that haunts. It provides a study of contemporary horror films that activate well-known genre conventions to serve as the "metaphor" or rather synecdoche for displaced anxieties arising from violent historical rupture and various forms of racialized and gendered oppression. In a sense, these films produce and place their spectacular absences *in service of* the historical events they represent and point to unimaginable atrocities by engaging in modes of visuality that are oblique or indirect. These films practice a kind of overrepresentation as they substitute fantasy and excessive violence for accuracy, forcibly drawing the eye toward the historical truths they refuse to represent directly. The work of imagination necessary for the invocation of the "missed" historical truth they gesture to, then, is drawn out of the viewer. This dissertation begins with foundational analyses of three contemporary films (two horror and one action) from the 2000s which engage in similar projects of radical historical play. The films *Inglourious Basterds* (2009 Tarantino), *El Espinazo del Diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*, 2001 Del Toro), and *El Laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006 Del Toro) reconstitute the moments of atrocity (the Holocaust and the Spanish Civil War) which inspired them, with little to no regard for historical accuracy. This chapter marries theories of trauma and globalization to close analyses of these prescient films to unearth the ways in which their respective methods of historical play trouble the nature of the respectful and authentic representation of "untouchable" historical traumas. Throughout, I will account for the globalizing processes which have collapsed distances and time to allow for the broader circulation of traumatic events and mobilizes the language of trauma theory to define the relationship between the absences (from official historical records, from living memory) that often characterize collective traumas and imaginaries and the excessive signifiers that these films use to frame and display, to make spectacularly visible, such absences.

Following the release of Stephen Spielberg's critically-acclaimed film, *Schindler's List* (1993), filmmaker Claude Lanzmann decried the narrative film's attempts to essentially aestheticize the Holocaust and smooth the historical crisis it presents.[2] Lanzmann compared the film unfavorably with his own epic, *Shoah* (1985). Lanzmann wrote, "The Holocaust is unique in that it builds a circle around you, with a circle of fire, that you cannot cross, because a certain absolute form of horror is not transferable. Pretending to do so is to be guilty of the most serious violation. Fiction is a violation, I am deeply convinced that there is a prohibition on representation."[3] Lanzmann regarded Spielberg's, film, and indeed, most attempts to represent the experience of the Holocaust through "Hollywood" narrative film, as a kind of vulgarity, a lie filling the void that demarcates the missing truth. Lanzmann' use of the ring of fire image is an

[1] "100 Scariest Movie Moments," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JILpgm6Kkag&t=4293s&ab_channel=StudioLost%26Found.

[2] Hansen, Miriam Bratu, "Schindler's List Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry,* 301.

[3] Traverso, "Claude Lanzmann: A Critical Appraisal," *Jacobin,* https://jacobin.com/2018/07/claude-lanzmann-shoah-holocaust-antisemitism/.

evocative one. Lanzmann wrote repeatedly that he sought to invent a new form of representation to communicate the Holocaust without the salve of a hopeful narrative, a redemptive arc, acting, or literal reenactments. His film was purposely grueling and withholding, directing the viewer to confront the dearth of data, stories, and lives at the center of one of the most studied moments in modern history. For Lanzmann, the truth of the Holocaust was sacred and untouchable and absolutely removed from any possibility for direct representation. He warned of the inherent pleasure of the narrative structure and the story of "the good German," Oskar Schindler, but also in the *performance* of the Holocaust. Lanzmann's own withholding in *Shoah,* presents first-hand accounts of the Holocaust, without *representing* the events themselves, even through archival footage. In a sense, his nine-hour long mediation is ascetic compared to leaner films such as Alain Renais' *Night and Fog,* which pore over and archive the tactile "leavings" of the Holocaust to gesture at its scale.

Surprisingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly) according to film critic Uri Klein, the filmmaker "enjoyed" Quentin Tarantino's radically excessive and joyfully historically unfaithful film *Inglourious Basterds,* "very much."[4] Despite his disavowal of Spielberg's opus, Lanzmann embraced Tarantino's. To be sure, Tarantino's film is not a direct analogue to Spielberg's *Schindler.* While *Basterds* is about the historical moment of World War II and the Holocaust (much more indirectly), as well as the shadow the Holocaust casts over every interaction in the film, it willfully refuses to turn to the acts of killing, the systematic murder in the camps and ghettos under the Third Reich. In Tarantino's film, the genocidal industry of the Holocaust is always somewhere else, a ghost haunting the characters' actions and framing their motivations. While Tarantino's film is often referred to as a Holocaust film[5] it very obviously and purposefully avoids even mentioning the camps and certainly never attempts to recreate them. Like Lanzmann, who rejected what he saw as a softening, and redemptive term "Holocaust," *Basterds* refuses to attach either imagery or language to the sublimated and yet inescapable specter of industrialized mass murder hiding beyond the edges of the frame. Though *Basterds* is one of the most revisionist, inaccurate, irreverent, and excessive treatments of a true and contentious moment of traumatic collective rupture produced in the Hollywood narrative style, it too evokes a greater unrepresentable truth through withholding. Tarantino's outrageous work of spectacle shares a kind of kinship with Lanzmann's evocative and anti-representational treatment of an unrepresentable story. Drawing on a legacy of documentary and photography, *Basterds* directs the viewer to gaze at a void that stands as an indirect entry point through which the viewer might access the unrepresentable or "missed" historical event or rupture. In turn, I show how Del Toro expresses atrocity through a visual language of impossibility, a magical realist visual and cultural language that reconstitutes the world of the narrative and permits the impossible to coexist directly adjacent to and in conversation with devastating realism. Tarantino's hyper-excessive tone and visuals, and Del Toro's dreamy elision, foreshadow the new avenues of traumatic representation that will become more prevalent in the meta-generic horror films of the 2010s. This chapter builds on earlier trauma and genre theories to construct the framework with which to analyze the visual language and networks that contemporary

[4] Klein, "How Claude Lanzmann Felt About Tarantino's 'Inglourious Basterds.'" *Haaretz*, https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/holocaust-remembrance-day/2018-07-17/ty-article-magazine/premium/how-claude-lanzmann-felt-about-inglourious-basterds/0000017f-dfab-d856-a37f-ffebdc750000.

[5] Stevens, "The Good, the Bad, and the Nazis: Quentin Tarantino's Inglourious Basterds," *Slate*, https://www.slate.com/culture/2009/08/quentin-tarantino-s-inglourious-basterds.html.

narrative films, particularly horror films, have developed to mediate the absences of historical trauma *through* excess.

Scholars have theorized the experience of historical trauma and its aftermath. For example, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* Cathy Caruth's study of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* builds on psychoanalytic theories to study the narrative burden of *survival.* She writes,

> If fright is the term by which Freud defines the traumatic effect of not having been prepared in time, then the trauma of the nightmare does not simply consist in the experience within the dream, but in the experience of waking from it. It is the experience of waking into consciousness that, peculiarly, is identified with the reliving of the trauma. And as such it is not only the dream that surprises consciousness but, indeed, the very waking itself that constitutes the surprise: the fact not only of the dream but of having passed beyond it. What is enigmatically suggested…is that the trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in having survived…without knowing it...If history is to be understood as the history of a trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own.[6]

Lanzmann's critique of Spielberg's work gestures to the ancient ethical constraints and limitations placed on visual expression of traumatic events, but Caruth's articulation of the irresistible nature of the compulsive *return* of the survivor, points to their mandate to witness and re-enliven the traumatic event. This dialectical tension between expressive recognition and responsible representation has long codified traumatic absences as unrepresentable and yet distracting in their ephemerality and ambiguity. Caruth's invocation of a broader "history of trauma" peppered with historical ruptures throughout, necessitates an indirect visual language through which to collectively directly address and "assume one's survival."

Throughout this dissertation, I show how forms of repression, as well as official and unofficial censorship, often shape the very responsibility of the traumatic event. In chapter 2, I take up and expand upon Laura Frost's argument that when images of the bodies of victims (particularly those of falling or fallen victims) were blacklisted from news coverage of the September 11th attacks, the United States was disassociated from its own trauma. According to Frost, without the benefit of fully confronting these news images of this catastrophic event the nation was left to turn to narrative discourses to aid in the reintegration of collective national trauma. Frost argues that the disaster imagery in films like *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) sufficiently mediated and decontextualized 9/11 in a manner that both invites the viewer to confront their own trauma and to recontextualize it within the diegesis. Frost's study is arresting, particularly in her extended discussion of the sudden withdrawal and permanent loss of news footage of the bodies of victims. Still, she stops just short of connecting the generic conventions of horror itself to a broader system of indirect address to the trauma of catastrophe experienced on a national and/or/ global scale. This dissertation further expands the horror film's possibilities for representing such "missing" and unrepresentable moments of historical trauma not simply through the transposed and disassociated iconography of disasters in cross-genre films, but through a range of strategies used in horror films of the 2010s for withholding and for eliding and by generating radical excess. This dissertation in other words, takes up Lanzmann's challenge and analyzes the ways in which the horror films of the 2010s register the ruptures caused by gender, racial, and historical trauma as formal aporias that inscribe absence and draw the eye toward that which is missing from the historical record and from memory itself.

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[6] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 64.

After establishing the beginnings of these specific modes of historical representation and revisionism, this dissertation turns exclusively to horror films of the 2010s, both domestic and international. If, as this dissertation contends, only a mode of address that is equal parts indirect and irreverent in its excesses can give the viewer greater access to the sacred and unspeakable traumatic event, then it must also be the case that a "disreputable" genre inherently defined by its generic and visual excesses would offer the most direct point of entry into historical events which must not be reconstructed (as Lanzmann feared), but instead re-invented. In his incisive and detailed discussion of the concentration camp photography by Dirk Reinartz and Mikael Levin, Ulrich Baer activates the language of art history and study to analyze the stylistic photography conventions both artists use to photograph absence as a way to "picture trauma." Baer writes that the concentration camp photos from both artists, "are unlike most other postwar images of Holocaust sites. They contain no evidence of the sites' historical uses, and they rely explicitly on the aesthetic traditions of landscape art and, as I will explain, on the auratic 'experience of place' to commemorate the destruction of experience and memory."[7] Baer contends that each artist uses the apolitical conventions of landscape photography to turn a sterile void into an image of un-picture-able and unrepresentable rupture. Such photographs, he continues, "show us that there is something in a catastrophe as vast as the Holocaust that remains unassimilable to historicist or contextual readings."[8]

Like Lanzmann, Baer makes a persuasive case for the use of visual withholding to stand for historical atrocity and trauma. Chapter two engages with and builds upon builds upon Baer's argument about the unassimilability of the traumatic event to historicism and contends that it is the unfeeling *processes* of genre that propel the horror narrative forward, that create the space necessary to admit the unassimilable traumatic event into the firmament. Focusing in *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014) and *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2011), this chapter takes up the contemporary slasher film which is newly and endlessly self-aware and savvy. In the 2010s, the slasher film—a subgenre that scholars have endlessly (and quite helpfully) analyzed in terms of its local specificity and its monster's ability to symbolize and signify historical rupture and change has been gutted and emptied of the connotative meaning of its iconic killers. That is, I show that the genre has been given over to a ruthlessly efficient functional process of generic convention in which the "monster" has been made increasingly irrelevant to the socio-cultural context of its production and, therefore, generalizable. In other words, I contend that the creature has been emptied of meaning and instead stands as a placeholder around which meaning is made, as the arresting spectacle drawing the eye toward its hollowed-out figure. In an era of rapid globalization, as terror, trauma, travel, time, and the nation-state have become more elastic and diffuse concepts, the monster itself has become increasingly ephemeral and arbitrary and functions as a spectacular placeholder that demarcates the place where meaning is, "to be determined," such that it can stand in for any generalized trauma.

Chapter three addresses catastrophe maternity—specifically, the trauma of unwanted motherhood and the unassimilability of the women who refuses to mother. I revisit core theories from classical feminist film criticism to codify an emergent visual language of divergent and resistant (millennial) mothers/mothering. For theorists like Barbara Creed, Linda Williams, and Susan Lurie, feminine monstrosity capitalized on the threatened subjectivity of the child and the insufficiently differentiated mother. Horror films have historically and often homogenously tended toward suspicion of both female independence and of "over-mothering." Theorists like

[7] Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma,* 66.
[8] Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma,* 66-67.

Carol Clover and Creed have convincingly analyzed the horror genre's preoccupation with the mother's mediation of her child's relation to the symbolic, and the myriad ways in which her interference may impede trouble their individuation. In contemporary or "millennial" horror films however, anxiety and disgust arise not from horror of the consuming mother of the past, but from the elusive and reluctant "resistant" mother of the present, one who is ambivalent towards maternity, and therefore inappropriately and horrifyingly "complete" apart from her child. In *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) and *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018) I argue, the mother's rejection of her nurturing duties and her anti-performativity, both inappropriately liberates her and alienates her from her child. Her absence, not her body, terrifies. True terror lurks not in the figure of the mother who is possessive, controlling, and dominating, but in the mother who resists motherhood, whose indifference inspires horror.

Chapter four engages in close analyses of New Black horror through the films *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) and *Candyman* (Nia DaCosta, 2021), films that address the afterlives and legacies of slavery and Jim Crow and the traumas of anti-black racism that have often been voided from the official historical record. This chapter builds on Afropessimist interpretations of American and colonial visual and cultural practices and structures, which contend that the afterlife of U.S. colonial exploitation and violence has made Black subjectivity an impossibility within the confines of these systems as they currently exist. Afropessimist scholar Frank Wilderson writes that even films that attempt to tell Black "slave stories," cannot transcend White supremacist systems and forces which produce them because such films leverage Black subjectivity in order to reinscribe White supremacy through visual practices that restage anti-Black narratives and formal techniques. My final chapter builds on these theories to posit that bodily violence in the Black horror film creates an anarchic space that destabilizes anti-Black institutions and visual cultures and permits horror to act as a staging ground for the production of Black subjectivity.

While this dissertation analyzes fairly varied horror films, subgenres, and tropes, the guiding principle throughout this project has been the empowerment of the underrepresented. Each historical aporia made visible, each freed monstrous body, each retreating mother has been unpacked, analyzed, and made visible in order to read power and agency into absence and invisibility. My abiding project is the empowerment of marginalized group and underrepresented bodies and lives. If then, diversity in onscreen representations have largely stagnated if not worsened over time, perhaps reframing and recalibrating how we might consider representation and expression *through* withholding and absence might offer new possibilities for activist viewing and cultural production. My hope is that this dissertation will reveal how contemporary horror films have developed a visual language with which to represent the unspeakable that *also* offers new visual practices through which we may reconstitute our agency and orientation to the firmament.

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Chapter 1: Historical Production Through Inauthenticity and Excess

> …these photographs also place us in relation to [the Holocaust]. They also ask: How do we remember the Holocaust without inevitably forgetting that this event challenged both the individual and the collective capacity for memory and questioned the notion of survival in ways we are still struggling to comprehend? Where is the proper position from which to face this stark truth, and how is this notion of a position related to the experience of place?[9]

In the quote above, Ulrich Baer discusses photographs documenting the holocaust in collections by Mikael Levin and Dirk Reinartz, who each worked with images of concentration camps that had been destroyed beyond recognition and erased—that no longer have a physical presence or information that might identify the origins of the images and their content. These photos depict empty fields, open vistas, and trees and overgrowth that create barriers and frames around open land. Other than "accompanying texts that announce, 'These are Holocaust sites,'"[10] the locations Levin and Reinartz depict are nondescript spaces, divorced from their original purposes, meanings, and historical import, spaces where retreating Nazi forces were able to destroy the physical markers that confirmed the existence, breadth, and institutionalization of their genocidal project. Baer writes that these photographs invoke the "rules" of landscape photography and use these codes of formalism to direct the viewer's eye to the vacant space at the heart of each image. Most importantly, Baer teases out a theory of forms of landscape photography capable of representing historical trauma through absence, framed and delineated through absences that are framed through the "rules" of photography. He describes how Reinartz's and Levin's work invoke lines, colors, and curves to direct the eye, not for aesthetic reasons but instead to stay the viewer's gaze at the empty heart of the frame. According to Baer, landscape photography offers new methods for imbuing absence with meaning and representing ethically troubled traumatic memory. Baer analyzes how each artist reconstructs "place" through vacancy. Both artists confront a moment of traumatic absence and failures of memory not through a documentarian completionism, but by crystallizing history in flux and the shifting and incompleteness of traumatic absence through a plasticized flash of immutable history locked *in process.* That is, the unspeakable historical moment is frozen at the point of becoming. As it can only be understood and reckoned with through its own absence, through the aporia it cannot displace, the traumatic historical moment is always to be understood stuck mid-transition, neither a known and complete historical event nor a totally lost event with no record or witness. The traumatic historical moment is trapped as a rupture, a vibration along the timeline of the archive of History, a tear that is spectacular in its interruption and unknowable through its failure to represent. The absence at the heart of the traumatic historical absence, arrests the event in a halfway state, as an event that can neither "complete" as a knowable moment to be integrated into the historical record, nor disappear as a totally unknown period. The traumatic historical absence then, is an unresolvable cultural neurosis that demands *chronic* cultural and collective reckoning.

At the dawn of the new millennium, a series of films were released that sought to represent missed historical moments through a new visual language of "the unspeakable" capable of addressing traumatic blankness, historical absence and erasure, and institutional

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[9] Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma,* 67-68.

[10] Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma,* 66.

marginalization, while avoiding the creative and productive limitations imposed by the ethical concerns raised through the pursuit of accurate representation. Films like *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009)*, El Laberinto del Fauno* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006), and *El Espinazo del Diablo* (Del Toro, 2001) transcend linguistic barriers and the difficulties of representing traumatic moments accurately by constructing new modes of representation through historical revision and elaboration. These films engage in defiant inauthenticity through radically violent and stylized excess; such excesses include absences that are overly-embodied and materialized through (sometimes fantastical) presences that challenge the ethical and practical limitations of "picturing" or narrating the collective traumatic historical rupture. In place of the framed absences depicted in the photographic landscapes Baer studies, these films "fill" the narrative and *mise-en-scène* to an extreme degree and supply a truth that is simultaneously inauthentic and excessively generative. They ignore the "known" record of historical moments of trauma, choosing instead to consider the margins of memory, the "rumors" and half-remembered experiences that can coalesce to construct a picture of the unrepresentable and unknowable. They address lost and incomplete historical memory via aesthetic devices and tonal shifts that speak to the omissions that define institutional and individual traumatic memory. It is these films' meta-editorial production of the historical past which stands alone in their ability to gesture to the absences they address and thematize. The hyper and willful un-reality of the historical play performed in *Basterds* and the fantastical elision activated in *Laberinto* and *Espinazo,* authentically recall the silence surrounding the excised, forgotten, and repressed historical moments they address through a potent "practice of historical production" through stylized rituals of address, gratification and revenge, as well as their construction of "useful" silences or structuring absences following moments of cathartic spectacle.

(Mis)remembering the Holocaust

In the opening scene of the World War II-set film *Inglorious Basterds,* the brutally efficient "Jew Hunter," Hans Landa, interrogates a French dairy farmer to discover where the farmer has hidden a neighboring Jewish family fleeing from Nazi forces. When the farmer admits to only knowing "rumors," Landa excitedly exclaims, "I love rumors! Facts can be so misleading where rumors true or false are often revealing." It is precisely this intersection between truth and "rumors" that is the crux of the film's project and at the heart of this chapter. The critical reception of the film is telling in this respect. Many of the initial reviews of *Inglorious Basterds* expressed shock at the film's (and filmmaker's) "use" of true historical events. After the film's Cannes release, *The New Yorker's* David Denby wrote, "in 'Basterds,' Tarantino is mucking about with a tragic moment of history. Chaplin and Lubitsch played with Nazis, too, but they worked as farceurs, using comedy to warn of catastrophe; they didn't carve up Nazis using horror-film flourishes."[11] Dave Calhoun of *Time Out* wrote that *Basterds* was, "an immature work that doesn't know whether it's a pastiche, a spoof, a counterfactual drama, a revenge tragedy or a character comedy. How can we, within a space of minutes, feel adult sympathy for a hunted Jewish family and then childish glee when a Nazi's skull is crushed with a baseball bat?"[12] Even in his mixed to positive review, *The Guardian*'s David Cox called the film

[11] Denby, "Amercans in Paris: *Inglourious Basterds* and *Julie & Julia*," *The New Yorker,* http://www.newyorker/magazine/2009/08/24/americans-in-paris.

[12] Calhoun, "*Inglourious Basterds," Time out Magazine,* https://www.timeout.com/movies/inglourious-basterds-1.

"kosher revenge porn," which strikes at least as derisive as it does complimentary.[13] Both Denby and Calhoun gesture to a concern that seemed pervasive among reviewers who had the most extreme negative responses to the film upon its release: how much can a mainstream narrative film "play" with true historical events and is it always necessary and desirable that similar films practice "maturity?" Dave Calhoun gestures to the limits that he believes should circumscribe the possibility for fictionalized representations of true historical events: "perhaps the biggest faux pas is introducing real historical characters. Tarantino's inventions are big enough."[14] David Denby too, pointed to a discomfiting excess characterizing *Basterds*, arguing that, "The movie's outrageous panache gave the audience license to enjoy the violence as lawless entertainment…but [the film is] too silly to be enjoyed, even as a joke."[15] The most critical voices surrounding the film's premiere frequently implied that *Basterds* committed all manner of crimes of excess acceptable in genre films, but absolutely intolerable in a film depicting a "tragic moment in history."

Inglourious Basterds is, in many ways, an impertinent film with seemingly no reverence before a traumatic and murky historical moment. Though it does not address the Holocaust directly, that unspeakable event looms large over the film, lingering just offscreen as the unifying element across the disparate storylines and characters the narrative weaves together. The Holocaust motivates Shosanna's storyline quite directly, as well as those of the members of the Nazi high command, and especially the Basterds who murder Nazis not for national pride and patriotic glory but as direct retaliation for the atrocities committed by the Third Reich during the Holocaust. Still, as the critics quoted above note, the film confronts a troubled and sensitive historical moment with a radical and irreverent tone that breaks with previous customs of representation across major studio productions about the Holocaust (*Schindler's List, Sophie's Choice, The Pianist,* etc.,). As Emre Koyuncu writes,

> …*Inglourious Basterds* succeed in going beyond the representational standards in the depiction of Nazi Germany and in discrediting…conventions…by redefining the problematic of memory and responsibility…by opening up the concept of responsibility to a new temporality, instead of restricting it to a dialogue with the past. *Inglourious Basterds* is a parody of Americanised and linear narrative structure, prevalent in historical films produced in Hollywood. [16]

Koyuncu continues that *Basterds* "freed the artistic creation from the burden of documentary proof" and that the film was able to create a "cinematic regime of non-representation…a counter-historical narrative, constantly alternating between what happened, what did not happen, and what has not yet happened."[17] Koyuncu argues that *Inglorious Basterds* flies in the face of convention and "responsibility" in the way it represents an extremely sensitive moment of historical trauma, but also that that irreverence and ahistorical temporal play challenges the nationalistic and "linear" structure of history itself. For Koyuncu, the film's revisionist style creates temporal folds and wrinkles that restructure, expand, compress, and re-order time into a "new temporality," an exploded three-dimensional timeline of human history which is capricious

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[13] Cox, "*Inglourious Basterds* is Cinema's Revenge on Life," *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/aug/20/inglourious-basterds-tarantino-change-history.

[14] Calhoun, "*Inglourious Basterds,*" *Time out Magazine,* https://www.timeout.com/movies/inglourious-basterds-1.

[15] Denby, "Amercans in Paris: *Inglourious Basterds* and *Julie & Julia*," *The New Yorker,* http://www.newyorker/magazine/2009/08/24/americans-in-paris.

[16] Koyuncu, "To have done with representation: Resnais and Tarantino on the Holocaust," *Third Text,* 255.

[17] Koyuncu, "To have done with representation: Resnais and Tarantino on the Holocaust," *Third Text,* 255.

and disordered. While the film certainly uses violence, excess, and productive/purposeful inaccuracy to destabilize History as a known and linear chronology, the film offers radical visuals, bodily excess, and an anti-historical play not simply to imply instabilities in the chronological structure of human history but even more importantly, to create purposefully un-credible and outrageous images and tone as *substitutes* that *cannot* be smoothly integrated into a historical narrative. The film's metatextuality and self-reflexivity jostle the viewer and make the film's ruptures and stylistic departures (realism vs instances of narration or title cards for example) hyper-visual and excessive and impossible to integrate into a "standard" representation of this traumatic historical moment. These spectacular images and dissonant rhythms and tones certainly crystallize unsettled historical moments of trauma and elaborate the nature of history itself not only as unsettled and shifting, but also crucially work through hyper visual excess to juxtapose the excess of absence structuring a historical record of events that occurred and can only be grasped in absentia. Caroline Guthrie acknowledges that *Basterds* seeks to destabilize our conception of History, but she reads the film as working through affective appeals:

> …in *Inglourious Basterds*, Tarantino seems to be seeking a visceral response, one which raises questions about the past via affective engagement, rather than a conveyance of historical fact. This is a potentially useful means of challenging the historical imaginary; by pushing the viewer toward a different kind of affective engagement with the past, Tarantino may trigger a re-examination of what has previously been uncritically accepted.[18]

Like many contemporary critics of the film, Guthrie sees it as a kind of allegorical, affective exercise. Critics like Guthrie often cite the wish-fulfillment of the film and the wild fantasy of instant and ahistorical violence against real-life figures who did not pay for their crimes as a kind of emotional salve or process, as if this revision can patch-up, soothe, or satisfy a lingering historical/emotional wound. The affective potency of the film cannot and should not be dismissed, but its productive potential is far more interesting when considered in the context of trauma theory. That is, the film not only appeals to a certain kind of aestheticized, violent revenge fantasy, but also offers these embodied reconciliations to satisfy specific troubled and "missed" historical moments, events which are mostly encountered through their absence than through the fullness of a complete or known historical record.

Tragedy in and of itself is a permissible, even necessary, element of the representation of the human experience, but historically, the tragic or catastrophic moment of untouchable collective trauma becomes sanctified and ossified in terms of the aesthetic choices with which it may be treated. When such events are treated as sacrosanct, the practice of representing the historical past becomes ever more fixed and divorced from the nonlinear, non-narratable experience of individual and collective historical trauma it recollects. Many critical voices decried the "tone" of *Basterds* but none could define the ambiguous golden mean of accuracy and seriousness such material "required"—that is, how one could represent the traumatic historical event in a manner that sufficiently addresses collective emotional and ethical inheritance. The mandate to strive for an impossible and amorphous faithfulness of representation that is just "enough" (but not too much) in terms of tone, style, and aesthetics, is the inverse of the blurry form of the traumatic historical moment, which is defined in large part by its incompleteness and absence.

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[18] Guthrie, "Narratives of Rupture: Tarantino's Counterfactual histories and the American Historical Imaginary," *Rethinking History,* 353.

Basterds was criticized for being too long, too bloody, too irreverent, too excessive, and as having too many generic identities without ever committing to one. Simply put, the film was considered to be "too much" and it is this "too much-ness," this excess, I would argue, which allows the film to implicate the viewer in the historical moment it revives. When films confronting the insufficient record of historical trauma through narrative, it is essential that the viewer be forced to consider their own relationship to the overwhelming nothingness, the deafening silence of the troubled and painful historical memory of trauma one would rather not confront. Only an excessive display of overwhelming style, color, and noise, I argue, can fill the frame with sufficient sensation that is required to overtly mark omissions in the historical narrative known only through the very *absence* of such excess, such representational cacophony. That is, waves of subsuming stimuli and the provocation of multiple and even conflicting affects leave official silence and institutionalized absences in their wake, leaving the viewer adrift with a facsimile of the emptiness that stands in the place of the collective memory of the period and its aftermath.

In the wake of the systematic oppression, conscription, and eradication of memory in the traumatic historical moment (here, the Holocaust,) intentionally fictionalized representations of ostensibly known historical moments can function to gesture toward that which has been lost or erased from institutional and collective memory, toward that which cannot be located in the archive, in official government reports, in the scholarly historical record. The traumatic historical moment cannot be sufficiently and completely captured through any one conventional aesthetic practice in film. However, in the films discussed in this chapter, stylized, visual excesses are spectacle enough to point, in the aesthetic mode of an arresting beacon, to the insufficiency of traditional methods of historical representation by crystallizing in images and sound the elusive and traumatic experience at the heart of the "missed" historical moment or rupture. Where Freudian psychoanalytic theory conceives of the traumatic incident as a confronting blankness, *Basterds* film forges radical and personal links together to fill the gaps structuring institutional and national memory. For example, scholar of trauma theory Cathy Caruth writes, "…trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience."[19] *Basterds* uses violent excess and spectacle to represent the chaotic and unbounded afterlife of trauma, its legacy and indefinable haunting, and the ongoing "crisis of survival," of *witnessing* and *testimony,* which demands a witness.

As Baer describes in his analysis of Levin's and Reinartz's concentration camp photographs, part of the horror produced during the post-war period, was not simply the crimes against humanity and violations that had been committed by the Third Reich, but the Nazis' intermittently successful concealment of the full extent of their crimes, their alteration of material reality itself. The Nazi regime was known for its fastidious documentation, its careful recordkeeping of every village occupied, every possession stolen, and every life destroyed. This attention to detail extended to the Nazi's efforts to conceal their crimes and indeed to cast doubt on the veracity of the claims of their victims. Retreating Nazi forces destroyed as much evidence of their methods as they could, from the foundations of their gas chambers to their remaining prisoners. Authorities at some camps went so far as to plant new trees in the ruins of the foundations of the gas chambers, to reconstitute and bend the very landscape itself to their

[19] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 58.

expunged version of history.[20] Records, buildings, and bodies were purged, burned and buried, as Nazi authorities attempted to control the historical narrative being constructed even as the Reich was in its death throes. This ritualized atrocity then, bereft of millions of personal testimonies, is characterized by equal parts embodied spectacle and haunting absence and active erasure. This "excess" or cumulative absence is mirrored in the incomplete historical records for the period.

The holocaust is one of the most studied, most conspicuous, and in theory at least, one of the most widely "known" historical moments. In truth however, many of the most important testaments to this simultaneously intensely personal and global trauma were never documented or have been erased, and those that remain cannot possibly convey the scope of the tragedy or the horror of the experience of annihilation. The histories of the marginalized and massacred cannot be understood and confronted directly nor can they ever be considered complete or definitive. Instead, these histories exist on the fringes of national and institutional memory and can only be alluded to through a union of emotion and the ambiguous margins of memory. Walter Benjamin writes, "To articulate the past historically…means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[21] *Inglorious Basterds* engages in wildly excessive violence, hauntings, and historical revisionism to provoke the "flashes" necessary to apprehend unrecorded, unspeakable, and missed traumatic history. The spectacle of violence in *Inglorious Basterds,* its "horror-film flourishes" and "pornographic" excess, its scale, and its "outrageous panache" cry out and frantically point to the historical voids they encircle and highlight. The film's seemingly inappropriate flourishes, its at times garish color and violence, its almost tactile specularity, force a confrontation with and gaze into the void that stands for the un-representable experience at the center of the film's noise and stylized reimagining.

In the climax of *Inglorious Basterds*, the Basterds and a Jewish woman intent on avenging her family's deaths, separately plan and execute the murder of the German high command. This scene was one of the film's most controversial, both for its violence as well as its aggressively fictionalized treatment of Hitler's death. The critic Dave Calhoun gestured to the challenge of engaging with a narrative interested in exploring both the pathos of the victim of history alongside the glee to be had in reimagining the pain of the real-life war criminal, writing, "The one cancels out the other."[22] Eyal Peretz writes that Tarantino's irreverent use and misuse of the Shoah as an aesthetic instrument, can commandeer the destructive imagery and rhetorical violence employed by the fascist state in order to turn that corrosive genocidal fantasy back on the state in an ahistorical reckoning. Peretz writes,

> This awareness causes him to flirt quite dangerously with fascistic creations of his own, with the production of a heroic figure such as Aldo Raine; yet this flirtation, it seems to me, is essential if one wants at the same time to distance oneself most effectively from this fascistic image, and to open up a new type of image, a burning cinema of Jewish vengeance that shows and reminds, insists and burns, with the memorious scar of an unforgettable outside, in a showing and a reminding that happens as if it can only happen as an image, a filming of a Shoah.[23]

Peretz reads a natural affinity into *Basterds'* marriage of the Shoah and Tarantino's proclivity toward ahistorical erasure/production. Peretz's use of "distance" and the film as one that is

[20] Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma,* 78.
[21] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations,* 255.
[22] Calhoun, "*Inglourious Basterds,*" *Time out Magazine,* https://www.timeout.com/movies/inglourious-basterds-1.
[23] Peretz, "What is a Cinema of Jewish Vengeance?," 71.

"memorious" and one which "reminds," is particularly striking in that he joins his reading of the ahistoricity of the film as anti-fascist and at the same time, a delay. This parallel is almost paradoxical, Peretz positions the film as both an urgent repudiation through its counter-use of the "language" of the Reich *and* a *delayed* affective experience, a simultaneous wound *and* reminding scar. For Peretz, the film must be considered in the context of the conditional states of during and after, hijacking the tools/visual language of the fascist state to build an imaginary that reimposes a literal and allegorical wound. Alexander Ornella by contrast, reads the film's use of violence as far more insidious, particularly when coupled with the film's fictional components. That is, what the film produces whole cloth *alongside* the historical elaborations it creates. Ornella writes,

> Many critics perceived Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* to be a violation of boundaries. What bothers these critics is not just "the" violence in the film or the re-writing of history, but the combination of violence, blood, dialogue, framing techniques, the filmic colors, and the narrative (or the re-writing of historical narrative) that adds up to what makes *Inglourious Basterds* the film it is...Tarantino's audacity allows him to trick the viewers into the cinema with the expectation of seeing another of Tarantino's violence-esque films only to find out that they, the viewers, and their expectations are being played with in Tarantino style. They hope for violence and catharsis only to find out that they do not get what they thought they paid for…Tarantino makes obvious the audience's complicity with what happens on-screen; not with the Third Reich ideology (although the film can also be an opportunity to critically reflect on anti-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance), but with the joy about the pain of the other and the entertainment we get out of it, the very reason we are watching Tarantino's film(s).[24]
>
> But Landa's survival has its price, both for Landa and the audience. When Raine permanently marks him with a swastika, the audience gets to see the carving in all its bloodiness and the perpetrator is finally punished. Catharsis at last? Hardly. The blood we see and the pain we hear is not intended to meet the expectations of spectacle. Rather, Tarantino wants to point out the ambiguity that lies within language and signs.[25]

Ornella's analysis of the film's structure and the contradictory pleasure, catharsis, and denial he claims the film offers, twists the affective projects Peretz and Guthrie detect at play in *Basterds.* For Ornella, the film is a trap like Madame Mimieux's theater, luring the audience with the promise of cathartic violence and then trapping them inside a metatextual and doubled reflection of the audience's own bloodlust. While Ornella gestures to the viewer's doubling of the destructive looks exerted by the characters onscreen, his most interesting analysis is of the film's violence against Hans Landa. Landa is a fascinating case study as his entirely fictional character *seems* to offer the viewer something of an "escape hatch" from the ethical concerns aroused through the film's interest in the Holocaust (albeit indirectly), but *because* Landa is positioned as a kind of embodied violence, he becomes a slippery limit test of the film's system of signification. That is, Landa's torture is gratuitous and, in some respects, entirely semiological, the film has greater proximity and access to the viewer's relation to catharsis and less access to the historical production the film often gestures to. This is to say, Ornella's claim that the film

[24] Ornella, "Disruptive Violence as Means to Create a Space for Reflection: Thoughts on Tarantino's Attempts at Audience Irritation," *Quentin Tarantino's* Inglourious Basterds: *A Manipulation of Metacinema,* 229.
[25] Ornella, "Disruptive Violence as Means to Create a Space for Reflection: Thoughts on Tarantino's Attempts at Audience Irritation," *Quentin Tarantino's* Inglourious Basterds: *A Manipulation of Metacinema,* 235.

externalizes semiological and category trouble through its use of violence wedges a gap between the film's signifiers and their meanings, fracturing the film's potency as a tool for (indirect) historical production.

I argue that it is the film's immediate, excessive, and urgent violence *coupled* with its purposeful inaccuracy that are conditional elements necessary to produce film's meta-editorial practice or *ritual* of history. The film and this sequence in particular, do not allow for a "proper" or comfortable distance between the affective truths they capture and the historical pain they can only gesture towards. The joy and pleasure to be had through the reimaging and manipulation the film offers serves to amplify the echo of the troubled, incomplete, and unsettled nature of the historical record of the period the film recounts. Not only does this moment of excessive and overwhelming visceral violence offer the viewer a kind of sublime wish-fulfillment, but by marrying the pleasure of the image so closely with the vulgarity of the act itself, the sequence collapses the distance between the memory and practice of traumatic history. That is to say, the sequence implies that there is a vulgarity not in specularity, but in *the very act of not looking*, of failing to confront the excesses of blurring and forgetting, the elision and revision that is assumed and unchallenged in the incomplete historical ledger of human suffering from the period.

The climax of *Inglorious Basterds* is one of Quentin Tarantino's most violent and outrageous affairs, a hyper-visual collision of history and excess. After Shosanna survives the murder of her family by "The Jew Hunter" Hans Landa, Shosanna acquires identification papers and an inheritance cover story that help her disguise herself as the French niece of a movie theater owner. After a happenstance meeting with a Nazi war hero turned bio-pic movie star, Shosanna learns her theater is the chosen location for the premiere of Josef Goebbels' newest film. Shosanna decides that she and her lover Marcel will capitalize on the entire German high command gathering in one place on the night of the screening, and plan a suicide mission wherein they will seal the theater, project an edited version of Goebbel's film that reveals Shosanna's identity and plan for revenge, and then burn the theater to the ground with Nazi leadership trapped inside. At the same time, the titular group of ragtag soldiers "The Basterds," learn of the screening and separate and apart from Shosanna and Marcel, plan their own attack intended to blow up the theater and every Nazi in attendance on the night of Goebbels' premiere. Marcel acts as cameraman for Shosanna who recuts Goebbels' film to displace the handsome star of the propaganda film with the face of Shosanna, "the jew" who outmaneuvered the Nazis, including "The Jew Hunter" himself. Both groups converge on the theater at the same time during the film premiere, burning, shooting, and blowing up every Nazi in attendance including Adolf Hitler and Josef Goebbels. Shosanna's portion of the film plays just before the fire and explosions begin, making her eerie and gleeful disembodied laughter the last sound and her face the last image projected against the rising smoke blackening the air just before the theater is destroyed. The aesthetics of bodily violence in this sequence and the deafening excess of explosions and gun volleys, register the film's dual interests in ambiguous ephemerality and the spectacle of destruction. While the final theater explosion sequence is perhaps best remembered for its use of one close-up of Shosanna, the climactic "Revenge of the Giant Face" sequence complicates the ways in which the film seeks to challenge the viewer's own identification and culpability in the collective historical loss and destruction of institutional and personal histories from the World War II era and the Holocaust. Though the theater sequence is heavily oriented toward the raging fire in the building and the wild gunfire that mows down the German high command, it also shows a keen interest in forcing the viewer to consider the connection and

identification (or lack thereof) to be had through the scrutiny of the faces of the players in the theater.

In Madame Mimieux's theater, in a bit of intentional historical revisionism, it is the faceless German elite who are herded to their violent deaths by fire and gunshots. They both recall and reconstitute the mass executions committed by the Nazis. One cannot help but think of firing squads and gas chambers as the writhing masses are mowed down by gunfire in the smoky incinerator of the burning theater. During the melodramatic climax of Goebbel's propaganda film within the film, *Nation's Pride,* Shosanna's face replaces that of Germany's national hero, Frederick Zoller. She laughs in a ghostly echo as her lover Marcel ignites an enormous pile of nitrate film stock, setting off an inferno behind the film screen. As a wall of fire bursts forth and a mass of hundreds of Nazis panic and push against the locked doors of the theater, the last members of "The Basterds" burst through the doors to Adolf Hitler's private viewing box on the second level of the theater. Hitler and Goebbels stand for an impossibly (relative to the action) long take as they are riddled by bullets. Their bodies rock back and forth in a throwback to the cartoonish violence of older gangster and western film traditions, silly and excessive but also a striking image of the historical suspension and prolongation constructed through this metahistorical bodily reckoning. Once Hitler and Goebbels are dead, the sequence generally favors long shots that show the Nazi's as an anonymous mass of people in silhouette, from behind, or from above, consolidating them and dehumanizing their suffering. These long shots are interspersed with medium and close up shots of the Basterds' sublime expressions as they continue to shoot Hitler's body until it is no longer recognizable. As the chaos of the scene rises to a frenzy, the fire burns brighter, bathing the theater in bright flames and deep shadows until the final explosion goes off and the viewer is thrust into the quiet outside. By ignoring and withholding the faces of those being massacred and then cutting to close-ups of the Basterds' and Shosanna's smiling faces, the film is able to evoke the sense of horror and panic traditionally associated with the atrocities of the Holocaust, while marrying these emotions to the inexpressible delight of the Basterds. That is to say, this sequence revives the insufficiently documented anonymous suffering of the Holocaust and then recasts the historical roles involved, to gesture toward the need to look at the void and to begin to fill in the radical absences. By substituting the extreme expressions worn by hyper-unreal figures, and by concluding the sequence with the wild-eyed joy of the Basterds and Shosanna's ephemeral state as a revenant, the sequence short circuits any pretense at authenticity and transmits the sense of suffering across time while also reconstructing the end of the Nazi regime in an act of (anti)historical production.

In his deeply personal article about watching *Inglorious Basterds* as a Jew, "My Son Killed Adolph Hitler," Sheldon Roth writes, "I knew the murder of Adolf Hitler as a fact."[26] Roth references the climax of *Inglorious Basterds* in which his real-life son Eli Roth, as his character "the Bear Jew," repeatedly shoots Adolph Hitler in the face until his visage is pulverized beyond recognition. In the midst of a chaotic massacre in the theater, the sequence temporarily slows down. The scene shifts from a loud and fast-paced shooting and explosions punctuated by the sound of screams and Shosanna's laughter, to a slow motion shot of Donny Donowitz's (the Bear Jew) ecstatic face as he looks down at the panicked crowd and gleefully shoots as many Nazis as possible. As Donowitz fires an unbroken stream of volleys, the ambient sound fades slightly and the deep rhythmic hum of his weapon discharging overwhelms. Sheldon Roth notes, "The feelings evoked while watching this film contain our history — personal and group… Emotional facts, or feelings, are a condensed, animal form of personal history;

[26] Roth, "My Son Killed Adolf Hitler," *Jewish Journal,* https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/74890/.

expanding them tells the story of one's life."[27] Roth beautifully encapsulates the endless and haunting need fulfilled by *Inglorious Basterds's* irreverent historical play and production. Not only does the film offer a more affectively satisfying "ending" than the historical record ever could, but it also points to how the intangible and the unquantifiable of trauma, though not reflected in institutional memory, undeniably influence the desire to testify that lies at the heart of the impulse to chronicle. History as chronicle then, must be expanded and stretched to accommodate the excess fueling ongoing historical production; that is, the act of witnessing itself. Trauma becomes transhistorically viral as a sense of event is transmitted across generations. Roth goes on to note that as a Jewish person, a part of him can never separate itself from the debts of the past; "I cannot hear enough; it never ends."[28] The insufficiently historicized and documented traumatic experience demands perpetual testimony from its victims. Unfortunately, this testimony is always incomplete and inadequate to the task of complete documentation; one can never "hear enough" or speak enough to satisfy what Roth describes as the "injunction to tell our story." An excessive amalgam of emotion, memory, and affect, I argue, can begin to be "enough" to respond to that which "never ends." Dori Laub writes,

> The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event…The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself.[29]

For Laub, the "massive" traumatic moment absorbs the secondary witness, the listener. The afterlife of the historical event goes far beyond mere record-keeping. The event itself becomes a cyclical historical process, revived in perpetuity as it can never be sufficiently resolved. The listener recreates the event anew and differently through their position as witness, refracting the event in an act of production that is simultaneously "too late" and "too soon"; too late in that the traumatic event is always missed to some degree and too soon in that the witness must construct their own positionality *as* they encounter the traumatic event, the "witness to himself." To sufficiently capture and represent the blankness and the *delay* that characterizes the missed or undocumented traumatic historical event, film must not purport to represent at all, but instead to simply present. The incompleteness of a highly mediated aesthetic artifice creates the conditions of possibility for the *insufficiency* necessary for a *gestural* image of the missed event, the image that signals and expresses *and* withholds by turn. Excess becomes necessary both to serve as a beacon signal for all that has been lost in the historiographic record of the period, and to inflate the aesthetic space on screen enough to create an overly large void in which no complete truth can be found. The excesses of films like *Basterds* draw the eye to what is missing rather than what is by virtue of their inaccuracies, their fantastical spectacles, their deviation from what is ostensibly "known." Witnessing is itself an ongoing project of reconstruction which can never be satisfied through traditional means, can never be concluded. Trauma then, is transmitted across time and may be said not to have an afterlife at all in the sense that it is a process which cannot reach completion. Films such as *Basterds* then, offer and indirect entry point through which to

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[27] Roth, "My Son Killed Adolf Hitler," *Jewish Journal,* https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/74890/.
[28] Roth, "My Son Killed Adolf Hitler," *Jewish Journal,* https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/74890/.
[29] Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* 57.

access traumatic memory and the discourses that surround the historical past; they short-circuit the cyclical demands of ongoing testimony-witness-event-self feedback loop, by creating a new spectral object which can attract the viewer/witness's eye to the absent and absented traumatic moment, while rejecting the ethical limitations that attend more direct, "factual" modes of address and representations.

No sequence from *Inglourious Basterds* better encapsulates the film's project of historical production, than the one which casts character Shosanna as the laughing "face of Jewish vengeance," a revenant who directly addresses her killers, the audience, and the nature of historical authorship itself. After having barely survived an encounter with "the Jew Hunter" in the film's opening sequence, Shosanna later traps the German high command in her theater and burns them all. As part of her plan to destroy the Nazi government, Shosanna makes a film she splices with the official propaganda film the Nazi's have gathered to watch onscreen. Appearing in the film, she stares directly into the camera and confronts the Nazi's she plans to murder, as well as the audience itself. Though Shosanna is murdered in the projection booth well before the film reel reaches the splice, her film plays after her death, reviving her voice and her experience as literal afterlife. Her voice rings out in the darkened theater as her face is captured in a close up, "I have a message for Germany. That you are all going to die. And I want you to look deep into the face of the Jew who is going to do it. Marcel, burn it down." Shosanna is the avenging revenant, the night and fog returning to consume those who would destroy and deny her story. The film reworks the ephemerality and impermanence of lost history by weaponizing the intangible. It is through her impermanence and ephemerality that Shosanna transcends her body, nationality, religion, and indeed her death, to return to re-impose her will with greater potency than she could when still in possession of her own presence. The return of the repressed is made literal, as the past reaches out through the smoke to offer an impression of a historical moment.

Shosanna's face looms large, projected onto the smoke overtaking the theater and slowing her to figuratively tower over the Nazi high command. She is elevated and commanding as her image is projected high above all the Nazis crowded in the audience and only she remains at the viewer's eyeline throughout the sequence. Shosanna's laugh rings out clearly over the sound of screams and silver nitrate-fueled blasts. Her wild laughter, her joy, and her volume, amplify the already chaotic scene of destruction wrought by Shosanna and the Basterds' well-placed explosives. Her "giant" face stands as both an enormous and mesmerizing symbol for the suffering that has been elided within the narrative and by history, while at the same time existing as a hollow and weightless object, a specter or phantasmagoric image projected onto the smoke filling the room. Shosanna's voice is violently separated from her life and her body; and while it is a testament to the ways in which she and her experience go on after her death as the "voice that cries out from the wound," it also resounds with the echoes that reverberate within the empty historical void registered and concealed by the projection of her face. That is to say, Shosanna's presence endures in an incorporeal form that marks her absence while at the same time highlighting the aporia her last words and acts conceal and then reveal. Shosanna's cinematic "afterlife" and her projection/resurrection in the theater position her as an indexical image of traumatic absence, an image that begins the loss-survival-testimony cycle wherein Shosanna is simultaneously missed and irrepressible. Her "return" after death as a haunting specter provides a crystalized image of the afterlife of historical trauma as simultaneously chaotic and ephemeral, as an ongoing, unintegrated return of the event-as-rupture.

Caruth writes that history does not function as a linear and rational chain of events but is instead structured by the holes and punctures in historical and institutional memory, that the

record is in fact a chain-link structure, comprised more of missing matter than of the substance of known and assimilated events. History must be conceived of as a system of elisions and absences. Caruth's essential chapter on Freud's discussion of history and trauma (particularly generational/cultural trauma), considers survival and the aftermath of the traumatic incident in ways Freud's work did not.[30] She writes of the repetition compulsion in trauma theory and argues that, "Repetition…is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but…the very attempt to claim one's own survival. If history is to be understood as the history of a trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own."[31] For Caruth, the traumatic moment or incident leaves no physical or measurable mark of its occurrence, just as it fails to in Freud's estimation. The difference is that for Freud, uncovering the sufferer's memory of the traumatic incident can be the first step in their clinical protocol to begin addressing and treating the various neuroses stemming from their brush with death. For Freud, to uncover and integrate the initial incident through talk therapy is to confront and ideally overcome the haunting absence characterizing the lost moment of traumatic experience.[32] Caruth builds on Freud, by arguing that not only is the sufferer haunted by the knowledge that one has experienced an event seismic enough to cause one's waking mind to fail in its ordering of the experience of life, but also by the knowledge that they survived such an experience. According to Caruth, the act of waking, of becoming aware *after* the traumatic event is the forceful rupture in the individual's experience of their existence. One's inability to claim the "dream" from which they have awakened is the true source of trauma which haunts the survivor. For Caruth, it is this return to life without context that haunts the sufferer, not the trauma of the event or even of having missed the event, but of one's inability to *claim* the failure. For Freud, trauma is the story of the missed event, of what happened and how one must respond to it. For Caruth, trauma comes from a failure of story*telling.* History then, is necessarily an elusive narrative, defiant and structured by absence, insufficiency, and the missed event, rather than by a faithful and linear record of the human experience. The discourses that comprise the "record" of history cannot be understood as immutable and sufficient.

The theater fire sequence registers the mutability, incompleteness, and structuring absences that characterize the historical record. As the projector is destroyed and the explosions devastate the theater and finally blow open the locked front doors, the chaos, violence, and destruction of the scene implode in on themselves as the theater once again becomes silent and empty. This silence—the hushed quiet that follows Shosanna's and the Basterds' deaths and their acts of destruction—is deafening precisely because of the aural and visual excess that precedes it. The film's revision of the historical events surrounding the fall of the Third Reich is shaped by its imperative to overwhelm and to activate innumerable sensations and affects in the viewer, not only to gesture toward the insufficient record of history and all that has gone unnoted and unrecorded, but also to make excessive normalcy. Quiet is rendered vulgar and loaded in the wake of this excess of representation. Absence and silence are then no longer simply a normal result of the production of the historical narrative but instead an untenable and intolerable signal of the insufficiently "claimed" collective trauma and atrocities arising from the Third Reich. Shosanna's ghostly projection via her avatar and her ephemeral, absent presence (a "too late" face), is an/in excess of life, a spectral afterlife of trauma which persists beyond the event itself. The shape of Shosanna's face, the persistence of her voice beyond her death, projected across the

[30] Freud, *The Uncanny.*
[31] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 64.
[32] Freud, *The Uncanny.*

destruction of the theater and the characters whose real-life counterparts largely escaped such onscreen reckonings, sutures the historical voice through its over-embodiment. The gulf of the missed event, the rupture in the continuum of history, is temporarily bridged and absence is given form. Conversely, the quiet left behind in the aftermath of the theater's destruction recreates the "too soon" of the missed event, and begins the cycle anew.

A Return of the Repressed[33]

When asked about the inspiration for his film *The Devil's Backbone,* writer-director Guillermo del Toro commented, "I wanted the ghost story to be a metaphor for the war and the war to be a metaphor for the ghost story."[34] His approach is an interesting one, not only in his invocation of metaphor, but in the renewing ouroboros of tension he constructs between the "ghost story" and the war. There's always a degree of metaphor in the horror film, a genre defined by the displacement and masking required to conceal the primal and collective anxieties the genre mines and sublimates them into the polluted form of the monster.[35] Del Toro invokes the "ghost story" to address a tumultuous and arguably "lost" historical moment, but also positions the war as a device through which to access the ghost story. That is, the feedback loop created through the ghost story/war dialectic frames the war as a productive lens through which to refract the film's haunting, just as the ghost is used as a figure through which to articulate a missing historical narrative. The film asks the viewer to not only confront the nature of historical ruptures through the ghost as a placeholder, but to participate in an imaginary which produces *the war itself* through the ghost. That is, when activated to express a missed historical moment, the revenant is not pure spectacle but instead an excessive *image* that *overwhelms* and supplies a willfully and purposely *inauthentic* representation of an unspeakable, unimaginable historical absence. The film is one of a handful produced during the new millennium that offers an escape from the weight, ethical implications, and limitations of directly addressing, constructing, and re-producing the blankness that arises from collective trauma by engaging in a productive inauthenticity forged through radical, violent excess and fantastical elision.

The Devil's Backbone is a symmetrical iterative phrase that repeats as a refracted echo of itself. The film is set at the tail end of the Spanish Civil War. An orphanage for the children of fallen Republican loyalists teeters on the edge of ruin as the victorious Francoists advance. While the few remaining adults in the orphanage prepare for Francoism to subsume the nation, they work to paper over the history of the facility, removing objectionable material and erecting religious ephemera as cover. Meanwhile, the boys negotiate the destruction of their families and childhoods by telling each other stories of the ghost that may haunt the orphanage, *el que suspira* (the one who sighs). These realist and fantasy narratives are represented through the layout of the orphanage itself. The "upstairs" world of the classroom, kitchen, and office is governed by order and quotidian concerns: religion, education, labor, and sustenance. The "downstairs" space, the world dominated by Santi the ghost, multiple scenes of violence, and untold repressed memories, is the chaotic world of spirituality, savagery, and forgetting. As the war outside penetrates the orphanage, these distinct worlds come into greater proximity and conflict, mirroring the historical crisis of the war itself and the lingering and ongoing crisis of memory and forgetting surrounding the nation's relationship to the war in its aftermath. In the film's explosive climax

[33] Freud, *The Uncanny.*

[34] "100 Scariest Movie Moments," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JILpgm6Kkag&t=4293s&ab_channel=StudioLost%26Found.

[35] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 5.

the oldest "orphan," the handyman Jacinto, blows up the building so that he might abscond with the Republican riches the headmaster and mistress have kept hidden during the war.

Backbone is bookended by complementary sequences that quote *The Searchers'* symmetrical opening and closing segments. *Backbone* begins with the camera already in motion, pushing forward through a dark doorway and forcing the viewer into the unknown beyond. The film ends with the camera (and viewer) looking out from within the dark frame of a doorway. A group of wounded and vulnerable boys shuffle away from the camera toward a barren and foreboding landscape. As the boys limp into the distance, the ghost of their former guardian watches from the shadows. The camera pushes forward, aligned with the ghost of the boys' former guardian, Dr. Casares, as he follows them partway until they move into the direct sunlight of the day. As the boys grow smaller in the distance, the camera tracks forward, exploding the frame and letting the barrier of the doorway disappear, leaving only Dr. Casares' silhouette as the last framing object in the field. As Dr. Casares narrates, "El fantasma soy yo (I am the ghost)," his dark body becomes the proxy for the fractured institution the boys leave behind, the burnt orphanage that no longer offers them protection.

Though there is a nostalgia and wistfulness to the film's final frame, as the doctor is condemned for his indecisive impotence in life to endure an eternal afterlife as a specter permanently tied to the ruins of the building her used to repress his dreams, the boys' departure inaugurates a much more subversive project. The Spanish Civil War is something of a "lost" conflict in the sense that it is one of innumerable global conflicts which is more easily understood through its structuring, discursive absences and aporias than through its place in the "record" of world history. That is, due to factors such as the success of the fascist combatants in the conflict as well as decades of "successful" repression and alteration of the historical record after the war, the Spanish Civil war exists in the murky hinterlands of mis/un/non-remembered history. It is an event without a complete factual narrative or documented archival history through which it might be encountered and known.

The civil war spanned from 1936 to 1939 and by the time the Franco dictatorship was installed, nearly 200,000 Spanish citizens had already been killed in extrajudicial murders, with at least 20,000 more Republicans executed after the war. Defeated Republicans were executed after trials that lasted minutes during which they were not allowed lawyers and could not present evidence or, in some instances, even speak in their own defense. Those who were sent to prison camps were sometimes used as slave laborers and over half a million Republicans were exiled and thousands more murdered after being deported and sent to concentration camps. In a historical parallel few noted at the time and few notice in the present day, the Franco regime engaged in a systematic extermination of their political rivals and the nation's "undesirables" during and after the war. The Francoist killing machine was as efficient as it was brutal, dumping thousands of bodies in mass graves as the state solidified its control over the populace and silenced dissent within its borders.[36]

Under Franco, history wasn't simply lost or incomplete; it was systematically concealed, destroyed, and criminalized. Paul Preston notes that, much like the Third Reich, the Franco regime sought to censor the historical narrative of the Spanish Civil War, which created a "major lacuna in the historiography of the war." [37] The victorious Nationalists were extremely successful at controlling political discourse, national memory, and even the expression of personal experience. Every potential avenue for representations of the truth of the conflict was state-

[36] Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain,* xvii.

[37] Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain,* xii.

controlled, from art to the nation's education system; in turn, "gaps" in the national and collective memory of the period became a repository for all manner of propaganda. It cannot be overstated how much power the Franco regime exercised over the citizenry's freedom to remember the collective historical past. Whereas the Holocaust created a culture with an unceasing directive to remember, the Spanish Civil War and the atrocities committed during the conflict and afterwards made it essential for the average Spaniard to commit themselves to forgetting in perpetuity. The Spanish Civil War has always been misremembered and misunderstood due to the nation's successful *de jure* and *de facto* censorship campaign.[38] Even after Franco's death, the state continued to deny culpability in the massacre of its own people and passed the 1977 Amnesty Law which decreed that authorities could never be held accountable for any crimes against humanity committed during the Franco era. Not only did this absolve war criminals of their misdeeds, but it had the added effect of freezing the public discourse regarding the war and Franco, at a time when public and indeed global opinion was generally favorable toward them.

In the decades immediately preceding Franco's death, the fascist regime set about destroying state archives, such as those of Franco's Falange ruling party, prisoner records, and records of deaths and burials.[39] Preston writes that even when records were not destroyed with malicious intent, "there were also 'inadvertent' losses when some town councils sold their archives by the ton as waste paper for recycling."[40] The Civil War can be said to best be understood more through its absences than through any comprehensive historical archive. It is in this aporia that Del Toro's film *invents* a new version of history through fantastical exaggeration and elision to address both the open wounds of a nation still gripped by decades of *silent* conflict and the unsettled nature of the archive/record/narrative of history itself—a narrative, as Caruth writes, that is best understood as a sequence of blank spaces than an ordered chronological record of known events, a "history as the history of a trauma."[41]

As the few surviving boys leave the orphanage and walk into the wild unknown wilderness that the viewer understands is miles from civilization, they offer an interesting challenge to the sanctity and authority of the archive itself. Obviously, the boys are at risk to a degree; they all bear wounds of some kind, some with serious physical injuries and others the loss of their childhood innocence. They are alone, without resources, and without adult guardians. However, the boys have also emerged from a dark night trapped with ghosts and memories of murder in the ruins of the orphanage, having exorcised them all. They leave behind the destruction, the haunting, and the impotence that has been rotting the institution from the inside and they experience a coming of age as they move into the light of a new day and beyond the confines of the restrictive framing and darkness that has set the visual tone for their time indoors. They move, free from the stifling restrictiveness of ascetic study and the brutality of libidinal consumption, into a new day. This note of (some) uplift after the devastating violence and murder that has destroyed the only home the boys have known, is an intriguing one with which to conclude given the real-world effects of such violence on Spain after the end of the war. The official cessation of hostilities marked the end of the greatest number of extrajudicial murders in the state, as well as armed conflict, but it crystalized that contentious moment for subsequent decades. That is, the regime's harsh policy of unquestioning silence followed by the

[38] Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain,* xii.
[39] Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain,* xvi-xvii.
[40] Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain,* xvi.
[41] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 69.

"Pact de Olvido" beginning in the mid-1970s, froze Spain in the death rattles of the republic for decades after the end of the war. The nature of the "missed" language, imagery, and understanding of the conflict marking the war's afterlife, condemned the Spanish people and state to an ongoing haunting of itself, an irrepressible recurrence of the unsettled and unintegrated historical moment. Then what of Del Toro's play with the end of his film? What to make of the boys and their persistence, their push into the future and the unknown after the screen cuts to black for the last time? *The Devil's Backbone* draws attention to a missed historical moment (a traumatic historical event that was and remains repressed, missed, and under remembered) to be sure, but any historical film can do the same. What of his use of the haunting narrative? Of horror? Of the afterlives he represents—the ghost's, the nation's, of history itself? The boys move on, neither to gesture to the state's survival or even that of the populace, nor to offer a mollifying "happy" ending. The boys are a direct repudiation of the authority and stability of the historical record itself. The film forecloses the possibility of historical authenticity from the first by binding the film's realist (the world of the orphanage "upstairs") historical and horror (the world of the haunting "downstairs) narratives together, but this usurpation is of the permanency of the historical record and not the event itself, as it exists largely in absentia as an unspeakable object. The boys then, become excessive in and of themselves, excess beyond any pretense of either realism or horror, a new image of afterlife itself, a picture of the unrepresentable *unsettledness* of the record. They move beyond the frame, beyond true historical events, and beyond the omniscient gaze of the camera, embodying the elusiveness of a missed and un-witnessed (that is, due to the destruction of the witness) event. The final shot of the boys is a cinematic production of the unimaginable, a relative on the family tree of Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic,* a temporary and elusive glimpse of an intangible, unknowable, unsettled cultural event.

On May 14th, 2022 a group of families gathered at the mass grave site "Pit 111" at Paterna cemetery.[42] In 1940 21 loyalists were shot over the course of a few months and their bodies were dumped together in Pit 111. 82 years later, their surviving loved ones were finally able to recover their remains (of those that were identifiable) and take them home for proper burials. Their recovery was due almost entirely to the recordkeeping performed by grave-digger, Leoncio Badía, who risked his life to document the final resting places of Loyalists and to inform their families of their locations where possible. This documentation, this archival project of the body, was an act against the state. This crystallization of names, of lives, of murders committed by the state, had to happen outside the mechanisms of official memory. There were(are) de jure and de facto limits to how the events and persons associated with the war could be represented and remembered, how they could be integrated into public education, how they could be discussed in popular media.[43] These restrictions codified everything from how motion pictures could represent Franco and falangists long after the war's end, to how and if (almost never) families could discover the locations of their Loyalist loved ones' bodies. In 2014 the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances published a report that found that during the war and the subsequent Franco dictatorship, 114,226 Spanish citizens were disappeared. These are in addition to the hundreds of thousands who died in the war and those who died after being deported to concentration camps. These disappearances dwarf those committed by most other regimes and dictatorships in the modern era. Yet even so, due to the

[42] Jones, "'He's Coming Home': mass grave in Valencia gives up Franco's victims," *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/15/hes-coming-home-mass-grave-in-valencia-gives-up-francos-victims.

[43] Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain,* 520-521.

state's successful control over and manipulation of the historical narrative in the aftermath of the war, the Spanish Civil war enjoys a degree of amnesty within the historical record and exists as a largely silent, undocumented atrocity. In Spain, investigation and representation of the war continue to be troubled and controlled by the state.

Paul Preston has referred to the war as "The Spanish Holocaust." He writes that in doing so, he intends not to imply an exact symmetry or equivalency to both periods/projects of extrajudicial and de jure murder, but to "suggest parallels and resonances"[44] between both extermination efforts. Both periods saw the use of similar methods and rhetoric, and the targeting of similar groups, but they diverge in crucial ways in terms of their respective historical afterlives and memory. That is, the Spanish Civil War was the successful Holocaust of *history* the Third Reich never achieved. When the dust settled, the fascist Francoists carried the day in 1939 and in the intervening years, even decades after Francisco Franco's death from heart failure in 1975, the state's abiding project was one of *erasure,* the Pact of Forgetting—"*El Pacto de Olvido.*"[45] After the end of the Franco regime, the state engaged remaining leftists in a tacit agreement to "forget" the events of the civil war. The state and those who participated in war crimes, advocated "reconciliation" through collective denial as the path forward through the lingering aftereffects of the war.[46] This "pact" was codified into law through the Amnesty Law of 1977, which provided for the release of some political prisoners and the return of some political exiles and conferred amnesty for Francoists who committed war crimes.[47] The first major legislative act of the post-Franco Spanish regime was to decontextualize, edit, and excuse the persistent legacies of the civil war. The institutions of the state were mobilized not only to protect high-ranking officials, but to legislate the nation's ability to navigate and testify to its own history. Repression, forgetting, and a kind of mutually obliterating "reconciliation" between fact and fiction were activated to mediate the nation's relationship to and claim on its historical narrative.

Between 1976 and 1983 the military dictatorship governing Argentina waged a brutal campaign of murder and forced disappearances against its own people. During The Dirty War, an estimated 30,000 people went "missing." *Los Desaparecidos* (the disappeared) similarly comprise a fascinating lacuna in Latin American history. They are a group primarily encountered through their absence, through their unknowability and yet they and the events of the Dirty War are some of the most widely taught historical moments and actors from Latin America. That is, this moment and the shadow of the desaparecidos loom large in history pedagogy across the Western world, somewhat overrepresented as it were and often standing as the synechdocal moment used to act as a terrible placeholder for all Latin American history. Still, the *junta* was eventually removed from power and the nation began to reconcile itself to its own history. After democracy was restored in Argentina in 1983, the government established CONADEP, the *Comision Nacional sobre la Desaparicion de Personas* (the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons). The commission was tasked with investigating the events of the Dirty War, reporting their findings, and trying and convicting hundreds of officials for their participation in crimes against the people of Argentina. While this official effort to restore some national memory/archive of this period was certainly limited in scope and effect, it marked an important gesture by the state. Argentina chose, as one of its first acts as a reestablished

[44] Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain,* xii.
[45] Davis, "Is Spain Recovering Its Memory? Breaking the *Pacto de Olvido," Human Rights Quarterly,* 858.
[46] Davis, "Is Spain Recovering Its Memory? Breaking the *Pacto de Olvido," Human Rights Quarterly,* 863.
[47] Davis, "Is Spain Recovering Its Memory? Breaking the *Pacto de Olvido," Human Rights Quarterly,* 863.

democracy, the representation of missed historical moments and the construction of a degree of national memory. This act is significant for our purposes because the Dirty War and Los Desaparecidos are historical moments/figures that connote absence and historical loss and a failure of institutional memory and yet they also (arguably) can be said to carry outsize importance in the global historical archive as they represent a brief historical moment (however devastating). I invoke Argentina's seemingly unrelated history of disappearances (bodily and historical), to gesture both to Argentina's negotiation of and address through its own history, and to point to Argentina's symbolic import as a site of missed historical memory when Spain engaged in a much longer and more successful project of erasure. Argentina's *Desaparecidos* became excessive in their own right in a sense, once their "processing" through the historical record "ended." That is, once the nation (at least in a limited sense after the end of the Dirty War) was able to *glance* at its history in a way Spain still has not.

In 2005, Spain tested the reach of international human rights law, by prosecuting and convicting an Argentinian war criminal across national borders. Spain contended that crimes against humanity could not be confined within the state where those crimes occurred and in fact, Spain won its case and helped encourage Argentina to end its own amnesty laws which protected surviving war criminals active during the Dirty War. In an act one Argentinian attorney called "returning the favor," Argentina is now the venue for a decades-long lawsuit against Spain, brought about by Spanish victims of the Franco regime.[48] These victims seek records associated with war crimes committed by the Falange as well as the burial sites for the unlocatable relatives murdered during the war and its aftermath. The historical record of the war and the decades of fascist repression afterward continue to resist direct inquiry due to continued resistance by the state. As Preston writes,

> Serious investigation was not possible until after the death of Franco in 1975. When researchers began the task, they were confronted not only with the deliberate destruction of much archival material by the Francoist authorities but also with the fact that many deaths had simply been registered either falsely or not at all. In addition to the concealment of crimes by the dictatorship was the continued fear of witnesses about coming forward and the obstruction of research, especially in the provinces of Old Castile. Archival material has mysteriously disappeared and frequently local officials have refused to permit consultation of the civilian registry.[49]

The act of literal reclamation (of bodies) has been criminalized (at the very least by default) since before the war ended. The project of recovery has been blocked by the state and this stasis has been enshrined in the law and cultural practice ever since, condemning the state to a perpetual haunting of itself. The nation's history is institutionally unsettled and therefore *always* in flux and threatening. The spectre of the nation *haunts itself* and cannot be settled directly.

As recently as 2012, the UN Commissioner for human rights pointed out that such a law is in a sense "illegal," as there is no statute of limitations on crimes against humanity at the international level which should, in theory, protect Spaniards as well. In a move which revealed how entrenched the governing positive attitude and national memory of Franco is, Spain fought the UN's efforts to persuade the country to overturn the law and changed nothing. The passage of the Amnesty law coincided with the informal "pact of forgetting" begun in serious after the death of Franco in 1975. Both wings of the Spanish political establishment reached a tacit

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[48] Dowsett and Pinedo, "Spaniards seek justice in Argentina for Franco-era crimes," *Reuters,* https://www.reuters.com/article/us-spain-franco/spaniards-seek-justice-in-argentina-for-franco-era-crimes-idUSBRE98P0SL20130926.

[49] Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain,* xvi-xvii.

agreement that the best way forward for the new Spain would be to "forget" the truth of the war and its aftermath. The bad actors from the war would never pay for their crimes against humanity and those who had suffered under the mantle of "victim" and "other" as outsiders and losers of the war, would be reintegrated into the nation as full Spaniards again, legally and rhetorically. This forgetting, this institutional lacuna, came to represent a much more insidious threat to the collective and historical memory than the outright censorship and violent order imposed under Franco.

Ironically, the system that all but eliminated strenuous criticism of Francoism, also inspired one of the most brutally affective examinations of historical absence in Del Toro's 2006 film *El Laberinto Del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth)*. *Laberinto* is a reverent film, innately empathetic toward the archetypes it collects from the ashes of the Civil War. The film tells the story of a little girl whose mother remarries and follows her new Francoist husband to his post in rural Spain. Set years after the war, it highlights the rebellions of the post-war period. *Laberinto* draws parallels between the harsh realities experienced by the vanquished and the increasingly fantastic experiences of Ofelia, who discovers and engages with a fairy tale world only she sees around her. One might be tempted to categorize *Laberinto* as merely allegorical. In truth, the film uses the language of fantasy and arresting spectacles to gesture toward the historical ambiguity it recreates; aesthetic excess and archival absence represent two sides of the same historiographic coin. Because *Laberinto* must respond to a historical moment which is not only lost but for which there exists no cultural framework that might make it comprehensible or meaningful, the film must create its own language to respond to the "lacuna of history" that inspired it. That is to say, the film uses a blend of aesthetically elaborate fairy tale elements not only to hint at the missing events of a redacted and lost history, but also to supply the imagery for producing a new mode of address that might provide such a cultural framework.

It should be noted that while this film "edits" history in some ways that are akin to those employed in *Basterds,* it enjoyed and continues to enjoy a much more positive critical response. Barring a subjective discussion of style and aesthetics, it may be that this film benefits from centering on historical events that are largely unknown, even within the nation in which they occurred. The elegance of Del Toro's touch seems even lighter when his film reconstitutes a historical moment for which there is next to no narrative of the war that claims to be comprehensive. That is to say, in addressing a historical trauma which is largely defined by concealment and repression, *Laberinto* is not bound by the connotations of reimagining a *known* historical moment, or even one with as much cultural *visibility.* The war is understood mostly in its absences and aporias, as a rule rather than the exception. Unlike the Holocaust which is both known and unknown and exists as a largely unified dominant narrative with many points of view left marginalized and forgotten altogether, the Spanish Civil War is a forgotten war and even more profoundly, it has been historically ignored, misremembered, and misunderstood *within the country in where it took place.* Instead of having to perform the labor of divorcing the viewer from "known" historical beats as *Basterds* does, *Laberinto* must produce the language and imagery for the war from the Republican side, nearly whole cloth. Where *Basterds* implicates the viewer by asking them to react to their revisionist revenge fantasy of the war, *Laberinto* offers the viewer access to the sensation of knowing and not knowing—of "waking from the dream" Caruth calls the "enigma" of survival.[50] In *Laberinto,* the "reclamation" of the narrative of history and "one's own survival," is an act of dreaming, of aesthetics, and of renewed cultural practice.

[50] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 58.

In his effusive review in *The Chicago Tribune,* Michael Wilmington wrote that *Pan's Labyrinth,* "is all the more affecting because del Toro so effectively 'places' the fantasy in real life… we can become amazed and enthralled at both the terrors of the reality outside and the splendors of the imagination within."[51] The differences in how each wave of critics responded to both films' treatment and "play" with the respective historical events can be neither a matter of quality nor purely a referendum on the artistry or reputations of each filmmaker. Recall how Dave Calhoun decried the mashup of tone and of real events and fantasy in *Basterds*: "The one cancels out the other."[52] The dual narratives of "known" historical truth and fantasy were at times denounced in the context of the Holocaust and World War II, but Del Toro's marriage between fantasy and reality is permissible and even acclaimed not only because of its elegance and artistry, but because even in its fantastic flights and tactile dreams, it does not challenge an established dominant narrative of victor and loser. Instead, its greatest project is to create the impression of a historical moment which goes beyond being merely unspeakable. After seventy years of control, amnesty, and "forgetting," the events of the war were not merely unspeakable, but unimaginable and even un-dreamable.

In the context of the missing event, *Laberinto's* historical production cannot misremember or misrepresent. The film works to erect the scaffolding of structures and symbols with which to form the lexicon of trauma for the national rupture not peppered with lacunae, but defined by its own absence and disappearance. Where Caruth discusses trauma as the "voice crying out from the wound" and the voids structuring the narrative of history the Spanish Civil War is itself, the blank interruption that cannot be claimed. Unable to confront and name the events of its modern rupture, the nation is trapped in a dream from which it cannot awaken—a fantasy of wholeness. By transforming the narrative of history into that of a fairy tale, the film registers Spain's persistent rejection of knowing and its refusal to claim its recent past. By blurring the lines between the dream space and the real world of the film, *Laberinto* makes painfully visible the delusion characterizing the state and the populace's near-total silence and repression regarding the war crimes permitted under the color of authority.

Laberinto del Fauno deftly walks the line between political reality and fantasy, as it blurs the border between the realist narrative of the political conflicts of the period and the fantasy space of monsters and fairies. This intermingling of emotional and historical truths is most apparent in the "Pale Man" scene. To "reclaim" her rightful place as a princess in a magical underworld realm, the heroine Ofelia must retrieve a dagger from the lair of the monstrous child-eating "Pale Man." In the mode of the magical realist heroine, Ofelia easily accepts the existence of a magical world alongside her own. She generally accepts the magical beings she encounters as commonplace, inadvertently normalizing them. She is represented not only as being able to immediately access the language of fantasy, but as belonging to both worlds herself. Through Ofelia, the dual narratives of magic and reality exist on the same plane and constitute a complete world through their marriage: insufficiency (realism) balanced with excess (horror). Through this "excess" of storytelling, of dual/layered narrative techniques and formal surplus, the film (paradoxically) creates the indirect address necessary to authentically *and* inaccurately depict the opacity of the traumatic rupture.

The faun reveals to Ofelia that the world of magic exists just beyond the boundaries of her own as a different but parallel realm. When Ofelia enters the fantasy underworld by slipping

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[51] Wilmington, "In Spain's fascist heyday, 'Labyrinth' cocoons a child," *T*he Chicago Tribune, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2006-12-29-0612290326-story.html.

[52] Calhoun, "*Inglourious Basterds," Time out Magazine,* https://www.timeout.com/movies/inglourious-basterds-1.

under the floorboards of her room, she encounters a gaunt and desiccated monster, frozen and immobile at the head of a long table laid out with a feast. Doubling a parallel dinner party "upstairs" headed by Ofelia's stepfather Captain Vidal, the "Pale Man" is seated before an expansive and sumptuous meal. The blazing fire behind him throws the fire grate in stark relief and gives it the appearance of a gaping maw. Countless courses and delicacies cover the long banquet table, all for the consumptive and yet suspiciously gaunt creature dining alone. The excess of the "upstairs" party is doubled in the creature's lair. While the Captain and his cronies (all symbolic of the institutions in power under Franco—the church, the military, wealthy elites) discuss cutting ration cards for the public as they indulge in a feast, the Pale Man controls and yet *resists* a cartoonishly expansive and luxurious dinner. Like the privileged elite class seated around Vidal's table, the Pale Man is paradoxically consumptive. His body is starving for nourishment, but his hunger can only be satisfied by the destruction of the future, of children, and not the food before him.

Ofelia looks with a start when she first notices the monster, but immediately switches to curiosity as she begins to incorporate his existence into her experience. She barely reacts to the monster in the room with her. Her gaze is curious and searching, willing to confront the horror haunting the space behind her known world. Ofelia even lifts the plate holding the creature's disarticulated eyeballs and then makes a childish face of disgust as she might to a plate of unappetizing food, once again normalizing the nightmarish new world around her. Even then, Ofelia neither backs away nor does she seem at all deterred from her mission. The Pale Man represents a being to be incorporated into her understanding of her experience, not simply denied and visually "missed." Ofelia's look itself translates the monstrous threat into a comprehensible, knowable actor within her own context.

Ofelia's only real "failure" of understanding and looking comes moments after completing her quest, not from fear or panic, but from hunger. Ofelia is undone by the most banal instinct, as she eats from the forbidden food on the table. That is to say, in a moment of supreme tension and elation, Ofelia has her first real failure of vision when she allows her suffering in the real world (the viewer is reminded that Ofelia was punished by her stepfather and sent to bed without dinner) to confine and constrain her journey on the other side. This eruption of the real within the fairy tale narrative is not simply the catalyst that begins the film's horror set piece, but also registers the interrelationship between the real and fantasy worlds. Ofelia can go back and forth between both places, but she brings elements of each with her into the other realm. The quotidian of the horrific and fantastic speaks to the bleeding between boundaries of memory and experience. The Pale Man scene might seem like the pinnacle of the fantasy excess in *Laberinto,* but it is also intensely interested in marrying the dream with the banality of the ordinary. Importantly, then, at one point, the camera pans across a pile of old shoes in the corner of the dining hall. The viewer is given to understand that they are the shoes of the monster's many murdered child victims. In one sense the monster is fantastic and horrifying, but in another it harkens back to historical actors, both in the Third Reich and in Spain, who did quantify lives lost in terms of piles of possessions left behind. Once again, excess must stand for absent truth. This fundamentally mundane concern, the leftovers from a meal, demarcates the intersection of fantastic and magical consumption and the ordinary concerns of everyday, albeit horrific, life. The dreamy space overlapping both the real world and fantasy place encapsulates both the known facts of the dominant order, and everything lost from the archive and institutional memory in the "gap" that is trauma. The eons of murder committed by the shriveled creature aligned with the imagery used to represent the Fascist Francoists, cannot be sufficiently

represented and accounted for. The absence left behind by the disappeared cannot be properly quantified, but the size of that absence and all the other lost pieces of the historical record of trauma can be figured through the abundance and excess of the "traces" and "rumors" left behind.

The image of the pile of shoes so intensely brings one back to Holocaust photography (some of which I discuss at the opening of this chapter) that the viewer cannot help but consider their understanding of historical atrocity in the context of the fantasy narrative. However, instead of simply reinforcing the *de jure* and *de facto* denial practiced in Spain regarding the war, the pairing of this striking and loaded image and the fairy tale narrative works to illuminate the ways in which the historically absented truth of a "lost" period continues to "cry out" even through the dream and fog of fantasy. The undeniable connotations invoked through the framing and pan used in this specific shot, makes literal the bleed through of the irrepressible reality of the "missing" traumatic moment into the carefully ordered fantasy of historical repression. While the specularity of the Holocaust imbued the narrative of history both in the individual and the collective to endlessly testify to and name the "lacunae" of the conflict, the near-total absence of a comprehensive narrative of the Spanish Civil War destabilizes the foundations of every ostensibly settled claim the nation can make on its own past. That is to say, when not confronted directly, the blocked experience of national trauma must out, through an indefinable haunting or a return of the repressed. The closing narration of *Laberinto* describes what happens after the princess from Ofelia's story returns to the underworld, "she left behind little traces of her time on earth, which are only visible to those who know where to look." *El Espinazo del Diablo, El Laberinto del Fauno* and *Inglorious Basterds* force the viewer to search for "the traces" within the larger, incomplete tapestries of fraught historical periods. They refuse to reproduce the dominant versions of events, and instead use radical, irreverent methods to register the incomplete nature of historical representation. By assaulting the viewer's expectations regarding the linearity and accuracy of institutional and cultural memory, each film creates the space, language, and practice necessary for the performance of historical production—production which must ultimately be a purposeful act of will performed in perpetuity.

Chapter 2: Spectacular Absence: Horror and the Ephemeral Monster

As so many horror films often do, David Robert Mitchell's 2014 film, *It Follows,* begins with a murder. The film opens on a long shot down a sleepy suburban street reminiscent of *Halloween.* The camera pans slowly to screen right and lands on a panicked young woman bursting out of the front door of a nondescript suburban house. She runs headlong into the early evening, terrified and seemingly caught in a state of partial undress. As the would-be-victim runs away, the sound of her front door opening and closing once more, resonates from offscreen; danger follows after her.

However, the other half of the female victim-killer pairing never materializes. While the would-be victim continues to back away down the block while looking fearfully toward her house, the audience never glimpses her attacker. At first glance, one might expect such a seemingly incomplete chase pairing to disrupt its own generic structure. In fact, though the monster's body is withheld altogether throughout this sequence, it is the structure of the genre itself which assures the film's unbroken continuity and forces the viewer to project into the void and produce the threat themselves. I call this disembodied or randomized monster, the ephemeral monster.

The ephemeral monster is an often-disembodied figure in contemporary American horror that, I argue, gives form to traumatic absence and collective anxieties. The rise of the ephemeral monster—the monster or killer that has either an invisible or an arbitrary body which is not intrinsically related to the culture which produced it—signals a shift away from the genre's and the broader public's interest in the monster itself. The ephemeral monster appears (at least for a time) as an invisible empty space or a killer that is activated at random and not as a localized, specific object. Even more significantly, the ephemerality of the monster offers a new method for the representation of incomplete memory, missed bodies, and traumatic absence; the ephemeral monster possesses a paradoxically spectacular and empty body which serves as a placeholder that directs the audience to the absence at its center. That is, the ephemeral monster leverages generic rhythms and the (cinematic) attractions of the horror film monster to draw the eye not toward the creature itself, but to the absence it frames. By emptying the monster of its contextual markers and rendering it a purer signifier, the ephemeral monster horror film forces the viewer to reconsider the monster as an absence that has been given form. In its capacity to make us look, the ephemeral monster functions like a neon sign hung over neglected histories and traumas, gesturing to the void it represents. The ephemeral monster then, is not only an efficient signifier of that which is absent or missing, but one which can travel and be activated to encapsulate increasingly transborder, pan-linguistic anxieties. Through its delocalized body, the ephemeral monster can serve as the site for picturing the unspeakable and unrepresentable.

In his seminal 1979 article "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s," Robin Wood compares the figure of the monster to the world of "normality," the "boringly constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them."[53] He writes that the monster by contrast is, "much more protean, changing from period to period as society's basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments—rather as dreams use material from recent memory to express conflicts or desires that may go back to early childhood."[54] Wood's most basic conception of the horror film, "normality threatened by the monster," posits a rational and bland

[53] Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan…and Beyond,* 71.
[54] Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan…and Beyond,* 71.

world that exists to be disrupted by a monster necessarily structured by near literal markers for the anxieties of the culture which produced it.[55] Wood's formulation of the horror film is, in large part, structured around a correlative interpretation of the monster rather than a useful one. That is, Wood's interpretation of monsters that "clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments," implies the monster's purpose is to be read. The monster serves as a connotative device with an intentional form curated to draw on contextual meaning and signifiers that trigger an attendant response which must also be necessarily contextual. While Wood goes on to beautifully complicate and narrow his original prescriptive thesis, his implication that the monster is necessarily symbolic and coded for cultural specificity, loaded with the signifiers of its context, is particularly arresting in the current global moment.

The disembodied or de-localized monster is an effaced signifier for an a-contextual and ongoing global condition of networked trauma. Though the bedrock of horror film scholarship was largely founded on unearthing connections between the specificity of the monster to a particular and locatable experience of trauma or rupture, this kind of criticism is no longer sustainable in a globalized period of explosively expanded flows and exchanges-of everything from information to time to terror.[5657] In his article linking the figure of Godzilla to American and Japanese anxieties, resentments, and memories about the U.S. government's decision to use atomic weapons in Japan, Chon Noriega describes the creature and links the specificity of his body and weaknesses to his symbolic import:

> Like Godzilla, identified as a four-hundred-foot tall dinosaur marking a transition between sea and land creatures and aroused 'after all these centuries' by Strontium-90 (a radioactive product of H-bomb explosions), Japan in 1954 is a transitional monster caught between the imperial past and the postwar industrial future, aroused by United States H-bomb tests. directed at United States H-bomb testing in order to address a pressing concern at the mass cultural level.[58]

Noriega goes on to make an extremely persuasive argument about the afterlife of atomic anxieties in Japan as embodied by Godzilla, but it is important to note how the specificity of the creature figures in his piece. Noriega mentions the monster's reptilian (a sea and land creature) nature, his size, and his linkage to atomic power and destruction. The monster has diffuse and allegorical meaning, but Noriega's discussion begins with a framework grounded in analysis of the creature's bodily specificity, his chemical composition and physical look. The monster's body must be analyzed first, as being formed and influenced *specifically* and visually by the period/context that produced it.

In *The Monster Show,* David Skal similarly writes that the disfigured *Phantom of the Opera* (1925) symbolizes the "mutilation anxiety" experienced and aroused by the gravely wounded veterans returning from foreign wars[59]:

> …as Erik, the Opera Ghost, the cause of the ruined face was never made clear, and the Phantom of Paris could easily have taken his place in the *Union des Gueukes Cassées*—the French brotherhood of bashed faces (or, more literally, "broken mugs"), a group of

[55] Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan…and Beyond,* 71.
[56] Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror.*
[57] Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film,* 46.
[58] Noriega, "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When 'Them!' is us," 68.
[59] Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror,* 68.

> more than 5,000 disfigured veterans, members of which traditionally led the Armistice parades.[60]

Skal makes a direct connection between the facial transformation and disfigurement of the Phantom and the first generation of veterans returning from the first mechanized war, World War I, with grievous, often facial, physical injuries. For Skal, the monster's physical body necessarily draws from and informs the context from which it emerges. Again, the kind of visual and referential analysis Noriega and Skal perform is both intuitive and essential, but the contemporary monster has shifted and continues to shift in the new millennium. How then, do monsters with indeterminate and randomized bodies make meaning when their bodies do not appear to be explicitly marked and formed by the anxieties of the moment that produced them? The ephemeral monster destroys the specificity of the monstrous body and recreates the aporias of shared cultural anxieties through its "missing" or indeterminate body. As the concept of the nation-state has become increasingly diffuse in a post-9/11 period of mobilized global imagination, the monster, too, has become increasingly intangible and arbitrary.[61]

Ulrich Beck writes that globalization "denotes the processes through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities, and networks."[62] The dominance of the nation-state is weakened by transborder and transnational flows diffuse loci of power (economic, political, social, cultural). It is this system of networks, flows, and processes which is refracted through the monster. The inhuman threat in the horror film produced by the global moment not only defies categorization and violates boundaries but posits the increasing irrelevance of the border itself. The monster has often acted the embodied herald/border, a warning sign demarcating cultural and socially "liminal" spaces where one can cease to "be," where one's subjectivity is threatened by a closer alignment with the "other."[63] As the geopolitical and cultural boundaries structuring contemporary global exchange and flow are eroded, the monster has also begun to exhibit an increasingly permeable border of body and meaning. In the world of "normality" as broadly defined by Wood, the creature became a (specific, often literal) repository for the unsavory, and the embodiment of Cohen's aptly named "category crisis." As Cohen notes, the creature itself could be read as the "harbinger" of contextual ruptures to the "classificatory order of things."[64] In the current period of elided boundary and disruption of historical "order" or category, the monster has shifted once more, but in a tectonic sense. Unwilling to capitalize on easily exported local cultural markers and anxieties, the monster has become a more generalized placeholder for more dispersive anxieties which cannot be concretely traced to a single source and considered in perfect political or geographical isolation. As global flows of people, capital, and culture defy geopolitical demarcations, anxieties too become mobile and communal, even viral. The monster's growing ambiguity is an attendant and necessary byproduct of the growing influence of a shared global imaginary and flows of anxiety.

The proliferation of new forms of media have contributed to such processes. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that modernity's electronic mass media have "transformed everyday discourse" and had a profound effect on the "work of the imagination."[65]

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[60] Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror,* 66.
[61] Beck, Ulrich. *What Is Globalization?*, 4.
[62] Beck, *What Is Globalization?*, 11.
[63] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 12.
[64] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 6.
[65] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 3.

He contends that electronic media offer, "resources for experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies for all sorts of persons" and "resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project." According to Appadurai, the "work of the imagination…is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern." For Appadurai, mass media allows the average person to access a global imaginary, a translocal transnational space of invention. The globalized world is characterized by official and transgressive flows that have as their product the migratory exchanges of cultural production and imagination. He writes:

> The idea of fantasy carries with it the inescapable connotation of thought divorced from projects and actions, and it also has a private, even individualistic sound about it. The imagination, on the other hand, has a projective sense about it, the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression, whether aesthetic or otherwise. Fantasy can dissipate (because its logic is so often autotelic), but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action. It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape.[66]

Not only can the individual contribute to the production of the collective imaginary, but they are newly able to embed the global within their regional or local context. The individual can access and *be accessed by* the global. Against the background of the horror film then, the flow of nonspecific and decontextualized anxiety (which may have been local in nature but which is increasingly subject to export) is reflected in the missing form of the contemporary American monster. A creature engineered to embody local *and* global anxieties, is necessarily ambiguous and generalized.

Universal horror films and creature features through the midcentury often favored a formal style which at first hinted at the monster, and then represented it through brief glimpses of its body. During this period of American horror cinema, monsters were kept offscreen until the tension and the anticipation of a visual confrontation with their bodies became unbearable. This mode of representation was structured as such both for artistic reasons and practical ones, to heighten tension and draw on earlier forms of horror media, while finessing the technological and production limitations of special effects techniques at the time. The slasher subgenre of the 1970s saw a rise in the popularity of the point-of-view technique (named the "I-camera" technique by Carol Clover)[67], which embedded the viewer within the killer to watch through their shared gaze. Although this technique, most notably used in films such as *Halloween, Psycho,* and *Friday the 13th,* did temporarily keep the killer offscreen, it was a formal choice designed to force the viewer into an intimate and uncomfortable optical alignment with the killer rather than to engage in a kind of disembodied generic play. The ephemeral monster stands apart from such conventions in its indeterminate body and the ambivalence which structures it, as represented through the monster's invisibility or the arbitrariness of the body it occupies. As we can see in *It Follows,* the ephemeral monster matters only insofar as it creates a void the viewer is irresistibly compelled to study and fill. The monster withholds its physical form at first, transforming empty spaces into loaded ones and diminishing the import of its own body.

In his essential book *Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, Noel Carroll unintentionally presages the future erosion of the monster's supremacy when he writes, "Of

[66] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 7.
[67] Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 45.

course, "Dracula," here, is merely a heuristic device. Any old monster X can be plugged into the formula."[68] Carroll's interest is in the pleasure-principle-defying paradox of horror film viewership and the art-horror monster, but as a byproduct of his work he anticipated the ways in which the monster would fall to the power of this formula, to the seductive lure of genre. The horror genre experienced a popular and critical resurgence at the dawn of the new millennium, during the coming of age of spectators and creators raised on films such as *The Last House on the Left* (1972)*, Halloween* (1978)*, I Spit on Your Grave* (1978)*,* and other hyper violent and oftentimes nihilistic horror films. Beginning with *Scream* in 1996 and continuing more or less uninterrupted today, horror entered another postmodern, self-referential moment. Not only was the very structure of the genre tested (and ultimately strengthened) with the rise of the downer ending horror film intended to skewer viewer expectations (*Drag Me To Hell* [2009]*, Cabin Fever* [2002]*, Dead Silence* [2007]*, The Final Destination* [2009]*, The Mist* [2007]), but the genre itself became distilled into shorthand rules directly referenced in many horror films (*Scream* [1996]*, The Cabin in the Woods* [2011]*, Behind the Mask* [2006]*, Candyman* [2021]*,* etc.). Horror viewers *had* to come forearmed with a certain degree of familiarity with genre rules to experience every Easter egg and payoff built into hyper-self-reflexive horror films from the late 1990s until today. It is this self-reflexive moment of reinforced genre structure that played a role in producing the ephemeral monster, a monster which still maintains the rhythms of genre and the spectacle of the horror monster while reaching a level of distillation so efficient that its body is rendered arbitrary and without the individualization and meaning that might come with the monster's embodiment within a discrete character.

For all his prioritization of genre structure over the monster itself, Carroll offers a productive structure through which to consider the "before and after" of the monster's transformation. That is, Carroll emphasizes the genre's engagement with disgust and story structure over its relationship to the monster, but he also gestures to the "discovery" narrative as a defining pillar to his own understanding of the genre, indirectly reconstituting the importance of the monster and its particular body. Carroll writes that the discovery narrative in horror is, "an appetite of the mind…whetted by the prospect of knowing the putatively unknowable, and then satisfied through a continuous process of revelation…there is a special functional relationship between the beings that mark off the horror genre…the disgust that such beings evince might be seen as part of the price to be paid for the pleasure of their disclosure.[69] He continues, "the impossible being does disgust, but that disgust is part of an overall narrative address which is not only pleasurable, but whose potential pleasure depends on the confirmation of the existence of the monster as a being that violates, defies, or problematizes standing cultural classifications.[70] For Carroll, the import of the monster is in the disgust it arouses and the puzzle it presents to the characters and viewers, a problem to solve and a discovery to confirm. However, through his invocation of category and the irresistible investigatory impulse toward the monster, Carroll implicitly reimposes the monster's preeminence. It is the creature's category trouble and specifically impure body which drive the twin engines of genre as Carroll reads them, disgust and discovery. The monster must be formed in a perfect and uncannily polluted way so as to violate *correctly* to produce disgust, to confound and, in doing so, to encourage investigation. Even in his genre project which is only tangentially interested in specific monstrous bodies, Carroll offers his reader an entry point through which to consider the strength and function of a

[68] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, 27.
[69] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, 184.
[70] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, 186.

monster which cannot produce disgust, or is at least ambivalent about doing so, as a result of its intentional non-specificity. Jeffrey Cohen writes that one might consider the monster through its refusal to participate in the "classificatory order of things,"[71] but what if the monster does not refuse and what if the order of things itself is thrown into question?

In his article on what he calls the "realistic horror film," (what is now known as the slasher film), J.P. Telotte writes, "Basically, monsters do not a horror film make; rather, the special ingredients are an emphasis on our perceptual participation in the world depicted, often accompanied by a 'perception imagery,' underscoring the film's concern with the manner in which we see the world and our place in it."[72] Here, Telotte appears to render the monster's specificity irrelevant, as they "do not a horror film make" since monsters are only the "special ingredients" in the horror film. Still, Telotte indirectly positions the horror film as a process in search of a *specific* monster. According to Telotte's description of the spectator's relationship to the horror film, "*our* perceptual participation in the world depicted…the manner in which we see the world and our place in it," constructs the genre as a process of mediation and translation through which "our" world must be cycled in order to be apprehended. He claims that the genre is best understood through the viewer's desire to apply the monster's body and the sublimated themes of the narrative to their own "world and [their] place in it," Telotte reinscribes context and specificity to the genre he seems to initially intend to ambiguate. He continues, "Starting from what is conceived to be our normal world, the realistic horror film seems to evoke a sense of otherness…which, we are told, has its source in ourselves. As its horrors gradually emerge from the very fabric of our society, from our families, even from within our spirits and psyches, we become fascinated with this newly revealed dimension in our lives."[73] Once more, Telotte reconsecrates the monster as a signifier that makes meaning through its embodiment of immediate and intensely (socio-cultural) contextual markers. Telotte does not allow for the irrelevance or arbitrariness of the monster because the ephemeral monster form had not yet been formed in the postmodern and increasingly self-aware turn of the genre in the global, post-9/11 moment.

In her fascinating piece "Black Screens, Lost Bodies," Laura Frost analyzes American news coverage of 9/11, its effect on the post-traumatic United States and its influence on the horror genre across the decade. She argues that once the bodies disappeared from American news coverage of 9/11, when the corpses and falling bodies were cut away from and edited from footage of the terrorist attack beginning on 9/12, editorial repression locked the American psyche in a kind of stasis, a neurotic condition of incomplete confrontation, acceptance, and mourning. Frost writes, "Mainstream representations of 9/11 constructed a particular relationship between spectacle and viewer, presenting selected elements of the events while withholding others. Although this mode was meant to protect people from the most upsetting images of 9/11 devastation, the strategy resulted in representations that remain stalled in the preliminary stage of suspense and confusion."[74] Frost goes on to argue that a mode emerged in some horror films produced during the following decade, which saw horror films invoke 9/11 imagery in the context of different narrative horrors (disease, Lovecraftian nightmares), to offer audiences the

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[71] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 6.
[72] Telotte, "Faith and Idolatry in the Horror Film," *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, 22.
[73] Telotte, "Faith and Idolatry in the Horror Film," *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, 23.
[74] Frost, "Black Screens, Lost Bodies: The Cinematic Apparatus of 9/11 Horror." *Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, 14-15.

completion, the bodies necessary for them to work through their lingering neurotic state of suffering left unresolved since 9/11.

This chapter certainly owes a great deal to Frost's conception of looking and trauma, and her effective binding of horror and trauma theories neatly avoids pathologizing the nation while analyzing the symptomatic threads running through the horror genre after 9/11. However, this project challenges her assumption that the wound of shared trauma can *still* be considered apart from a global chain of traumatic ruptures; that trauma can be closed, can be resolved *at all.* This chapter theorizes the figure of the ephemeral monster in part to answer this very question, to consider shifts in the horror genre and to link them to the 9/11 moment not because 9/11 must be considered the root of every subsequent cycle of horror, but because 9/11 was specific in its mediation, its import to a global superpower, its spectacle, and its occurrence on the precipice of a determinative digital and global moment. At precisely the moment when borders were increasingly elided by processes of globalization, media images became viral, time was exploded, and a superpower was wounded and traumatized on the global stage. Emerging networks of digital technologies and social media platforms were (to borrow from *The Cabin in the Woods*) "binding" the world together, knitting far flung people and regions together with mixed results while diminishing the dominance of the local, from institutions like the church to the state itself. I propose that this confluence of events, of projected fears and viral trauma, catalyzed an ongoing, consuming, and unbreakable continuum of global anxiety, a chain of human history to be encountered not through knowable and containable chronological events, but through the gaps between links, missed moments of traumatic (structuring) absence. Aporias of lost bodies and unspeakable moments became the rule, no longer the exception. Aporias created by missing and lost bodies and unspeakable moments became the rule, not the exception, following 9/11. Loss and absence are obviously primal conditions, but their occurrence within the context of a digitally connected, spatio-temporally collapsed, projected, mediated, world order has transformed trauma into an irresistible and ongoing precondition of *human* life on a global scale and the 9/11 moment marked the *end* of isolatable trauma on the global stage.

The ephemeral monster then, is a symptom of the exploded world order. The monster is humbled, brought low and hollowed out. It ceases to signify itself. It's meaning is temporary, mobile, importable, and downloadable. The monster is the fleshy beacon which invokes the rules of formalism and the flows of genre to direct the eye in a look that produces the monster's own effacement. The monster of older American traditions of cinematic horror was structured through culturally specific markers and contexts and it was an object of anticipation and satisfaction. The monster was always imported from the margins beyond the screen and re-centered in a body that was eminently readable and linked to the context which produced it. For example, once its claws give way to a full-bodied and muscular humanoid fish hybrid, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) directly opposes the stifled and sexually repressed period it encounters through the film's scientists by absconding with female lead, Dr. Kay Lawrence. More recently, the folk monster of the Guatemalan horror film *La Llorona* (2019) is first encountered through the sounds of her mournful, disembodied crying in the distance; she must eventually take on a physical form so she can punish her murderers and stand as the indigenous body irresistibly tied to the genocidal colonial moment that produced her.

The specificity of the monster's body in these films undermines its translatability, accessibility, and potential as a receptacle for ambiguous and fluid viral terrors. As Adam Lowenstein writes in his discussion of the ethical implications of representing traumatic historical moments through horror films, "subordinating artistic representation's potential for

communication to its responsibility to history, however reassuring in the face of irresponsible representations, defeats the possibility of making trauma matter to those beyond its immediate point of impact." Here Lowenstein gestures to the limitations of mediating artistic representations through the confines of an ethical lens, but I would push his analysis further to consider the limitations imposed by a contextual reading of the monster's body and, indeed, of trauma itself. Lowenstein's conception of the limitations on artistic representation imply that these constraints can neuter a given text and its ability to make "trauma matter to those beyond its immediate point of impact." I argue that trauma *cannot* be limited to those within its immediate point of impact. This is not to say that all trauma everywhere matters everywhere, but that all collective traumas (in networked societies at least) are projected alongside and imbricated with other large-scale traumas to varying degrees, even if they are ignored by other communities in the network. That is, the ephemeral monster is a symptom of a new world order of trauma in which trauma *resists* confinement and exclusive localization (barring special cases of completely remote societies) because of their circulation via digital media. Traumatic ruptures, catastrophe, and collective anxieties must be considered as definitionally diffuse and more thoroughly mediated, global, and exportable than at any other point in history. Images of traumatic events and suffering are eminently viral and mobile, are increasingly unbound by the restrictions of space, time, and even language as they migrate across social media platforms. The ephemeral monster emerges in the history of the horror film to address the non-localizable nature of the traumatic event, its ability to circulate and resonate globally. Indeed, the ephemeral monster's missing body renders contextual and linguistic systems temporarily precarious.

I would like to return to the opening scene of *It Follows.* The film's ephemeral monster does not exist just offscreen or in the audience. Instead, the killer is clearly a locatable object of fear, but one which is represented through an ambiguous empty space. As far as the viewer knows, the terrified victim is running from literal nothingness. As the sequence will end not with any glimpse of the monster but instead the mangled body of its victim, it is the process of genre formation which must create the "condition of the monstrous." The sequence's musical score gestures to the visual absence of the monster from the first moment. At the precise instant the victim runs out of her house, the music sweeps in to signal the menace normally embodied in the monster and discordant tones instantly transform the victim's run into a chase, filling the void created by the missing visual. The gears of genre have begun to turn—flawlessly—even though the monster has ostensibly missed its cue. The absence of the classical iconography and fleshy body of the creature—or even a glimpse of such—does nothing to destabilize the process of horror. The efficient machinery of genre propels and shores up an otherwise untethered representation of ambiguous and unstable communal anxieties. As the sequence continues, the soon-to-be victim runs a circuitous path back to her front door, carefully avoiding a yet-unseen threat at the center of her loop. Still, a visual encounter never materializes. The missing monster's paradoxically spectacular (because its absent presence is carved out by camera movement and the fearful look of the terrified woman) and invisible form crystallizes the non-necessity of representing trauma and historical rupture through closed systems and localized, embodied figures. The structural referents and formal conventions, the gears that propel the horror film engine, still fit neatly together despite the monster's noticeable absence, and they continue to grind smoothly and gesture to the way in which the function of the creature has transcended its form.

The film's conceit is revealed fairly early on once the film's main character Jay, is infected by the titular "it" (the curse) which "follows." The film's killer is a malevolent force

that is transmitted (or transferred) from an infected victim to an uninfected one through sex. The force has no body of its own and instead appears as random strangers that follow its victim (at a steady, inexorable, brisk walk) until he or she transmits their haunting to someone else through sex or until they are killed. Then the cycle begins anew. Finally, and most importantly, the following force cannot be seen by those who have never been infected. Interestingly, once Jay is infected, the audience is as well, and they, too, are able to see the lurching figures most of the other characters cannot. The lore of the creature, then, retroactively accounts for the strangeness of the opening sequence, for the aporia that structures the character's and the camera's tense, circling movements. Here, the monster oscillates between an incorporeal form and a corporeal one, between absence or randomness and localized, arbitrary presence. This oscillation between forms directly addresses the horror genre's generic efficiency and process. The monster is both anyone and no one at all times.

In his essay, "A Genealogy of Monster Theory*,"* Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes, "Monsters…may be considered a kind of language, a way to give symbolic shape to and communicate affect and experience. The body of the monster is a text expressing human fear and desire—one language we speak through is monsters."[75] Weinstock points to the essence of the monster, its semiotic potential, but still frames its meaning-making as necessarily bound by a specific and limited network of signs (language). Weinstock gestures to the symbolic import of the monster, while still positioning it to be read or interpreted and considered within a syntactic structure. I contend that within the subgenre considered here, the monster has undergone a paradoxical shift as it has transitioned into a purer sign within a diminished contextual framework. The monster has become a "glocal signifier," a sign which borrows a folkloric tradition of accessibility (exportability) and marries it to a delocalized, newly networked, primal anxieties. This particular cycle of contemporary American horror has shifted toward a ritualized formalist generic play coupled with a radically a-contextual and diffuse monster.

Jeffrey Cohen offers seven potential "theses" one might apply to the contemporary horror film's monster. Cohen's project is to offer the reader seven potential theses for "reading" the monster, thereby reading culture.[76] In thesis number two, he suggests that the monster "always escapes" and can only be understood in its absence and through its propensity to shift form and location.[77] Cohen notes that "monstrous interpretation…must content itself with fragments."[78] Cohen points to the "signifiers of monstrous passing" which come to stand for the monster's body: footprints, talismans, teeth, etc.[79] It is noteworthy that even though thesis two seems to free the viewer and the monster by gesturing to the ways the monster will "shift" over time and accommodate new meaning and connotations, Cohen's thesis in fact continues to imply the necessity of returning to a close reading of the monster and its "signifiers." That is, even when Cohen offers an analytical method which honors the ambiguity of the monster and its "propensity to shift" to accommodate its context he still does not go so far as to allow for the possibility of a decontextualized creature, a monster capable of pervasive, globalized, cumulative trauma that splits across contexts and socio-cultural formations and historical contexts to address the ongoingness, the ubiquity of violent rupture and historical change.

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[75] Weinstock, "Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory," *The Monster Theory Reader*, 20. ,
[76] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 4.
[77] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 4.
[78] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 6.
[79] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 6.

Cohen's argument still implies a certain essential reading process which must occur to make meaning through horror genre films. Even in critical horror theories which have as their thesis a recognition of the monster's role as symbolic, there exists a persistent return to reading the monster's body as necessarily meaningful and laden with cultural signifiers. In truth, the monster in the global moment is insistently transitory and random. Local and global ruptures are no longer externalized and exorcized or examined through literal and specialized fleshy creatures, but by creatures and ghouls that make use of an ephemerality that is not evasive in Carol Clover's sense, but almost dispassionate and indifferent in its absence. The contemporary horror film monster terrifies not as a literal and embodied return of the repressed, but as an apathetic crystallization of decontextualized rupture that resists being read. The arbitrary nature of the globalized monster speaks to the virality characterizing the global "flow" of generalized and de-localized anxiety and dread. The monster has been divorced from the local contexts and structures which produced it as a result of both market forces (selecting for easily exported films) and increasingly communal global flows of anxiety enabled by digital media. Ironically, it is the anti-local and diffuse glocal ephemeral monster which is the most accessible and unconstrained by the barriers of language, institutional limitations, etc. The ambiguous glocal monster is a visual signifier of the "noninstitutional" and "unrecorded" and yet at the same time functions as a sign stripped of specific inherent meaning, only to be activated in service of far-flung and diffuse global anxieties. That is, the monster becomes the vehicle or signifier through which shared anxieties, from the specific and local to the universal and primal, can be expressed. What is significant about my intervention is not the rather simplistic notion that monsters represent meaning beyond themselves, but that the new wave of ephemeral monsters are not required or expected to be local or specific *themselves.* The anxieties they signify may or may not be intensely local and specific or regional, but the monster itself does not need to be physically related to or marked by the anxieties it represents. The ephemeral monster is a random object through which meaning is *accessed not made,* through the space the monster creates through displacement and *not* a fleshy body to be read.

The ephemeral monsters inhabiting Drew Goddard's 2011 film *The Cabin in the Woods* and *It Follows* haunt the very genre from which they emerge. Both films feature monsters which are somehow both purer as signifiers and bearers of symbolic meaning, while also being less concretely connected to the specific anxieties they mine than their forebears. That is to say, the creature that has been so frequently analyzed in terms of its tangible and often material relationship to the socio-historical rupture it exploits has passed into an era of globalization that has distilled it into a purer signifier which, while connotative, does not bear inherent *necessary* meaning but simply references an all-pervasive dread arising from persistent trauma. To represent the unrepresentable, traumas which are simultaneously transitorily viral and local, the monster produced during the global and networked era of the first decade of the 21st century has been severed from the tradition of specificity. To represent transborder/transbodied rupture, the monster has become an object which relies on its own specularity to gesture to the eroded and "missed" place of locality while simultaneously refusing to signify in the mode of the classical movie monster's practiced specificity.

Many horror films have had at their center elusive, ephemeral, or sporadically incorporeal creatures, from the title characters in *Dracula* and the *Invisible Man,* to Michael Myers from *Halloween.* The ambiguity of the contemporary horror film creature differs however, in the way it actively resists being read. Neither is the creature understood via the traces it leaves behind nor

is it interpretable through its physical markers when it returns. Instead, the creature exists as pure, spectacular absence, a function and process of form emptied of its own inherent meaning.

At first blush, it would seem that *It Follows'* back-loaded exposition could explain away the work of imagination and production through the absence the film opens with, but while absence and ephemerality are very common features of different kinds of monsters (ghosts, possessions, unseen psycho killers) genre cannot account for the seamless orchestration of camera movement, performance, and score which "process" in spite of the monster's absence. That the film withholds the metatextual "investigation"[80] associated with the ephemeralitiy employed in these older traditions and instead pushes forward through its horror narrative, signals that the formlessness of its creature is rooted not in an active evasiveness to be investigated and broken down, but in its nature as a signifier that resists attachment to a referent that offers inherent symbolic meaning.

Indeed, while the structural components of genre speak to the ways referents can illuminate each other, the very absence of the core bearer of meaning in the ephemeral monster horror film should destabilize the system. Instead, the streamlined and inherently decontextualized threat of the altogether withheld creature highlights the ways in which the generic processes of horror and imagination have displaced the viewer's need and desire for embodied specificity and symbolism. The ephemeral monster is a brutally efficient master of discourse and self-determination that rejects localized cultural production and feedback. In a horror film that so heavily relies on the generalized narrative of its horror rather than iconography, the monster capitalizes on and perpetuates a flow that is necessarily and somewhat paradoxically both accessible and elusory.

In his landmark study of nation formation, *Imagined Communities,* Benedict Anderson analyzes how the rise of mass media changed the ways in which communities/nations conceive of themselves and their position within an increasingly dispersive network of individuals through the print media of the newspaper. Anderson writes, "Beneath the decline of sacred communities, languages, a fundamental change was taking place in modes of apprehending the world, which, more than anything else, made it possible to 'think' the nation."[81] According to Anderson, while the cultural institutions and individuals comprising the nation were becoming more decentralized and diffuse, the rise of mass media pulled the collective together once more through the work of cultural (and political) production and ritualized repetition. The nation was at once the structure of the state and the product of a shared imaginary. Anderson located the "birth of the imagined community of the nation" in the "…basic structure of two forms of imagining…the novel and the newspaper."[82] Anderson continues:

> The significance of this mass ceremony—Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers—is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned? [83]

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[80] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, 100.

[81] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 22.

[82] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 23.

[83] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 35.

For Anderson, this simultaneously and paradoxically individual and collective ritual marries the practices of individual consciousness with cultural production and reinforcement by the masses. In describing the individual's "practice" of the religion of print media, Anderson subtly gestures towards the form's elision of the body. In his discussion of the "lair of the skull" being penetrated by the reader's "awareness" of his participation in a communal ritual, Anderson argues that the media functions as a space for cultural and political production, but in so doing he also implies the transcendence of the individual boundary. The "awareness" that crosses into the "lair of the skull," enacts a reciprocal pull on the individual and enables his distillation into the group through his participation in media. The individual has some agency within the process of collective imagining, but they also become subject to the erosion of their symbolic (local) import. Anderson continues:

> At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. [84]
>
> …fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. [85]

Both Anderson and Appadurai are interested in rehabilitating some of the troubled concepts imbedded in terms like "globalization" and "mass media." Anderson presages Appadurai's discussion of the global imaginary and also anticipates the productive potential inherent in the continuity between local and imagined community. Still, this participation and "seepage" between the local and collective anonymous communities, necessarily erodes the individual border. This increasingly permeable boundary, accounts for the increasingly irrelevant and transcendent body of the horror film monster.

Note the closing scene of *It Follows.* Jay has passed the curse on to one of her best friends, Paul. The final scene of the film opens with a slow traveling shot down the sidewalk in Jay's neighborhood. The framing and cinematography mimic a point of view shot, as the camera meanders slowly down the street, accompanied by soft diegetic ambient sounds of nature. In the following medium shot, Jay and Paul hold hands as they walk slowly down the street. The empty sidewalk stretches behind them in shadowy darkness. The scene cuts to a medium shot of the sidewalk ahead of the couple once more, this time keeping them in frame as the camera follows like a disembodied third companion. The couple divides the frame symmetrically in half while at extreme screen right, a neighbor slowly and rhythmically rakes his lawn and the sounds he makes add a metallic rasping sound over the track of soft nature sounds. The next shot is a close up of Jay and Paul's interlocked hands. In the following shot the sequence shifts back to the establishing long shot of the couple walking down the sidewalk, only this time in the extreme background a shadowy figure wearing the exact same clothing as Paul, follows behind. The figure neither runs nor stands still, but instead follows slowly, seemingly with purpose. Still, the figure's intentions are never clarified, and his appearance and path might be coincidental (the monster is anyone and no one). Jay and Paul amble forward, interminably slowly for an extended 11 second shot as the metallic scrape of the neighbor raking interrupts inordinately loudly, breaking through the soft diegetic sounds of nature. Finally, the sequence cuts to another two-shot behind Paul and Jay, but slightly tighter than the earlier medium shot. At the last moment

[84] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 35.
[85] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 36.

just before cutting to black, the camera seems to rush imperceptibly forward, hinting at the potential threat lurking behind the oblivious pair.

The generic formal conventions employed in this sequence once more hint at the formlessness characterizing the generalized anxiety the film exploits. The use of jarring sounds, an approximation of a point of view shot, and a deep focus shot which makes one hyper aware of what lurks beyond the confines frame, once more invokes the monstrous threat without necessitating its physical, fleshy appearance. The creeping figure far off in the background, clearly represents the unsettled, insidious nature of the film's unique conceit and "viral" creature. Still, the fact that the physical representation of the creature threatens even as it is potentially "missed" in the background or even "late," speaks to the well-oiled generic machine which still rushes in to fill the void left by the absent monster. The creature itself is irrelevant as an agent loaded with culturally or historically significant context. That it produces anxiety while appearing as little more than a silhouetted human figure is a testament not to the potency of the creature, but to its function as a mere silhouette employed to demarcate the region in which the tensions it exploits reside. That is, the creature is all spectacle, objectified visuality intended to draw the eye and attention to the empty vessel which itself stands only to embroider the void into which cultural trauma and rupture are corralled. The creature is not used to make literal meaning or to be physically read and analyzed for culturally specific signifiers. Instead, the monster functions as a neon signpost to draw the eye and point to the indeterminate figure waiting to be invested with the anxieties of the moment.

Drew Goddard's 2011 film *The Cabin in the Woods* makes clear that the ephemeral monster need not always be invisible or disembodied. The film is something of a love letter to the slasher subgenre of horror. While not quite parodic, the film is extremely self-referential and rife with genre metacommentary while still functioning flawlessly as a proper horror film. The movie features a group of five "archetypal" college students driving to the middle of nowhere to spend a relaxing week in a remote cabin. The plot could easily veer into cliché, but the framing narrative of the film elevates it far beyond this fairly rudimentary storyline. From the first, the viewer is made aware that the group of students is not in control of its own destiny. That is, from the stereotypically aggressive locals the group encounters, to the friends' awful survival skills, to the cabin itself, every decision and occurrence brought about once the group is "selected," is manipulated by a shadowy corporate/governmental agency working to manipulate the events of the trip. While the classic slasher narrative (young people violate moral codes against imbibing and sex before being violently punished by violent killers) unfolds "upstairs," an entire corporation of office drones, engineers, and executives work "downstairs" in order to manipulate and motivate the events happening in the slasher narrative "upstairs." For example, the "chem department" drugs the group's marijuana and hair dye to "slow cognition" during critical decision-making. While the pseudo-corporate-government organization at first appears to be using the "ritual" of the slasher encounter as some kind of capitalist effort, the dénouement reveals that slasher-type encounters are fairly regularly occurring in the world of the film and are used as a kind of sacrificial cleansing ritual wherein the same kinds of groups make culturally specific ritual sacrifices all over the world to persuade slumbering titan-esque deities from destroying the planet.

Cabin seems diametrically opposed to *It Follows'* sterile withholding, as it makes liberal and gleeful use of as many fleshy and varied iconic and archetypal creatures as possible. Although the film is self-reflexive throughout and includes many winking nods to classic horror imagery and narrative tropes, it too, only gives the appearance of an interest in the cultural

referents historically activated in horror films. On one hand, the film functions as an homage to its mythic, literary, and cinematic forbears in everything from its title to its conceit to its menagerie or "stable" of nightmare creatures. On the other, a film about a group of teens being terrorized and murdered at a cabin in the woods does not on its face sound like a film concerned with confronting and destabilizing the genre it mines. In truth, however, the film invokes the mechanisms of the horror film and ends by revealing the ways in which the genre has moved beyond the specificity of the creature into a function in service of process.

Early on in *Cabin,* the friend group decides to investigate the basement of their cabin and discovers a collection of seemingly random antiques and oddities. Each friend gravitates toward a different object. Dana, the protagonist, reads aloud from a horrifying old diary and unleashes the monsters the group will have to evade. Setting these events in motion (the trip, the cabin, the monsters) are a group of practiced but ordinary office drones and scientists who occupy the framing narrative for the horror film in progress. Each object in the basement is figuratively tethered to a specific monster in the scientists' stable of nightmares and the characters have chosen their own fate through their selected object they selected. That is to say, each monster has been randomly assigned to an intermediary and seemingly innocuous object by the scientists; by selecting an object, each protagonist unknowingly also selects the monster that will pursue the group. By highlighting the randomness and irrelevance of the monster's specificity, *Cabin* reconstitutes the horror film as a process in search of any monster, any terrifying placeholder that might be used to explore ever more generalized and delocalized anxieties/systems.

Just before the monster selection happens, the workers in the parallel narrative hold an office betting pool of sorts. A white board displays a detailed chart filled with the names of different monsters followed by the names of the "departments" and individuals wagering on their likelihood of being invoked during the ritual in the basement. For example, a demonic ballerina is invoked via a ballerina music box, while blowing a conch shell summons a carnivorous merman. By tying each creature to its constituent object and a specialized invocation ritual, the monster archive seems to imply the symbolic import and necessity of each one, as if each "punishes" and fulfills a different collective "need." In fact, the "stable" of "something nightmares are from," makes explicit the degradation of the monster's aura. However, the concept of the stable severs the monsters from their local sites of production and meaning and activates them in service of a cold, corporate archive, a globalized network. Locally produced creatures imbued with culturally specific meaning become merely functional when drafted in service of a broader global patchwork of delocalized anxieties. Local context and cultural specificity, then, are situated within a larger process of production reliant on the mobility and generalized version of monstrosity harnessed through global exchange and flow. Ritual and locality become the irrelevant and unbidden byproducts of a newly streamlined process, divorced from the demands of town, region, or nation. The monster may begin, even in a contemporary postmodern film, as a symbol with specific meaning (or at least as a necessary triggering signifier), but once invoked, it enters the realm of the easily reproducible and transferable.

A return to Appadurai is helpful here: he pushes back against the thread of globalization theory which deems it an eliding process, one which inscribes the generalized global over the local. He writes,

> …globalization is itself a deeply historical, uneven, and localizing process. Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization…if the genealogy of

> cultural forms is about their circulation across regions, the history of these forms is about their ongoing domestication into local practice.[86]

The fleshy monster is rendered largely inert in terms of its own connotative meaning, though it emanates as a specific and ritualized icon object, and is then diffused across a system structured by universal inputs. Instead, its import lies in its usefulness. The idea of the monster "stable" is introduced not through the horror tropes of campfire stories or cultural legends, but instead through the orderly and meticulously categorized betting system employed by the "upstairs" office workers. Before the "stable" of nightmare creatures in the film make an appearance in the diegesis, they are alluded to as different office workers call out and record their wagers, laying bets on the monsters they expect to be invoked during the cabin ritual. Once Dana performs the Latin reading ritual which awakens the "zombie redneck torture family," the Buckners, the narrative cuts back to the office level. All the losing gamblers groan as Ronald the intern and the maintenance department are declared the winners of the office pool. The white board cataloging the monsters and bettors is quite large and charts every creature in the "stable" represented by an accompanying object in the cabin basement. The grid lists an orderly expanse of legendary and fantastic creatures, everything from "sexy witches" to an "angry molesting tree" to the disconcertingly named "Kevin."

The introduction of the "stable" concept is interesting in that it is performed through the whiteboard and its association with the organizational departments within the industrial system (zoology, creative) rather than by organically emerging from the horror/cabin narrative. This reclassification of the fantastic and horrific under the umbrella of industry, commerce, and institutional process is not simply metacommentary and gentle postmodern genre play. Appadurai reminds his reader that globalization need not be a "homogenizing" process and that it often ends in transmitting remote cultural forms and media to other far-lung localities where they are reconstituted. No doubt the local has increasing access to and agency over a broader global imaginary, but the regulating force of the global imaginary overwhelms. Divorcing the monster and that which it initially symbolized from the cultural specificity which produced it results in the "nostalgia without memory"[87] Appadurai argues need not be an inevitable product of the process of globalization. The postmodern, which still relied on the objects and iconography of the past, gives way to the "postnostalgic"[88] and a system caught at the moment of change, in the *process of translation,* the ambiguation of the cultural origins of the ephemeral monster.

Toward the end of the film, when the corporate drones in the office narrative realize their counterparts in different countries all over the world have failed in their rituals of sacrifice to appease unseen gods, the narrative briefly cuts to a bank of screens which show the different rituals practiced globally. A fire rages on one screen while a giant ape-like creature lies dead in another. Immediately before this survey, however, the audience is treated to a seemingly unmotivated cut to what feels like another film. The scene involves a Japanese ritual featuring a group of school children menaced by a classically and specifically Japanese monster: a white-faced woman with long dark hair. While the film clearly references the history of cultural specificity traditionally associated with and coded in the monster, it recontextualizes the nature of the ritual that defeats the wraith. Appadurai defines ritual as the processes through which a given society reproduces itself. The endless colonization inherent in the project of transforming space into place, must be performed in perpetuity, in large part through ritual and cultural

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[86] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 17.
[87] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 30.
[88] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 31.

practice.[89] When the localized historical and cultural iconography of the Japanese wraith are divorced from their context and mobilized in service of a corporatized project of the state, the Japanese spirit is transformed into an aesthetic object to be read for generic purpose. The image is exported, emptied of its local significance, and activated as an aesthetic signifier to act as a placeholder for increasingly generalized and transborder anxieties.

The Japanese scene begins as a film within a film and for a moment, the cabin and the "puppeteer" office narratives fall away. The film cuts to the final stage of the Japanese ritual, where the innocent school-children vanquish the angry female spirit haunting them and transform her into a "happy frog." For a moment, the viewer forgets the larger framing device and engages with the spirit narrative on its own terms. The transformation, the ritual singing by the girls, and the schoolroom itself, all invite the viewer to search for the markers of cultural context hidden in the sequence. As the children burst into cheers, however, the scene cuts to a medium long shot of one of the puppeteers shouting expletives at the monitor. The film has pulled the viewer back out of the Japanese "film" and reframes it within the confines of the small screen. By bringing the viewer back into the office space, the film re-positions the Japan sequence within the context of the global process of mayhem captured across various television channels. The cultural specificity of the locally produced creature is diminished and the wraith becomes merely functional when placed within a broader global patchwork of delocalized anxieties manufactured by a global corporation.

Local context and cultural specificity then, are situated within a larger process of production reliant on the mobility and generalized version of monstrosity harnessed through global exchange and flow. Ritual and locality become the irrelevant and unbidden byproducts of a newly streamlined and devotedly efficient process, divorced from the demands of the local, the work of cooperative imagination and representation. Again, Appadurai is helpful here for understanding the monster's increasing interchangeability; he writes:

> The past is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting to which recourse can be taken as appropriate, depending on the movie to be made, the scene to be enacted, the hostages to be rescued. All this is par for the course, if you follow Jean Baudrillard or Jean-Francois Lyotard into a world of signs wholly unmoored from their social signifiers (all the world's a Disneyland). But I would like to suggest that the apparent increasing substitutability of whole periods and postures for one another, in the cultural styles of advanced capitalism, is tied to larger global forces, which have done much to show Americans that the past is usually another country.[90]

His words would seem to stand directly at odds with a reading of this sequence as "unmoored from social signifiers" as Baudrillard and Lyotard might argue. Instead as Appadurai might contend, the monster's meaninglessness does not gesture to a broader loss of meaning via signification at large, but instead a global virality and transborder ambiguity.

This theory of the absent/ephemeral monster does not in any way imply the contemporary cinematic monster as the harbinger of the end of certain modes of structural, generic, or cultural analysis. Nor does this chapter regard either the flows of globalization or their effect on the work of (nightmarish) imagination as a negative either in terms of global discourse or aesthetic practice. Instead, this chapter carves out a niche in which horror theory can consider the structures, objects, and functions of genre alongside and in tandem with the conspicuous and

[89] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 183.
[90] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 30.

undefinable flows that define the era of globalization and its imaginary. Appadurai writes that "locality is fragile." While the ephemeral monster of the current moment might suggest the ways in which specificity and locality are being eroded by the waves of global flows, it can also point to the ways in which the steadiest practices of form and aesthetics can be rededicated to the contexts that produced them. To efface the locality of nightmare, suffering, and haunting is to lose the signature excesses of repression, fear, and anxiety that are externalized by the local and which are symbiotically connected to the possibility of imagination for the local. The expression of the "work of the nightmare" in the global and local consciousness, is an indicator of the health and breadth of their respective spaces of imagination.

Chapter 3: The Resistant Mother in Millennial Horror

Possessor (Brandon Cronenberg, 2020) evokes horror through bodies in crisis, particularly the troubled body of main character Vos. Vos, the titular "possessor" is an assassin employed by a shadowy organization intent on carrying out kill contracts for extremely high value targets. Vos repeatedly undergoes a hybrid digital/surgical procedure which allows an assassin to implant their consciousness or "possess" their victim, always someone with access to the intended victim of assassination. This bio-tech-possession allows the assassin "passenger" to control the timing, circumstances, and aftermath of each job, all while never having to be physically present at the scene of the crime. Despite her virtuosity (her supervisor mentions that Vos is an exceptional killer) Vos struggles with her work during the film. When Vos's newest possession goes bad and her victim stabs through his own skull to remove the control device implanted in his brain, Vos's own body begins to seize and bleed, though she is far away in her company's facility. Once Vos in unable to control her host body, she begins to have violent hallucinations/fantasies of her real female body breaking down or becoming fused to that of her male host body. She often hallucinates that her face has become eyeless and disfigured as her sense of self is eroded due to the breach of border between both bodies. Vos's disconnect from her self, her body, and her agency is most intriguingly communicated through her troubled relationship to and performance of motherhood.

While Vos is an exceptional performer who can immerse herself in and project widely varying identities across gender, racial groups, etc., she proves to have radical performance anxiety in her personal life as she struggles to reproduce and enact the ritualized gestures of mothering. After executing a very difficult assassination in the opening sequence of the film, Vos returns home after her "business trip." The sequence begins with a medium shot centered on Vos, framing her between the sloping rooflines and garage doors of the rows of interchangeable townhomes in Vos's complex. Vos is formally transformed into a highly spectral object as she begins to "practice" mothering before facing her son and husband. Vos nervously puffs from a vape pen before trying out various greetings in different tones, smoothing and strengthening her voice, "Hi, darling…Hi, darling...Hi, darling…Hi, darling! What…what have you got there? Hi, darling! What have you got there?!'" She practices similar lines of ritualized intimacy tailored to her husband's expectations and then walks home as the identical townhomes on either side of the street look down on her, their windows reinforcing the consumptive public gaze that constructs expectations of maternal performance. The next shot emanates from within the family home, formally and symbolically aligning the viewer with Vos's son and husband and positioning them all as an audience primed to judge Vos's prepared performance of domestic maternity. That is, the family and the viewer are formally signaled to consider Vos apart from them and as a functional a-subjective body tasked to make a specific gestural offering to join the world of the family home. The boy and husband are at ease inside with the disembodied viewer's gaze between them, while Vos must earn entry to the home. She delivers her rehearsed greetings flawlessly, presenting only a perfect and curated gif of mothering, repetitive, recycled, and utterly predictable. Vos has correctly anticipated what greetings her family would offer and she responds with the perfect (in tone and content) rejoinders, wrapping them all in the comfort of her enthusiastic performativity. Vos is elemental in her violence, kinetic and intuitive, but her mothering is formally represented as an inorganic and counterintuitive empty gestural practice. That is, Vos's mothering must be forced and it is through her failures to perform *caring* that the film builds its maternal monster. The true source of horror in the film is the millennial maternal

monster. As this chapter will show through close readings of other contemporary horror films that exploit anxieties experienced and caused by the mothers they feature, the maternal horror film has transformed: no longer does the mother terrify through her consumptive and destructive appetites as in earlier iterations of horror film mothers. The dreadful mother in the post-millennium horror film threatens and provokes fear and anxiety through her absolute refusal (or sometimes inability) to perform mothering (soothing, holding, comforting, etc.) The millennial mother horror film exploits generational tensions and anxieties about performative mothering within the current highly mediated moment.

While the initial scene of Vos and her family hints at her discomfort with her mothering role, it is the bloody climax of the film that reveals the course of her professional and body trouble. Battling her host body for control, Vos is helpless as the body explores her memories and goes to her home to kill her family as leverage or revenge. After killing Vos' husband, the host, Colin, is surprised by an offscreen hand stabbing him in the throat. Colin looks up in shock and instantly raises his gun and fires a shot into his attacker. The sequence shifts to a medium close-up of Colin's attacker, Vos's young son, who looks on dispassionately. The following reverse shot doesn't find a bloodied Colin, but instead a resurgent Vos who reacts decisively by firing multiple additional shots into her own son. As control of the host body is denoted by which actor appears onscreen at a given moment, Vos's reappearance in this shot makes clear that it was she in control at the time of the shooting *and* that Vos had seconds to consider her actions before cutting down her son. After the final shooting of the son, Colin replaces Vos onscreen, as if Vos's work was completed not through her successful "possession" assignment, but through her annihilation of her family. Colin is left behind to die with Vos's son. The two fall to the ground facing each other, drawing their final breaths while locked in intimate eye contact. The sequence shifts to an overhead shot of both bodies curved toward each other in a broken circle as their puddles of blood slowly join and meet in the middle of their bodies. Vos does not reappear in Colin's body to mourn or comfort her son. She commits the ultimate act of violence against him and compounds her betrayal by refusing to reach for him, to comfort him. The blood pooling between both bodies crystallizes Vos's abdication and radical rejection of her maternal role, as a stranger's bodily waste stretches out to connect with her son and his spilled blood in the place where Vos seems to choose to escape.

Possessor offers a startling depiction of its main character's ultimate liberation through a violent act of filicide, as if her role as a mother interrupts her virtuosity as a possessor. Her failure to distinguish between her victim's bodies and her own is directly linked to her inability to reinforce her own subjectivity in relation to her identity as a mother. Vos's body confusion is a symptom of the bodily doubling/incompleteness produced through her stateless mother-body. Her own body is porous and subject to the determination of her child's and it is therefore chaotic and contaminating, foreclosing her easy re-integration of self, pre- and post-possession. Vos's final rejection of her mothering duties and sacrifice of her son to reinforce her own subjectivity is a fundamental refusal of the maternal obligation to cling, to grasp, to sacrifice the self in service of the child and the ritualized performances used to communicate gestural mothering in the social/public sphere that also contaminates the domestic home space.

In her groundbreaking text *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed was among the first scholars to conduct a critical analysis of the gendered horror produced through the female monster in film. As she argued in 1993, historically much critical attention had been paid to the figure of the female victim and less to the woman as monster.[91] For theorists such as Creed and

[91] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism*, Psychoanalysis, 1.

Linda Williams, feminine monstrosity was often produced through the threatened subjectivity of the child and the insufficiently differentiated mother. Think of the possessive specter of Mrs. Bates in *Psycho* (1960) or Carrie's fanatical mother Mrs. White in *Carrie* (1976). Even horror films produced during the 1970s at the peak of US divorce rates and a resurgent feminist movement generally tended toward suspicion of women and had at their core a deep mistrust of "over-mothering" and the child's potentially troubled relation to the symbolic. In contemporary or "millennial" horror films, however, a shift in the representation of the maternal has taken place: anxiety and disgust arise not from horror of the consuming mother of the past, but from the elusive, reluctant, and "resistant" mother of the present, one who is inappropriately "complete" apart from her child. Unsurprisingly, given the current context of the boomerang generation and the increasingly multigenerational American household, true terror lurks not in the figure of the mother who will not let go but in the mother who will not cling, will not readily offer herself to be consumed by her offspring, by patriarchal domesticity.

The contemporary (specifically, post-2000 or millennial) maternal horror film draws on the child (and the audience's) terror of the mother's successful individuation. Films such as *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) and *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018) take as their project not the reunification of the troubled mother and child (as Aviva Briefel argues) but instead a crystallization of the primal terror of the insufficiently accessible mother. The mother threatens not through her obsession with her children, but through her completeness apart from them. millennial maternal horror films feature mothers who are inappropriately divided from their children and emotionally remote. These mothers are reluctant to touch (that is, to make their bodily surfaces unconditionally accessible to offspring) and resistant to their own bodily and mental erasure. In these films, the mother no longer overwhelms but instead frustrates by clinging to and reinforcing the boundaries of her body and refusing to function as a literal and figurative liminal space. Rachel Cusk writes that birth and motherhood divides "women from themselves… When she is with them, she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself."[92] The mother in the millennial horror film provokes dread and terrifies through her refusal to encompass her children, her rejection of the expected biological and semiological continuity between them.

This chapter does not seek to imply a sweeping generational shift in all representations of mothers in contemporary horror films, but instead to highlight a distinct representational mode which seems to have emerged in this film historical moment in the life of a subgenre. While the horror genre has a long and storied history of troubled, failed, and resentful mothers in films like *Carrie, Friday the 13th, Sleepaway Camp,* and *The House on Sorority Row,* millennial maternal horror stands apart in the (oftentimes willful) ambivalence that characterizes the threat posed by the mother. Maternal horror is a well-established subgenre in horror, but recontextualizing this semiological discussion of motherhood and performative nurturing by focusing on millennial maternal horror films both makes clear this text's clear distinction between historical film theories of maternal horror as well as its project of exploring the maternal pole to the binary of the millennial "child." That is, popular and theoretical discussion of the "millennial" generation or child has often gestured to, but insufficiently thematized, their mothers.

In 2014 the Clark University Poll of "Emerging Adults" found that among surveyed adults between 25 and 39 years old, 81% of millennials reported somewhat positive to positive

[92] Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother,* 7.

relationships with their mothers.[93] 85% reported speaking to their parents in person or by phone, text, or email at least once a week. A surprising 37% reported doing so at least once a day. Millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996 according to the Pew Research Center, are living at home for a longer period of time after adolescence and have stronger and more connected relationships with their parents and perhaps most interestingly, are doing so in part because they choose to. The overriding narrative of the millennial experience has been shaped by the economic instability and precarity of the era in which they came of age. According to popular periodicals, millennials have been delayed and hampered in their efforts to "leave the nest" due to their first job and first home buying years coming during the Great Recession and were often forced to "boomerang" home to live with family, even if temporarily.[94] Naturally this period of economic strife limited the millennial generation's ability to achieve traditional markers of adulthood such as first-time home-buying[95] and parenthood[96] at the ages their parents did, but this generation is also the most enthusiastic about their physical and emotional proximity to their parents. This is not to say all millennials think or act in any homogenous way, but instead that they are likely significantly changed in terms of their relationships to their parents from the generations reflected in the classic "bad mother" films noted above.

This chapter will build on the groundbreaking theories in Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* to gesture to the ways in which specifically female monstrosity has functioned in the past so that we depart from the classic readings of the monstrous mother in the context of what amounts to a tectonic generational rupture. The previous chapter gestured to the ways in which culturally specific markers are increasingly irrelevant and displaced in the current global context. This chapter will perform close readings on the films *Hereditary* and *The Babadook* to tease out the nature of the increasingly liberated and, in a sense, diffuse mother starring in a certain sub-genre of contemporary horror films. The context of the new millennium is so radically different in terms of parent-child relations on all fronts, that it should be considered a fundamental rupture and interruption of the (filmic) primal processes that have often seemed so insensitive to context and representational evolutions. The millennial horror film demands that the mother "haunt" her child, as it places a great deal of import on her presence. However, through her withdrawal and withholding, the millennial maternal monster no longer acts as a utilitarian portal for her child to pass cleanly through into the symbolic order, but instead a distinct actor and agent of her own desire.

In her chapter "The Castrating Mother," Barbara Creed analyzes the film *Psycho* (1960) and writes that the monstrous mother's "perversity is almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behavior towards her offspring, particularly the male child." In "The Archaic Mother," Creed adds:

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[93] "New Clark University Poll: Grown-up Millennials are Closely Connected to Parents," ClarkNOW, https://www.clar know.clarku.edu/2014/11/06/new-clark-university-poll-grown-up-millennials-are-closely-connected-to-parents/.

[94] Fry, "It's becoming more common for young adults to live at home – and for longer stretches," *Pew Research Center*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/05/its-becoming-more-common-for-young-adults-to-live-at-home-and-for-longer-stretches/.

[95] Fry, "5 Facts about Millennial households," *Pew Research Center*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/5-facts-about-millennial-households/.

[96] Barroso, "As Millennials Near 40, They're Approaching Family Life Differently Than Previous Generations," *Pew Research Center,* https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/27/as-millennials-near-40-theyre-approaching-family-life-differently-than-previous-generations/.

> Fear of losing oneself and one's boundaries is made more acute in a society which values boundaries over continuity, and separateness over sameness. …Because the archaic mother is closely associated with death in its negative aspects – death seen as a desire for continuity and the loss of boundaries – her presence is marked negatively within the project of the horror film. Both the mother and death signify a monstrous obliteration of the self…[97]

For Creed, the monstrous mother, whether archaic or biological, is always made so through her over-mothering. The monstrous mother allows only the thinnest permeable membrane between herself and her child and in so doing, returns them to an abject state, semiologically troubled. The archaic mother is almost cosmic, a mother who is all encompassing and simultaneously without presence. She is the enveloping abyss, endless and existing everywhere and nowhere. The castrating mother consumes her child, returning him to her body through jealous absorption. The mother in the classic horror film terrifies by mothering through erasure.

In her article "Lost Objects and Mistaken Subjects," Kaja Silverman analyzes the significance of the transitional and maternal objects (the mother's breast, the blanket, etc.) disavowed during the Lacanian mirror stage.

> Subjectivity is thus from the very outset dependent upon the recognition of a distance separating self from other-on an object whose loss is simultaneous with its apprehension. …the object thus acquires from the very beginning the value of that, without which the subject can never be whole or complete, and for which it consequently yearns. At the same time, the cultural identity of the subject depends upon this separation. Indeed it could almost be said, that to the degree that the object has been lost, the subject has been found.[98]

These parallel dissections of mothering conducted by Creed and Silverman assume the persistent soundness of the psychoanalytic assertion that the construction of the child's healthy subjectivity relies upon the mother's objectification and his separation and distance from her.

Much of the current critical theory regarding cinematic maternal monsters continues to rely on an analytical framework grounded in the primacy of the infantile responses. Any consideration of the horror produced through the millennial maternal monster however, must be more closely tied to a discussion of historical context than ever before. This is not to say that one must rely upon a structural analysis of the individual monster, but instead that the millennial moment marks a tectonic rupture in the U.S. and, to an extent, global context. It is one marked by radical economic/social/generational shifts which occurred at an exponentially quicker pace largely due to rapid advancements made in technology and the processes of globalization. The child's individuation and awareness of their own subjectivity are no longer the effects of a threshold they pass through once, but instead part of an ongoing project/process of reassurance via ritual return to the mother. Thus, it is *only* the mother who can offer the child continual access to the symbolic as she stands as the constant transitional object. Silverman explains that the mother's objectivity must be perceived as a fixture at the fringes of the child's unconscious, to testify to the child's own subjectivity. In the early twenty-first, the production of the child as subject has become a much more mediated, recursive process. The child relies on their own "haunting" by the mother's objectification, her position outside the symbolic which reinforces the child's own subjectivity. Whereas most earlier analyses with an interest in a psychoanalytic framework relied on the Freudian assumption that while the child experiences a primal desire for

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[97] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism*, Psychoanalysis, 30.

[98] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 7.

the mother, they also resist becoming subsumed by and within her. These earlier analyses of over-mothering as monstrous assume the child's drive to flee the semiological jurisdiction of the mother. The millennial horror film however, produces horror through the mother's separateness, her dispossession of the child.

Hereditary is a graphic horror film ostensibly about a satanist cult's gradual destruction of a family in mourning. In truth, the film evokes horror in large part through generational trauma and failed maternal relations. The film begins with the Graham family (Annie, Steve, and their children Peter and Charlie) coming together to bury Annie's mother. Annie had an extremely troubled relationship with her mother, particularly as her mother forced Annie to go through with her first (unplanned) pregnancy against her will, and the conflict between the two looms large over the rest of the film, even though Annie's mother is gone before the opening frame. Her failed mothering haunts and final (indirectly) kills the family members left behind. After the funeral, the family reaches a state of tense stasis when a tragic accident breaks the family completely, leaving them vulnerable to and ultimately destroyed by the evil influence of insidious satanist cult members infiltrating the family during their time of grief. One of the most horrifying scenes in *Hereditary* features Annie finding her teenage son literally erupting with ants from his bodily orifices. This striking instance of body horror terrifies and repulses, but its effects pale in comparison to the violation and disgust posed by the mother herself. Roughly halfway through the film, Toni Collette's character Annie realizes her house and bed are being invaded by a steady stream of ants. She tiptoes down a dark hallway, following the trail of ants by moonlight, straight to her son Peter's bedroom. Annie looks on in horror as she finds ants first swarming on and then emerging from her son's eyes and mouth. She stares in openmouthed terror as the score swells with dissonant notes and straining strings. As she looks on in horror, the score drops away, replaced by her son's voice interrupting her trance. The camera holds on a close up of Annie's horrified face as her son asks in confusion, "Mom?" The son's off-screen call reveals that Annie is "sleepwalking" again and her vision is not real. Still, Annie's face remains frozen, locked in bug-eyed and openmouthed horror even as she looks at her normal, healthy son.

In her article "When the Woman Looks," Linda Williams notes that in the climactic unmasking scene from the 1925 version of *The Phantom of the Opera*, the viewer watches Christine exert a look of desire onto the monstrous body of the Phantom. For one brief instant, the monster is revealed to the audience with his back to Christine, who looks on in unknowing anticipation and desire. In that moment, the viewer interprets Christine's look as her desire for the monster she does not yet see, the creature with whom she must share some affinity. Though the plot and the viewer both understand that Christine has not shared in the viewer's look at the Phantom's reveal, they both collude to read Christine as desirous of the monster in spite—and perhaps even because of—his monstrosity. Christine's projected look and its accompanying emotional motivation and response override the facts of the scene and have potential beyond the temporal and objective context of the moment. That is, Christine's look has potency and meaning that persists beyond the motivations of the plot and directions of the diegesis. The plot motivations which direct Christine's gaze toward the subject she consumes help catalyze her look, but Christine's responses once her active searching intent is aligned with her initial unbidden glance, point to the ways in which she exerts power beyond the film frames which contain her. So too does Toni Collette's character family matriarch Annie, wield her own active and specifically maternal gaze beyond the bounds of her frame/body. Far from participating in her own subjective erasure through a system of gazes acted upon her as a woman, wife, and

mother, Annie subverts her limitations as a spectral/consumable object by exerting an active and searching gaze that recontextualizes her children (specifically her son.)

As Annie continues to look at her son in horror long after she "wakes," the close-up used to frame her face implies a kind of kinship or equivalence between Peter and the infested body Annie hallucinated. That Annie's look of terror persists albeit briefly, once she "awakens" from her trance, reveals not only her troubled relationships with her children, but the ways in which she resists mothering, resists acting as an affirming presence to her children. Peter's call, "Mom?" is a tendril reaching out for reassurance, but Annie's refusal to produce or even perform a reciprocal gesture of affirmation, crystallizes her unwillingness to "answer" her children through her mothering. Where Christine's look in *Phantom* elides the boundaries between the film frames to gesture to her own kinship with the monster and her desire for it, Annie's look, coupled with the mixed offscreen and onscreen sound, work to create an unbroken continuum of bodies between her living son and the infested son of her nightmares. More than the horrifying and repulsive image of Peter's abject form, it is Annie's continued look of horror exerted onto Peter which interprets his healthy, living, un-infested body as equally disgusting and threatening. Annie's look overpowers the narrative and the literal visual itself. Her look of horror fortifies her subjectivity through its active rejection of her child. By implying a kind of formal and functional slippage between monster and child, Annie displaces her own objectification and role as spectacle onto her son, thereby shoring up her independence and agency apart from him.

Once Annie wakes up, the scene cuts to a long shot of Peter's bedroom, with mother and son uneasily occupying opposite sides of the same frame. Annie and Peter externalize their fraught dynamic through their theatrical blocking, as Peter sits up in bed bent slightly toward his mother as she holds her body rigidly and always stubbornly away from her son. After some confused miscommunication, the son finally yells across the room, "Why are you scared of me?!" Once again, the mother resists offering her son reassurance as she pretends to mishear him. Over and over again, Annie responds to her children with a confused, "What?" Her children, Peter in particular, call to Annie, and she is unwilling to respond. While Annie's look overpowers and blurs the borders between shots, diffusing the boundary between son and monster, her voice is markedly restrained and controlled until she and her son slip into screaming. If Annie's look projects outward to influence Peter's objectivity, her voice withdraws and withholds to reinforce her cohesiveness away from him.

The structure of the sequence replicates the mother's rejection of the maternal, as the rest of the scene is structured in shot-reverse-shot style, isolating both family members within their respective frames. The viewer is offered yet another close-up of Annie's face as she looks at her son. This time in profile, Annie spits out "I never wanted to be your mother!" and instantly claps her hands over her mouth while leaning back slightly, almost imperceptibly. Annie continues sharing the unforgivable, eschewing the repression that is the hallmark of properly corralled maternal interiority: "I tried to have a miscarriage." Annie no longer covers her mouth, as she allows her worst confessions to spill out. She drops all pretense and confirms her son's worst fears.

Peter: Why?!
Annie: I was scared. I didn't feel like a mother, but she pressured me.
Peter: Then why did you have me!?
Annie: It wasn't my fault, I tried to stop it!
Peter: How?!

Annie: However I could. I did everything they told me not to do, but it didn't work…I'm happy it didn't work.

Peter cries out in primal terror, "You tried to kill me!" and for the first time his voice violates his mother's shot. His persistent crying continues as offscreen sound, even while the camera cuts back to the same medium close up reverse shot of his mother. The shots back and forth are shorter as both characters yell over each other, "Why did you try to kill me?!" "I love you, I didn't!" Here, the sound mismatch between the images of each character paired with the other's offscreen sound, reinforces the horror unleashed through the distance between mother and son. Both characters sob and descend into chaos as they suddenly both appear soaking wet. In an echo of a real memory Annie described earlier in the film, both she and Peter are soaked in flammable fluid. Annie sobs into the camera in one last close up, as a match is struck and lit by an unknown hand just beyond the edge of the frame. Suddenly the screen is engulfed in flames and Annie wakes with a start, realizing everything from the previous sequence was a dream.

To serve as the reaffirming object, the mother must sublimate her own subjectivity and remain boundary-less and insufficiently individuated. By clinging to her completeness apart from her child, the mother in the millennial maternal horror film denies the child the ritual of reconstitution they access via the mother's permeable and transitional body. Her refusal to respond, to cling, to clutch and even look, prioritizes the mother's subjectivity at the expense of her child's desire. The frustrated reciprocity between mother and child horrifies because it serves the mother's interests. Williams[99] and Ann Kaplan[100] analyzed a common theme in the maternal melodrama, which often featured an inappropriate or vulgar mother hurting or rejecting her child to turn them over to a "proper mother." The classic example of the self-sacrificing titular mother in *Stella Dallas* pretends to be a woman of ill-repute to scandalize her beloved adult daughter and send her into the arms of her seemingly perfect, high society step-mother. To sacrifice herself for her child's benefit is the mother's sublime narrative and symbolic function. Her injury of the child is merely a testament to the mother's correctness, as it is grounded in the assumption and confirmation of her adoration of the child. Still, representation of the mother's rejection of the child remains an incredibly taboo image and theme in western visual culture, particularly when the rejection is made in service of the *mother's* interests and desires. Maternal self-interest is a threatening and singular mode in millennial maternal horror.

Even before the traumatic and horrific events of the film unfold, Annie withholds and withdraws from her children in favor of building the static and perfect miniatures she constructs to replicate scenes from her life. Annie secludes herself in her attic office and peers into tiny dioramas of scenes that include the hospital room in which she gave birth to one of her children. On one level, Annie seems definitionally preoccupied by her maternal role and her connections to her children, even in her highly isolating and individual art, as all of her miniature scenes seem to consist of moments from her life as wife or mother. However, even her tools speak to the ways in which Annie uses different kinds of façade and performance to distance herself from her children. Annie quite literally objectifies her family members, the spaces they occupy, and their shared memories through her work. Her objectification allows Annie to both distance herself from her family by removing herself from her visual representations of their shared life, and to exert controlling power over each family member's miniature avatar, thereby transforming Annie into an omniscient "creator" with dominion over her family through *non-biological* power.

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[99] Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal,* 3.
[100] Kaplan, "Ann Kaplan Replies to Linda Williams's 'Something Else besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama'," *Cinema Journal,* 40.

Annie reconstitutes her family through her hands and her artistry, fortifying her self and producing a family beyond the border of her body.

More than once, Annie is shown working while wearing a headset with magnifying glasses. Ordinarily a symbol of hyper perceptive vision, here the glasses speak to the useful masquerade that is Annie's performative mothering. While the glasses allow Annie to better immerse herself in her work and adopt a point of view closer to the scale of her miniature scenes, they also function as another (socially acceptable) division between Annie and her family. When interrupted while working, Annie must divert her attention and turn to face her family. She sits and lifts her glasses to address whomever is calling her. This movement and mediated look is, of course, a product and necessity of plot. Still, Annie's lived-in ritual of movement and differentiated look seems to speak to the ways in which Annie has from the very first, segmented and corralled her time/gaze/attention in specific and unequal ways. Annie's clearest sight is reserved for her work. The strain of her minute practice taxes her vision and necessitates specialized eyewear, but it also creates a wearable private space which does not permit her family's entry and allows Annie to be bodily present and simultaneously remote and willfully inaccessible, her perception and attention is pointedly focused elsewhere by a technology that delimits the scope of her point of view to the miniature, material, inanimate objects at hand. To represent a mother working and having an art practice outside of her maternal duties does not necessarily imply she is purposefully emotionally remote and reluctant in her mothering. It is only that Annie seems to consistently reinforce subtle barriers between herself and her family, which code her art practice as at least in part crafted to allow her a distant aesthetic look at her family which also protects her from having to share or return their gaze.

In her chapter on *Psycho* from *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed posits that the threat of the clinging mother looming over the events of the film in *Psycho* is in part related to her omniscient and "probing" gaze at her son's innermost self. In her discussion of the power of the look exerted by Marion's mother's portrait and Norman's fantasy mother, Creed emphasizes the obsessiveness inherent in the woman's and especially the mother's stare.

> Marion says she would like them to meet at her place with her mother's picture on the mantel. Sam counters her stated desire with a question: "And after the steak do we send Sister to the movies, turn Mamma's picture to the wall?" The mother stands for social and familial respectability. It is interesting to note the way in which attention is indirectly drawn to the mother's look. It is as if she is able to watch everything from her position in the picture frame. Throughout *Psycho* woman is associated with eyes that stare and appraise. It is the maternal gaze that Norman most fears, the look that will lay bare his innermost secret desires, particularly his sexual ones; it is this aspect of the mother, her probing gaze, that he tries to "kill" in other women. The role of the mother as moral watchdog…[101]

Even for Marion, a woman with criminal impulses but otherwise seemingly normal, the mother's look has an omniscience that persists even in her absence. It is Marion who first brings up her mother's look when she asks Sam if he will still want to see her if her "mother's picture on the wall." While Creed focuses on the lasciviousness of Sam's gesture to the mother's moralistic look, it is Marion who invokes the objectified stare of the mother as an active agent which judges even when the mother herself is gone. So piercing is the mother's stare, that it continues to search even when only a facsimile of the mother's eye remains.

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[101] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism*, Psychoanalysis, 508-9.

In *Hereditary,* the mother's fearsome "probing" look is transformed into a concerted look away from her children. The mother rejects her position as "moral watchdog" in favor of a less effacing unified self. Her gaze is not split from her self, but is instead part of her integrated subjectivity. After the film's catalyzing accident, Steve the father visits Annie's workshop to find her creating an exact minute rendering of the scene, complete with her own daughter's head represented in a bloody scale model. Steve gasps, "Jesus Christ, Annie. You're not planning on letting him see that, are you?" Annie looks up without dropping her paintbrush and responds with a confused "Who?" Steve responds angrily, "Peter!" Annie remarks that, "It's not about him…It's a neutral view of the accident." Annie will go on to respond to her son in ways that are anything but neutral throughout the rest of the film, but this gesture makes evident Annie's regard for her own "neutrality" in reference to her family. In the midst of her primal grieving, Annie still clings most desperately to her incorporated self which persists so long as it can remain untethered from the emotional bondage of motherhood.

In one of the most disturbing moments from the film, Annie's failure to maintain any pretense of maternal performance transforms her into a conduit for the family's frustrations and desires. The remaining Graham family members sit down for a violently emotional dinner after the death of the daughter, Charlie. The unresolved simmering tensions present throughout the film since the family's horrific loss boil over as Peter finally provokes his mother out of her withdrawn silence. The scene opens in a medium shot from behind Annie's head. Peter and Steve sit on either side of Annie and the table area is illuminated by warm but weak lighting. The living room beyond sits in darkness. Each family member is shown in distinct medium shots, isolated from the rest of the family. Annie picks at her food in silence, never raising her eyes from her plate until Peter makes a purposeful clattering sound as he eats. Peter shoots brief glances toward both his parents as he slurps and rattles his way through his meal, almost compulsively loudly. Annie goes back to picking her food as if her averted gaze is an act of disciplined withdrawal, both literal and emotional. Peter glances at his father and then his mother again before commenting in a voice of concerted normalcy, "This is really good, Dad." Steve is framed in a medium close-up as he smiles at his son and says, "Thanks, buddy." The camera cuts to another medium shot of Annie, anticipating her reaction. She scoffs at her food and pokes it even more aggressively. The sequence cuts between three more back and forth medium shots of mother and son until resting on Peter as he asks his mother, "You okay, Mom?" Annie looks up startled and responds with the signature response she seems to be programmed to use with her children, "What?" The sequence wrings every drop of tension out of the following exchange by drawing out the shot lengths until the argument between Peter and Annie spills over from unspoken tension into outright hostility and rage:

Peter: Is there something on your mind?
Annie: Is there something on your mind?
Peter: It seems like there might be something you wanna say.
Steve: *Interjecting* Peter-
Annie: Like what? I mean why would I want to say something? So I can watch you sneer at me?
Peter: Sneer at you? I don't ever sneer at you.
Annie: Oh, Sweetie, you don't have to, you get your point across.
Peter: Okay so fine, then say what you wanna say then.
Steve: *Interjecting* Peter-
Annie: I don't want to say anything, I've tried saying things.

Peter: Okay, so try again. Release yourself.
Annie: Oh, release you, you mean.
Peter: Yeah, fine release me. Just say it, just fucking say it!
Annie: Don't you swear at me you little shit! Don't you ever raise your voice at me! I am your mother! Do you understand? All I do is worry and slave and defend you. And all I get back is that fucking face on your face!

That Peter and Annie seem to be having parallel conversations while arguing is no coincidence. In fact, as discussed previously, Annie generally responds to her children with the bare minimum of interaction. Until this point in the film, Annie hasn't said much to her children, save for a brief interaction with Charlie after Annie's mother's funeral. Annie's experience throughout the film has been largely oriented around her interiority. Annie's contention, "I don't want to say anything, I've tried saying things" is only half true. Annie has been largely inscrutable throughout most of the film and anything she has expressed has been communicated through absence and withholding. Indeed, her repetition of the question, "What?" suggests that she has sealed herself off from them perceptually, that initially she hears only the sound of her family's voices and not the content of their efforts at conversation. Peter's scream, "Yeah, fine release me. Just say it! Just fucking say it!" echoes his experience throughout much of the film as he has consistently attempted to reconcile with his mother rather than "release" himself from her.

Like *Hereditary, The Babadook* produced horror through maternal failure, frustration, and betrayal. In her article, "Parenting through Horror: Reassurance in Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*,"[102] Aviva Briefel argues that it is the mean mother scenes in the film which are the most painful to watch, not those of the violent confrontations between mother and young son. The film concerns a single mother struggling to raise her difficult son, Samuel, on her own after his father's death years before. From the start, the film delineates a clear division between the mother Amelia's insufficient attempts at proper performative mothering, and her true troubled relationship to her maternal role. The film features Amelia repeating the daily rituals of mothering, bedtime stories, dinner, etc., over and over again. The viewer is absolutely meant to settle into the ordinary and yet precarious system of performative rituals Amelia relies upon to help keep her accountable as a "good" mother. From the first, however, Amelia is resistant to becoming subsumed by her child. Her son, Samuel, is an energetic and often problematic child who tests Amelia's patience throughout the film. While struggling to raise her child as a single mother, Amelia is also trapped in complicated grief over her husband who died in a traffic accident while driving Amelia to the hospital to give birth. Thus, Amelia is trapped in a negative feedback loop of maternal alienation and romantic/sexual frustration. As Amelia's careful performance of her maternal duties becomes unsustainable and begins to fall apart, she inadvertently "lets in" the titular monster. *The Babadook* feeds off of the family's disconnect, possessing Amelia and allowing her darkest fantasies about killing her son to drive her. Ultimately, Amelia must reconsecrate her relationship with her son *and* surrender to her limitations as a mother in order to neutralize and trap the Babadook. The film begins with a beautifully, symmetrically framed and warmly lit sequence as Amelia performs monster check and bedtime story rituals with her son. After being awakened by Samuel's distressed plea, "Mom! I had the dream again," Amelia instantly rises from her bed to placate her son. The sequence cuts to a shot of Samuel and Amelia balanced on either side of the frame as they look under Samuel's bed. Amelia shoots her son a bemused glance before dropping his bed skirt back down in a transition to the next scene. In the next shot, Amelia flings open the closet doors as

[102] Briefel, "Parenting through Horror: Reassurance in Jennifer Kent's The Babadook," *Camera Obscura*, 14-15.

Samuel clings to her. Amelia's extended arms divide the frame horizontally and Samuel's grasp fuses their bodies into a single vertical column. Amelia gives her son another knowing glance and shuts the closet.

This initial shot sequence comprising the bedtime ritual is intriguing in that it constructs a kind of visual feedback loop between mother and son from the very first. Initially, Samuel and Amelia are separated and isolated in separate frames. The narrative and precise framing clearly draw the two together through the practiced mother-son ceremony they engage in, but formally they are also a mother and son at odds. Over the course of each of the four initial shots of Amelia and Samuel's exchange, Samuel attempts to successfully re-frame and reconfigure his mother's body while Amelia performs the (literal and figurative) act of mothering while simultaneously reinforcing her physical and symbolic resistance to her son's clutching need. After the initial shot—reverse—shot pairing, the sequence cuts to the two-shot of Amelia and Samuel peering under Samuel's bed. Samuel and Amelia are at once formally united and symbolically distant. The mother and son are brought together as a matched and balanced pair on either side of the same frame, yet Amelia subtly shores up her own remoteness from her son.

In the first two shots, Amelia leaps out of bed to meet her son. Her physicality is smooth and creates a clear directional flow toward her son in such a way that she seems to elide the frame dividing them. Conversely while Amelia and Samuel reside in frame together and balance each other as they investigate under the bed, Amelia is static and resolutely apart from her son. Her glance toward him is almost reluctant and her look coupled with her silence are equal parts comfortable and withholding. Amelia has transformed the bedtime ritual into a brutally efficient process which she can enact, step-by-step, without contributing her own essential and participatory investment. Her involvement in the bonding bedtime ritual invokes the classic image of maternal engagement, but the way Amelia has streamlined the process of reassurance allows her to perfect and thereby distance herself from the attendant emotional demands of her performative mothering duties.

As they stand staring into his open closet, Samuel desperately clings to Amelia's body while she grips the wide-open closet doors, as if to keep from returning her son's touch. Amelia never lets go of the closet doors and in doing so, she both physically governs the shot and transforms the "investigative" act as a performative process or ritual rather than an act with the intent of discovery. Samuel's obsessive grasp reads like a self-soothing act, one brought on by his relationship to Amelia's mothering than mere monster panic. That is, while each of these four shots brings Samuel physically closer and closer to his mother, he is nevertheless farther and farther away from her sphere of attention. Amelia shoots her son another brief glance, but while Samuel keeps staring at her with a mix of adoration and fear, Amelia looks away quickly and instead fixes her gaze on the camera. She offers the viewer a tired smile while Samuel looks up at her searchingly. Amelia does not engage in the kind of mutual mother-son obsession socially required for proper mothering and in so doing, feeds his terror with her well-defined, discrete individuality, the apartness of her performance for an audience kept at a distance. In other words, Samuel clings to and courts his mother's attention through her gaze, but Amelia only maintains a look with the audience.

Both "monster hunt" scenes involve Amelia and Samuel peering into the camera as they search, and therefore necessarily formally position the audience as the monster haunting the closet and space beneath the bed. As Amelia peers into the closet and under the bed, she is already subject to the dual gazes exerted by her son and the audience. Naturally, in narrative cinema, the viewer is usually positioned with a privileged omniscient viewing position to a point,

but their power is especially excessive when the camera's point of view aligns itself with the point of view of the creature. Amelia, too, is additionally liberated through her searching stare. Amelia's sustained look into the dark spaces of Samuel's room presages the eerie affinity the rest of the film will imply she innately shares with the titular Babadook. This gaze is a kind of double look, however, as Amelia also shares an intimate and private exchange with the audience beyond the monstrous one. This elision and gesture toward the fourth wall allows Amelia to subvert the nature of her specularity and temporarily throw off the aesthetic demands placed on her performance of mothering. Amelia rejects her son's gaze and temporarily displaces her seemingly indelible identity as a mother by prioritizing her individual privacy through her one—way look into the void of the audience's look. Her returned look at the audience offers a kind of gendered subversion and a private exploration of her desires separate and apart from her mothering role.

In her book *The Monstrous Feminine,* a work of feminist film scholarship heavily influenced by second wave feminism and the context which produced it, Barbara Creed analyzes *Psycho* and offers an essential analysis of the midcentury consumptive mother-monster who horrifies through her over-mothering. In her discussion of the final scene of the film*,* which finds Norman Bates in prison and finally completely subsumed by the "mother side" of his identity, Creed writes:

> In the penultimate scene of the film the seemingly indestructible nature of the power of the mother is made clear once and for all…Mother continues to see everything, even beyond the grave. Poison, burial, mummification – all efforts to destroy her power have failed. She stares out through Norman's eyes, her grin infusing his face with wicked delight. The grotesque image points symbolically to the kind of power the mother exerts over her son. In Norman's case she is so powerful that he gives up his own identity. She is not an external, separate entity; she is part of the child's inner self, the interior voice of the maternal authority. It is this dimension of the mother – her enculturating, moral function – that has generally been neglected in critical approaches to *Psycho*, despite the fact that a major part of the film's ideological and sexist project seems to be to demonstrate that, when left without a husband, the "true" representative of the law, the mother is incapable of exercising authority wisely. In *Psycho*, all boundaries that mark out the speaking subject as separate from the other have collapsed, giving rise to the terror of the abject self. In order to confront this terror, Norman becomes the parent he both loves and fears – the castrating mother of infancy. When Norman says to Marion: "Mother . . . isn't quite herself today", he was dead right. She was not. She was someone else. Her mad son—Norman.[103]

Creed's discussion here is particularly noteworthy in that it confronts specifically and necessarily female monstrosity and yet, it still relies on a decidedly Freudian understanding of the mother-child relationship and the pre-Oedipal mother. The films she cites, particularly *Psycho,* demonstrate an unmistakable interest in the troubled mother-child relationship. The consuming mother has been a classic archetype in horror since the genre's infancy. However, most analyses of the obsessive/improper mother figure is largely grounded in Freud's discussion of the child's infantile reactions and desire to separate themselves from the mother. In theory, the child grows with, and never quite loses, their primal fear of being reincorporated into the mother. Thus, in the Freudian structure, the child is fated to fear their own contamination by over-closeness with the mother, or to meet her unhealthy obsession with their own. What Freud denied and Barbara

[103] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism*, Psychoanalysis, 542-544.

Creed did not choose to thoroughly address, is the potential for female pleasure not in engaging in an overpowering form of monstrous mothering or in subverting gendered expectations of mothers, but instead in the pleasure to be had in rejecting the mother role altogether within motherhood itself.

In her book *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenting,* Jennifer Senior interviews and observes a sampling of different parents to form a portrait of the realities and difficulties of parenting in the current moment.[104] Senior peppers various anthropological, social, and economic studies of parenting habits over the last century throughout. Senior recounts the story of one mother in particular who tried to give her son "space" whenever he became reluctant to respond to her texts or engage with her. This mother admitted that she felt "miserable" during this process and that should would have preferred being ignored. Senior supposes that Beth must have found it, "uncomfortable not to give love." Still, Senior also cites a 2004 survey of over 900 working women in Texas which found that the group ranked child-care 16th out of 19 different activities in terms of which gave them the most pleasure. Senior also gestured to an ongoing study which found that parents ranked their children "low on the list of people whose company [they] enjoy."[105]

Here lies the crux of Senior's project and indeed the larger paradox in parenting and for the purposes of this paper, the ongoing paradox in representations of parenting particularly motherhood. To summarize in a slightly reductive way, Senior's project posits that parents experience extreme self-imposed and socially reinforced pressure to create "joyful" childhoods for their children at the expense of their own pleasure. This conclusion might seem quite intuitive, but only recently are texts like Senior's emerging to offer a different kind of framework through which to thematize parental pleasure. From the mid-century period forward, particularly in the 1980s, many studies of American children and parents sought to measure parental strain and "investment," but rarely prior to the new millennium were these studies intended to measure parental enjoyment. So, too, has a genre obsessed with the parent child relationship particularly the mother child relationship paradoxically refused to confront parental (dis)pleasure. To interrogate the possibilities for and limitations to maternal pleasure is to implicitly admit the possibility of a self-serving mother. That is, a discussion of pleasure allows one to begin to conceive of a framework from which to examine maternal pleasure, and therefore, choice or will. To permit a mother and her onscreen avatar to engage even in a discourse of pleasure is to create the circumstances in which she may begin to separate herself from her maternal role and the self-sacrifice seemingly inherent to the functions of mothering.

In his final summation of the Norman Bates "case," the psychiatrist brought in by the police analyzes Norman through Freudian psychoanalysis thereby explaining Norman's psychosis *and* displacing culpability for his actions onto his mother's failed mothering and implicitly laying blame for broader social ruptures and violence at the feet of women unwilling to fulfill their gendered and familial obligations. The doctor explains:

> He was never all Norman but he was often only mother. And because he was so pathologically jealous of her, he assumed that she was as jealous of him. Therefore, if he felt a strong attraction to any other woman, the mother side of him would go wild. When he met your sister, he was touched by her, aroused by her, he wanted her. That set off the jealous mother and mother killed the girl.

[104] Senior, Jennifer, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*.
[105] Senior, Jennifer, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*, 5.

The doctor refers to the classic symptoms of the Freudian Oedipus complex gone wrong. The "sick" Norman never achieved the adolescent benchmark of identifying with the father and essentially disavowing the mother. In missing this developmental milestone, Freudian theory posits that Norman would then be overly possessive of the mother. In both the psychoanalytic and media studies grounded in Freudian theory, very little attention has been paid historically to the seemingly inherent accompanying conclusion regarding *the mother's* obsession with her child. Freud and other psychoanalysts advised, rather as an aside, that a child could be stunted and harmed by an obsessive or overly involved mother, but rarely did these theorists link their study of the child's obsession with the mother to the level of her own interest in/obsession with the child. Dr. Richman rather neatly explains that "because he was so pathologically jealous of her, he assumed that she was as jealous of him." Both Freud and Lacan assume female perversion, parent-child identification and jealousy, and inappropriate (usually female) desire in transference, but neither they nor the horror films which exploit the dynamics they constructed, have sufficiently critically engaged with the *necessity* with which the genre views maternal obsession. That is, in the context of the maternal horror film, the overly involved mother is normalized as a natural extension of mother-love. Only the question of maternal pleasure and resistance can offer the viewer the opportunity to explore how authentic and purposeful a representation of maternal performance and process can ever be.

As Amelia and Samuel continue the bedtime ritual, they lie together in his bed. Amelia reads the story of *The Three Little Pigs* as Samuel cuddles close to her and stares intently at the pages of the book. On its face, the scene is the picture of idealized mother-son bonding. Amelia's voice is soft and her body accessible for cuddling. However, once the sequence cuts to night Amelia recoils from her son's literal and figurative unconscious embrace. Amelia allows Samuel to sleep in her bed, but while her acceptance of his presence is the "right" kind of performative mothering, she cannot bring herself to respond to his overtures to her. The first shot in the nighttime segment is of Samuel's foot digging into some indeterminate part of Amelia's body, as he wraps around her in a tight squeeze. The following shot is an upside-down image of Samuel's hand flexing compulsively as he sleeps, grabbing his mother hard by the throat. In the subsequent close-up, Samuel's sleeping face is still quite animated as he grinds his teeth loudly in his mother's ear. Finally, the sequence cuts to a close up of Amelia's emotionless face. She extricates herself from her son's grasp and slides over to the edge of her bed. Amelia and Samuel are once again balanced on the edges of the frame, symmetrical on either side of the wide gulf between them.

While Samuel has been broken down into his constituent annoying pieces, the sequence keeps his mother whole in a close-up of her exhausted face. Amelia works backward in removing the literal grasping tendrils of her son's need as she pushes him away. She pulls his foot out of her waist and slides over to curl up on the opposite edge of her bed, away from Samuel. In a medium long shot hovering over the shared bed, Amelia curls almost desperately away from her son while his body remains curved toward his mother. Still, the unreciprocated desire between mother and son seems to remain comfortably in tension, as their sleeping bodies are positioned at the edges of the frame, symmetrically balanced at the fringes of the anchoring void between them. As long as Amelia is able to create literal and figurative distance between herself and her son, she can successfully perform the other less tactile and effacing rituals of mothering.

In the subsequent reading scene the following night, Amelia essentially "unleashes" the titular Babadook by accidentally reading his story to her son at bedtime, invoking a violent haunting inside their home through her maternal insufficiency, her failure to anticipate the threat

posed by the unknown and haunted book. The scene is an indirect indictment of Amelia's mothering even as she performs the bedtime story ritual—a good mother would know her child's books after all, the film seems to imply. Though Samuel screams after being traumatized by the monstrous storybook his mother reads him, it is the mother's resistance to her mothering role which proves to be the source of horror even in this moment of monster terror. The horror in this sequence seeps out not from the monster book nor in the form of an overbearing and ever "watchful" mother, but from an inappropriately autonomous, independent, and disinterested one. The very performative act of reading the bedtime story becomes the vehicle for Amelia to reinforce her separation from her son.

While Amelia is performing the "proper" mothering mechanics of bedtime, the formal elements reinforce her distance from her mothering role throughout. Though both figures are cuddled close and side by side on Samuel's tiny child's bed, the faces of mother and son never once occupy the same frame during the reading ritual. Amelia's performance is oriented around the book and the symbols of mothering, which allow her to maintain her distance from her son and to reinforce a figurative boundary between them even as their bodies are touching. When Amelia begins to suspect the book is more threatening than it appears, she does shut it and try to put a stop to the reading activity. Only then does she look at Samuel as they are both shown in long shot. Only by ending the reading practice can Amelia allow herself (and the viewer, through her point of view) to look at Samuel. For Amelia to acknowledge and reach for Samuel while reading would be too compromising. She would surrender her autonomy and completeness apart from her child and her ritual performance would become something else—an actual act of mothering. She can offer either her look or her storytelling voice, never both at once. Her withholding is her safeguard against being subsumed and having her individual subjectivity erased in the process of reading or even soothing.

After the traumatic reading, Samuel falls asleep in Amelia's bed again. The film captures mother and son in a close-up that echoes their earlier post-bedtime story scene. Amelia stares straight forward in seeming hopelessness as Samuel's disembodied hand squeezes her neck tightly as he sleeps. However, this time the shot of Amelia's despondent expression is immediately is followed by an eyeline shot of the Babadook book. In this sense, the film offers an almost mirror image of monstrous mothering as the one discussed by Creed. Here, the mother terrifies in her refusal to overwhelm and consume, instead leaning in to her alignment with the monstrous in favor of her own freedom from the child. The deviance associated with the monster offers the mother the ultimate fear-inducing weapon to wield against her son: her indifference toward him.

Like Annie's in *Hereditary*, Amelia's relationship to her mothering is reluctant and evasive. She actively rejects her son's touch and slips out of his too-tight hugs. Reinforcing her own border and subjectivity is Amelia's most fiercely protected form of resistance and intimately tied to her jealous guardianship of her husband's memory. As in *Hereditary*, maternal rejection in *The Babadook* erupts from the mother's deviant self-interest. Her willful and anarchic resistance, to her maternal mandate to soothe to obsess to consume, transforms Amelia into the elusive monster haunting her son's childhood. As Amelia recovers her own unified body at the expense of her son's reassurance, she retreats to the periphery of the child's dominion. The millennial maternal monster horrifies by refusing to serve as the oceanic abyss against which the child would constitute himself. Unlike Mrs. Bates or even the alien queen who threatens Ripley in *Alien* (1979), the millennial monstrous mother horrifies not through easy violence and possessiveness, but by being unable to even muster enough interest in her child to consume

them. The antithesis of maternal love isn't possessiveness, hate or violence, but instead ambivalence.

Chapter 4: New Black Horror, Violence, and Black Subjectivity

Jordan Peele's directorial debut *Get Out* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 23, 2016, only three days after the inauguration of the new president, and reached wide release in February, just a month later. This was also almost exactly five years to the day after the death of Trayvon Martin, two and a half years after the shooting of Michael Brown and the period of civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, over two years after the shooting of Tamir Rice, and just over a year and a half after the death of Sandra Bland, among countless others over all the preceding years. It was this post-Obama, post-post-racial, potentially anarchic moment of mediated hypervisual violence against Black bodies and subjectivity, which produced *Get Out*. The film tells the story of Chris, a Black photographer who agrees to travel to the home of Rose, his White girlfriend, for a family anniversary celebration, only to find that there is a deadly hidden menace lurking behind the family's friendly façade. The Armitages seem like a friendly family (save for the racist microaggressions they and their elite friends levy at Chris.) In truth, have created a niche industry and amassed their wealth through the ritualized medical colonization of Black bodies. The family literally captures and auctions off Black (always Black, the film makes clear) victims who are buried in the "sunken place" of their own minds to allow their uber wealthy White owners to prolong their lives and engage in the ultimate forms of enslavement, gentrification and cultural tourism by having their brains surgically transplanted into the hollowed-out bodies of captive Black victims. Each member of the family has a role to play in the process: patriarch Dean is a brain surgeon who learned and inherited his neo-eugenics practice from his father, matriarch Missy "prepares" the host/victims by hypnotizing them and repressing their consciousness into "The Sunken Place" brother Jeremy is learning the family surgical procedure and hunting victims, while Chris's girlfriend, Rose uses love and sex to lure victims. Protagonist Chris must survive a kind of nightmarish rumspringa and a climactic confrontation with his sublimated traumas, as he wages a bloody battle to fight back against and defeat the racist family/system that would colonize his body. Racist imagery and ignorant villains are nothing new in race films, melodrama, crime films, or horror, but *Get Out* is particularly striking in the way it positions the Armitages as progressive color blindness run amok.

Get Out is revelatory as a horror genre film and it broadened the national discourse on race, but its most compelling intervention was in the film's construction of a (temporary) site for the production of Black subjectivity. The film weaves genre and American histories together, marrying midcentury body snatching tropes popularized in White media in films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Stepford Wives* (1975) to the literal legacy of kidnapping and bodily occupation undergirding the American project since the colonial era through the enslavement and annihilation of Black bodies. The histories of both American cinema and the nation itself are irrevocably bound up in the exploitation of Black labor, suffering, and humiliation. Since the birth of American moving images, Black life was almost[106] invariably represented through stereotyping mockery[107], the degrading mimicry of blackface[108], or demonizing images of rapacious, violent, or criminal Blackness[109]. To draw on

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[106] Field, "Archival Rediscovery and the Production of History: Solving the Mystery of *Something Good-Negro Kiss* (1898)," *Film History,* p1-33.

[107] Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present,* 15.

[108] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 15.

[109] Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present,* 16.

Afropessimism's conception of the "human" world, the cinema is an institution and a visual cultural practice predicated on and produced by a world order that defines the human (White) body against the leveraged nonhumanity of the (Black) body.[110] As such, cinema has historically lacked the expressive capacity to construct an imaginary beyond the anti-Black impulses and drives structuring the known world.

Mainstream horror films featuring (and almost never starring) Black characters (*The Shining, Night of the Living Dead, The People Under the Stairs, Candyman,* etc.,) have historically been made by White directors, producers, and studios (save for a few directed or written by Black artists such as *Blacula* and *Tales from the Hood*) and have more often than not invoked Black bodies solely to exploit their pain with little regard for their characterization (*Scream 2, I Still Know What You Did Last Summer, Halloween:* Resurrection). However, the current *resurgent* cycle of Black horror has not only exponentially increased Black representation across top level acting and production metrics beyond most if not all other genres of mainstream cinema in the 2010s,[111] but has also increased the instances (however brief and fledgling) of anarchic (naked) violence or violent adjacent acts (looks, smiles, pleasure responses) peppered throughout the current cycle of Black-helmed horror media (*Candyman, Trouble, The First Purge, Lovecraft Country).* For all the laudatory critical acclaim heaped on the new wave of Black horror media of the 2010s (*Us, Lovecraft Country, Candyman,* etc.) and especially *Get Out,* as products of an anti-Black world and media practice, popular narrative films cannot offer a totally radical and complete sustained visual or thematic repudiation of the global order which produced them. However, new modes of representation and identification newly practiced in contemporary Black horror films *coupled with* the genre's facility for spectacular violent excess, create fractures in the institution that produced them, forcing flashes of an imaginary of Black subjectivity through those fissures. The radically excessive violence of horror destroys the sanctity of the institution of mainstream cinema and its avatar, the (White) individual. It is during this temporary disruption of the sacred, that the audience experiences a concomitant realignment of their viewing position, not simply owing to the destruction of the physical White body, but the consumptive destructiveness temporarily loaned to Black characters. James Baldwin writes that to choose to identify with Blackness in mainstream cinema is a kind of heretical abnegation and renunciation of the self: "…*no one,* I read somewhere, a long time ago, *makes his escape personality black."*[112] The promise of escape through the cinema, through the pleasure it offers and the distillation of the self into the firmament, would be abortive if one's agency were limited to that of the Black body in the cinema and the reach of the Black body in America. American cinema, like the culture from which it emerged, positions Blackness as a condition to be repeatedly and ritualistically invoked and coded as other to reconsecrate the sanctity and preeminence of Whiteness. As Christina Sharpe writes, "…freedoms for those people constituted as White were and are produced through others' body

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[110] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,* 35.

[111] *Lovecraft Country* is a television series created by Misha Green with episodes written or directed by Cheryl Dunye, Victoria Mahoney, Ihuoma Ofordire, and Misha Green herself, as well as a Black main cast. Jordan Peele directed, wrote, and/or produced *Get Out, Us,* and the 2021 *Candyman* revival and each features Black majority casts. Justin Simien wrote, directed, and produced *Bad Hair* and Amazon released their exclusive film *Black Box* from Emmanuel Osei-Kuffour while Hulu included short films from Alexandria Collins, Stefan Dezil, Robin Cloud, Wanjiru M. Njendu, and Naledi Jackson in their "Huluween Bite Size Horror" collection. Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz directed 2020's *Antebellum* starring Janelle Monae.

[112] Baldwin, *The Devil Finds His Work*, 28.

legally and otherwise being made to wear unfreedom…"[113] The codification of Blackness as a nonhuman and unfree, is a foundational process for the construction/reproduction of Whiteness. Therefore, Blackness must find a visual means through which to acquire and possess agency, *specifically* at the expense of White dominance.

Blackness exists in the unsettled hinterlands beyond the protections and systems governing human life. It becomes transformed and repurposed as an abject space, paradoxically overdetermined through its sacrificial use value and formless as an ambiguous un-human condition. As Frank Wilderson writes in *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms, "*though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field…-is sutured by anti-Black solidarity."[114] Wilderson expresses deep skepticism that any systems or institutions produced by an anti-Black world order can offer a repudiation of and escape from that same system. Indeed, contemporary Black horror films like *Get Out, Candyman, The First Purge,* etc., offer flashes of anti-White supremacist insight, jokes, and signification through violence, the destruction of institutions and seats of power, and indeed of the state itself and its agents, but these moments often remain just that, flashes that are unsustainable in the face of the entrenched visual practice and use of anti-Black violence. As Wilderson writes,

> The violence of the Middle Passage and the Slave estate, technologies of accumulation and fungibility, recompose and reenact their horrors on each succeeding generation of Blacks. This violence is both gratuitous (not contingent on transgressions against the hegemony of civil society) and structural (positioning Blacks ontologically outside of Humanity and civil society.) Simultaneously, it renders the ontological status of Humanity (life itself) wholly dependent on civil society's repetition compulsion: the frenzied and fragmented machinations through which civil society reenacts gratuitous violence on the Black that civil society might know itself as the domain of Humans—generation after generation.[115]

Wilderson argues that Blackness cannot be understood through the lenses of "exploitation" or "alienation" as Blackness is a manufactured condition which situates one beyond the expectations, positions, and structures available to the Human. Blackness is reconstituted as the shadow necessary to position Whiteness within the light of the ordered world of reason. For Wilderson, Blackness is the site of abjection, the inhuman and fungible. The Black cannot become "alienated" from a system that has no place for them. The Black position beyond the Human is produced and reconstituted through ontological and structural violence that is both frenzied and made unremarkable through quotidian and perpetual existential ritualized practices of violence. If the world order must be reinforced through the abnegation of Blackness, then how can a visual system produced by that same order also allow for the production and representation of Black subjectivity? How could it produce a Black subjectivity stable enough to entice the (always constructed and addressed as White) viewer to (even temporarily) identify with it at the expense of their own affirming dominant viewing position aligned with Whiteness?

There must be a layered elision in any identification between Black protagonists and White viewers. In her feminist analysis of the limits of identification in narrative cinema, Laura Mulvey writes,

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[113] Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects,* 15.
[114] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,* 58-59.
[115] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,* 55.

> The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject. which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others. This mirror-moment predates language for the child. Important for this article is the fact that it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the 'I' of subjectivity.[116]

Mulvey (drawing on Christian Metz) cites the Lacanian infantile mirror stage in which the child projects perfection onto an external ideal double of themselves, their reflection. Mulvey gestures to the "matrix of the imaginary" that undergirds the viewer's relationship with the screen, the way the apparatus doubles the individual's early effort to articulate "the I of subjectivity." In the darkened theater, deprived of their own image reflected in the firmament, the viewer adopts the bodies onscreen as their surrogate, a more powerful and perfect avatar as their representative. Mulvey invokes Lacan and Metz in service of her broader feminist analysis which troubles the viewer's easy relationship with the identification relationship. She argues women are problematic bodies onscreen and are often objectified rather than active players in film and therefore, offer an unappealing site of identification for viewers, thereby limiting their attraction as ego ideals. This chapter will refer to identification throughout and in light of its interest in identification with Black characters, bodies, and *human beings,* will use the term to encompass primary and secondary identification. That is, as my argument will make clear in my case studies, narrative-motivated identification or plot-based appeals are irrelevant for my purposes. This chapter will put little to no stock in the authorial or superficial projects structuring the Black horror films I will gesture to, instead analyzing these films through the lens of the anti-Black world which structures them and corrals them into the realm of the non-human. When this chapter invokes the term identification, it is with the intent of obfuscating the barrier between character/actor/human subject, as Black lives can *never* overcome their troubled non-human status within the existing White supremacist order and are therefore *always* a site of doubled/troubled identification. The viewer's ability to "identify" with a Black character at the level of narrative is entirely shaped by their absolute and definitional inability and unwillingness to "identify" with (essentially imagine the subjectivity of) the non-human Black. Just as the Black human cannot escape their denied humanity within a White supremacist global order, a non-Black viewer cannot escape their access to the dominant anti-Black lifeworld and a privileged viewing position which protects them from descending into the "socially dead" world of Black non-life.[117] Every viewer touched by any mass media form is constructed and addressed through White supremacy. White supremacy is constitutive of our world; there is no escape from it and the network of visual cultures and meanings produced by that order. The camera-eye, narrative, and system of visual meanings created by and reinforced through mass media all imagine the viewer as belonging to the dominant order, to White life. Transracial identification then, is doubly troubled in that neither the viewer (always constructed/addressed as White) nor the human, will willingly disempower their viewing/life position by identifying with Black (non) life. How then, can cinema (here, Black horror) produce films that offer even a temporary

[116] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader,* 62.
[117] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study,* 38.

challenge to the art practice which produced it largely *through* alienating the viewer from Blackness?

While some works of contemporary Black-starring/produced media may gesture toward temporary rebellions through violence against law enforcement/agents of the state (*Queen & Slim*), the renegotiation of Black land ownership in the South (*Queen Sugar*), and violent encounters with corrupt economic and political systems (*Widows, Set It Off*), the system within which these films were made will not produce or permit its own downfall. As Wilderson argues, White supremacy removes the conditions of possibility for Black subjectivity; however, contemporary Black horror offers enough fantastic and specular upheaval to potentially crack the dominant narrative system of power and meaning that equates Whiteness with the human. Wilderson writes that even "slave films," or Black films, though they may seek to tell Black stories and use narrative activism to confront, reveal, and erode dominant anti-Black structures and practices, are unable to work outside the anti-Black system which ultimately structures the world that produced them. For Wilderson and other Afropessmist scholars, narrative film is simply another anti-Black system and to seek redress through the tools of the oppressor is impossible. He writes,

> If, as Afropessimism argues, *Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures,* then this also means that, at a higher level of abstraction, the claims of universal humanity that the above theories all subscribe to are hobbled by a meta-aporia: a contradiction that manifests whenever one looks seriously at the structure of Black suffering in comparison to the presumed universal structure of all sentient beings. Again, Black people *embody* a meta-aporia for political thought and action—Black people are the wrench in the works.[118]

This theory assumes that not only is the known world engaged in a perpetual production and reinforcement of anti-Black racist systems, structures, and power dynamics, but that these processes and structures are neatly and (almost) without exception reproduced through and across global visual cultures. Wilderson seems to indirectly invoke Arjun Appadurai's analysis of cultural/social reproduction here, aligning visual cultures practices with the broader repetitive and obsessive anti-Black violence used to mine Black objectification to yield White subjectivity. Therefore historically, while there have been flashes of agency produced in Black media across different genres and forms, these representations generally stop short of the systemic deconstruction and anarchic impulses necessary to generate the conditions necessary to produce the *potential* or conditions of possibility, for Black subjectivity. However, the increasingly complicated modes of identification offered in emerging contemporary Black horror, cause brief stutters in the flow of White supremacist discourses and practices which, in turn, create aporias through which brief, wild imagined glimpses of Black subjectivity can insidiously make themselves known, the screen against the intent and operation of the form itself. *Get Out* challenges and loosens the spectator's viewing position within the ostensibly neutral (White) dominant, by imbuing Chris's point of view with a degree of agency and enticing the viewer to allow themselves to be (temporarily) embedded in moments when Chris creates the conditions for the emergence of brief flashes of Black subjectivity.

Get Out astounded audiences in large part because of the myriad ways it confronted White viewers (often those who would consider themselves "progressive") with their own culpability in upholding and benefitting from a White supremacist world order in ways as varied

[118] Wilderson, *Afropessimism,* 15.

as White flight to microaggressions in language and gesture; but its most subversive element was the way in which Chris's point of view and subjectivity are imbued with agency and ultimately constructed through his use of violence against White supremacy. This is not to say violence itself is an absolute good or is always morally good or morally evil or even narratively productive. Indeed, from its infancy, American cinema established a visual and iconographic language which capitalized on and perpetuated a global White supremacist order by demonizing Black lives and coding Blackness as other, criminal, violent, sexually rapacious, deviant, and the object of White violence. To locate Chris's agency in his use of violence is not to imply violence as necessarily supremely empowering, but instead to suggest that Chris's use of violence to save himself and take violent revenge *invites* the viewer to identify with him as their Baldwinian "escape personality," to undermine the visual system which has historically positioned Blackness as a necessarily disempowered position with which one would not willingly align oneself. In short, Chris'ss use of violence elevates his character's agency beyond even the power (in the moment) historically enjoyed by the broader institutions he undermines (healthcare, law enforcement, higher education, etc.). Excess violence in contemporary Black horror is a necessary element to the construction of Black subjectivity, not merely as the salve of revenge through the plot, but as a tool for shifting the ultimate the form of agency in the horror text (the power of life and death) to the hands of Black characters. These characters construct nascent flashes of Black subject position through a new mode of identification that is *active* and not grounded in older modes of representing Blackness through the "spectacle of sufferance." That is, Chris'ss violent vengeance elevates his journey beyond the pitiable to-be-looked(cried)-at and temporarily erodes the borders between his point of view and the viewer's.

A turn to genre theory is helpful here. Carol Clover has famously written of her amazement when, during her first slasher film moviegoing experience, she observed viewers cheering for the murderous killer and then shifting their allegiance to align with the hero "Final Girl."[119] While I do not intend to imply equivalence between female-helmed horror and feminist theory and Black horror and Afropessimist or critical race theories, I am interested in identification as a kind of "gateway" to Black subjectivity not because Black subjectivity must be constructed through a White spectator or film form, but because forcing the viewer into an irresistible alignment and identification with Black protagonists as they engage in excess violence (physical and vengeful) against anti-Black violence and an anarchic disturbance of the order of things, both destabilizes the deeply ingrained history of limiting representations of Blackness in mainstream media to images of pain and suffering, and rejects the stranglehold White supremacy has on the moral instruction and visual codes structuring moving image art. Put another way, violent rebellion (often imbued with a degree of pleasure or satisfaction through the added revenge through violent excess plot) imbues Black hero characters with the power they temporarily commandeer from the dominant structures and order they assail, while also frustrating the viewer's assertion of their own dominance through a ritualized affect of pity.

As the privileged and untouchable status of the human is destabilized, Black subjectivity has renewed potential through the glitch created in the anti-Black world/visual order caused by this combination of threatened systems of power and new overtures toward (human) identification with Black bodies, agency, and violence. As the spectator is formally embedded in the protagonist's point of view, they are forced to witness and participate (albeit as a passenger) in the destruction of the systems which protect them at the expense of Black bodies. In a neat twist, Chris's destruction of the world constructed by the Armitages does not seek to enlighten or

[119] Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film,* 35.

move the (White) spectator, inspiring them in a call to arms for racial equality within the existing White supremacist system. Instead, the film's violent denouement embeds the viewer within Chris in a *helpless* alignment as he attacks their onscreen avatars. The viewer is seduced by Chris's power and then subsumed within him, separate but together. The film's project is not that of revealing White colonialism and bodily/cultural appropriation, but the destruction of the viewer's ability to separate themselves from the Black protagonist's wildest excesses of retribution and destruction. Chris is not in the sunken place, the viewer is, and it is only their sacrificial submersion which can free Chris. For Chris to exist, the viewer must be destroyed and "sunk."

Armitage matriarch Missy is charged with preparing Chris'ss body for the eventual implantation of his White owner's mind and during a warped "therapy" session, Missy hypnotizes him and traps Chris in the "sunken place" of his own mind. Missy uses the rhythmic sound of a teaspoon scraping against a delicate tea-cup as a kind of focus device to mesmerize Chris before ordering, "Now sink into the floor. Sink." Chris immediately imagines his adolescent self, sinking into his bed before his adult self emerges below on the other side of the frame inside a nightmarish empty black void. Chris floats in an indeterminate substance that is both nothingness defined by a kind of wind resistance and speckled with suspended particles and the sounds of a distant heartbeat and watery gurgling like a nightmarish amniotic fluid. This is one of the most visually arresting sequences of the film and certainly one of, if not *the,* most compelling and emotionally devastating. At first, Chris'ss paralyzed body, separated from his mind and will, releases a few tears as his consciousness slips away. Chris is helpless and vulnerable and the cuts back and forth between long shots of Chris's psyche's "spiritual" descent and close-ups of his devastated physical body directly address the viewer, forcing them to witness his victimization and the ruthless processing of the body associated with White supremacist colonial ownership of Black lives. Chris'ss mind "self" floats in black space as he screams and yells silently while trying to "swim" toward the fading light guiding the way "out" through his body's gaze, far above his reach. The viewer cannot help but feel horror at Chris'ss plight. This is perhaps the most frequently cited sequence in contemporaneous reviews of the film. Critics breathlessly described how the sequence neatly and formally confronted White America with the face of Black repression and commodification. However, it is this beauty and formal clarity that perpetuates the viewer's distance from Chris. The viewer can grab ahold of a manageable, beautiful image and free themselves from any mandate to further explore their direct complicity in Chris's plight (and those of other Black people). The image is the answer and its beauty and immediacy give the viewer an easy solution to a question they did not court.

Robin R. Means Coleman and Novotny Lawrence call the sunken place, "Blackness forever recessed into Whiteness."[120] In a similar vein, Kevin Wynter writes, "The sunken place is a rupture in time and space where traumas from the past are conjured into the present to be weaponized…As was the Middle Passage, the sunken place is both a locus of irreparable trauma, a site of enduring memory, and a passage into bondage and enslavement, powerfully vivifying slavery and its spectral presence."[121] Wynter's analysis of the sunken place is extremely persuasive and well-supported. The film clearly constructs the sunken place as a site of lost memory and the afterlife of chattel slavery—an afterlife that was born paradoxically out of non-life, of social death. However, the sunken place (like the rest of the film) is *still* bound by the

[120] Coleman & Lawrence, "A Peaceful Place Denied: Horror's 'Whitopias,'" *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror,* 60.

[121] Wynter, Kevin, *Critical Race Theory and Jordan Peele's Get Out*, 130.

White supremacist formal and ideological conventions of the medium. What of this kind of representation of pain and Black suffering in the context of an apparatus of the dominant, a network of meanings and visual cultures that can *never* escape the trap of White supremacy, regardless of auteur intent? The sunken place offers an incredible visual prism which refracts and reflects the mire of the past "trauma…enduring memory…spectral presence"; but where earlier chapters in this dissertation analyzed the formal and rhetorical devices emerging to compensate for historical/representational lack and to complicate and broaden the parameters of historical records and official memory/traumatic absence, my reading of the sunken place is intended to elaborate the special case of Blackness and its representation in *Get Out* and the broader genre. Peele's work (like Nia Da Costa's *Candyman,* my discussion of which follows below) offers an astonishing new catalog of iconography and formal gestures through which to represent the moments of missed and repressed anti-Black violence undergirding all American/global institutions and practices. However, while these images, like the visually arresting "sunken place" segment of the film, create a new language and formal practice through which to express Black suffering, they terminate with a viewer necessarily, irresistibly, and self-interestedly structured by and through a White supremacist global order and visual culture. Images of Black suffering then, *cannot* construct. That is, images of Black suffering cannot produce Black subjectivity. Black suffering cannot be the conduit through which to establish Black subjectivity *nor* through which to destabilize White supremacy and the White stranglehold on the human. To imply otherwise is to imagine that Whiteness can be persuaded, can be addressed *enough* and *perfectly,* through the affective image, to dispossess itself of dominance over the world. Without the eliding and destabilizing element of *violence*, of anti-institutional chaos brought about indirectly through the destruction of the human (body) and *coupled* with identification as seen in Black horror media like *Candyman*, Black suffering remains only that. It cannot be enlisted as a tool through which to empower Blackness. It exists solely to reward the viewer produced through White supremacy.

At best, images of Black suffering can only reinforce the viewer's subjectivity through their disavowal. Mikal J. Gaines describes the sunken place as a site of transracial possibility,

> Instead of having Chris see himself through the eyes of others, the sunken place forces Chris to become his own *other* who looks outward from within the cage of his body. The result is a dialectical, identificatory relationship between Chris and the audience in which we all become passive spectators with no choice but to let the horror before us unfold as it is. While Du Bois described the peculiar sensation of double consciousness with considerable exactitude, Peele uses the film medium's unique capacity to have us take up Chris's point of view and experience this exaggerated form of subjection for ourselves. We witness Chris's terrified, panic-stricken expression, what Du Bois refers to as the "sad havoc" wrought by powerlessness, and we scream along with him in desperate yet ineffectual resistance as Missy shuts his eyes…the sunken place symbolizes the crippling immobility that stems from living with a divided sense of self as well as the psychological devastation that is the deeper legacy of chattel slavery, which was not simply a captivity of the body but also of the mind and soul.[122]

Though elegant, Gaines' analysis is predicated on the viewer's susceptibility to be moved by/identify with Black bodies/lives in pain, as well as the possibility that the viewer would ever reject their own supremacy. Gaines' interpretation supposes that the apparatus, alignment

[122] Gaines, "Staying Woke in Sunken Places, or the Wages of Double Consciousness," *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror,* 167-168.

between the protagonist and viewer, and viewing position are equipped to displace the supremacy of White supremacy. That is, Gaines seems to gesture to transracial identification as irresistible as any other and untroubled in the sense that the viewer is able and willing to relate to Blackness on the level of the human. In fact, the viewer can *never* imagine or access Black subjectivity *nor* does the system which empowers them make such access attractive. To identify and "take up Chris's point of view" based on narrative-generated sympathy (never empathy), would diminish the viewer empowered by White supremacy and its modes of looking. Images of Black suffering do not persuade but in fact reinforce White supremacy. The viewer's privileged and racialized viewing position must be *troubled,* the spectator's power *threatened* in order for cinema to begin working against the White supremacist institutions that produced it as a tool through which to reinforce that same power structure. Only by engaging the viewer in an *unwilling* and *uncomfortable* alignment or identification, can cinema attempt to undermine its own ontological system. Trans-life (life vs. nonlife) affective appeals do little more than exorcise the "ghosts" of White supremacy, externalizing and dismissing legacies of chattel slavery through defensive catharsis.

The visual systems and modes of viewership structuring the world order of power and White humanity necessarily produced through leveraged (and foreclosed) Black subjectivity maintain the viewer's distance from Chris through ritualized aesthetic ascetic practices. Even now, at his most sympathetic and visually arresting, Chris is still safely cordoned off and unable to pose a threat to the narrative and the real-world systems of oppression. He is used as a device, unable to indict the viewer through any means beyond an intellectual practice of pity and pleasure at his (often aesthetically pleasing) suffering. Though the film's formal design in this sequence gives the appearance of drawing the viewer and protagonist closer together, the film up to this point merely offers an ideological entreaty that the viewer can resist. Their alignment with Chris is one of convenience and only holds so long as Chris is subjected to the crushing system of erasure created by the Armitages. That is, Chris's "use" is limited to his aesthetic appeal and his sacrificial role as the lightning rod protecting the viewer by insulating them from his ordeal. Chris's beautiful suffering positions his pain alongside the "forced gaiety" of the slave, an aesthetic display which neuters the emotive potential of the sufferer and reinforces the hierarchical power-sufferance differential between the human and nonhuman, allowing the viewer to consume his pain while remaining formally removed from it. Though he is at his most spectacular and emotive during this sequence, Chris is subsumed by/into the image and transformed into an aporia for himself. That is, his "self" is erased by Missy in a practical sense as she severs the connection between his mind and body; but in a broader sense, Chris is flattened and activated as a further dehumanized allegorical figure, a symbol or symptom, a signifier forced to embody meaning beyond his own and is, therefore paradoxically, meaningless.

There is no question that *Get Out* resonated with Black audiences and offered not only a rare instance of a Black protagonist in horror and an even rarer "happy" ending for a Black main character. The film also functioned through dual narratives that each "saw" their respective audiences in a deft bit of bilingual expression. The film offers a "discovery" narrative that is predicated on a large portion of the audience being *surprised* by the Armitage's menace, *alongside* a story marked by characters, to borrow from Henry Louis Gates Jr., "signifyin"[123] to each other and failing to read each other's signification, revealing the fatalism in the film's premise from the outset for spectators constructed through the "tradition" of violence of White

[123] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism,* 26.

supremacy.[124] However, Chris's aestheticized descent into the sunken place brings to mind Zakkiyah Iman Jackson's discussion of the "indexical" slave:

> So, it is not only a body that is stolen, but also the becoming of the slave: the slave's future perfect state of being. The black(ened) are, therefore, defined as plastic: impressionable, stretchable, and misshapen to the point that the mind may not survive—it potentially goes wild. We are well beyond alienation, exploitation, subjection, domestication, and even animalization; we can only describe such transmogrification as a form of engineering. *Slavery's technologies were not the denial of humanity but the plasticization of humanity.*[125]

Jackson describes the slave as both an "index for the calculation of the degree of humanity"[126] and a site for the processing and un- (not "de" which implies a total stripping, but instead a lessening and shifting) humanization of Black life, a destructive process of new construction rather than total erasure. In *Get Out,* the wistful, emotive, plot-based and aesthetically pleasing representations of Chris's experience imply a reconstructive process of recognition and atonement, as if witnessing can catalyze a kind of healing process. As David Marriott writes, "Black anger gives way to the White wish for Black therapeutics, the wish to *help* as well as forgive those who hate you."[127] Chris's suffering (beautifully) does not break down the border between his experience and the audience's, thereby destabilizing systems of White supremacy through understanding and healing. His pain beatifies the Human audience that watches him for their own (more than edification) catharsis and reincorporation into the comforting embrace of the dominant order.

It is *only* when Chris uses violence to explode the world constructed by the Armitages and indirectly acts *contrary* to what the Hollywood/corporate system historically "intends" through the moral/censorship codes and visual practices habituated over time, and *forces* the viewer to vicariously join him in destroying the systems that arm them with Chris's pilfered agency, that the film radically challenges the system which produced it and offers a glimpse of a new form of Black subjectivity that masters the masters. During the film's gruesome reveal of the Armitage's coagula procedure, Chris meets his new "owner," the blind art dealer Jim Hudson. Hudson notes that unlike the Armitage's other clients, he does not care that Chris is Black. His consumption of Chris is specific; "I want your eye man. I want those things you see through." Here, the film addresses the viewer's desire to appropriate Chris's "eye," an external organ one step removed from their viewing position, perfectly located to filter, interpret, and curate Chris's pain as an exhibit, distant and incapable of returning the spectator's gaze.

In the nightmarish finale of *Get Out,* Chris is incapacitated and finds himself restrained in a leather easy chair in the Armitage basement "game room." Chris wakes and through a series of macabre videos, discovers the Armitage family's plans (and his girlfriend's complicity in their intended colonization of his body). Chris manages to escape his bindings and engages in a brutal guerilla war against the family. It should be noted that the violence Chris uses against all the members of the Armitage family in this sequence is clearly motivated by his efforts to escape the house, not as revenge against his captors—at least initially. Through the tight framing and jarring editing, this sequence collapses the comfortable formal distance between Chris and the viewer. The murders Chris commits are as intimate as they are violent. Over the course of a fast-paced

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[124] Coates, *Between the World and Me,* 110.

[125] Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World,* 71.

[126] Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World,* 46.

[127] Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity,* 200.

14-shot sequence, Chris ambushes patriarch Dean just outside the latter's basement surgical theater. In a (comparatively) long take, Dean pauses his surgical procedure to stare down the hallway outside his door in search of his medical assistant son. As Dean turns back to reenter his surgical suite, the thumping sounds of swiftly approaching steps announce Chris's arrival just before he enters the frame in the following shot. Chris first re-enters the narrative positioned behind a taxidermied stag head which he uses to impale Dean. As the camera is positioned behind Dean and Chris is shot over Dean's shoulder, the audience is first reconnected with Chris through Dean's perspective as victim, despite Chris's position as sympathetic protagonist. Chris screams loudly and nails Dean to the doorjamb with the stag's antlers, but simultaneously aims his weapon at the audience as well, as blood sprays toward the camera. The following one second shot repositions the viewer at Chris's side and more notably, directly behind the base of the stag head, as if the viewer now joins Chris in pushing the weapon deeper into Dean's flesh. Dean stares forward and slightly screen right in surprise, as his throat begins to pour blood. In the following shot, Dean is a slightly blurred figure just at the fringe of the frame while Chris's body cuts a diagonal line of movement across the center of the screen as he pushes the stag head deeper and stares directly into Dean's eyes, consuming Dean's initial death throes. As Chris pushes against Dean to penetrate his body with the stag antlers, he breathes hard and seems to inhale Dean's dying breaths. Chris pulls the stag head away from Dean's body and Dean spits out an inhuman amount of blood with *grand guignol* flare. Chris watches impassively as Dean stumbles away to die in his surgical suite, accidentally starting what will become a raging housefire along the way.

I contend that this moment of shift in perspective and identification is the film's most important innovation. Chris overthrows the medical/institutional/economic machinery that would process his body and mind into nothingness, but, more importantly, the film forces the viewer to join with Chris in his destructive escape. It is a marvel of power upheaval. The formal properties of mainstream narrative cinema lead the viewer of any narrative film to identify (to some degree) with the main character of that film, even if they are an odious villain or anti-hero. Obviously, the plot of *Get Out* entices the viewer to cheer for Chris and enjoy his escape from and revenge upon his captors as they would cheer on Laurie Strode as she stands up to and defeats Michael Myers. What is new and exceptional in this case and across most contemporary Black horror of the last decade is that the viewer is formally embedded with (but not subsumed within) the protagonist as he assails the very institutions that *elevate the viewer* (constructed by White supremacy) above him. The difference between Chris and Laurie Strode's empowerment is that the viewer is primed to identify with Strode to a certain degree, while *Get Out's* subversion *forces* the viewer to temporarily "watch" in a way that is against their own self-interest as spectators constructed through White supremacy. That is, though this film like all cinema, is structured by White supremacist systems permanently engaged in the sacrificial dehumanization of Black life, it is nevertheless able to temporarily confront the viewer constructed by White supremacy with the destruction of the power structures that enable their subject position through a look they cannot refuse *while* using the apparatus produced by those very structures. As in Laura Mulvey's theory of "Visual Pleasure" in which the spectator's agency is limited according to the network of looks offered (and those withheld), Black life in film is limited by the structures which produce it. That is, the audience may wish to resist the (always) White visual culture producing films featuring Black bodies and stories, but there is not *institutional* freedom for the spectator. Individual viewers, especially Black spectators, may seek to resist the anti-Black impulses governing global visual cultures, but, as Wilderson makes clear, there is no

institutional subjectivity available to them. The individual viewer, particularly the Black viewer, might seek to suture their subjectivity within the viewing position and relation to the film, but the institution/practice allows no space for resistance. The viewer is briefly forced to either engage with a pleasurable view of their own structural disempowerment or accept that for a moment, there is no place for them to occupy within what is almost always an entrenched anti-Black art form. Frank Wilderson writes that, "there is no interracial redemption. There is no Afrocentric redemption. Redemption is the narrative inheritance of Humans. There is no denouement to social death"[128] and that "suffering without a solution is a hard thing to hold, especially if that suffering fuels the psychic health of the rest of the world. But that's what it means to be a Slave, to be the host of that parasite called the Human."[129] In *Get Out,* the viewer is drawn in with the promise of a beautifully tragic solution, a redemption of the world around them. The violent crescendo of the film that directly embeds them in the destruction of the world order they desire to "redeem," transforms Chris into the sunken place he has escaped and then internalized. Chris cracks open and becomes expansive and consumptive, an endless sea blotting out the human world as it is, feeding on the parasite by turn.

Nia DaCosta's 2021 film *Candyman* (spiritual sequel to Bernard Rose's 1992 film *Candyman*) was neither as critically nor as commercially successful as *Get Out.*[130] The long-awaited sequel directed by one of the few Black female directors entrusted to helm a legacy franchise had the terrible luck to be subsumed within the period of lost-releases and shifted release dates during the COVID-19 shutdown. It was also compared with *Get Out* at every turn, partly because of the excellence of the former and partly because as contemporary Black horror films, both were rarities and corralled together in a subsection of the genre. Still, it seems that the reason for the underwhelming response to *Candyman* stems from deeper divergences between the two films. *Candyman* is a brutal(ist) film. It offers no solutions, no refuge from the glare of White supremacist domination it projects unfiltered onto its audience. It tells the story of a "local" revenant generated through a lynching just before the turn of the (last) century, who returns whenever he is summoned through a mirror-chant ritual, and in *Candyman* (2021) unlike the 1992 original, all of *Candyman*'s "returns" are enacted against racial/structural injustices. Where *Get Out* mines the hysteria and paranoia rampant in the 1950s sci-fi and 1970s body snatching/contamination films it so often quotes, *Candyman* brooks no equivocation in its characters. That is, *Candyman* constructs a (mirror) image of the world which is structured through the absolute knowledge of the world as ritualistically, chronically, and necessarily (to sustain White supremacist institutions) violent against the Black body. For most of its runtime, *Get Out* is structured like many feminist horror films from the last quarter of the twentieth century (*The Stepford Wives, Rosemary's Baby, Carrie,* Etc.). A protagonist experiences a growing sense of paranoia that the institutions around them and even those loved ones closest to them, are secretly plotting their downfall. The denouement of these films was generally the resolution of the discovery narrative with the grand reveal that the main character was right to be paranoid. *Get Out* follows the same generic conventions, but as gestured to earlier in this chapter, only persuades once the main character commandeers the viewer's privileged viewing position and forces them to indirectly participate in the destruction of their own empowerment. That *Get Out* gives so much credence to the main character (and film's) paranoia, severely limits how anarchic the film can be.

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[128] Wilderson, *Afropessimism,* 325.

[129] Wilderson, *Afropessimism,* 329.

[130] *Candyman* (2021), *Rotten Tomatoes,* https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/candyman_2021.

One need only read most any of the laudatory reviews for *Get Out* to find critics complimenting the "insidious" nature of the Armitage family's racism and Chris's paranoia throughout the film. Note this selection from Thelma Adams' review of *Get Out:*

> And, this is the movie's beauty, the audience shares Chris's paranoia and unease in the company of these apparently welcoming white folks. Is the racism real or perceived—or both?...Could it simply be culture clash—or something more diabolical? The scales begin to tip between paranoia and threat as Chris attends an awkward garden party…[131]

Adams commits the kind of humanistic folly Frank Wilderson warns of in his discussion of the limitations of theory in the face of the non-humanity of the Black,

> Humanist discourse can only think a subjects' relation to violence as a contingency and not as a matrix that positions the subject. Put another way, Humanism…cannot imagine an object who has been positioned by gratuitous violence and who has no cartographic and temporal capacities to lose-a sentient being for whom recognition and incorporation is impossible…Humanism, can only produce discourse that has as its foundation alienation and exploitation as a grammar of suffering…[132]

As Wilderson's argument suggests, in the known White supremacist world, Blackness forecloses the necessary pre-conditions for the experience of paranoia. That is, one cannot be paranoid if one is *always* (at the very least systemically) *provably and infallibly right.* No Black character can experience paranoia as they *are always* being pursued, consumed, and made fungible by the world around them. The "paranoia" that Adams detects and that *Get Out* relies upon, is a comforting illusion for the viewer. The spectator constructed through White supremacy (the one around which the apparatus is almost irrevocably structured) *cannot* cross the border and occupy the point of view of the socially dead object, *cannot fathom* a condition which completely forecloses any possibility for a mode of existence *before* racism and racial animus. For the socially dead, the racial violence of White supremacy *cannot* be insidious, is not debatable, *cannot* sneak up on the sufferer. They are definitional states. The discovery narrative in *Get Out* is *predicated* on the *perception* of paranoia in the main character and the audience, that is, a performative paranoia. Viewed through the lens of Afropessimism, *Get Out* maintains a mollifying fiction for most of its runtime *despite* its gestures to signifying and a more complicated racial representation. Until Chris begins taking violent action while locked in a forcible doubleness with the viewer, his performance is that of someone ignorant to the realities of a White supremacist world. Through most of the film, Chris is locked in the sunken place of a White supremacist orientation toward existing power dynamics. His performative ignorance to discovery arc is a counter-racial one. This discovery structure then, positions most of *Get Out* within a framework which reinforces the institutions of global White supremacy; in contrast *Candyman* refracts the society it represents, building a grammar of existing and potential categorical trouble.[133]

The original *Candyman* (1992) tells the story of a revered Black painter in the 19th century who made the fatal error of falling in love with and impregnating his rich, White client. He is subsequently lynched in a brutal fashion and becomes a figure of local folklore and then an urban legend in the 1990s, the period when the film was produced. A White graduate student studying folk culture in the city inadvertently summons Candyman and triggers a series of killings at his hands (these killings it should be noted, are all of Black residents of local Chicago

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[131] Adams, "Jordan Peele Explores Racism's Horror in Comedy Thriller 'Get Out'," *Observer.com.*

[132] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,* 54.

[133] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 6.

housing projects where Helen "studies" the Black majority community.) The subversive potential of the Candyman figure is reclaimed in service of a broad social/institutional critique in the 2021 version of *Candyman.* It tells the story of visual artist Anthony who, faced with a choice between cultural irrelevance or the commodification of his past and identity to feed a colonialist art market, studies the Candyman legend and decides to feature the tale and the local Cabrini projects (the setting of the original film) in his next art installation. Anthony becomes seduced by the mystery of Candyman and ultimately inadvertently invites his own destruction by invoking Candyman. As Anthony is slowly possessed by Candyman (who also simultaneously exists as a separate ghostly entity that carries out bloody violence at Anthony transforms) his body externalizes his change and incomplete mastery of his self/body, as his tissue begins to decay and slough off. Finally, by film's end Anthony has become the new Candyman, still himself but also doubled with the presence of the spirits of other "Candyman" ghosts embedded within his new revenant's body. Interestingly, in the (2021) sequel to *Candyman*, Candyman turns his vengeance not toward the helpless and displaced residents of the community, but the institutions that shun them (the police, the media, etc.)

From the moment the film begins, *Candyman* upends the usual order of things. Even before the first frame of the film proper crosses the screen, each production company and distributor's pre-roll sequences (including the roaring MGM lion) are projected as if flipped backwards, as if the viewer is looking out from inside the protection screen. Not only are the institutions themselves transformed, but the viewer is translated as well. From the outset, the production takes up the reflection motif that will persist throughout the film and this reversal signals coming structural trouble and traps the viewer within a mirror world, upended and yet unfiltered. The audience is not only forced into an alternate version of the world, but they are confined within an invisible frame, helpless and caged and only permitted to echo, to reflect while being exiled from a generative, meaning-making, active position of authority. Unlike *Get Out, Candyman* does not lull the viewer into a false sense of security (superiority) to then displace their omnipotence and force them into an unwilling, unwitting alignment with an active Black protagonist. From these earliest moments, the film signals that it will represent a *reflection* of the real world—not a perfect copy but an inversion of the power structures and institutions governing life.

The film begins by turning the viewer away and depriving the audience of a position of omniscience, of their ability to manage/choose the nature and scope of their point of view. After a brief flashback sequence to a traumatic incident during the childhood of a minor character, the title sequence begins. During the nearly two-minute credit sequence, the viewer floats above the city streets of Chicago, treated to an otherworldly view of the city's towering skyscrapers from an unexpected angle, from their underside. The viewer is helplessly skimmed across the city, paradoxically in constant motion and completely immobilized along the axis and unable to shift their view. The audience is laid low and slowly floats above the city streets, staring into the clouds and the buildings closing in from all sides. The city is transformed and appears otherworldly as the skyline disappears into an opaque mist high above. The film offers a perfect inversion, a reflection of the real world that disappears into a cloudy sky. A vibrant, strikingly blue, raised bridge passes over head, cutting the frame in half as its passing signals a shift from day to night. The frame tightens. The focal length remains the same, but the buildings on each side of the unseen street below push in and loom inward at an imposing angle and compressing the frame. Neon and fluorescent lights peek through the dark night sky, glowing ominous and strange. The scene tilts slightly and the skyline cuts a diagonal line across the frame as the

viewer seems to sink down, endlessly sliding lower into the bowels of the city grid. The last building passes by overhead and the world fades to black. The sequence forces the viewer into a helpless journey around a city gone mad, too bright, too lopsided, and too fast. The world races by and senselessly tramples and disregards the viewer. From the first, the audience has a clear sense of their powerlessness and irrelevance in the inverted world of the film. The very systems of meaning and order that organize direction, language, and even gravity, are destroyed and rebuilt in reverse, leaving no place for the dominant gaze.

Candyman pushes the genre itself to the limit by playing with narrative structure. The film continues rolling long after the point in the narrative at which most horror films (especially Black horror films) end. Black horror films such as *The People Under the Stairs, Ganja & Hess,* and even (as stated by Jordan Peele himself) *Get Out* absolutely *must* end and cut to black before the arrival of police and the investigation of the events (deaths) in the film and the "restoration of order." Order is the very thing that threatens and most Black horror films, to maintain the fiction of displacement onto the monster, must end before normalcy is reconstituted. *Candyman's* horror is *overtly* bound up in the anti-Black "order of things" and offers a visual language both for the anti-Black practices of erasure used to produce Whiteness (that "Anti-Blackness manifests as the monumentalization and fortification of civil society against social death"[134]) and the almost completely unspeakable/unimaginable imaginary of *structural violence/destruction* of anti-Black institutions and bodies.

Candyman consistently elevates folk practices (urban legends, visual art, etc.) and conveys a deep distrust of all institutions. While this narrative shift away from dominant institutions of power can never be enough to interrupt the White supremacist framework of the world (as it is still a product of those same systems and working roughly as intended) the film frustrates the viewer's ability to distance themselves from being directly implicated by representations of Black suffering (which can themselves be dehumanizing) and the film's closed-off and overdetermined visual language does not offer an entry point for dominant (controlling, pitying, consumptive) modes of looking. In her analysis of the ethics of representing Black suffering Saidiya V. Hartman writes,

> …rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual. By defamiliarizing the familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and the quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle. What concerns me here is the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property. Consequently, the scenes of subjection examined here focus on the enactment of subjugation and the constitution of the subject and include the blows delivered to Topsy and Zip Coon on the popular stage, slaves coerced to dance in the marketplace, the simulation of will in slave law, the fashioning of identity, and the processes of individuation and normalization.[135]

Hartman expresses a deep suspicion of the persistence of spectacle in media (particularly moving image media) representations of commodified and exploited Black bodies. For Hartman, the ease with which one can invoke and activate images of Black suffering to the point of cliché, points to the dominant caste's unwillingness to unsettle national mythologies. The sanctity and

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[134] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,* 90.

[135] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 4.

preeminence of Whiteness has always relied on the rhetorical and literal suppression and torture of Black bodies. However, in the current American moment of hyper-overt racism and performative, even aestheticized White supremacy, the disarticulation of Black bodies in the context of the horror film is unsustainable as activism *without a radical structural shift* away from the "surplus" Black body, a body with use value *only* insofar as it can serve as the polluted abjected object with no ontological import. That is, the representation of Black bodies in pain is not in and of itself transgressive, and indeed serves an anti-Black gaze even if it is intended to elucidate suffering or inspire empathy. To seek to establish Black subjectivity through a project that must "pass through" representations of Black pain and bodily injury implies a kind of value-lessness or "surplus" of Black bodies/bodily representations that can be employed/produced only to be destroyed. The terminal body, the body that exists only to be destroyed is an old trope in horror (see most bodies and deaths in slasher films) but it is the excess suffering/uselessness represented through and in conjunction with lost/absent onscreen Black subjectivity that reinforces White supremacy, even if its project is not initially or intentionally racist. To project Black pain through an aestheticized ritual of displacement through generic means, is a striptease of racial exploitation, enticing through the promise of visual titillation and the "safe scare" of an over-familiar and sterilized racial play and catharsis. Each crime/injustice Candyman responds to is grounded in institutional betrayals. Anthony walks through and ultimately "dies" in Cabrini Green, a housing project that was later emptied of its residents to make room for an influx of new residents rapidly gentrifying surrounding neighborhoods. His community and their folk culture is displaced and lost to exploitative capitalist forces and Candyman responds to this erasure by reclaiming the unseen parts of the community, the subterranean, the inside of a painted church and empty apartments. When Anthony is gently coerced to "repackage" his ethnic identity and socioeconomic experiences in a more commercial way, Candyman destroys both the racist art dealer and the dismissive art critic. Finally, after Anthony is killed in an act of police brutality and unmotivated violence, he returns as Candyman and kills every responding officer at the scene of the crime, engaging in a violent confrontation with the true constant source of horror throughout the film; a violent policing system invested in the destruction and warehousing of Black bodies. *Candyman* must necessarily represent Black suffering throughout the film due to the nature of the racist genesis of the revenant it features, but that suffering is *always* structural. That is, whether the violence against Black bodies in the film is perpetrated by agents/institutions of a racist state or the literal corruption/interruption/deterioration of the flesh through rot from within, the film inscribes decay onto the Black body, constructing Black subjectivity through the use of a hypervisual corruption of the flesh that is inextricably bound up with the generative impulses of a racist caste system. The film masters the eye through a quotidian routinized violence[136] that is always visually related to the oppressive institutions which demand it.

The final sequence of *Candyman* is a true reckoning with American law enforcement's tradition of consumption and destruction of Black lives, and it echoes *Get Out's* sadomasochistic repositioning of the viewer as they are forced to watch the destruction of the bodies that affirm their supremacy through the subjugation of others. *The Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) famously concludes with its powerful Black lead surviving a nightmarish nighttime onslaught of zombies, only to be gunned down in the final moments by local law enforcement who cannot interpret his body as "alive." Black Horror films like *The People Under the Stairs* and *Tales From the Hood* also tell stories grounded in representations of corrupt and violent police who victimize helpless Black bodies, and dramatic films like *Middle of Nowhere* and *Queen and Slim*

[136] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 4.

have done much to explore institutional, corporate, and state violence against Black lives as well, but only *Candyman* marries a *structuring* formal language that externalizes the grammar of anti-Blackness as a defining element of the world order, with an overtly embodied chaotic violence wielded against those same elements *specifically* through a network of consumptive and formally overpowering Black subjects.

After losing her boyfriend, Anthony McCoy (protagonist and newly possessed vessel for Candyman), to an unjustified shooting committed by White police officers under the color of authority, secondary lead Brianna finds herself handcuffed in the back of a squad car. The film refuses to soften the adversarial and consumptive relationship between Black citizens and the police that has undergirded the supernatural and real-world events of the film from the first. The film maintains a consistent suspicion of all institutions throughout, severing the audience from the bodies of power they normally engage in a mutual, cyclical reinforcement of domination. *Candyman* neatly subverts the trope of the arrival of the "cavalry" at the end of a horror film, the safety promised and the restoration of order assured through the (theoretically) longed-for coming of law enforcement. After being roughly manhandled into the back seat of a squad car, Brianna pants softly and remains in soft focus against a blurry background of police cars outside her window. The voices of the police officers on the scene blend into unintelligible, harsh murmurs. The officer in charge walks by Brianna's window and slides into the front seat of the same car, watching her through the rearview mirror. The officer's approach is its own kind of haunting. He is a blurred figure over her shoulder, materializing in her window and his gaze consumes Brianna as a captive body. Brianna begins to shake and then stare as the officer peppers her with implicit threats unless she supports his version of the murder of her boyfriend as a justified killing. She refuses to speak, eyes darting frantically as she is lit by the flashing blue lights of the police cars around her.

The officer never deigns to look directly at Brianna, instead meeting her gaze as reflected in his rearview mirror, thereby keeping his body and gaze separate from hers across their respective frames. Interestingly, while the viewer remains firmly in the backseat with Brianna, aligned with every hitching breath and uneasy look, they are denied any identification with the police officer. He remains a cypher, practically offscreen, as his form remains mostly hidden and ultimately reduced only to the reflection of his eyes in the mirror. He is corralled and imprisoned through his own attempt to control Brianna. He is mastered through his own gaze. Choosing a violent end for her captor, Brianna asks to see herself in the rear-view mirror in exchange for her concession that she will "say whatever you want." The officer signs his own death warrant by turning the mirror to face Brianna, allowing her to stare at her own reflection as she invokes Candyman who returns and murders every officer on the scene.

The thematic difference in this scene with the historical past of Black film and Black horror cannot be overstated. As I noted earlier in this chapter, in Black horror, even if the hero has survived the night, they can only hope the film in which they feature might end before the true threat arrives on scene and at best, interrogates the survivors. Films such as *Night of the Living Dead* helped complicate how Blacks encountered and were consumed by law enforcement and the other institutional forces structuring and sustaining a White supremacist world. However, it is almost *never* done that a film, particularly an American Black horror film, luxuriates in the violent destruction of institutions and indeed the broader frameworks structuring the world. Films such as *Tales from the Hood, Get Out, The People Under the Stairs,* and most recently *Antebellum* collapse and compress racist bad acts to isolated crimes by bad *actors*—not systems. By assigning the racism each of these films deals with at least in part to anti-Blackness by one

agent, one system, or even one time period, American films featuring Black protagonists (until recently almost always made by White producers and artists) have historically sought to deny the global meaning-making impulses that flow through the Black body, the leveraging of Black objectification in service of White subjectivity and the production of race and the construction of national loci of power as an ongoing, inexorable project. *Compressing* the global and structuring flows of anti-Blackness that give order to the known world into the body of a single corrupt agent or agency caters to and manufactures spectatorial *anticipation* of a system of easy shorthand, a sanitized collection of signifiers, to articulate *manageable* representations of anti-Black destruction that are *not* ritualized, systemic, state-sponsored, and industrialized.

During the final "summoning scene," Brianna invokes Candyman to save her from the corrupt police who are threatening her. Brianna watches herself in the rearview mirror and displaces the officer and the institutions he represents, commandeering the frame for herself. As Brianna completes the invocation ritual, she sits back her in seat with a wry laugh. Just as the officer responds in confusion, "Candyman?" the unsettling score from the inverted cityscape credit sequence at the beginning of the film starts to play. As the sound grows louder, the film cuts to a close-up of the car door locks (previously intended to capture and cage Brianna) triggering. Not only does the score signal a return to the inverted world from the beginning of the film, but the perspective of the camera shifts from one fairly solidly aligned with Brianna, to a more distant, mobile one. That is, after the doors lock (due to Candyman's ghostly intervention) the camera "leaves" the angles used earlier in the sequence, which embedded the camera's point of view firmly in the backseat *alongside* Brianna. After the doors lock, the camera seems to rise and the viewer is thrust forward into the front seat. The viewer comes face to face with the first dying police officer to stagger away from the scene, as the camera positions the audience as if they are floating in the front seat of the vehicle and *aligned* with the policeman in the driver's seat. The scene marks a formal shift aurally and visually to denote the beginning of Candyman's quick massacre of all the police officers in the investigating unit. As the film enters its graphic finale set piece, the viewer is severed from their previous alignment with Brianna. They are unmoored as the camera becomes more mobile and adopts the perspective of the police, forced to watch the carnage that unfolds while Brianna looks away. Not only does this sequence withhold the spectacle of Black bodies in pain, but it undermines horror structure itself as the protagonist Brianna essentially temporarily "checks out." Brianna is not forced to bear the weight of the massacre sequence. Though she summoned Candyman, in an elegant reversal of the first film's anti-Black violence, Brianna is not threatened by his return. Her refusal to look at any of the screaming and dying officers pleading for help removes Brianna from the final violent encounter. Instead, the sequence is structured in such a way as to thrust the viewer forward and create a visual kinship between their viewing position and the power structures and agents being torn apart. Here, Brianna constructs her own subjectivity by invoking the elemental destruction of the (White supremacist) institutions around her and then *refusing to participate* in the destruction that follows. Her agency is derived from her ability to *sacrifice* the audience and the authority of the (White) camera eye. Brianna creates a new world order and then uses it to implicate and destroy the viewer and the visual systems that empower them.

New Black horror resides at the intersection of political rupture, a wider proliferation of Black auteurs/authors/creators in popular corporate media, and the extreme violence of the modern horror film; it has cracked open a fissure in the bedrock of American representations of Blackness and created an (albeit temporary) site for the production of Black subjectivity by creating new possibilities for cross racial identification and systemic destruction. There has never

been another period when audiences were forced to identify with characters destroying the meaning-making processes and institutions that produce Blackness as "dead," fungible, and abject. While film itself will remain an anti-Black form produced by and reinforcing a White supremacists world order, the excess, chaos, and violence of the horror genre may offer new opportunities for the production of a visual language of disorder potent enough to create a *potential* imaginary in which a new world might be conjured up. Thus far, the mainstream, narrative cinema has not offered a compelling image of a power-inverted world, has not represented an a-racial text capable of repudiating or at least muting the systems which invent race to displace anxieties and trouble. It may be that the rise of more numerous Black creative productions, increasing excess violence and gore available to the genre, and more complicated networks of identification, power, and looking, may create the conditions necessary for the construction of a new visual language of Black agency and anti-systemic imagery.

Había que Volver a la manera tradicional de contar historias cuando son historias duras: a la fantasia, los cuentos de hadas o las leyendas. De Ahí me agarré a La Llorona…El horror era una manera muy lógica de hablar de un genocidio."

It was necessary to return to the traditional method of telling stories when the stories are difficult: to fantasy, fairy tales, or legends. From there I seized on *La Llorona…*The horror [genre] was a logical method through which to speak of a genocide.

-Jayro Bustamante[137]

Conclusion: Where to from here?

I will conclude by turning to a film that broadly takes up the overarching concerns of this dissertation. Throughout I have argued that horror offers new possibilities for the indirect address to and expression of the unspeakable through an expanded visual language. Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona* (2019) is a film about a nation literally haunted by the ghosts of its violent past. As Bustamante himself has made clear, the film capitalizes on the popularity of the folk figure, *La Llorona,* to tell the story of an extremely difficult historical moment in a more manageable fictional context. The Guatemalan genocide remains a historical event that is still largely understood *in absentia.* That is, like the Spanish Civil War, the Guatemalan genocide was a war waged by the state against its own citizens, a devastating conflict motivated by racist and economic interests that were opposed to the indigenous Maya. Foreign corporate interests, forces in neighboring nations armed and trained by the U.S., and dictators and junta governments across Central America colluded to undo agrarian, economic, and democratic reforms brought about during Guatemala's short decade led by a representative democracy between 1944 and 1954. An American-funded coup overthrew the elected government and plunged Guatemala into decades of civil war. In order to continue to foment support for the state and justify its own oppressive excesses, the government of Guatemala fixed upon the (largely landless, often economically isolated, and generally politically underrepresented) Indigenous Maya population of the country and labeled them subversive enemies of the state (mostly through *de facto* practices). By the end of the war approximately 200,000 Guatemalans were dead. 83% of the dead were indigenous people despite indigenous groups making up a minority of the overall population with their populations generally geographically isolated in the more remote areas of Guatemala.

The national conflict was so traumatic and contentious that the afterlife of the war continues to pose a threat to the perceived power of the state. The 36-year war ended in 1996 with the conclusion of violent hostilities, but it remained a troubled historical subject. As recently as 2013, the state overturned the war crimes conviction of General Montt, the only person to have ever been convicted to war crimes in the nation which convicted him.[138] The following year, Guatemala passed a resolution declaring that the state had not committed

[137] Camhaji, "Para Hollywood Los Latinos ya no Somos Solo Consumidores de Telenovelas, Fútbol y Narcohistorias," *El País*, https://elpais.com/mexico/2021-02-25/para-hollywood-los-latinos-ya-no-somos-solo-consumidores-de-telenovelas-futbol-y-narcohistorias.html.

[138] "Guatemala Slipping Back into Impunity on Anniversary of Overturned Genocide Conviction." *Amnesty International*, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/05/guatemala-slipping-back-impunity-anniversary-overturned-genocide-conviction/.

genocide against its people.[139] Like Spain, Guatemala not only codified a national policy of whitewashing and historical denial and erasure, but they used tools of the legal system to produce new history after the fact. That is, the law was used to fill the very void in the national historical narrative created by the same state which engineered that absence. The state created conditions which marked the genocide as a historical event that must remain unspoken and unspeakable, in the law, in the media, and indeed in every day public life. Bustamante intended his film as an intervention in the impenetrable national discourse (or lack thereof) surrounding the lingering afterlife of the genocide. A rejoinder to public messaging and propaganda denying any unsettled ruptures in Guatemalan history. Bustamante wagered that embedding a problematic national history and silence within a film figure that is simultaneously nonverbal, excessively expressive and spectral, and immensely popular and identifiable, would re-mobilize the public imagination and discourse hindering a historical reconciliation and the representation of a missed historical moment.

In *La Llorona,* the titular Latin American iteration of the weeping woman folk figure haunts and possesses the well-to-do and well-connected family of General Monteverde, unleashing a wraith symbolizing vengeance on a figure with a real-world counterpart, one who stands representative of the broader enforced institutional silence and erasure characterizing the nation's relationship to its own past. The film tells the story of the General who is essentially a barely concealed double of the once-convicted war criminal. General Efrain Rios Montt. The film lifts directly from history, from the real-life circumstances surrounding Montt's crimes, his public interviews, and his courtroom testimony, to directly address the crimes the state found it politically expedient to cover up. The film begins with the General being tried for war crimes committed decades before. As in the real-world trial, after hundreds of witness testimonies and copious evidence, the fictional General's conviction is ultimately set aside on a technicality. As masses of protestors descend on the family compound, blocking the family inside and assailing them with political chants and wails every minute of the day and night, a new maid joins the household. This young indigenous person, it turns out, is neither a maid nor a living person. She is *la Llorona,* a woman cursed to spend her afterlife wandering the earth sobbing and searching for her dead children. The avenging revenant character, Alma, infiltrates the house and her arrival signals an insidious coming apart, a fracturing of the house, the family, and the illusions and denials they have historically relied upon to reconcile themselves with a family legacy produced through the mass suffering of indigenous people. The family is a microcosm of the nation denying its own complicity in and production through the denied suffering of the powerless.

In perhaps the most moving sequence of the film, Witness 82, an older Maya Ixil (indigenous) woman testifies during a highly publicized trial, publicly naming and claiming the crimes committed against her body, her family, and her community during the genocide decades earlier. The sequence begins in a fairly tight close-up of Witness 82's veiled face. Though the scene lasts for just over four minutes, there are no cuts or radical formal shifts. Rather, Witness 82 anchors the shot, positioned exactly in the center of the frame and presented as both a spectacular figure and an elusive one. The camera remains trained on her even as the camera slowly pulls back to reveal an inordinately packed courtroom. Though other characters speak from offscreen or figure more prominently in the plot (the main characters are seated off to one

[139] "Guatemala Slipping Back into Impunity on Anniversary of Overturned Genocide Conviction." *Amnesty International*, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/05/guatemala-slipping-back-impunity-anniversary-overturned-genocide-conviction/.

side a few rows back into the courtroom) Witness 82 dominates the frame and anchors the camera eye, keeping it trained on her face. She draws the eye with her ceremonial Maya clothing and ornamental veil, but that same veil casts her face in deep shadow and withholds it from everyone else in the courtroom as well as the viewer. This paradoxical pairing of spectrality and absence transforms Witness 82 into an ephemeral and elusive figure, positioning her as the embodiment of the historical trouble and absence crystallizing the traumatic moment she describes.

As witness 82 testifies, her words form a kind of lacuna that recreates the stutter or rupture presented by the very historical moment she alludes to. Witness 82 whispers her testimony in tight, clipped phrases. Her raspy voice conceals as much as it reveals. At the same time, the sequence creates an interesting linguistic rupture, a disconnect. As Witness 82 whispers her testimony and forces both those in the courtroom and the spectators of the film to lean in and strain to hear her words, she also withholds her testimony and creates a barrier between her immediate account and the one the audience hears. That is, Witness 82, as a Maya Ixil woman, speaks a Maya language, here, Kaqchikel. This is one of many Maya languages and wildly different than the dominant language spoken in Guatemala, Spanish. Therefore, while both the courtroom and the film itself are organized and oriented around Witness 82 (through the framing, the unbroken long take, the silence of diegetic sounds beyond her voice) she is withheld from the viewer and those in the courtroom. The average Guatemalan does not speak Kaqchikel and Witness 82 first testifies in her native language before her words are translated by the male courtroom interpreter by her side. While this "telephone" game of testimony is the reality faced by an Indigenous person seeking recourse in the Spanish/majority-serving Guatemalan legal system, its formal duplication in spite of the tools available through which to omit this delay (subtitles, dubbing, asking all characters to speak Spanish in spite of regional or historical inaccuracy) is intriguing. It is as if the film uses this linguistic rupture both to reduce the viewer's omniscience and reposition them within the courtroom, desperately eager to understand Witness 82's testimony, and to formally recreate the delay that is the original historical event and its eventual (if at all) incorporation into the historical archive/narrative. In turn, as Witness 82 recounts the horrors of her rape by soldiers, her face remains hidden behind a lace veil, giving her a ghostly appearance as the camera tracks in slowly towards her throughout her testimony. The numerous cameras and audience that packs the courtroom give her veiled testimony the status of a media spectacle, while sound, camera movement, and costuming suggest the absences from the historical record her testimony represents. Like the folk figure of *La Llorona,* she is a spectral figure that slowly becomes a spectacle that stands in for the (national) experience of trauma has been erased, violently suppressed, and eliminated from the historical record.

La Llorona is a moving example of horror in the new millennium, horror that articulates immediate, local anxieties and fears while making the monster into an iconographic figure ready for export. Global exchanges, colonial exploitation, and gender violence are made viral and transborder, infecting horror traditions within and across local networks. Most importantly, the film makes evident the horror genre's most significant use may be in the twenty-first century: imbuing absence meaningful, spectacular, and urgent. Should horror continue to offer a visual language that makes absence, historical rupture, and marginalization productive and meaningful *in spite of* the ways in which they may at first *appear* inexpressive, the horror film may offer new modes of access and cultural production for the underrepresented and the historically marginalized.

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