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American Sociological Association

What's Blood Got to Do with It? A Culture of Cinema Horrors at the Precipice of an Abyss

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Abstract

At a cultural moment in which the horrifying is central, what are the pedagogical options available by which to teach and think with our students? Horror movies, like all media, are mythmakers; media and culture reflect and reproduce but also create or consolidate. Teaching horror leads to new conversations, makes the familiar strange, and gives students new language and tools through which to assess and rewrite cultural and social narratives. This conversation bridges sociology, gender studies, and media studies to highlight the importance and usefulness of film analysis and theoretical texts that fall outside of sociology in developing robust sociological and interdisciplinary dialogue. We review the films, texts, themes, and approaches that we have used to get students to read difficult theory, think collaboratively and critically, and write in ways that push their voices and ideas beyond that with which they are accustomed and comfortable.

Keywords

horror, gender and sexuality studies, feminist theory, media theory, pedagogy

Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it.

—Avery Gordon ([1997] 2008:7)

To take stock of the world is to bear witness to a litany of horrors, real and imagined, varying according to position and population. Apocalyptically changing climates, polar vortices and collapsed ice shelves, robotic killing machines, famine, zoonotic disease, catastrophic economic collapse, militarized carceral states, the looming threat of nuclear war—the planet, at this moment, feels always on the precipice of collapse. At a cultural moment in which the distorted unrealities of paranoid speculative fictions regularly seem to bleed into the apparent realities of material life, in which societies seem to feverishly imagine themselves at the edge of an abyss, the horrifying—or, more pointedly, terror—is central.

Of course, this is not the first time in recent memory that "the end" has been nigh. Millenarian preoccupations are ancient and, in more recent times, have underwritten the pessimistic existentialism of the past few centuries' global carnage. As twentieth-century logics of extermination have extended and mutated—into indefinite detentions in necropolitical death worlds (see Mbembe and

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Meintjes 2003), ever-mutating forms of liberal and neoliberal governance, and plague horizons of ontological disintegration (see Parisi and Goodman 2005)—the socio-politico-ecological condition manifests beyond direct representation. Yet the scale of concurrent dooms we face or deflect (or that have been lost to our agreed-on historical and cultural amnesia) exceeds our capacity to consciously absorb horror. How can one fathom the scale of such a cosmic, social, and historical monstrousness when we have so often failed to recognize the everyday horrors and violence of racism, misogyny, deepening economic inequities, or excessive consumption? What are "we" to a planet that no longer suffers our climatic predispositions? What sort of categorical imperative could possibly apply to a process of such magnitude? These are some of the major anxieties that overawe critical theory at an axial moment in which it, along with "us," has been declared at "an end." Thus, to pose a question central to the concerns of this article, what are the pedagogical options available by which to teach and think with our students, and what value do horror films add?

Since 2014, we have been teaching a class about sex, gender, race, and politics in U.S. horror films[1] called "What's Blood Got to Do with It?" The course, which draws from media and film theory, feminist theory, intersectionality and critical race theory, literature, and social theory, is reading- and writing-heavy. We have taught and cotaught "What's Blood" in person and online,[2] in Women and Gender Studies and in Sociology, for undergraduate students at a public university in New York City, and to a class of graduate and undergraduate students at a private university in New Orleans. Although most of the content of the course is the same whether taught online or in person, we focus here on the in-person iterations[3] because film-watching and the discussions that follow are best experienced together in a shared space (in the most movie-theater-like room available). We have found that introducing and analyzing horror films in a classroom setting has consistently produced student writing and discussion that is remarkably nuanced and creative. By employing a genre of dissolution as the object of analysis, our classes have led students to consider sociological and social-theoretical frames at a canted remove. This remove, much like a Brechtian performance, frees students to engage seriously with conceptual tools for making sense of actually existing horrors without feeling stymied by "common sense" refusals of critical analysis or disciplinary strictures. For

the purposes of this conversation, we focus on our experiences that have bridged sociology, gender studies, and film studies to highlight the importance and usefulness of film analysis, as well as theoretical texts that fall outside of sociology, in developing robust sociological and interdisciplinary dialogue. Teaching horror leads to new conversations, makes the familiar strange (or the strange familiar), and gives students new language and tools through which to assess and rewrite cultural and social narratives.

In what follows, we review the films, texts, themes, and approaches that we have used to get students to read difficult theory, think collaboratively and critically, and write in ways that push their voices and ideas beyond that with which they are accustomed and comfortable. Parts I and II explain the reason for using horror, its usefulness as a genre that is often maligned for its violence and apparent vacuity, and how to introduce film analysis in the context of a sociology course. Parts III and IV overview the theories and motifs that we often use to ground an initial approach to and analysis of the films, focused on two central themes: seeing, looking, and being seen and monstrosity. We conclude with a proposition for why horror matters and a reflection on the insights the genre has to offer in thinking and teaching about apocalypse and future-oriented terror.

PART I: WHY HORROR?

The cinematic tropes that make genre films legible and iterative are especially useful for demonstrating the social construction of social scripts and norms. Horror, as genre, is driven by tropes, style, and mood organized to approach and evoke terror; as such, horror is an abject carnival mirror. Fans of horror recognize the "rules" of horror films that dictate who lives and dies (see Clover 1993), what places are dangerous, and the likely identity of the killer. Observation of social scripts and norms is similar to identification of horror film tropes. Patterned behaviors become more apparent when understood through the similarity to generic patterns and repetitions in film. Those patterns and tropes make it possible for a viewer to see and internalize meanings encoded in films without an endless, repeated explanation. In other words, tropes, like social scripts and norms, are shortcuts. Furthermore, we learn something of our social scripts and norms from films just as much as films reflect our norms.

But genre is not linear or sequential; the tropes of horror film can move forward and backward and

reorganize in, toward, or from a given moment. Tropes and conventions create a lexicon of possible meanings by which to decode the past, present, and future. The source or site of these tropes is time and again located in the home, between an imagined urban/rural divide, or in the (woman's) body. American horror films harness the familiar power of the domestic and women's relationship to gender and the home, and their potential to transgress established gendered roles and boundaries, to create phobic atmospheres of dread. Given that the genre's raison d'etre is to imagine worlds in flux, it may at first be surprising that patriarchal domesticity is such a durable motif. Unlike those of real life, horror film's haunted houses tend to be purged of demons, with the nuclear family largely in love and intact by the film's conclusion. And when families are broken, such as when Jason drowns in Crystal Lake, it is the mother's ontology that is decimated. The onus of domesticity continues to fall squarely on mothers in what Jack Halberstam (2005) identifies as heteronormative space and time. Mrs. Voorhees might have snapped, but really, who can blame her? It seems that as long as the normative domestic is secure, horror is free to imagine ethereal and supernatural realms that threaten the home and family and what is done in the name of its protection. These translations help to contain and quell our fears by cathecting our fears onto a monster; but, just as likely, they coax the fear from us, whisper across some of our most deeply held, abject anxieties about the future and our existence. Because horror is available to visual, aesthetic, political, social, philosophical, and technical analysis, it is fertile ground for creativity and critique; horror has potential as a pedagogy of the oppressed, an interrogation of aesthetic socialities, and a safe glimpse into the abyssal dark. Horror films may bring us to the edge of the abyss, but we don't always get to dive in.

As many students have been correct to note, however, horror films are not always scary or horrifying, and even those that are may cease to be after enough time has passed. At first glance, many horror films are not even very bleak; they are contemporary morality tales that affirm a dualistic paradigm of good and evil that seems to offer viewers a warning, affirmation, escape, or catharsis. Critical approaches to horror, as Eugene Thacker (2017) has noted, may focus too readily on horror as a therapeutic release valve for collective social ills and fears. Filmmakers and audiences can use horror films to work through anxieties by taking them, in the figure of the monster (whether human or otherwise), to a most horrifying end. Horror, in this case, leaves us feeling that at least things aren't that bad or that, rationally, our fears are just as unfounded. Students often approach the films in this way. This perspective, however, is rooted in a normative us/them, self/Other binary that, although almost always leaving room for multiply located experiences, is a reflection of a particular idea of who the audience is. While we emphasize that horror films can be read as reflections—intentional or not—of a general idea of social anxieties in a given moment, we stress with students that these are not universal and that there is more to the experience of horror than catharsis or release. If horror is only a means of release, why do we get nightmares after watching? Horror is also, like any media, productive or generative (Haraway 1991); filmmakers produce and reproduce fears, giving audiences new things to fear and new ways to fear the old or familiar. But they also leave ample room for counternarrative and radical readings. In the context of teaching, the multitude of forms horror films assume and the analyses bound only by the limits of our own imaginations free students to open their thinking as far—or further—than any horror movie goes.

PART II: SEEING HORROR

Christian Metz asserted that "Film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand" (Monaco [1997] 2000:158). Yet explanation is what students are tasked to do. Students struggle to explain their response to a movie and to extrapolate meaning much in the same way that they struggle to do so with difficult theoretical texts. We ask them to do both and to read the films through the texts. Many students who enroll in the course have an interest in horror films, but no matter their comfort or familiarity with the genre, a great deal of work goes into how to watch—to see—a film. A basic assumption of the course is that images matter, and the context in which an image appears matters immensely; this contextual weight provides the lexiconical shorthand that films, especially genre films, rely on for legibility. In much the same way that language and meaning emerge in patterns from reading and rereading difficult texts, meaning and sense come through the textures, colors, shadows, and conventions of a film and its genre.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger ([1972] 1988) argues that there are ways of seeing the world that are determined or influenced by technologies, medium, our social positions and statuses, and

culture. Seeing is relational: between ourselves and others, the image itself, and what we believe about the world. But each image also embodies a way of seeing, whether it is shared by the viewer or not. In order words, what and how one sees is imprinted in the images one creates and is then seen by others through their own, culturally and historically informed ways of seeing. Horror films rely on tropes to help guide the viewer through the movie: Sex = death, don't go up the stairs, being home alone is bad, the virgin will survive. As a genre, it is also always trying to upend those conventions to scare and surprise and necessarily as social and cultural concerns change over time. Early horror films used Gothic motifs and monsters; films of the 1950s featured invaders from space; in 1960 with *Psycho*, for example, Alfred Hitchcock located the evil in the nice boy next door who takes care of his ailing mother.

Students are often adept at situating a film in its social context or in viewing it through the lens of social issues; for students of sociology especially, Berger's ([1972] 1988) argument is a logical extension of a sociological perspective turned toward the analysis of images. More difficult is guiding them to see a film as more than its plot and to trust and reflect on their immediate, visceral responses to what they are watching; in other words, to sense and *see* a movie and to trust themselves more than movie critics or the director. We introduce students to Roland Barthes's ([1957]1972) terms "denotation" and "connotation" as two modes by which meaning can be communicated and construed in films. Denotative meaning is the "obvious" or literal meaning. For example, *Psycho* opens with a daytime flyover shot of Phoenix, Arizona, that lands the viewer in a room with a man and woman getting dressed. We learn from the dialogue that the couple are in a relationship but haven't gotten married for financial reasons. The scene denotatively communicates information about these individuals, their relationship to one another, and little else. Objects, people, and events have literal meanings, nothing more than the images or words themselves; but the connotative meanings utilize the context of preceding scenes and social, historical, and cultural context. Connotation lays a foundation for how we interpret later events, for where we think these characters are headed, and how we feel about them and their actions. The couple are not having an adulterous affair, but their meeting feels illicit due to the connotative choices made by the director: They meet during the day, the man has been married before, the woman has to go back to work, they

are in a financially strained position. How will we feel 45 minutes later[4] when the woman, Marion, is murdered by Norman Bates? Connotative meanings are often gleaned sociologically, but they are also affective and political. We can't know, just from watching *Psycho*, what Alfred Hitchcock thinks of women or violence against women, psychoanalysis, the police, mental health and illness, trauma, or crime. But if we look closely at how the film is constructed, we learn something about *how* the director *sees* (that is, what choices he made) and how that seeing was translated to film (intentionally or not).

But cinematic images and imagery are not mere reflections or even connotations of what we are, with horror as the cinematic manifestation of the thick, dark pool that is our cultural id; nor do we passively absorb what we see. Horror films present us with questions and imagined landscapes of human darkness and demise (Thacker 2017), for those who choose to look and see, and maybe even when we try to look away. Because visual language is not the same as writing, where the reader is left to imagine what is described and what something looks like and means, in film, we see what the director wants us to see; in a sense, there is little room for imagination. What students find challenging in analysis of a film is to see the "ways of seeing" not just of a filmmaker situated in a given place and time, but to engage with their visceral responses (or lack thereof). We challenge them to think past the director. Whatever a director believes their movie to be about is not necessarily what the movie means, or at least not all or always what it means. One of the jobs of a filmmaker is to find openings for imagination and the unknown for visual or aesthetic interpretation. Horror provides a unique experience: Not being affected by the horror on the screen is just as interesting and relevant as being appalled. At this point, there are students who inevitably begin asking, what does it mean to watch at all?

PART III: THE HORROR OF LOOKING

There are many ways to approach horror, and neither this section nor Part IV of this article cover all of the organizational themes we've used. This section sketches a way to teach theories and films through the idea of looking, seeing, watching, and being looked at.

To see or be seen, made visible or invisible, are recurrent motifs in horror. Movies like *Alien*, *The Conjuring*, or *The Thing* keep the monster hidden,

in dark corners and shadow or through subterfuge and assimilation. The effect is to feel watched and uneasy, to know that the characters are threatened by something unseen and often uncanny. This dynamic, between visibility and invisibility, has analogues in the social world. Facial recognition (and misrecognition), nineteenth-century lantern laws, body cameras, biometrics, having a bank account or credit card (or not), the scopophilic pleasure and punishment of social media: The experiences connected of these things are distributed like the swing of a pendulum, where differential relations to visibility and invisibility can correlate to a reduction in life chances.

Laura Mulvey theorized "the male gaze" in the 1970s to describe what she argued is the inherent gaze held by the audience, the actors in a film, and the filmmakers. Film, according to Mulvey (1975), subordinates the first two to the third by hiding the camera and lulling the audience into the fantasy world, eliminating any critical distance. The presence of women, however, always threatens to break the illusion by reminding the (male) viewer of the woman's sexual difference, resulting in the undesirable experience of castration anxiety; thus, her presence must always be held by the male character's gaze in such a way that prevents the audience from having its own gaze or look. For students, Mulvey provides a concept that can be readily applied to almost any horror film and from which they can extrapolate different notions of a dominant gaze (a White gaze, heterosexual gaze, imperial gaze). Her work is difficult enough for those who want to go deeper into film theory and psychoanalysis but accessible enough to serve as an entry point into feminist film theory and critique.

Mulvey's (1975) concept, however, has limitations. Analyzing a film like *The Silence of the Lambs* or *Peeping Tom* through the male gaze may prove fruitful; but applied to *It Follows* or *Get Out*, the concept tends toward pathologization or to elide more generative and interesting points. bell hooks's work on the oppositional gaze centers Black women spectators as a challenge to or means to move beyond Mulvey. According to hooks (1992:122), Black women spectators "critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator" and thus continually deconstruct the binary posited by Mulvey that figures woman as image to be looked on and man as the bearer of the look. Extending hooks's argument, the oppositional gaze is a way to read against the grain, a disidentification (Muñoz 1999)

with dominant paradigms and normative visions of gender, race, home, heroes, sex, and desire. James Baldwin's ([1976] 2011) short analysis of *The Exorcist* is an oppositional counternarrative, a refusal of denotative meaning. For Baldwin, *The Exorcist* is a movie teeming with racialized relations of class, where the horror for White viewers is the breaching of the sacred private space of the family and the violation of a young girl's innocence. The horror, then, is in the presumed safety of that space, of whiteness and its supremacy. The evil is not the devil in Regan; the real terror of the film is the banal form evil takes, in everyday life, in bourgeois society's assumption and expectation of security and entitlement, the assumption that Regan is actually innocent and deserving of redemption. Baldwin asks us to consider where or who the devil really is, to look at the film as a case of displacement. Blackness, in its very absence (except perhaps represented metaphorically as the devil itself, as that which must be cast out), is made abject. If Regan can conveniently forget that she's killed several men, that she can regain her innocence, is it America's hope that it can do the same, that the demon can be exorcized?

We are sitting in our classroom at a CUNY college in Manhattan's Upper East Side on a Friday evening. Because of limited space and resources, we've taught this class in a number of settings, but this semester, we're lucky enough to be in Hunter's main screening room. This allows us to periodically watch full films in class and debrief together through the readings and movie assignments students have completed over the course of the week. We have just finished screening a film, *It Follows*, during which we collectively and individually experienced something like Mulvey's gaze even as it inevitably fails to capture our affective states. Working through this postscreening moment is always a question of navigating *a* gaze, which is another way of saying representation. For us—sociology PhDs teaching a film class in a Women and Gender Studies department—the question of representation is always front of mind, even as what we and our students *mean* by the term is ever in flux.

Our students, who with rare exceptions are *not* White heterosexual men, are not feeling particularly castrated in Mulvey's sense by *It Follows*. But they are immediately attuned to the world of the film and to other forms of castration that it compels. The suburban whiteness of the film's just-outside-Detroit setting is an obvious tell of a certain set of preoccupations with world-building that does

not reflect their own lived experience as (largely) New Yorkers. But we are, at this point, used to this specific horror film nonplace in which White wealth and comfort is only ever threatened by the supernatural. Baldwin's critique has been internalized, and the question of who is represented in what ways and under what conditions has given way to another line of questioning: What does the particular schema of mass culture, indexed by a film like *The Exorcist*, allow (in the diegetic logic of the cinema) *to happen*?

What forms of sexual contact and logics of personal subjecthood become possible in this world that would otherwise be foreclosed? What does the racial castration internal to the film tell us about social logics of—to use a word that we have assiduously tried to deconstruct and avoid—*agency*? Not only *who* has it but *what acts* and *how*? In pursuing this line of inquiry, matters of formal representation give way to questions of social power. Race, in its disembodied absence nonetheless does narrative work and speaks, as Baldwin reminds us, to the formal erasures through which the extractive violence of American racial formations operate. And it is these erasures in *It Follows* to which students turn. This is a language that our students know intuitively and to which they arrive through contemplating (to use Mulvey's term) visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In other words, this approach forges a clear inextricable linkage between sex and race and positions these categories as social actors in themselves that operate both when embodied and apparent and when spectral or absent. This realization is foundational to developing a sociological imagination adequate to the twenty-first century United States.

PART IV: MONSTERS EVERYWHERE

Monstrosity is one of the most useful and fraught concepts in the analysis of horror films. This section summarizes some of the theories and uses of monstrosity, the concept's expansive usefulness for students, and some of the challenges we—and the students—raise about the term.

Monsters and monstrosity pose a multipronged threat: to the promise of moving closer to "perfection of the body," wherein any reminder of vulnerability is threat (Haraway 1991; Shildrick 2001), and to a socially agreed-on desire to maintain the invisibility of everyday monstrosity, as represented culturally, visually. Monstrosity is the psychopath, corporation, virus, and nature (Weinstock 2013). In other words, "monsters" are everywhere, and strain

as we do to abject, we make them, they make us, and we are them. That we are the monsters does not, however, grant humans totalizing supremacy and agency in the world. Indeed, the monster, more than a symbol of power, is our vulnerability and fear of it. Empathic identification with the monster is rife with a loathe, humanistic condescension akin to "we are the world" and "the children are our future" sentimentalities (something Jordan Peele's film, *Us*, skillfully resists). The audience can love Shrek despite his monstrousness because he is good; we allegorize queer oppression onto the vampires (who "come out of the coffin") of *True Blood*. Monsters represent, but they also produce: They actively engage the audience by touching and modulating fears and anxieties. They can also excite us and make us feel seen.

Barbara Creed (1993) theorized the characterization of the feminine as monstrous and the monstrous as feminine. The monstrous-feminine is a figure that represents or embodies all that is to be feared (by men) about woman (as female, as monster) and women's sexual difference. Following Mulvey, Creed's approach is similarly steeped in psychoanalytic theory and thus shares similar limitations. Limitations aside, the term gives students a lens through which to critically identify and analyze various manifestations of monstrosity. Discussions of, for example, *Alien* or *Carrie* are more nuanced when students are able to analyze the films through the male gaze while using the monstrous-feminine to make sense of female characters like Ripley and Carrie who possess power. The work of Jack Halberstam, on the other hand, draws students away from what can become the facile and unsatisfying approaches of psychoanalysis. Halberstam (1995) argues that in Gothic fiction, deviant subjectivities are produced in opposition to that which is deemed normal. Monstrosity marks a moment when boundaries—between good and evil, self and other, health and illness or perversity—dissolve, become abject (see Kristeva and Roudiez 1982). Monstrosity in horror films, by contrast, comes to subsume "otherness" of all kinds—nation, gender, race, body— under sexual and sexualized difference to be feared; the result is an erasure of more overt representations of racialized, xenophobic, and other social anxieties and concerns. In this sense, Halberstam affords students a "flip" of the monstrous.

For example, in *The Silence of the Lambs*, students easily read the character of Buffalo Bill as a problematic collapse of nonnormative gender identity, desire, and/or mental illness with psychopathy. What they also see, through Halberstam, is the significance of class. Clarice, as hard as she works to

attain the good life, has more in common with Buffalo Bill's class status than she does with Hannibal Lecter's. Lecter identifies Clarice as "poor, white trash," and although Bill is never directly labeled as such, the working-class town where Clarice finds him, the local accent, and the state of the house he occupies signal as much. Bill is the monster of the film; he kills women not because he wants or needs to—killing for the pleasure of killing—but only to satisfy what Lecter deems a base, misguided desire to create himself anew. Buffalo Bill's apparent sexual and gender confusion, at best, or perversion, at worst, are explanation, symptom, and cause of his place in the world. The question then becomes, who is the real monster? If the monster is still Buffalo Bill, who created the monster? This is monstrosity in one of its most useful applications. Students rethink their assessments and identifications, shifting the location of monstrosity and reconsidering its source.

The limitations of the concept, however, become clear for those students who are frustrated by binary thinking. Although monstrosity does not have to be either/or, or even require a foil, a "good guy" on the other side, horror films regularly position the story as such. Does it matter why or how Buffalo Bill becomes a monster if the question itself tends toward a binary us/them proposition? Indeed, horror films rarely venture beyond the paranoid ramblings of the American political classes. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) might warn us to beware of America's deindustrialized rural working class or, conversely, point the finger back at entitled liberals from the coasts who evacuated and disinvested the rural middle, but it does very little to foster an imaginary beyond heteronormative domesticity as the baseline context for American social structure or to even nod toward the fiction of a rural/urban divide to begin with.

The students who enroll in our class, which runs three hours a week on Friday nights, are a self-selecting group. They are not necessarily (or even often) horror fans, but they are the sort of folks who will give over a weekend evening to think through and discuss the relationship between Hollywood genre and compulsory heteronormativity. This primes us for certain kinds of critiques, particularly of the misogyny in much of the genre. What is harder, both for us and for the students, is to think against the genre's simple moralizing to seek out the structural scaffolding that is enacted through the characters on screen. Leatherface is of course a horror, but he is also a good son performing family chores under conditions of extreme isolation and economic dispossession.

What, we are always asking, does this tell us about how dynamics of filial duty align with fiduciary demands and compulsive labor structures under capitalism (see Berlant 2011)? Students are perhaps reluctant to see in Leatherface an idealization of heteropatriarchal family duties that they (and we) have also internalized even as they (and we) have, with varying degrees of success, rejected them. But horror's position at the borderline posits an invitation that can otherwise be too terrible to contemplate. That to be "good," which is to say to comport with the compulsory duties and affective dispositions of the proper subject in the "postmodern geographies" of twenty-first-century heteronormative space time, is to be Leatherface. To recognize ourselves in Leatherface is to come, through the work of genre analysis, to a specific type of understanding of the queer impulses that lie at the heart of heterocapitalist families and, in turn, to appreciate, with scholars like Jack Halberstam and Jane Ward (2015), our own *productive* failures in achieving those ends. This is a diegetic critique of social structure *and* what Raymond Williams (1977) called a "structure of feeling."

TERROR, APOCALYPSE, FUTURE: HOW HORROR MATTERS

Eugene Thacker (2014) has argued that horror has been unique in its commitment to theorizing an ontological reality that surrounds the human realm but is incommensurate with it. The ground against which it lurks and thrums can only be approached obliquely, through an adumbration of what is not. Such a negative theology necessitates a motive force that remains inaccessible to the human, to life as we know and think it. This inscrutability is the cosmic horror of "weird media," which demands a chimerical interlocutor between the impossible and the real. The horror film has done the work of presentation by means of seepage and unsettling/unsettled encodings of fear and monstrosity: Feet firmly planted in the abyss, the American horror film has acted as a sort of perverse death drive of the social unconscious. In a twist that only horror can make, such terrors, pessimism, and darkness are also a pedagogical means by which to engage in radical critique of representational, historical, and contemporary violences heaped on suffering populations in the name of an "us" that feels ever more remote and capricious.

The apocalyptic, end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it doomscape can be found in horror films, but it

takes a more mundane form: destruction and desecration of the nuclear family or, conversely, the surfacing of a more humane humanity and the reconsolidation of normative social hierarchies in the wake of zombie plagues or alien invasions. But even when a horror movie doesn't directly engage with nihilism or the end of human society, there exists the endless iterations of whiteness as consolidated power, woman as victim or root of all evil, and the reductive simplicity inherent in the good/evil juxtaposition, even when slippage exists. Despite this, as we've suggested, counternarratives—a disidentifying and oppositional gaze—can surface. No amount of radical reading will fix the representational violence in horror (or in any genre for that matter), but for a genre that affixes dread to the other, makes known fears into monsters, and regularly guts the bodies of women, horror rarely pretends to be anything it's not.

Horror films are often grounded in a recognizable if uncanny reality while being at the same time free of reality's physical and practical constraints. It is a style driven by what is darkest, perambulating between fear, terror, and horror. Horror films resonate with and modulate social and cultural anxieties with uncanny or outright nightmarish scenarios just removed from reality: being buried alive, monsters under the bed, infection and invasion, possession, and violent death. The removal allows us to watch these films with enough disinterest to enjoy them, be scared, and possibly have a cathartic experience without needing to reflect too deeply on the movie's implications or our real fears.

But this distance is never far from the constantly generative tides of fantasy and reality, fear and reason, that circulate newstime images and imaginaries to deny or stoke fear regarding high unemployment, communism, war, cultural anarchy, loss of relevance, loss of control, children, teenagers, the city, the country, what's close to home but invisible, the foreign and the "other," sex and sexuality, that which we find strange and threatening, gender, social expectations, nuclear accidents and chemical spills, disaster. Thus, the visual and cinematic tropes, moods, and motifs of horror undergird and disrupt processes of cultural mythmaking and the circulation of nationalist narratives, unevenly and differentially contributing to what Benedict Anderson ([1983] 1991) termed "imagined communities," fictive yet real nationalisms made in language and shared beliefs rather than in blood (although, in this context, blood is equally important in a literal sense). In other words, horror is an affective confrontation with the limits of the social. At its most misanthropic, horror shows us that any striving toward a sublime or meaningful life-death through sacrifice or a life of hard work has given way to cynical malaise and resignation; conversely, horror's dispensation of human happy endings opens up to reimaginings of the social or new worlds entirely, with or without humans.

Horror movies, like all media, are mythmakers; media and culture reflect and reproduce but also create or consolidate. Through the repetition of generic conventions and the often-used locales of home, abandoned buildings, and woodsy cabins, those same environments then become uncanny. Through horror films, we learn not only what to fear but also how to fear (what it looks like to be afraid), what is likely to be threatened (home, family, neighborhood, society, children, security, purity), and how to vanquish the threat. The genre, when it tells us where the evil lies, precludes the ability to confront where we are; when it doesn't, it forces a confrontation with what we fail to be. In this case, horror is not sublime; it is not a glimpse into an unknown but is instead about our fear of what we can know and do not want to confront. This is the horror of social transgressions, not death or mortality. But horror, via the abject, monstrous, and nonhuman, can transcend the social, at least momentarily, and open up to new ways of thinking and knowing the social, political, and historical in that seepage of abyssal truths, allowing us to attenuate the horror of the past and its immanent futures. This is the horror that, rather than enervates, excites and destabilizes. Coupled with critical and intellectual demands, horror films permit students a creative, aesthetic, and scholarly freedom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

NOTES

1. Mostly U.S. films. There are a few non-U.S. movies that sometimes appear on the schedule, but the majority are English-language films produced by U.S.-based filmmakers and/or studios. Also included are films that have been popular with U.S. audiences, that take place in the United States (even if not produced by a U.S. studio or filmmakers), or

that echo themes similar to those in other U.S. films. For example, David Cronenberg's films have been made in Canada and the United States, but the body horror subgenre is relevant to course themes.

2. The class has been taught online several times. The synchronous iterations met Fridays from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm one semester and on Thursdays from 4:30 pm to 6:00 pm in another. The class was taught asynchronously in an online summer session and once during a regular semester with optional Sunday discussions. Despite the lack of regular meetings, the eight-week online asynchronous summer course went very well. Students regularly took advantage of extensive office hours availability and optional discussion sessions. The asynchronous regular semester course, however, was challenging. Students were taking more classes and did not have the intensity and focus that necessarily come with a summer course that condenses 15 weeks into 8, leading some students to feel more adrift (a common experience in remote learning).

3. It is worth noting that the in-person class has almost always met on Fridays from 5:30 pm to 8:30 pm and has never had fewer than 20 students. There are a few reasons for this, a significant one being that the Friday time made the class accessible to students who work during business hours. The schedule, topic, and that it is an upper-level course attracted students for multiple reasons, making the level of experience with gender studies and horror films quite varied. Many of the students love horror movies and were excited to take it whether it fulfilled a particular requirement or not; some thought it was the most interesting option available to satisfy a general or Women and Gender Studies requirement; but there are always a few who, on the first day, admit that they do not like horror movies at all and are only there because they needed it and it was the only thing that fit their school or work schedule.

4. A fun exercise: When introducing *Psycho*, we ask students who have already seen the movie if they remember how the movie begins. Unless they are fans of the movie who have seen it multiple times or saw it for the first time recently, almost no one remembers what happens in the first 45 minutes. This is useful for pointing out (a) how Norman Bates and the shower scene figure so prominently in our collective cultural memories, (b) that Marion's life is so easily written out of the film, and (c) that there is a difference between seeing a movie casually and watching a movie intentionally, for the purpose of analysis in an academic setting.

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