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Horror Without End:
Narratives of Fear Under Modern Capitalism



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Senior Honors Thesis in Comparative Literature

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To my parents, Aníbal and Priscilla

Introduction

“The most important things are the hardest to say.” - Stephen King

In the small New England town of Middlebury, Vermont, two teenage boys walked home from a party, as the hour neared midnight. I was one of them, and the other was my friend, Javier. We were returning to the college dorms that both of us called home in the summers since we were twelve years old. Our parents are college professors, you see, and to shore up the family finances, all of them work during the summers at Middlebury College’s summer language school. While our parents worked all day, we had our run of the place, since usually the most helpful thing a bunch of teenagers can do on summer vacation is stay out of trouble, and out of the adults’ hair. Most nights we watched scary movies, or hung out at the campus burger joint and bar. This night we were coming back from a Spanish School party, where neither of us danced much, but did our best at chatting up college students, who still generally saw us as cute kids, to our grave disappointment. I should note that the route home from this party made us pass by the old graveyard that sat off to the side of Middlebury’s main campus.

As we turned a corner beside the graveyard, we saw what looked like a girl lying on the sidewalk. Though it was hard to tell exactly what we were seeing, we agreed that if there was a girl lying there, we should see if she needed help. That was when she stood up. Wet strands of hair covered her face, which we could not make out. That same moment is when we both came to the immediate conclusion that this was not in fact a living girl, and we were likely about to die

at the hands of an avenging spirit. Even as we got closer to her, we could not make out any distinguishing features, or even clothes. We kept walking closer, at this point wanting to prove to ourselves that this really was not a ghost, to glean anything that could reassure us. But we were not so lucky. Before we could get close enough to make out any human markers, the girl turned and walked right into the complete darkness of the graveyard. Needless to say, at this point we decided to turn back and take an alternate route home.

All of this would have been strange enough, but daylight did nothing to ease our confusion as to what we had seen. To our baffled horror, when we went back the following morning to the sidewalk by the graveyard, we realized that the whole side of the graveyard stretching for a block was sectioned off by a high, chain-link fence. We could not find a single opening through which the girl could have walked through the night before.

I cannot say if this experience was exactly what sparked my fascination with horror as a narrative genre, but it did for the first time make me think substantively about storytelling. What happens in the process of telling a story, and the processing of a story? How does narrative help fight fear? Fear is at the heart of this project, but it is not only fear like that of two boys facing down a mysterious creature at night. This project is just as much about the more mundane fears that drove our parents to seek extra work at Middlebury in the midst of the global Recession of 2008 to assure the education of their children, and the fear held by many of the residents of Middlebury, which certainly was not fully *of us* as the loud, dark, comparatively wealthy strangers that we were, but of the instability and uncertainty we represented as a group of people brought into contact with them by extraordinary circumstances.

This project is about *narratives of fear*. What are they, who tells them, and what strange powers do they hold in our lives? I should explain here my reasoning for using the terms “narratives of fear,” or “fear narratives,” instead of simply talking about “horror movies” or “scary stories.” It does not matter, and rather only confuses the issue, to have to determine whether a film or novel is actually scary, scary to some people but not others, disgusting or shocking rather than frightening, et cetera. What matters here is that horror is a category that is at once artistic, historical, corporate, and practical. What is termed horror, or thriller, or mystery is as much determined by Netflix and Rotten Tomatoes as by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), media scholars, and historical literary movements such as Gothic literature.

I like to think of this project as what comes after walking by the graveyard. What to do do when one encounters something that cannot be explained? You tell a story, over and over again, to anyone who will listen, because as you tell them about this unexplainable phenomenon, you enter into conversation, and together, you try to understand. During the years of and after the Great Recession, during which my generation and I have grown up, there has been much for people to try to understand. How do you live through times of economic crisis, and what do you come out believing in on the other side? What doubts about leaders, successes and institutions only grow day by day, once they have been seen ‘in the daylight’?

Practically speaking, I intend to address these questions about economic fear and uncertainty by analyzing and theorizing the relationship of the dominated classes of society to narratives of fear, such as they appear in popular media and daily life. My work draws on a long scholarly tradition of theorizing the points of connection between political economy, art and the proletarian classes. Marxist and Marxian scholars such as Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci,

Fredric Jameson, Jacques Rancière, and David Harvey (along with Marx himself) have been central to the development of vocabularies for thinking through the structure of my arguments. In conjunction with these writers, thinkers in Post-Colonial and Subaltern Studies have grounded my research, as I have found that Spivak, Bhabha, and the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group have often connected experiences and musings I had of my own accord with theoretical work that speaks to shared experiences from those who have lived in or near the global economic periphery.

Each of the following chapters builds on the fundamental concept of narratives of fear under modern capitalism. Chapter I begins with an analysis of the construction of fear narratives, looking at convention, allegory and dynamics between the “masses” and horror as part of mass media. It will lay the theoretical groundwork for the project, as well as establishing a pattern of using close readings of individual films and texts to illustrate a point about narratives of fear more broadly, beginning with a comparison of Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* (1981) with Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard’s *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012). Chapter II brings in a case study of a community’s use of narrative to process “unspeakable” historical trauma. This case study comes from Argentina, looking at the period of and following the military dictatorship of Rafael Videla and a military Junta through a pair of films, Luis Puenzo’s *La historia oficial* (1985) and Juan José Campanella’s *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009). Chapter III is the centerpiece of the project, containing its main theoretical contribution and comprising of a series of close readings and analysis of genre conventions. It first explores depictions of working class protagonists in horror, then compares these to their upper-middle class and rich counterparts, and ends with an examination of intersecting class and racial tropes, and of how these develop my theoretical

framework on living, dying and audience identification in narratives of fear. This chapter contains readings of John Carpenter and Debra Hill's *Halloween* (1976), Adam Wingard's *You're Next* (2011), Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). Finally, chapter IV brings the conversation back to the current historical moment in an American neoliberal society, asking about the potential political significance of anti-capitalist knowledge undergirding popular media, and how that knowledge can reshape public conversations about capitalism, neoliberalism and American imperialism.

This project also very much derives from my enjoyment of horror media, and the 'amateur' discussion that they so regularly provoke. It is my belief, which I present here, that the telling of narratives of fear as a way to process the unexplained, though certainly considered by the academy in the past, contains structures that no one either involved in storytelling or its academic study have fully explored. To this end, I want the academy and the public to meet on the sidewalk between the college and the graveyard, and to converse about what they saw, as equals in bafflement and mortal fear.

I

Conventionality, Allegory and a Politics of the Subaltern

One of the concerns of this project is the dialectic of aesthetics and politics, as it relates to media viewed and acted on as ‘popular,’ which Fredric Jameson also calls “commercial” (1). This issue is a focus of the project not in the sense of seeking a resolution to it, but in that it serves as a frame for proposing the importance of the work. To make clear exactly how the aforementioned dialectic is at play in the creation and consumption of horror media, I want to begin somewhat far afield from the central focus of this project on narratives of fear under modern capitalism. We begin with a scene narrated by French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who in 1981 published a version of his dissertation titled *Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth Century France*. In its eleventh chapter, Rancière describes a fraternal association of tailors at work in their shop, sometime in the 1850s. Rancière’s representation of these tailors and other associated workers writing during France’s Second Republic (1848-1851) is an important referent for this project, because of the dynamic it suggests between a mass, working class audience, and current popular horror media.

Specifically, Rancière cites J.P. Gilland’s description of the shop, which contains a “lithograph depicting Jesus crowned with thorns and leaning on two allegorical figures, liberty and equality. In this moving picture the Son of God holds under his bare feet the demon of pride, who is vomiting gold. And the word 'Hope' is inscribed on the shining disk above his head, which is all tenderness and meekness” (303-304). Gilland goes on to describe a related allegorical image of the the Republic, depicted “as a strong and gorgeous woman” who, like

Jesus, is surrounded by symbols of democracy and collectivity (303-304). He contrasts these images to the art he has seen in the homes of the bourgeoisie, and draws a clear moral distinction between the noble, humble aesthetics of the associated workers, and those of the bourgeoisie, which to him are “petty” and “frivolous” (304). However, Rancière takes pains to demonstrate how, in addition to Marx’s depiction of the proletariat as “an appendage of the machine” of capital, these socialist workers also incorporated social and aesthetic characteristics into their lives that contain a ‘frivolity’ and ‘sentimentality’ supposedly denied them (Marx 479). Thus, Rancière makes note of how, “the frugal repast of fraternal workers, repeating the miracles of multiplied bread and consecrated wine, again takes on the fragrance of Sundays in the countryside” (305).

It is the juxtaposition of seemingly conservative aesthetic sensibilities and socialist politics that is the point of connection between Rancière’s study and this project. Specifically, Rancière demonstrates a contradiction between the radical political changes being experimented by workers’ associations, and aesthetic (even ethical) connections asserted by those same workers to disappearing feudal social structures, which Marx describes as, “the enemies of their [proletarians’] enemies” (480). My assertion is that the dynamic between modern mass audiences and a corporate system that develops and disseminates horror media for mass consumption is similar to the one demonstrated by Rancière between the Parisian workers and the bourgeois ruling class. Rancière details this dynamic in the Preface to the English Edition of his work, noting that “it [Rancière’s text] introduces us directly into the speech of these workers, in all its forms, from personal confidence or the recital of daily experience through to philosophical speculations and programs for the future, by the way of the fictitious stories recorded in their [the

workers’] journals” (x). It is this frivolous ‘speech’ that seems to produce at once anti-capitalist sentiment and retrograde sentimentality. And yet, Rancière suggests that the masses themselves might not find these feelings so conflicting. Here also he cites the locksmith, J.P. Gilland, writing in a working-class journal about aestheticized representations of smiths, as saying, “as you can see, I know how to appreciate my craft, and yet I would have liked to have been a painter” (5). The sense of “wanting to be a painter” has a twofold meaning here, as it contains the sense of workers wanting the power to represent, generally speaking, but also to represent *themselves* specifically.

I will not argue that corporate or even independently produced horror films give this power to the people, or represent socialist or communist attitudes on class relations. However, I do propose that the complex and sometimes contradictory political outlooks *of workers and other oppressed people* are reflected and validated by these narratives of fear, despite the inescapable capitalist processes involved in their creation. But what is it about narrative, and very particularly horror narratives, that allows for the dynamics described above? Two related concepts come into relief before all others: the role of narrative convention in horror stories, and a Gramscian view of “common sense.” Again, this project does not claim that horror narratives are somehow the ‘best,’ or only current example of subaltern classes “speaking,” to use Spivak’s concept. The reason for this study then, is to examine a particularly salient and (hopefully) clear example of some of the ways heterodox and subaltern (political) knowledges survive and disseminate in explicitly hostile (aesthetic) environments.

To reiterate, convention-centered artistry in horror and conflicting constructions of common sense are the two significant factors engaging fear narratives as a space for popular

storytelling, and thus for anti-capitalist testification. Rancière refers to spaces with similar potential in his first chapter of *Nights of Labor*, listing “idiotic paintings...ornamental paintings...billboards, popular prints”¹ that he claims are, “the new hieroglyphics of the duplicity of the illiterate” (9). This latter sentence, though enigmatically written, (and of course, translated) is also illuminating. While “hieroglyphics” can be taken literally, as referring to pictorial representations or signs, (such as the painting of Jesus in Rancière’s Chapter 11) the use of the word “duplicity” here carries more of its archaic meaning of ‘doubleness’, rather than the currently more common meaning of ‘deceitfulness’. Therefore, Rancière is claiming that popular art, as enumerated in the Rimbaud citation, contains the ‘duplicity’, or doubleness, of working class thought. This emphasizes its complexity, and distance from unified and comprehensive ideology. Here, Rancière is pushing toward an idea that will be central to our understanding of horror narrative. It is American literary critic Fredric Jameson who will give voice to this idea, and (coincidentally, the same year as Rancière) publish his text, *The Political Unconscious*, in which he writes, “all literature, no matter how weakly, must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious...all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community” (70). My suggestion is that the politics that Jameson finds as part of all literature can clearly mesh with the artistic impulses that Rancière notes in the politicized associated workers. But how exactly do these sprawling, vague concepts interact in horror media?

Answers can be gleaned through a discussion on the structures of horror narratives, beginning with the notion of ‘common sense’. This term, as I will be employing it, comes from Italian Marxist and political thinker, Antonio Gramsci. In his usage, the term is highly political,

¹ This list is a citation of Rimbaud, from his poem, *Une saison en enfer* (1873).

as it relates to another Gramscian concept, cultural hegemony. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci characterizes hegemony as a power in the realm of “civil society,” “which the dominant group exercises throughout society...” in conjunction with State power, and which together constitute domination by a class or social group (12). The often-cited definition of Gramscian common sense says that it is “basically the most widespread conception of life and of man. Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of ‘common sense’” (326 n5). One might assume, therefore, that common sense would then refer to knowledge that is dominant, or culturally hegemonic. However, in the definition above, it is clear that common sense is not merely implemented from the top-down, but is multi-directional. Indeed, Gramsci introduces it initially as one area of “spontaneous philosophy” which is accessible by all people. Another of these, which also informs this study, is “folklore” (323). The multi-directional structure suggests what Gramsci himself does in his essay, “The Study of Philosophy”: that there is not one singular common sense or “philosophy” but that many of these make up the world, and that in fact, these philosophies can conflict and undermine each other. For the purposes of this project, it will be understood that there are multiple ‘common senses’ alongside a ‘hegemonic’ one which will be herein named as such. These counter-hegemonic, or subaltern common senses are our focus, and they are what I claim finds fertile ground in horror narrative.

We will here flesh out how conventionality functions as a method for representing common sense in the landscape of horror². To do so we must look into the formal qualities of conventions in the horror genre, and how creators and audiences interact with them in ways that

² To clarify, I am using the term “convention” in a somewhat unconventional way. When I talk about ‘conventional horror’ for example, I am referring to horror narratives that lean more on conventions in establishing a plot, premise and character arcs, rather than creating allegorical structures to directly address political issues through social commentary art. More on this on the following page.

engage a form of the ‘political unconscious’. The discursive potential of conventional horror relates to several facets of the genre, broadly speaking. First, there is the very fact that horror media is part of so-called ‘genre fiction’ in general, a term which distinguishes it from ‘literary fiction’. In film terminology, genre films, or associated ‘B-movies’ are distinguished from both arthouse film and blockbusters, which are independent, niche-market films, and large budget, highly publicized (and thus, often commercially and critically successful) films respectively (Shone 27-40). This designation, limited though it may be, marks genre films as popular in a somewhat contradictory way³. On one hand, media that is massively popular is of course, massively lucrative, and it would be immensely misguided to think that major studios do not understand this. On the other, conventional horror narratives involve entering discursive frames that are popular, but *not hegemonic*. Put another way, horror contains common sense both in the hegemonic sense and the Gramscian folkloric sense, and yet it is not subsumed by either liberal or socialist ideological rigidity. In terms of film designations, commercially successful horror is distinguished from blockbusters by the amount of both studio money and studio control involved in a movie’s creation, while B-movies differ from arthouse cinema in the latter’s social connection to high art, academia and bourgeois taste.

Second, within the scope of genre fiction/film, there is a crucial split in creative trends. We will designate these trends ‘conventional’ and ‘allegorical’. These trends are not mutually exclusive within a narrative, but they differ strongly in terms of their political work, which affects the way a narrative is read. The conventional approach we have already begun to examine. It is a de-individualized form of storytelling, (folkloric) which emphasizes connection

³ *Halloween, Evil Dead, The Babadook, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, It Follows, Paranormal Activity, Blair Witch Project* and many other highly successful horror films are independent. Meanwhile, *Saw, I Am Legend, Final Destination, World War Z, Pan's Labyrinth, The Purge, and Don't Breathe* are all major studio distributed.

to the cultural and communitarian, and reinforces or expands on folk knowledges⁴. Allegorical storytelling is also fairly straightforward. It intends, and is perceived as an attempt to convince the audience of a belief. Jameson notes the existence of a “footnote-subtext of an older web of political allusion” in texts that are written as what we might think of as explicit ‘social commentary’ (33). Examples of this kind of storytelling are common in the Zombie subgenre of horror, in works such as Max Brooks’ *World War Z* (2006) or George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). However, the works I am concerned with in this project tend to rely more heavily on conventional storytelling, rather than the allegorical, in order to study the presence and nature of a political unconscious in horror. Jameson himself alludes to such a possibility, musing that one generation’s “meditation on social classes and political regimes becomes the very *pensée sauvage* of a whole narrative production” (34).

Of course, horror directors and writers such as Wes Craven, Kimberly Peirce and James Wan are aware of conventions as an artistic method, and they are aware of viewers’ awareness as well, even if neither considers the weight of the political in the text. Regardless, this meta-awareness does not detract from the conventional approach but enhances it, as it affects many of the most common formal and narrative aspects of horror. For example, in films involving ghosts and serial killers, a common trope involves the creature appearing or crossing the background of a shot in a way that only the audience can see, and that often is never revealed

⁴ This ‘conventional’ storytelling, especially in its connection to folklore, may bring to mind Jean-Luc Nancy’s writings on myth in *The Inoperative Community* (1986). This would be worrisome, as I do not mean to suggest that conventional narrative resembles his conception of mythmaking that tends toward Fascism. Nancy does see myth (including his interrupted myth) as “communitarian in its essence,” as well as labeling it “tautegorical” in opposition to the “allegorical,” which serves our study well (50).

to any character. This convention demonstrates a direct engagement and dialogue with the audience by the creators of a film, opening the door to politics as part of a formal conversation⁵.

One of the best cited examples of this sort of interaction between audience expectations and creative decision making comes from Wes Craven's teen-horror classic, *Scream* (1996). From the advent of slasher horror, many slasher antagonists have a propensity for "teleportation" to a jump scare appropriate position, regardless of distance from their victim or logical steps between their appearance in one location and another (TV Tropes, Villain Teleportation). Appearing in some of the most well-known slashers, such as Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, the effectiveness of this trope has made it a staple of slasher movies ever since. However, as jump scares overall have become more common, audiences have learned to recognize related tropes, and so their use has come to be derided by critics and audiences as a sign of poor writing (Bahr 1). However, in *Scream*, Craven twists this particular 'teleportation' method by using it not only as a means of disorienting the audience, but as a way of maintaining the "whodunnit" element in the plot. It is only at the end of the movie that the audience is given an explanation for the Ghostface Killer's teleporting abilities, as it is revealed that in fact two teenagers have been orchestrating the murders throughout the film, each donning the Ghostface costume at different points. In this way, a formal element becomes a narrative one, such that the story succeeds in undermining audience expectations, which themselves are informed by the explicit use of recognizable horror tropes. This kind of awareness and dialogue with narrative traditions is present to a greater or lesser extent in a vast majority of horror media, because as mentioned,

⁵ In particular, many tropes surround ghosts and demons can be traced either to advances in special effects throughout the history of film, or to even older examples of phantasms, such as those in representations of Hamlet. An example of this latter connection is the directorial choice of whether to show a physical ghost or not, even when the plot revolves around its purported existence. This comes up both in Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) and James Wan's *The Conjuring*.

formal play and interaction is central to the conceptualization of horror as a site for the political unconscious.

In Jameson's writing on the political unconscious, there is a wariness of this dialogue between consumable commodity and proletarian subject. He cites the relationship between totalitarian "fantasy futures" and "those of cultural programming and penetration: not the iron cage, but rather the *société de consommation* with its consumption of images and simulacra..." as two sides of one capitalist coin (92). It would not be unreasonable to think that such a lucrative commodity as horror media would be crafted in such a way that it could never undermine the capitalist society from whence it springs. And yet, any Marxist will affirm that contradiction is at the core of capitalist social structure. Marx himself, writing in his teleological manner, asserts, "not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons..." (478). The point we can take from this is that at the very least, the contradictions and destructive impulses of capitalism are exploitable, and especially when discussing movement from the political unconscious to a state of 'consciousness' or awareness, it is wrong to discount the very possibility of subaltern subjects both knowing, and acting of their own accord. Jay McRoy, in the introduction to the compilation of essays, *Japanese Horror Cinema*, notes that "analysing representations of horror...has long provided one of the most compelling avenues for understanding the cultural impact of social and political change" (15). He cites Andrew Tudor and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in emphasizing "sensitivity to cultural variations" which, among other things, McRoy believes involves recognizing the importance of folkloric traditions (15). Although McRoy is writing specifically on the Japanese context, it is no great stretch to consider that this dynamic prevails

around the world, since McRoy's basic claim is simply that culturally specific history and folklore is an important analytic perspective. From this far realm of film criticism, we can see the connection reach toward Gramsci's sedimentation of common sense through the language of folklore and subaltern knowledges.

The basic link, therefore, is between artistic conventionality, and social-political common sense. To visualize the way these systems function, rather than analyzing one text, a comparison of two at once, though delicate, will demonstrate the layering of allegorical storytelling alongside the conventional. The two works are Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981) and Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), and their relationship is one of 'original' and 'parody' respectively. To a greater or lesser extent, the relationship these two films share is a common one in horror, as even when a work is not explicitly a parody or homage to an older piece, the artistic move towards referentiality and citation that prevails in horror makes the difference difficult to parse.

The titles of both pieces lay out clearly the basic premises of both films, but also demonstrate an important plot aspect, which is a strong sense of the archetypal. This is most visible in the somewhat tongue in cheek title *The Cabin in the Woods*, which besides specifically referencing the trope that the movie is based on, also pokes fun at the vaguely ominous air of titles like *The Last House on the Left*, *The Orphanage*, *The Houses October Built*, *Cabin Fever*, *House of Wax* and many more. On the level of plot, *The Cabin in the Woods* traces conventions and themes that have become common in horror by returning (anachronistically) to *Evil Dead* as an early example of a low-budget format that achieved great commercial success. Anecdotally, *Evil Dead* was an amateur production on many levels, including a "comedy of errors" during

shooting which included the crew and cast getting lost in the woods, according to actor Bruce Campbell's autobiography, *If Chins Could Kill: Confessions of a B Movie Actor* (101). Many of the elements of movies like *Evil Dead* that arose from limitations on budget and experience, through its success, became common tropes in horror. Examples of this include the trope of the 'group of friends on vacation', or limited settings like the cabin in the woods, or the haunted building. There is an ambiguous message to take from this dynamic of successful low-budget horror films. On one hand, one could certainly argue that there is a low bar of entry to filmmakers who wish to make horror films, and that there is an ability for horror to converse horizontally in terms of class as opposed to many dominant forms of art, and especially cinema. On the other, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that some conventions in horror (as in society) are mediated by dominant social forces such as media corporations who recycle narrative and formal elements from highly successful low-budget movies like *Evil Dead*, or later, *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* for films made with the intention to cash in on a source of easy money⁶.

The Cabin in the Woods should certainly not be considered a corporate cash-in film. It is more correctly described as a passion project, albeit one by two already accomplished and acclaimed screenwriters. Explicitly, the project functions as a critique of trends within the horror genre, which writer Joss Whedon described as often resembling "torture porn" (quoted in Earnshaw 1). The film's ending also attacks both the studio system and audiences themselves, laying blame for the protagonists' deaths on both, through representative, symbolic characters.

⁶ *The Blair Witch Project* (2001) is credited as one of the first highly successful 'found footage' horror films. Its profit margin is nearly as legendary as the film itself, as the \$60,000 movie went on to gross \$248.6 million (BoxOfficeMojo). For its part, *Paranormal Activity* is the most profitable film in history, with a return on investment rate of 433,000 percent (O'Carroll 1).

However, it is Whedon and Goddard's intensely deconstructive methodology in this critique that is instructive for us, as the film necessarily deals in a series of tropes that it means to criticize and put an end to. Although the ending scenes recontextualize the rest of the film, most of it follows the beats of the traditional, *Evil Dead* indebted "cabin in the woods" storyline. We will soon delve further into the dynamic potentially at play between conventional art made for (and by?) "mass" audiences and those allegorical works produced in explicitly "politicized," but often elite contexts, but already we can see that not all violence is read in the same way by mass audiences. In this case, the issue is one of common sense as a factor for explaining, and perhaps justifying, the violence of movies like *Evil Dead*, or *Halloween*, versus that in *The Cabin in the Woods*. By functioning partially as a critique specifically of horror filmmaking and the studio system, *Cabin in the Woods* undermines the unconsciously political element of horror tropes, and thus, their discursive power. And yet, this is only partially the case because neither writer/director nor audience is consciously engaging with the full political significance of the tropes in question. As we will look into later, even though *Halloween*'s writers saw political significance in the strong femininity of the film's protagonist, they did not see it in the film's suburban setting, or the white, upper middle class upbringing of its antagonist. This functions as a kind of mutation of Jameson's conception of political allegory. Essentially, when an explicitly social or political topic is present in a horror narrative, it counteracts cultural discourse at an 'unspeakable' level, because there is an explicit topic that can be pointed to, either through the content of the work, or in widely known background information about the author or creative process.

The importance of allegory here is as a contrast with narratives that leave space for counter-hegemonic knowledges. But allegorical storytelling is not the only factor that can make

certain knowledges ‘unspeakable’. This dynamic for example, appears in discussions on the mass production of art, as critiqued by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin refers to a “hidden political significance” in works of art that are reproducible (and he notes, are more and more “designed for reproducibility”) even as he posits that film’s reliance on capital, and relation to commodification work to counter any revolutionary potential in film as an art form (7). Benjamin finds this at play in the contrast between works that receive the public’s “uncritical enjoy[ment]” and one that receives its “outrage,” and his point of arrival is a vision of the public under capitalism being either concentrated (on forms of challenging art) or distracted (by mechanically replicable art) (16).

Writing from a moment where the trends that Benjamin touches on have played out rapidly and to an extent further than what he imagined, I want to push his argument on commodified art in a different direction. Benjamin acknowledges the growth in importance of the masses, but stresses that Fascism can “organize” the masses to its own ends by giving them “an expression while preserving property” (17-18). I tend to agree with this assertion, and believe that it works well to describe the growing strength of neoliberal order as a response to the defeat of Fascism, particularly in the context of media, in which corporate entities hold few ideological positions, and essentially never do if it goes against the bottom line. The conclusion we might draw, however, is that in horror narratives, as in any commodified art, dominant capitalist order cannot be threatened, and this is essentially Benjamin’s argument. I am not so sure that this is the end of the discussion.

Using Benjamin’s categories of popular art as the uncritically enjoyed and individually experienced art as that which challenges, where do we place horror? It is hard to think of most

horror as anything outside the realm of that which is uncritically enjoyed, and yet, how does this Benjaminian view square with Gramscian sedimentation, and the concept of subaltern knowledge as critical (in both senses) broadly speaking? My sense is that insofar as this is possible, it occurs in Benjamin's final line in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, where he claims that "Communism responds [to Fascism] by politicizing art" (19). I suspect that Benjamin was not thinking of movies like *Halloween* or *The Conjuring* in invoking politicized art, but it is not a far reach to find truth in such an idea. Thus, it is not just a rethinking of what art is political, but how the masses interact with the political, that shows us the way forward from Benjamin's framework. Just as Rancière contrasts the "dreams" of associated workers with the rigidity of many iterations of Marxist thought, so to do reproduced and commodified horror films clash with a superficial view of politicized art. For example, Benjamin holds that although in literature, the power distinction between reader and writer is waning, in film this can only happen when people (and workers in particular) are allowed to represent themselves, and be represented as themselves in film, as they would in writing, as opposed to being subjected to the "illusion-promoting spectacles" of capitalist filmmaking (11). What Benjamin misses, in my view, (and that which Rancière latches onto) is the ability for self-representation through politically significant folklore, subaltern knowledges and counter-hegemonic common senses. All of these are, in a word, conventions. From this definition of conventions we can appreciate the significance of horror's obsession with the concept, and of the role it plays as a medium for creative practice. Prepared with this understanding of conventions in the limited context of horror narratives, we can move into an

exploration of how these conventions stem from and interact with social narratives about politics and history.

II

The End of Language: Lessons in Narrative Healing from Argentina

There are no shortage of crises and instances of violence attributable to capitalist movements toward domination. Indeed, marxist theorist David Harvey writes in his book, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* that “crises are essential to the reproduction of capitalism” (ix). Harvey later compares capital to a ship’s engine, which might “stutter and stall and sometimes appear to be on the verge of collapse” and the problems of which he hopes to study (11). This is not an unfair metaphor, but it leads Harvey away from differentiations, and specific examples of capital’s reliance on violence and subjugation. Any oppression is violence experienced in daily life, violence from which it is not possible to be distant. Marx and the many who have come after him explain the fundamental mechanics of capitalism, from wage labor, to private property, to the imperialist extraction of resources for the metropole as examples of this kind of violence. But beyond the violence that all workers experience, capitalist processes have played out very differently across time and space. That is to say, there are periods of violence that may not be as narratively tied to class warfare as, for example, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, or the 1848 uprisings in Europe, but that bear the indisputable marks of capitalist aggression. Here we will look at one of these moments, the period of military dictatorship in

Argentina, often referred to as *La Guerra Sucia* or the Dirty War, which lasted officially from 1976 until 1983⁷.

As a time and place, it has much to teach us. Temporally, the dictatorship predates most of the horror texts that we are examining. Also, it functions as an early marker of the establishment of neoliberal policies and governments across the globe, which connect directly into various periods of economic downturn and devastation, including in Argentina itself, and culminating (thus far) with the global Great Recession and U.S. housing market crash of 2008-2009. Place matters as well, because Argentina's response to a period of massive state violence can be read as a sort of harbinger from a "peripheral" region, towards the United States and West, of the way in which discourse around capitalist and neoliberal violence can develop and present a serious counter-hegemony to neoliberal national narratives. This dynamic connects to critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha's postulate of colonial subjects being caught in a "time lag" in terms of modernity. Bhabha notes, for example, that of postmodern art works particularly, colonial subjects, "can only assume a disjunctive and displaced relation to these works; we cannot accept them until we subject them to a *lagging*" (2).

Although Bhabha acknowledges that 'signs' of modernity go beyond areas like art, it is not clear that the concept of a time lag between cultures accounts fully for the *responses* of a subaltern culture to impositions of modernity that are Bhabha's explicit focus in "Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity." One dynamic we will explore, therefore, suggests that in the case of horror and the unspeakable, *because of U.S. imperialist and anti-communist policies*,

⁷ As national conversations on this period have developed in Argentina, many activists, writers and journalists such as Noga Tarnopolsky, Claudia Acuña and Kristie Robertson have pushed back against use of the term "Dirty War" to describe the period of dictatorship during the 1970s-80s. They argue that the term masks the one-sidedness of the violence, and lets the U.S. elude responsibility for CIA actions like Operation Condor. For these reasons, I will refer to the period as the Junta or Dictatorship.

places like Argentina find themselves 'ahead' of the U.S. and the West in terms of processing and vocalizing traumas associated with neoliberalism and its enforcement. In accepting this postulate, we also raise up, in the academic sphere at least, the experiences and knowledges of oppressed people as not only additive, but indispensable. Those seeking an end to capitalist violence in the United States can perhaps enact a less paternalistic form of solidarity with their counterparts in the global south by re-understanding these communities as teachers of a knowledge without which our own society will not survive. The receiving of this knowledge must also, if nothing else, strive to be an affirmation to the suffering and terror wrought in our name, as residents of the metropolis. Bhabha himself, even within his discussion on time lag, points to the reality of knowledge movement from the 'Third World' to the dominant 'First World'. He cites Indian historian Gyan Prakash's assertion that "The Third World, far from being confined to its assigned space, has penetrated the inner sanctum of the 'First World' in the process of being 'Third Worlded'—arousing, inciting, and affiliating with the subordinated others in the First World..." (1). While this project is not about finding out if or how much that process of affiliation is currently happening, it does concern itself with horror and folk storytelling as discursive points of contact between peripheral and metropolitan subaltern subjects. In regards to Latin America in particular, the now-defunct Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, asserts in its founding statement that even in a period of time lag, where "displacement of revolutionary projects" goes hand in hand with "redemocratization," the subaltern subject speaks, and "*acts* to produce social effects that are visible, if not always predictable or understandable..." (110-112).

Of course, even such an assertion acknowledges that *who* sees or engages with those social effects is a complex question. Although widely acknowledged by certain segments of Western society, such as immigrant communities and some academic circles, to a great extent, the political repression, anti-leftist purging and genocides that the United States and other neoliberal states directed and enacted are part of what is unspeakable, both in the states themselves and in the regions victimized. Is it possible to imagine ways of speaking capitalist violence in the United States, for example, without understanding the U.S. government's direct involvement in the massacring of nearly 200,000 Guatemalans during the Guatemalan Civil War, or 30,000 Argentines during the military dictatorship, or the *Crise congolaise*⁸ in the Congo following its independence, which is estimated to have killed around 100,000 people? The educational aspect is important in assuring that 'affiliation' can grow out of an understanding that violence in the metropolis and the periphery is essentially the same in purpose and effect.

Of course, even if the example is only one of many, it is the specifics of the situation that will shed light on ties between state terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s, and horror narratives in the United States in the 2010s. In terms of background, the political situation in Argentina was complex in the decades leading up to the coup, and though there is not space here to break it down fully, it is important to know the involved parties. First, the U.S. government, through the CIA, was involved in decades-long operations across Latin America to extinguish substantive leftist political activity, in the context of the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Among these was Operation Condor, which began in 1968, and took place throughout the 1970s. The concrete effects of Condor were the overthrow of governments in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay (which

⁸ Tr: Congo Crisis

joined previously established dictatorships in Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay) and the deaths of some estimated 60,000 people, along with 400,000 imprisoned (National Geographic, CNN). The resulting right-wing military juntas prioritized and finalized the destruction of left-wing militias and political organizations, such as the urban-guerrilla group *Los Montoneros*, though their decline began during the return to power of Juan Perón in 1973⁹, with the Massacre at Ezeiza¹⁰. Many of those killed were “*desaparecidos*,” or kidnapped and presumed killed by the state, and of those, some number are known to have died by so-called “death-flights” in which victims were dropped out of airplanes or helicopters. Young women who were kidnapped while pregnant were kept alive until their children were born, and then executed, after which the child was sold or given to wealthy families who supported the government. All of this and more was done with the material, logistical and philosophical support of the CIA and the U.S. government, with the purpose of crushing socialist and communist political action, legal or guerrilla, with the secondary effect of establishing neoliberal economic and political policies in Latin America.

The most significant group working with the United States on Operation Condor were the various high ranking military officials of the Southern Cone, who would go on to instigate the aforementioned series of coups. As a rule, these military leaders saw themselves as political forces in their respective countries, and found themselves at odds with the political left. In Argentina, this enmity went beyond ideological politics, as the military had a decades long history of antagonism with the ruling Peróns involving previous coups d'état. In fact, both the

⁹ Juan Perón initially held power in Argentina from 1946-1955, instituting the long running Argentine political ideology of Peronismo. Although forced into exile in Francoist Spain from 1955-1973, he eventually returned and took back the Presidency, and died in office in 1974, succeeded by his wife, Isabel Martínez de Perón, who was subsequently overthrown in the military coup.

¹⁰ The Ezeiza Massacre occurred on June 20th, 1973, at the Ezeiza Airport in Buenos Aires. Right-wing Peronistas fired upon a rally of left-wing Peronistas waiting to welcome Juan Perón from exile. At least 13 were killed, and 365 injured, although exact figures have never been compiled.

Peronistas and the Junta sided with and supported right-wing militias and death squads in the lead up to the dictatorship, and throughout its imposition. Besides providing historical context, I bring up the dynamic between the Peronistas and the military because it reveals a disconnect between a narrated version of Argentine political history during the late 20th century, and one experienced. It may be a somewhat secondary point, but it should be noted that the ‘climate of fear’ on the part of the public arises before the dictatorship itself, and this is one of the traumatic elements shared between periods like the 1970s-80s in Argentina and economic crises such as the 2001 monetary crisis in Argentina, or the 2008 global financial crisis. Crises both political and economic are fully understood (processed) in retrospect, and such a process is a struggle in itself.

In fact, it has taken decades of sustained work by journalists and activists merely to uncover documentation of crimes committed, and while a first attempt at legal justice was made in the mid-1980s through President Alfonsín’s *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP¹¹) program, the process was overturned in 1989 and a long period of legal impunity followed, so that it is only recently that more recently to try some of those involved in court. This does not even broach the issue of cultural healing, which in Argentina has certainly been in process since the 1980s, and yet is by no means complete. Magazine editor Claudia Acuña, in an interview with the website LatinoRebels, gives a powerful insight into the healing process while describing why the term “Dirty War” masks the truth of what transpired in Argentina. She writes,

¹¹ Tr: National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons

The last dictatorship can't be described as dirty. Can baby kidnappings, torture and systemic rape of women, death flights that threw thousands of bodies into the Río de la Plata including the founder of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo or French nuns who lent their chapel to families of the disappeared? I have no words to describe what that means. *Because that's a dictatorship: the end of words, beyond language. Reducing a society to silence. So many years later, we are recovering our speech.* Slowly, very traumatically and together we are walking down the street to yell, "Nunca Más" (quoted in Dolven 5, emphasis added).

Acuña characterizes the process of healing as a recovery of speech, particularly in the political realm. The image of yelling "*Nunca Más*" (Never Again) on the street is a powerful one, but it is clear that Acuña sees it as a kind of goal for Argentine society, rather than an immediately possible response to violence. In historical terms, being able to assert something like "*Nunca Más*" has required knowledge of what happened, and the ability to process that knowledge as part of a community.

In Argentina, as across Latin America, storytelling has been a crucial part of this process, and when we look at a particular set of trends in post-dictatorship popular storytelling, similarities to horror narrative conventions appear time and again. This even though relatively few of the narratives about the period of dictatorship directly represent the violence of the era, and even fewer are classified or imagined as "horror" per se. This is not to suggest that there is no overlap between Argentine horror and narratives about dictatorship, but to point out a prevalent narrative strategy for talking about the dictatorship and its violence. To draw out the similarities between these seemingly disparate media contexts, we will build on the lessons of

the previous section, analyzing two Argentine films about the dictatorship period in the context of formal elements of horror filmmaking, as well as anecdotally alluding to other popular Argentine narrative works, demonstrating the existence and relevance of the narrative trends in question.

The two films are Luis Puenzo and Aída Bortnik's *La historia oficial*¹² (1985) and Juan José Campanella's *El secreto de sus ojos*¹³ (2009). Both films are described broadly as dramas, although both contain elements of the mystery and thriller genres as well. Before anything else, the time between both films is noteworthy, as *La historia oficial* is released just two years after the official end of the dictatorship, and *El secreto de sus ojos* comes out in 2009, two and a half decades later, but with the process of moving forward from the dictatorship and its policies still ongoing. In terms of plot, however, we begin to see clear artistic representations of the mindset that Acuña describes. Both films take place or have scenes in the years around the dictatorship, but neither places any action directly in the midst of the state violence. Both tell highly personal stories of family, and of love. And in both texts, the political is in movement, or the restriction of movement.

In *La historia oficial*, Alicia, a schoolteacher married to a government agent, has been living in a bubble, sheltered from, and wilfully ignoring, the violence tearing at society all around her. However, much of the story involves the horrors of the dictatorship literally invading, or seeping into that sheltered space. The film's central intrigue involves Alicia realizing that her adoptive daughter is likely the child of murdered political prisoners, and that her husband was involved, if not responsible. From the beginning of the family's story then, the

¹² Tr. The Official Story

¹³ Tr. The Secret in Their Eyes

signs of violence are infiltrating every space, to the point where eventually Alicia realizes that not only has her life been shaped by state violence, but that she is complicit in it as well. References to and moments of violence are interspersed throughout the film, but always presented somewhat obliquely, and even in a grimly humorous manner, as when Alicia's nephews frighten 'her' daughter by firing toy guns around the house, chasing her into her room, and near the end of the film, when Alicia meets the mother of a disappeared woman who may be the little girl's real mother, there are video game shooting noises coming from the background. (Puenzo and Bortnik 0:36:45, 1:31:59).

Early in the film, a scene between Alicia and her old friend Ana makes quite explicit the sickening interpretive uncertainty that both characters, in very different ways, have lived. Ana begins to tell the story of how she was abducted and tortured, intercut with shots of Gaby, Alicia's 'adopted' daughter sleeping. However, Ana begins the story as if it were a farcical event, and she and Alicia laugh as Ana tells of the armed men breaking down her door, pulling a hood over her head, and "breaking all my things" (0:23:25, translation mine). As the scene progresses however, Ana proceeds to tell about how she was held and tortured for what she was told was thirty-six days, and the mood changes drastically. The audience sees on Alicia's face as her cameradic grin becomes a horrified grimace, and Ana begins to cry (0:25:25). This dynamic functions effectively in the film, but importantly it also mirrors common formal twists in horror. Slasher movies in particular often move quickly between comedic or lighthearted and the shocking/grotesque as a technique for eliciting horror, such as in Tony Maylam's *The Burning* (1981). A somewhat infamous scene in this movie starts with a group of campers paddling out on a raft to grab a canoe they had lost, joking and laughing all the way there. Predictably however,

the scene ends with all five teens stabbed to death by a vengeful caretaker named Cropsey with a pair of garden shears, as Cropsey had been hidden in the canoe all along.

At the other end of this metaphor is the final twist of *El secreto de sus ojos*, in which a widower has kept his wife's killer prisoner in a shed for over twenty years, after the man was initially apprehended but released to serve in one of the earliest anti-leftist death squads. While it is clear that the character of the killer links an awful personal tragedy with a national one, it is also symbolic that even some twenty-five years after the end of the dictatorship, the widower, Morales, still literally holds the worst pain of that era as close to himself as possible. By bearing that pain in the form of the trapped killer, Morales, as so many others across Latin America, keeps it out of sight, and ostensibly within his control.

With Acuña's words about silence in mind, I submit that at least with several decades of remove from the ostensible "end of words," *El secreto de sus ojos*, as a narrative, is engaging a traumatic narrative by placing it within the context of social life. More will be said about this dynamic later, but one of the important uses of social conventions in film is to dispel disbelief about a plot point or premise. A later section, for example, will look at social conventions on greed and how it makes people act are used to 'explain' otherwise over-the-top, gratuitous violence in horror narratives. In terms of Morales and the twist in *secreto de sus ojos*, a similar logic is at play. Morales' dedication to such a painful existence both for the killer and for Morales himself is explainable to an audience in the context of not only individual but cultural suffering, where otherwise it might seem out of place in a narrative that has could have little to do with abstracted histories of genocide and state terror. The connection to Western horror narratives is in the way stories like *La historia oficial* and *El secreto de sus ojos* juxtapose

common sense about the dictatorship with an historical present. Any audience that watches either film can understand that the full horror of dictatorship is not just the violence of the period, but the consequences of that violence. Seeing these films in Argentina either in 1985 or 2009, it would be no great stretch to understand that the questions raised remain unresolved within the film because they are unresolved in real life. Put another way, one way to consider the temporalities of both films is that as much as both works are about the dictatorship period, they are also about their respective presents, and both emphasize the tenuous political distance between the past and present.

La historia oficial, even from a point much closer to the traumatic period in question, particularly engages conventions surrounding class, as well as conventions and hidden knowledges about the functioning of the dictatorship. These are represented both in the film and in life by the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*¹⁴ as those who suspect the truth of hidden violence. In fact, in 1986, after the end of the junta, the Mothers split into two groups, one designated as the “Founding Line” (*Linea fundadora*) and the other the “Association” (*Asociacion*). While both groups continued to work together throughout the 1990s and 2000s, their focuses diverged, as the *Linea fundadora* pushed for the recovery of bodies, criminal charges against perpetrators, and the finding of stolen children, while the *Asociacion* defined itself as continuing the political fight that their children died for. *Asociacion* leader Hebe de Bonafini asserts that “they were revolutionaries, for that reason they were taken!” (quoted in Iramain & Nielsen, translation mine). These two trajectories of the *Madres* organization speak to the complexity of responding

¹⁴ The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was an organization founded by the family members, and especially mothers of young people "disappeared" by the junta for "politically subversive" activity. The Mothers called for the release of their children from prison, as well as the release of information and criminal conviction of the perpetrators. Many also called for an end to the economic and social policies instituted by the dictatorship, which their children had died for opposing.

as a community to politically motivated violence, but also one community's path towards anti-capitalist radicalization via recognition of that violence. While it may not be surprising that those who have suffered so directly at the hands of anti-leftist violence find themselves distrustful of capitalism and its proponents, it is important to make the connection between films like *La historia oficial* and *El secreto de sus ojos*, as well as stories like *La noche de los lápices* (1986), *Garage olimpo* (1999), and *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia* (2011) and the worldviews that these communities have developed in the wake of dictatorships, prolonged armed conflicts and American-backed political instability. As is the case throughout this project, the potential of cinematic and written storytelling to move forward the change hoped for by the *Asociacion Madres* is dialectical. But in an historical moment where national centers of capital solidify monopolies on physical violence, it is important to seriously evaluate the ways that marginal communities can and do push back against hegemony.

III

Who Lives, Who Dies, and How?*Part 1:**Working Families, Haunted Houses*

It is a rather tired adage to say that “representation matters” in media and other fields, and the phrase itself has been dissected enough times that to do so here would mean very little. However, twisting the phrase slightly, taking “representation” in its more rigorous sense, in which it is, as Stuart Hall summarizes, “the production of meaning through language,” I want to take it as the foundation for the following section, in which the representative qualities of characters, settings, premises and conventions function to an extent linguistically in horror media (2). In essence, the chapter that follows is about choices. Why do writers and directors choose certain factors in attempting to craft a scary story, and what draws audiences towards horror? The interpretative choices that writers, directors and audiences make matter, as we have seen in the Argentine example, in creating space (or not) for the heretofore unspoken. And it has already been discussed how literary conventions can be involved in shaping and framing the narrative choices that exist. This chapter will look at trends within horror narratives that function as conventions, and yet may not even be visible enough to be categorized as conventions. This will be done by analyzing tropes around the cornerstone of horror narratives, death. My assertion is that class codings of protagonists and premises reveal unmistakable and vigorous anti-capitalist discourse at play in this supposedly crudest and (literally) cheapest of literary and film genres. These class codings interplay with conventional and even allegorical representations of race,

gender and sexuality in a way that complicates existing categories of what is ‘political’ in horror or not.

The frame of this discussion is the question of “who lives, who dies, and how?” This question might seem to build up an unnecessary moral binary between living and dying, and while it is true that such a binary is not necessary, we will see that the question itself does not imply a totalizing separation of associations with living and dying in horror narratives. The additional question of ‘how’ characters die when they do is one example of complications to the binary designation of those who live as ‘good’ and all others ‘bad’. Many layers of sedimented knowledge are discernible in an analysis of who lives and dies in horror media. However, despite these complexities, part of the usefulness of our research question as it is structured is both the brutal simplicity of gathering data, as well as the sheer amount of data itself. In the hundreds, if not thousands, of character deaths in narratives of fear, one sees all sorts of conflicting knowledges coming into play.

The concept of this project as a whole began with the haunting subgenre, and my curiosity about certain trends that I could not explain through the existing vocabulary of horror tropes and conventions. Specifically, I noted that in these haunting movies, unlike most of the zombie, slasher, or supernatural fear narratives I had read or watched, it was often the case that no protagonists died. And this even though the stories themselves did not shy away from death in general, with threats and visions of death being common, and attempts at killing being near universal. As I discussed the thesis of this section with friends and colleagues, I noticed that several times, the person I was talking to would try to finish my sentence, but with exactly the opposite conclusion, assuming that poorer characters would die, and that the rich would not. It is

certainly not wrong to believe that poor or otherwise marginal characters are often dehumanized in their deaths in horror media, but there are conditions that affect protagonists' living and dying that go beyond representations of individualized (is it even?) identity. One of the most important of these is the kind of story being told, which leads us to the example at hand, narratives of hauntings, spirits and demonic forces.

Haunting stories are some of the most recognizable in horror, as the subgenre has a long history across the world. Spirits and demons appear in Shakespeare, and in Edo period folk stories and literature of Japan, to say nothing of the much older traditions of spirits in Celtic, Native American, Middle Eastern and West African cultures. In Western film, most haunting narratives are indebted to late 19th century gothic literature, from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and defining works of horror fiction in the 20th century such as Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). Most if not all haunting narratives involve a form of entrance, or beginning. For example, many haunting narratives tell of a family or group of individuals moving into a new house, or some group of people, usually either workers of some kind or young thrill seekers, entering a haunted space, either a house or abandoned workplace (e.g. a hospital, factory, police station, school). Formally, this is a simple way of triggering action, but also speaks to foundational liberal narratives, such as aspirations to property ownership, or dedication to work and profit motive. A later section will talk more about the 'greed' that is often attributed to young thrill seekers specifically, and why this generally means that those characters do not survive their films, where the other two often do. However in general, the visible trend is that haunting narratives *tell stories about working class people*. As

many of my friends noted, this seems to run counter to some of the most recognizable horror tropes, such as the cliché ‘Haunted Mansion’ one finds in the aforementioned *Haunting of Hill House*. However, both a numerical and qualitative survey of haunting story, (and especially haunted house) plots demonstrates that in fact the protagonists rarely die, and in fact, the horror elements in the narrative serve a fully different purpose than the so-called “horror response” that film theorists often cite when discussing audience interaction with horror media.

The narrative arcs in haunting movies tend to be redemptive or restorative, as opposed to vindictive in the way that much of slasher, alien invasion or home invasion horror is. This is strongly related to the prevalence of narratives in which the protagonists are a family, and as previously mentioned, typically coded as working class. What is clear is that these protagonists, so unlike the often unpleasant college students or young professionals of slasher fiction, are supremely relatable. This relatability and their working class coding go hand in hand, as we can see a wide swath of examples from recent years: In James Wan’s *The Conjuring* (2013), a family of five children, a stay-at-home mother, and a teamster father are the subject of a demonic haunting when they move into a somewhat dilapidated old house in Rhode Island. *The Conjuring 2* (2016) follows a single mother and her four children living in a cheap old flat in Enfield, England. *The Babadook* (2015) tells the story of a distressingly overworked assisted living nurse and single mother and her wild son. The father in the 2015 *Poltergeist* remake was laid off from a John Deere factory, while the family in *A Haunting in Connecticut* move into a rental home in the titular state where they are offered the first month free to lessen the strain (and cost) of having to travel there frequently for their son’s cancer treatment. These are just a few examples of premises that involve class coding, before even delving into the myriad examples of short

lines and scenes that reference surprisingly mundane problems faced by the protagonists, many of which end up affecting the plot. The father in *The Conjuring*, for instance, is faced with increased insurance rates on his truck, and thus is forced to take longer routes, which leaves the mother more vulnerable to fear and stress that eventually allow the demonic presence to begin possessing her (Wan 0:28:43). Indeed, one of the innovative formal qualities in that film, as well as Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*, is the empathetic anxiety caused by watching the mother become more and more sleep deprived as the haunting progresses and she struggles to keep up with her work and her rambunctious offspring. Such a formal move toward relatability and empathy underscores the narrative importance of working class coding in these works, as without it there is little to make the audience care about the protagonists' survival and redemption.

All of the aforementioned examples of haunted house narratives also share a peculiar plot element, in which the mundane problems faced by the family end up dovetailing with the demonic or ghostly haunting, so that the stories end with the resolution not only of the haunting, but also to some extent of the existing tensions or problems that the family faced. This is not to say that the families become rich or that they ascend into some utopian state of familial harmony and the American Dream, but that they survive, and that they are shown to find more joy and closeness in each other. In *The Babadook* this narrative is especially explicit, as the mother and young son's previously stormy relationship (presumably affected by the titular Babadook, which itself is a stand in for their suppressed grief over the death of the husband/father) is markedly improved, as they learn to live both together, and with the grief/Babadook now forced into a peaceful coexistence with the family. *A Haunting in Connecticut* takes this restorative motif a

step further, deciding that the son not only survives the demonic assault on his family, but is even cured of his cancer after the events of the film.

This connection between mundane stressors and the supernatural can be posed in a fairly straightforward (if flat) way, by saying that it only represents ‘challenges that everyone faces’. One might self-assuredly conclude about a story of overcoming interpersonal and external obstacles: that ‘that’s life’. And maybe it is, but it also is, of course, a very particular *kind* of life, whose problems and obstacles are relatable to those who either have lived through similar experiences, or can recognize their own in the telling of the story. In the case of this subgenre of horror media, those who can most often relate are the working masses of the metropolis, whose closeness to centers of capital both tempts them toward it and subjects them to forms of suffering different from those of the periphery. This is what is sedimented in Western horror films. Revulsion, necessity, aspiration, pain, all of which cannot be understood for what or why they are. Haunting narratives in particular point to an ‘unexplainable’ aversion or uncanny in sites of capital and capitalism, in making the locus of the supernatural the old house (though newly bought or rented) or the workplace (abandoned as so many are) still ringing with the doubt and the uncanny that bore it. The language of horror speaks to the working classes’ doubts about dominant political economy as strongly as Marxism can, and no element of a horror story says as much about the originating culture as its protagonists.

What the living/surviving of working class protagonists in haunting narratives points to is a kind of teleology, different than Marx’s revolutionary socialism, but reminiscent of Rancière’s associated workers, in its use of religious/supernatural aesthetics to define self and other. The challenges that these working families face are fully evil. Quite explicitly, overcoming

supernatural, inexplicable evils is shown in many ways as the lot in life of the masses, and that the line between the terrifying uncertainty of being laid off from a job, or of a single parent pushing themselves to the limit to provide for their family, and a supernatural, unnatural terror is blurred at best, if not fully indistinguishable to the individual or community faced with such a scenario. What the haunting genre does well is represent the nebulousness and confusion that most people face when interacting with capitalist policies or forces. Even if the current systems of power have been in place for centuries, for those raised near or in the metropole, the forces that instigate a lay-off, or having their mortgage go underwater could feel supernatural or unexplainable. Placing working class protagonists in horror situations tied to the very sites of fear and uncertainty of real life should not be discounted as a discursive strategy or convention.

And yet, to universalize a confusion or panic of oppressed peoples is not accurate, and does not explain the entirety of the discourse that goes on in conventional horror. To come to a fuller understanding we must acknowledge what Foucault asserts, (and that which Spivak cites in "Can the Subaltern Speak?") that, "the masses know perfectly well, clearly...they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well" (Foucault, quoted in Spivak 69). But what is it exactly that falls into this category of what the masses "know"? It has to do, first of all, with the culpability of the bourgeois ruling classes themselves, and what exactly it is that they gain from upholding a system at once chaotic, oppressive and indiscriminately destructive.

Part 2:

Dangerous Wealth and Dangerous Greed

It almost goes without saying how closely tied liberal democracy is to safety. In particular, the right to ownership of property, laws protecting that property, and protecting one's safety in that property are at the core of the capitalist state structure in place in the United States. In a liberal imaginary, few ideas are as related as ownership of private property and safety. In one's own house, on one's own land, one is as safe as is possible, and the more isolated the safer. Right? Wrong, say countless horror stories. In fact, the opposite is true. The more isolated, the more expansive the property, the more is unknown, and the greater reason there is for paranoia. Moreover, the more one wants, the more one risks, such that amassing wealth is not an 'investment' in the sense of preparing for the future and guaranteeing survival, but instead exposes individuals to new and unknown dangers every time. This is one of the clearest cut divergences between dominant cultural narratives and the logic of horror.

To understand what is happening, we look to Noël Carroll's argument that horror responses are driven by 'conceptual category violations', as critiqued by Professor Matthew Strohl. Carroll's concept relates strongly to previously discussed elements including common sense and conventional narratives. He posits that an audience is 'horrified' by images or creations that trouble conceptual categories. The classic example of this is the Zombie, which troubles a living/dead binary category (1). Essentially, Strohl finds Carroll's assertions about category violations instructive to an extent, but argues that Carroll's focus on the natural sciences as the basis for emotional responses to category violations is limited. Strohl himself favors an

expanded use of the term to include social scientific phenomena, such as racial prejudice, which Strohl refers to as “socio-cultural categories” (1-2). I intend to use Strohl’s terminology, but it should be noted here that both Strohl and Carroll are concerned specifically with the ‘horror response’ from an audience, whereas my interest lies less in what is making people more or less afraid, but what “socio-cultural” objects and narratives are being talked about using the genre language of fear and horror. We will look at these issues in two parts: first, the consistent violation (or even, the overturning) of the cultural/political link between wealth and safety, and second, a strong representational correlation between greed and violent death. The section that follows will define and provide examples of these thematic threads about wealth, and attempt to understand their salience through careful analysis of primary sources, and by drawing connections to the political and film theory previously addressed. All of this with the aim of visualizing the politics at play when a mass audience consumes horror media at a movie theatre, on television, or in print. An important moment in almost any horror story is the establishing scene. As such, we will begin with a dissection of the wealth/safety dynamic, how the connection is established, and how it tends to break down in narratives of fear.

The process of the wealth/safety connection and its inversion is fairly straightforward, given a few basic cultural assumptions. It stems in part from a Hobbesian understanding of nature as violent, and society as a means of attaining security from pain, fear and death. In a capitalist framework, wealth is one of the strongest (if not *the*) indicators of social success, and is associated with virtue and goodness, even as an essential part of capitalist ecology is constant “creative destruction” and a “tradition of overthrowing tradition,” to borrow Marshall Berman’s terminology (48, 30). Regardless, wealth accumulation in a capitalist society can be considered

the apex of the social as a force against nature. On a practical level, wealth can be used to provide safety in a vast array of contexts. One straightforward example of this from the present is the gated community. It demonstrates the liberal capitalist thought process well: because one is wealthy, one is at greater risk of violence, both from ‘below’, and horizontally, because of capitalism’s unending need to destroy and rebuild. A wealthy person knows that at a certain point, they are a target for destruction. However, the same wealth that makes them a target also allows for protection. Gates and walls can be built, security personnel can be hired, secluded properties can be purchased, and in a broader sense, law can be established and enforced to one’s benefit, so that one is not victimized by the very violence necessary for the extraction of surplus value from others. It is an acknowledgment of this violence that defines the connection between wealth and safety. Berman, in his study of modernity, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, asserts that “our lives are controlled by a ruling class with vested interests not merely in change but in crisis and chaos” (95). Capitalism’s need for “crisis and chaos” brings about the *capitalist’s* need for safety and security. Given the long history and consistent force of liberal narratives in the United States, one might expect that as a layer of common sense, the wealth/safety connection would go unquestioned. However, as we have noted, this is not the case in horror narratives. As to how exactly this questioning goes, it involves primarily the use of visual and symbolic signifiers. One commonly cited example is the setting of John Carpenter and Debra Hill’s *Halloween*. Our premise here is that the use of a white, suburban, mid-western community as a horror setting absolutely relies on (and overturns) culturally-specific conventional wisdom about what places are safe, what it takes to create safety and why.

The example of *Halloween* is important for several reasons. First, as a film from 1978, many of the aesthetic choices Carpenter and Hill made have become part of the canon of horror conventions, and while one could look at any number of examples that draw from similar socio-cultural knowledge stores, most of these films are also specifically referencing or drawing influence from *Halloween* itself. Second, there are several narrative aspects of the film that clearly demonstrate a play with representations of class, and the common sense of a metropolitan ruling class, which lends itself easily to anti-capitalist readings. Expanding on the assertion that a white suburban town (in this case, the fictional Haddonfield, Illinois,) is culturally coded as a safe place, there are both clear historical markers, and references within the film. Of these historical markers the most evident is the movement of the 1940s and 50s known as “white flight,” in which white Americans migrated *en masse* out of urban centers, and into suburban developments and towns termed “exurbs” (Bogue and Seim 1). By the time *Halloween* was filmed and released, suburbs were a highly recognizable cultural object, such that it would not be necessary for a person to live in or interact with a suburb to understand what they signified and how they were represented. Given this condition, it is evident in the premise of the film that deeply held expectations of safety are being overturned and brutalized. The idea that a silent, masked killer with little discernible motivation could come into Anytown, USA, and kill without concern for the police, redlining, distance from the city, or any other ostensibly protective measure is thoroughly anxiety-producing, not only for those middle and upper class people who relied on them, but also in a broader, ‘nowhere is safe’ sense. Again, however, my point is not to argue about how scary or not *Halloween* is, but to sort through cultural imagery that is part of both the intention and effect of the film, and yet goes unnamed and unstudied.

To this end, we must go deeper into the particulars of *Halloween*, to strengthen the assertion that this movie is drawing on the political to create an aesthetic environment, but is doing so outside of the more understood, allegorical, author-centric conception of political art. Indeed, it would be fair to consider the premise of a killer entering a safe place as potentially reactionary. If Michael Myers, the killer in *Halloween*, were written as an outsider, it would be perhaps harder to argue that the film contains anti-suburb, and anti-capitalist assumptions. But as we know, this is not the case. *Halloween*'s official tagline upon its release is almost telling enough: "The night *HE* came home!" The line refers to the crucial first plot point, which is that Michael Myers was a native-born resident of Haddonfield, son of a white mother and father, and younger brother to his teenage sister, Judith. The story begins in a shocking way, as six-year old Michael stabs Judith to death on Halloween night, for what appears to be no reason (though scholars have noted that his sister's disinterest in babysitting Michael in favor of having sex with her boyfriend is presented as a possible trigger) (Gill 22).

Once the parents arrive home from an unspecified event, and find Michael holding a bloody knife in the front yard, he is committed to a mental institution for the next 15 years, until his eventual escape, and the subsequent events of the *Halloween* series. What is important in this scene is the focus on the normalcy of the Myers family, even in a fairly short opening scene. Michael Myers is not an outsider in Haddonfield, he is a product and reflection of its upper-middle class, white environment. Thus, the blame for his rampage cannot be laid anywhere else, and there can be no scapegoating and certainly no making sense of the situation (much less so in the later films when supernatural elements are introduced). Certainly this image

can bring to mind Berman's creative destruction, at least insofar as it speaks to capitalists destroying one another, and being destroyed by the worlds they create.

In terms of the family as a metaphor for society, it is especially curious to compare, even on a superficial level, the difference between representations of the working class family previously inspected, and the constantly disastrous images presented of the upper-middle class or rich family. Even if one wishes to read a film like *Halloween* in the context of psychoanalysis and the nuclear family, such an analysis could not ignore the vast representational difference between upper and lower class families in horror, and as such, it adds little to this study to do much more than note that indeed there is a deep genealogy reaching back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) for reading horror in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis. However, the centrality of the family both as identifiable protagonists in haunting horror, and alienated, sometimes absent presences in slasher horror does complicate a discussion about where differences in character identification come from in narratives of fear.

The other political element in the story of *Halloween* is the very "senselessness" of Michael Myers and his violence. As in many popular horror films before and since, some of the politically unconscious themes and fears that direct both the writing and the reading of a movie like *Halloween* are totally dismissed by all parties. For example, Dean Cundey, the cinematographer on *Halloween*, and a close colleague of Carpenter, said of the film that it had only a "very slim plot," and co-writer and producer Debra Hill said in an interview that "I thought they [critics calling *Halloween* a "morality tale"] were being ridiculously introspective about a film *that was meant to have no social statements*" (quoted in Konow 12 & 7, italics added). Fascinatingly, the impetus for this statement in the interview is in fact a fully different

political issue, that of representations of women in horror film. Konow writes in his piece on *Halloween* that this issue and the “no-sex rule¹⁵” were the two substantive political issues generally taken from the film, along with an acknowledgement of the suburban setting (7). And yet, even the production team considered the setting mainly in aesthetic terms, acknowledging that it should look like it “could more or less be your neighborhood...” but that “every town has a secret, every town has that lore of something that went horribly wrong with it...The idea of pulling off the veneer and what lies beneath has always intrigued me” (Konow, and Hill quoted in Konow 6). It is clear that this idea of ‘every town’s secret’ is meant to be individualized and apolitical. It speaks to Hill and Carpenter’s artistic talents that they identified and manifested this idea of revealing “what lies beneath” without seeming to have any specific sense of what actually does lie (not far) beneath the foundations of not just the small suburb, but all of American and liberal capitalist society.

The answer of course, is oppressive violence, and lots of it. The history of the suburbs in the United States, and the racial and class conflict that both created them, and are sustained by them, is well-documented. Author Ta-Nahesi Coates, in his piece, “The Case for Reparations” writes of redlining policies, “from the 1930s through the 1960s, black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market through means both legal and extralegal...whites employed every measure, from ‘restrictive covenants’ to bombings, to keep their neighborhoods segregated” (8). But such a case only speaks to the depth and scope of larger histories of violence, from colonialism, to chattel slavery, to white supremacy, all projects of capitalist expansion. It is my assertion that this is the issue that most narratives of fear, to a

¹⁵ The rule goes: if you are a young person in a horror film and you have sex during the course of the film, or if you seek out sex or sexual pleasure, you die.

greater or lesser extent, are facing. Connected to fears about family, gender, sexuality, race, nature, grief, and religion is political economy, or if nothing else, the structures of society through which we interpret both the personal and the societal. I do not have the resources for a comprehensive study on how much the public knows about, or how it understands issues related to dominant political-economic systems, but I believe that a study of narratives of fear provides some insight into that question, and at least can present the issue as one in serious need of consideration. Furthermore, this theme of underlying violence, visible in *Halloween*, looms even larger as it is traced through other films, books and television series. As is often the case, the presence of the “something lies beneath” theme varies in quantitative terms, from highly explicit, as in Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation of *The Shining* and Jay Anson’s book, *The Amityville Horror*, both of which invoke the “built on an Indian burial ground” trope, to virtually absent, irrelevant, or incomprehensible in the narrative, such as in James Gunn and Greg McLean’s *The Belko Experiment*, Álex de la Iglesia’s *El Bar*, and James Manos Jr.’s *Dexter* television series. Of course, engagement with political issues is not necessarily a factor in how enjoyable a work of art is, so my point here is that for reasons of message, form, or even quality of writing, certain narratives of fear are clearer examples for understanding conventionality than others.

However, all of these narratives do involve a particular kind of violence beyond what is enacted by individual characters. Violence can also function as a boundary, forcing subjects into horror scenarios through the same mechanisms that they took for granted. For example, in *Halloween*, the many layers of displaced violence, from Native American removal, to redlining policies and ghettoization, were needed to create peaceful, individual-centric suburbs, where neighbors do not answer the door when you knock, and family is nowhere to be found when

danger strikes. Similarly, though less subtly, in *The Belko Experiment*, a group of office workers recently transferred to an office park in Columbia becomes trapped inside their building as they are forced to take part in a bloody (and exceedingly vague) social experiment to see who will kill each other first. Just as in *Halloween*, the setting itself is indicative of violent imposition of class coding. Moreover, what a juxtaposition of *Halloween* and *The Belko Experiment* can reveal is the changing form of sites of capitalism over time. At the time of this writing, gentrification is a widely understood concept, but this is a recent development, which exists in the context of ‘white flight’ and suburbanization, but is also a previously unseen adaptation to challenges to dominant systems. For our purposes what is important is the easy slippage between a ‘normal’ corporate setting and what is essentially a prison, as the guards, gates and security measures presumed to be protecting them from the ‘outside’ flip to keep the office workers trapped. In both cases, and beyond, the message is straightforward: the places considered safest due to their connections to wealth and capital can easily become sights of horrific violence, because of the spilled blood and horror that are their foundations.

Criticism of the wealth/safety dynamic, however, is not the full picture. Most of what is dealt with in inversive representations of wealth/safety are the consequences of capital accumulation, sometimes generations removed from the present, and not the potential dangers of the process itself. But of course, capitalism, and its centering of accumulation and surplus value are alive and well, and so it should not be surprising to note that just as wealth is related to danger in the knowledges of horror, greed is also a deadly pursuit when it comes to narratives of fear. In some ways, conventions surrounding greed seem less complex and unconscious than those around wealth. However, in considering this, we must continue to examine how greed

affects the creation and audience perception of the narrative. Here the issue is suspension of disbelief. The premise is that assumptions surrounding greed tend to mitigate disbelief on the part of the audience when it comes to horror plot development. An example of this is the trope of “tempting fate,” or having an “over curious” cast of characters, which “inevitably starts the plot” of a horror narrative, putting the cast in situations that are sometimes considered improbable by audiences (TV Tropes Tempting Fate, Curiosity Killed the Cast). Greed can come into play as a motivating factor for the cast to go somewhere or do something that otherwise seems unwise or unlikely. To explain how this process works, I will present two examples, but it should be noted that this point delves into issues of audience mentality, which of course, are difficult to substantiate outside of anecdote and online aggregations such as the website TV Tropes. Common sense is inherently difficult to source, but websites and forums for media discussion like TV Tropes provide a valuable resource for evaluating subaltern reading strategies. In general, the ‘wiki’ style of collaborative information gathering is, as Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright describes it, a “profoundly anti-capitalist way of producing and disseminating knowledge” (3). Using these resources, we can understand that texts like the following two are *referring* to definable cultural knowledge that can satisfy audience disbelief even by its mere presence.

The first example comes from James Wan and Will Cannon’s 2015 film *Demonic*. In this film, a group of young documentary filmmakers travel down to an abandoned house in Louisiana after one of their friends begins experiencing visions of the house, where his mother had supposedly been the only survivor of a mass murder twenty years prior¹⁶. John, the character

¹⁶ Though it is later revealed that John’s mother actually *was* the murderer, and that he is in fact possessed by the same evil spirit that possessed her. As a result, he murders the entire group of friends with the exception of his pregnant girlfriend, who at the end is revealed to be carrying an unidentified demonic entity.

experiencing the visions, initially displays hesitation about going along, after he finds out that his girlfriend's ex-boyfriend, Bryan, is directing the documentary. Over the course of the argument, John notes, to general agreement, that Bryan's only interest is "capturing ghosts on tape so that he can make as much money out of it as he can" (Cannon 0:11:08). Later on in the film, after experiencing a series of supernatural phenomena in the house, John attempts to get the crew to leave, but his initial reading of Bryan is proven correct as he is rebuffed by Bryan, who says, "I wanna make sure you realize what we could be sitting on here," after which the other crew members assert that they want wealth and recognition for their discovery as well (0:53:33). What these expressions of doubt by John do is to ostensibly speak for the audience, who might reasonably question why anyone would go out of their way to search for paranormal entities in a creepy house, either earnestly or cynically. John's concerns are a formal way of addressing this barrier to the buy-in that a fictional story such as *Demonic* seeks, and Bryan's arrogant focus on profit, both narrated and demonstrated, completes the process, theoretically resulting in an audience willing to take the rest of the story as it is presented.

This use of greed as a form of logic highlights the dialectical qualities of Gramsci's common sense, as we have applied it to narratives of fear. On the one hand, the profit motive is supposed to be an understandable reason for a person to engage in what otherwise would be an absurd endeavor. More specifically, the idea goes, an audience can accept that regardless of their personal risk tolerance and sensibilities, it is not unthinkable that a different person would find that risk acceptable in the name of potential profit. On the other, there is a clear judgmental component to the way greed is represented. Even insofar as greed is represented as expected and commonplace, it is also deadly, leading directly to violent and unceremonious death, functioning

similarly to the more well-known “no sex rule” prevalent in slasher media. More than anything, greed and wealth function as methods of creating audience detachment from the characters, such that there is an unspoken connection made between the greed or wealth of a protagonist, and the acceptability (and thus, capacity for entertainment) of that character’s death.

Adam Wingard’s *You’re Next* (2013) demonstrates both sides of this convention in a clear, if particularly bloody, fashion. This ‘horror-comedy’ film is premised on a wedding anniversary dinner held by Aubrey and Paul Davison, at their luxurious and remote vacation home in Missouri. In attendance are all five Davison children and their respective partners. As soon as the dinner begins, the family is attacked by a group of men in animal masks, who proceed to break into the mansion. In the ensuing chaos, most of the Davison family is brutally killed, in between scenes of what can only be described as long form improv comedy. The premise of the movie already speaks to the appearance of the wealth/safety inversion, which is a common convention in the home invasion thriller particularly. However, two important details are added on over the course of the film. First, that the massacre was in fact orchestrated by Felix, one of the Davison children, with his partner, Zee. Second, that unbeknownst to all, Erin, one of the other Davison partners, was raised in a survivalist compound, and trained in survival and combat skills. These two facts collide to bring about the climax and denouement of the story, in which Erin first fights back and begins killing the home invaders, and eventually finds out that Felix, Zee, and even her boyfriend, Crispian, were in on a plot to murder their entire family for the large inheritance that would be left to them (Wingard 1:25:20). Upon finding this out, Erin brutally murders all three, notably stabbing Felix in the head with a blender and then plugging it in, so that Felix dies by having his skull and brain blended (1:23:05). This scene in particular

demonstrates well the massive difference in storytelling between working class/haunting horror and slasher horror. To make a rather extreme contrast, in *The Conjuring*, when Sadie, the family dog is killed (and I reiterate that Sadie's death is the only one in that entire movie) she is literally cried over and buried, even as her death heralds dangers to come (Wan 0:16:00, 0:19:28). These two scenes emphasize the impossibility of using a binary lives/dies model to evaluate the meaningfulness of living and dying in narratives of fear, and how those decisions are couched in terms of the engagement of audience empathy and identification with the protagonists.

The shocking greed of the Davison children in *You're Next* is given as the plausible explanation for why the audience just witnessed a film that consists of a string of murders interspersed with jokes about family gatherings. We should note the similarity in formal terms to Wes Craven's use and rethinking of the "teleporting villain" trope in the original *Scream*, referenced earlier in this project¹⁷. What stands out here is the extremity of both the premise and explanation, and the way that greed moves the story from being an unbelievable fiction, to one that is at least internally consistent. If one were to go character by character in *You're Next*, and consider why it is fine that they die (as every character except for Erin does by the end,) the most sensible conclusion involves either the wealth/safety inversion, or the greed category. There are those family members, including both parents, three siblings and their partners, who are victims, but their deaths entertain by their unsympathetic class position, and by the same formal methods that *Halloween* builds on with the category-violating idea of "babysitters being stalked at night" (Konow 5).

¹⁷ See page 12.

Then, once Erin begins killing off the attackers and eventually, Zee, Felix and Crispian, there is an even greater sense of legitimacy in their deaths as retribution and fair punishment for not just the committing of crimes, but for the philosophical underpinnings of those crimes. In terms of suspension of disbelief, it is helpful to think of how one would summarize the movie's plot, or pitch it to a studio. "It's a horror film about a rich kid who hires a death squad to murder his whole family" certainly pushes questions about motivation to the fore, but if the answer to "why?" is as simple as "because he wants the inheritance," then the story begins to fall into conceptual categories that fundamentally mesh with assumptions about how capitalist society works. In this sense, I would go so far as to submit that using greed and wealth as narrative techniques for addressing disbelief directly equates violence with capitalist political-economic systems. Put another way, what we see in the promulgation of narratives of fear is that audiences and creators of horror media understand the *impacts* of capitalism, on a personal and community level, and can identify them as horrible things.

Rancière, in the introduction *Nights of Labor*, notes that "a narrative is not a simple relating of facts. It is a way of constructing - or deconstructing - a world of experience" (x). This point is a central conceit of the French philosopher's compilation of workers' journals, articles and personal diaries, and its importance in the context of France during the Second Republic is mirrored by its relevance in the global metropole today. If there exists not only a series of narratives, but a whole sub-genre with a range of conventions that explicitly center around bourgeois death as entertainment, it is worth considering the various possible political functions of such a set of narratives. Just as in the French Second Republic, these modern horror narratives are part of a subaltern discourse on political-economic-social life.

We have finished this survey of living and dying in horror with the addendum of ‘how do those that die, die?’ Yet another question remains: how do horror protagonists live? Said another way, once beyond the question of ‘who’ is dying and living, we are still left with significant questions about what kinds of coding and action can save these protagonists from certain doom. To examine this question, we will delve into an issue that intersects deeply with class, and has already come up in this paper, the question of representing the racialized subject in horror. This study should not only expand but deepen our thinking about class coding and depoliticization of conventions in horror.

Part 3:

We Get Shit Done: Isolation, Recognition and the Life-Saving Monoracial Community

Any framework of ideas must contend with the question of why it is the way it is. Therefore, in a self-professed class-centric reading of narratives of fear, it should not be unexpected to contend with an imbalance of consideration of other fundamental narratives that shape American and liberal society, such as white supremacy, hetero and cisnormativity, ableism and patriarchy. The theory of intersectionality put forward by Professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw has deeply informed the process of this project, and its effect can be noted even in the fundamental thesis of this text, which concerns the interplay and designation of political subjects in horror media. All of the aforementioned oppressive systems are and have been subjects of political discourse in the United States, and in its media. In some ways, this puts them at risk of being discounted as purely explicit political subjects, which cannot escape the eye and censorship of liberal society. For this reason, this section will lay the groundwork for thinking and addressing intersections of politicized identity with class identification, in the context of narratives of fear and the ‘unspeakable’. Our window into this issue is the complicating factor of race in a class-focused analysis of horror narratives. I will present the case that class and its narrative markers are indispensable to the portrayal of race in narratives of fear, and that likewise, the placement of characters of color in horror reinforces the “classed” dynamics of dying/living in narratives of fear. Moreover, the previously explored set of relations -- that of allegorical narrative versus purportedly apolitical horror stories -- can also guide our thinking on portrayals of racialized characters in horror media¹⁸.

¹⁸ It is worth emphasizing the fact that race is not the only factor that could be discussed in relation to class for this project. I believe that any deeper exploration of the intersectional dynamics between sexuality, gender or ability would push in the same direction that this limited project asserts. My personal hope is that if an ability to theorize

There is no single context in which racialized characters appear. However, several aspects of horror plot and form require examination: when, where and how do characters of color die in horror narratives? Does their living and dying corroborate or disprove our previous assertion that a particular, sordid kind of death is reserved for middle and upper class characters? And finally, how does the marked whiteness of the authorial network of horror impact the “common sense” about characters of color in horror media? The following comparative analysis asserts that while race and racial tropes are a crucial aspect of horror metanarratives, a race-focused reading of horror media that works in tandem with a class-centric framework is not only possible, but constructive.

The central claim here is about community. Specifically, that the living and dying of characters of color in horror is primarily related to their demonstrated connection or disconnection to a mythic, monoracial “community.” It is worth noting that this claim refers to characters of color who are not the “monster” or main antagonist. This is important to mention because there are proportionally more examples of black antagonists in horror media than black protagonists, or members of a main cast (Complex 6). Though certainly much can be (and has been) said about this particular fact, my focus here is on *protagonists* of color, such as they appear on screen. My assertion here is that in discourse, and thus, in media, several dominant political-social tropes are salient. One of these dictates that communities of color are – almost by definition – working class or impoverished¹⁹. Second, that a character of color placed into a predominantly white space is identified as middle class or higher unless otherwise specified, and

politically unconscious class discourse are developed further, intersectional analyses of horror will find an even stronger foundation from which to investigate.

¹⁹ See: *Candyman* (1992), *Attack the Block* (2011), *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* (2014).

thus is displaced from the marginalized/monoracial community²⁰. Third, that this classed distinction (e.g. whether a minority character is portrayed as being connected to or displaced from a racial community) is a reliable indicator for the “danger” that the character is in throughout the text. In his paper, *Racial Horror*, Professor Matthew Strohl expands on Noel Carroll and Mary Douglas’ theories about “violations of conceptual categories” as the basis for a “horror response” by applying the idea of conceptual category violations to the more outwardly nuanced issues of the social sciences, including racial prejudice (Strohl 1). Although the fundamentals of category violation theorizing have their roots in philosophical projects that are currently out of favor, Strohl’s use of the terminology in regards to race is instructive. It may be useful to consider the placement of characters of color in predominantly white spaces as a kind of “conceptual category violation,” that, beyond invoking a “horror response” from an audience, codes them in particular ways, in this case, as both class privileged, and in mortal danger.

The 2017 film *Get Out*, directed by Jordan Peele, demonstrates several of the previously discussed conventions and frameworks, including the use of intentional political allegory and the association of racial community with safety. These are even more clearly noticed when contrasted with an opposing kind of minority representation: that of (within the film) isolated, tokenized, middle class characters of color, such as in Wes Craven’s *Scream 2*. While *Get Out* is written around an explicitly political statement about race, much of which centers on the importance of black solidarity and community, *Scream 2*, as does all of the *Scream* franchise, comments on horror genre conventions, in terms of artistry and entertainment value, aestheticizing not only blackness but black politics.

²⁰ See: *Scream 2* (1997), *The Cabin In the Woods* (2011), *Friday the 13th* (2009), *The Final Destination* (2009).

Any kind of commentary on film conventions will involve some reflection on social and political common sense as well. On the subject of racial representation, Wes Craven's commentary in *Scream 2* is concentrated at the start of the film, which follows a black couple (played by Omar Epps and Jada Pinkett) as they are about to see a horror movie called "Stab" at a movie theatre. The couple engage in the kind of metacommentary about horror that is a hallmark of the *Scream* franchise, as Maureen (Pinkett) remarks that "the horror genre is historical for excluding the African-American element" (Craven 0:01:08). This line reflects ongoing conversations about minority representation in cinema, often evaluated in quantitative terms, such as how many cast members are minorities, or how many speaking lines minority characters have. As such, the image of a black couple in a horror film discussing a lack of quantitative black representation in horror enacts its own resolution at a certain level, and ends with an irony also typical of the *Scream* series, wherein the black couple is one after the other attacked and killed by the Ghostface antagonist, all before the first ten minutes of the film are up. On the level of horror conventions, which Craven is explicitly playing with, there is a morbid humor referenced by these deaths that is characteristic of the "slasher" subgenre. This is based off of a narrative convention that black people are less susceptible to the fright tactics of conventional slasher antagonists. The reasons for this trope, like many others, are not clear, but some horror critics find its base in the fact that at some point, "Black men and women were added to horror films for the sake adding to the film body count," and that black audiences became aware of this external logic, provoking skepticism in the premises of horror in general (Complex 2). Before their deaths, the characters refer specifically to this trope, as Maureen says of *Stab's* white protagonist, "See, if that was me, I'd be out of there !" (Craven 0:09:18). This

series of comments build up to the ironic climax of both characters becoming the first victims of *Scream 2*'s villain. The deaths of black characters in a largely white film is meant both to equalize, in the sense that "no one is safe," and also differentiate the black characters, who need to almost apostrophically point out their own blackness, as they walk a path that only leads to unmourned death.

The narrative move analyzed above is an evidently creative aspect of *Scream 2*. However, analysis through the lens of an 'unconscious' political reading also situates *Scream 2* as a helpful example of class markers being inscribed onto racialized characters. As previously noted, one of the most substantive class markers on a minority character is placement within a predominantly white space. This is the case in *Scream 2* on several levels. First, the location of the opening scene is not so much racially coded as it is numerically a white space. The audience members in the movie theatre scenes are majority white, as are the employees. However, beyond this, as the movie progresses, more class and racial markers are alluded to. After the introductory scene, the setting of the film is more directly shown to be a small college town in Ohio, and the new characters introduced are shown to be affiliated with the college. In racial and class terms, both of these specifications of setting function as markers. As of 2016, Ohio's population was 79.5% Non-Hispanic White, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2008, 63.2% of college enrollees in the United States were White, and 60% were of a "high socioeconomic status (SES)," with only 14% coming from a "low" SES, according to research by the National Center for Education Statistics. What these statistics should indicate is not that colleges are "rich" places and that Ohio is a "white" place, but that horror conventions engage with assumptions that extend beyond the boundaries of fictional narrative or literary conventions. These assumptions

(rural Ohio is white, colleges are predominantly white institutions) still function as ‘narrative’ conventions, in terms of their dissemination through news media and other cultural artifacts, but they are placed outside of the realm of the ‘fictional’. The reason these conventions have an impact on audiences is because they are recognizable from ‘outside’ of horror or fiction broadly speaking. In terms of the setting, Craven is explicitly in dialogue with the use of affluent suburbs as a common setting for slasher horror, such as in John Carpenter’s *Halloween*. Indeed, one might point out that although the first *Scream* film takes place in California, and the second in Ohio, a viewer of both movies would be hard pressed to notice many visual differences in terms of location or setting. However, as one notes throughout the *Scream* franchise, an acknowledgement of tropes does not necessarily lead to a substantive difference in their use. In fact, *use* is often the way conventions and tropes are interacted with in horror filmmaking.

Scream 2 exemplifies clearly the position of class-based conventionality as less explicitly identifiable than other narrative conventions, such as the directly confronted issue of minority representation in horror. When a filmmaker like Craven points to an issue of racialized representation, an enormous amount of culturally specific references and shorthands are still at work. Even as a film that is centered around pointing out a number of horror media tropes and traditions, there are still narrative and formal aspects that remain outside of what was, and still is, discursive.

Although in many respects, Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* is a largely different movie than *Scream 2*, it too engages with horror tropes rooted in social issues, and uses allegorical dynamics to comment on a subject matter. The main difference is that while Craven’s focus is couched in terms of artistic conventions, Peele’s commentary is on an *explicitly political issue*, that is,

racism and race relations in the United States. The premise of the film is that a young black man goes to meet his white girlfriend's parents, and though at first they appear harmless, if somewhat ignorant, it is eventually discovered that the whole Armitage family (Chris' girlfriend included) is involved in kidnapping and auctioning off black people. The black characters' bodies are then sold to elderly whites who inhabit the new bodies by undergoing an experimental medical procedure. The narrative arc of *Get Out* demonstrates the discursive importance of community. However, because of this visibly political subject matter, it is a more complex process to identify where conversations about race or class are explicit, versus where they exist in the form of a shared cultural vocabulary.

To reiterate, my position is that whenever racial minority characters are protagonized in horror media, their relationship to an economically marginalized, monoracial community is indicative of the amount of danger the characters find themselves in, and how their death is depicted when they are killed. In *Get Out*, several of the most crucial moments in the film, including the climax in which the titular line is uttered, involve communitarian interactions between black people (Peele 0:55:48). The protagonist Chris' "black community" seems fairly small in terms of actual characters, but it is possible that this has to do with issues of cast size, and moreover, it is actually more extensive than it first appears. The two people who are closest to Chris throughout the film, both of whom save his life at different moments, are Chris' friend Rod, and Chris' mother, who never appears on screen, but has a significant narrative presence. Chris' connection to Rod is fairly straightforward, but nevertheless crucial to the plot and the representation of black community. Rod is Chris' close friend and a TSA agent, and Rod's own relation to an explicitly close-knit black community is the element that allows him to realize that

his friend is in danger, and eventually rescue him. As Rod says in a phone call to Chris “look bruh, all I’m doing is connecting the dots” (Peele 0:51:35).

Although this comment is initially made in a comical exchange about the fact that the Armitage mother is a hypnotist and that “white people love making people sex slaves and shit,” Rod later does connect a series of clues to find out what is going on at the Armitage house (Peele 0:50:49). This happens when Chris sends Rod a picture of a young black man Chris meets while with the Armitages. The man speaks in an old-fashioned way, and when Chris takes a flash photo of him, the young man begins to bleed from the nose and wildly yell at Chris to “get out” (Peele 0:55:48). Rod immediately recognizes the man as Andre Hayworth, and for our purposes, the reason for his recognition is crucial. Rod tells Chris, “Andre Hayworth. He used to kick it with Veronica” who was “Teresa’s sister, who work at the movie theatre on Eighth” (Peele 1:04:12). At this point Chris remembers having met him, and later Rod discovers that Hayworth has been reported missing for several weeks, and concludes that Hayworth was hypnotized by Mrs. Armitage, and somehow brainwashed. This scene between Chris and Rod is one of the clearest examples of the power that the monoracial (in this case, black) community has in horror media. Moreover, this exchange is followed up at the end of the film by Rod acting out a version of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) derived phrase “somebody come get they mans,” showing up at the end to take Chris away to safety. The implication of this phrase is that the individual, (in the case of the movie, Chris) has been doing something ridiculous, as evidenced by Rod’s first words to Chris once they are safe in Rod’s car, “I mean...I told you not to go in the house” (Peele 1:39:09). For these reasons it follows to assert that Chris’ relationship with Rod is critical in deciding Chris’ survival to the end of the film.

Furthermore, Chris only makes it to the point where Rod can save him because of a strange but touching connection between Chris and the memory of his mother. Early on in the film, Mrs. Armitage hypnotizes Chris, ostensibly to help him quit smoking, but actually in order to be able to subdue him if he finds out the family's plan. While hypnotizing him, she asks Chris about his mother, who died when he was a child. The memory is so painful that Chris begins to compulsively claw at the armchair he is sitting in, exposing the stuffing. When Chris eventually tries to leave the Armitages, Mrs. Armitage uses her hypnosis to knock Chris out. He awakes strapped into an armchair, and the audience sees that as he has been knocked out, he has been again scratching at the upholstery, as he had previously when thinking about his mother's death (Peele 1:22:10). The Armitage's plan is revealed to Chris, and he realizes that after once again being knocked out by hypnosis (which Mrs. Armitage triggers by clinking a spoon against her teacup,) he will be trapped forever. It is at this moment (though the audience does not realize it until some minutes have passed) that Chris manages to take some of the stuffing from the chair and stuff it in his ears, so that he will not be affected by the hypnotic trigger. This moment is where Chris' living and dying is essentially decided, as he successfully escapes captivity when the Armitage's son comes to move him to the operating room. Through the combination of the first hypnosis scene and the twist of Chris' escape, it becomes evident that Chris' connection to his mother actively saves his life. It is not farfetched to think of this as an example of *intergenerational* black community, in which a minority character's ability to survive is both passed down, and a result of a kind of sacrifice. This reading holds closely to a discursive trait

commonly associated with people of color specifically, which is a close connection to history and ancestry²¹.

The contrast between representations of black people in these two films is at the very least instructive about common ways racial minorities are represented in Western horror. The basic assertions here are straightforward: when isolated from a monoracial community, and thus coded as middle or upper class, characters of color die, and die gratuitously, but when the connection exists, characters survive more often and longer. Examples of this arise in the *Final Destination* series, *The Purge: Election Year*, *Demonic*, *The Cabin in the Woods* and *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones*, all of which represent highly commercially successful franchises²². In all of these films, protagonists of color (with Asian, Black and Latinx characters represented) are either connected or isolated from “their” communities, and in those where they are isolated (such as in *Final Destination*, *The Cabin in the Woods* and *Demonic*) they die quickly, grimly, and without mercy. *Get Out* exists with this history in mind, and perhaps even represents an ability to more consciously engage with long-running conversations on black liberation, solidarity between minority groups, and counter-hegemonic beliefs about white supremacy. What Jordan Peele has shown is that conventionality need not imply political or discursive stasis, and that the essence of horror as a popular art form is to look to the future by understanding the structures of the present.

²¹ Much of the conceptual backing for this assertion comes from political scientist Michael Dawson’s classic work on Black politics, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. For more on the concept of “linked fate,” see Chapter 4 of Dawson’s book.

²² Gross revenue of *The Purge* series: \$319 million. *Final Destination* series: \$665 million. *Paranormal Activity* series: \$889 million. *Saw* series, directed by *Demonic* producer James Wan: \$975.4 million.

IV

Repetition, Reaction, Progress and Normalcy*Part I: 'Gratuitous' Violence in the 'Tiger Economies'*

Repetition and cyclicalness are central concepts in both the craft and politics of narratives of fear. Formally, conventionality functions as a series of iterations of narrative elements through time. Internally to the narrative, cycles of violence and repetitions of (deadly) history are thematically present in every subsection of horror that has been mentioned thus far. In the previously referenced film *Get Out*, the protagonist, Chris, is only the most recent in a string of black people lured in and kidnapped by the Armitage family. Likewise, haunted house movies such as *The Conjuring* establish the endangered position of their protagonists by explaining how previous residents of the haunted house had died mysteriously in similar circumstances as the characters. It is difficult to generalize about how present a sense of history as repetitive is in popular discourse, truisms such as, "history repeats itself" aside.

However, on the issue of acknowledging a traumatic history, there are certainly no shortage of examples of cultures and communities that are explicitly in the process of not just re-telling, but re-writing the narratives surrounding important moments, and how they connect genealogically. In Chapter II, for instance, we studied how Argentina and other Latin American nations are in the process of critically examining their legacies of dictatorship and anti-leftist violence in connection to a political discourse of neoliberalism, where the two have not always been explicitly discursively linked. Having compared and found similarities between discourse outside and in the United States, where does the United States stand today? Do cases like

Argentina, and those we will touch on shortly of Japan and South Korea, suggest that the United States is moving toward a clearer discourse on liberal capitalism and its history? I submit that due to a convergence of factors, including a growing generational remove from legacies of the Cold War, it is. The focus of this chapter will be the discursive effect, in horror, of the 2007 U.S. housing market crash, and the ensuing global financial crisis. Looking at films like *Halloween*, *Scream*, and even *Get Out*, it is questionable at best whether political economy and economic news was foremost in the minds of writers and audiences at the time of their release. However, in many of the popular horror narratives from the period immediately following the Great Recession, we can clearly hear echoes of the crisis, in relation to its social impact on the level of individuals and communities.

We can begin with some of the real-life horror situations that working people found themselves in during the so-called Great Recession. In a panel for the United Nations General Assembly, Professor Sakiko Fukuda-Parr pointed to the “human consequences” of global economic crisis as “often hidden from much economic analyses that drive policy choices” (3). She describes that, “first of all, unemployment rises and household incomes drop. Households cope to meet basic needs through a variety of mechanisms such as sending out children or the elderly to work, reducing consumption of food and other essentials with consequences for health, withdrawing children from school and so on” (4). Moreover, she adds, “when job retrenchment takes place, the tendency is to protect employment for men and compromise on women’s jobs. But women’s incomes are essential for family survival, especially when they are heads of households and/or in poor families. They cannot afford to stop working so they end up in jobs with much worse and often unacceptable conditions” (4-5). While Fukuda-Parr’s analysis

primarily focuses on marginal regions of the world, it is certainly the case that similar effects prevailed in the United States, where 9 million people lost their jobs between 2008-2009 and millions of low-income homeowners (many of whom were in that position because of corporate and government incentivization of homeownership) were foreclosed upon and evicted from their homes (CoreLogic). As a teenager myself during the worst of the crisis, there are years that I will always remember as those when I barely saw my mother, who had to move between school-year long contracts throughout my middle and high school years, and so sometimes ended up with 3 hour commutes to and from home each work day. Even shielded by a great deal of class privilege and a close-knit family, there was never a doubt in my mind as to the connection between national news about the recession and the anxious conversations between adults at church, school and over the phone with relatives in Puerto Rico. These facts serve to remind us that even with the enormous differences in standards of living and resources available between many in metropolitan nations like the U.S. and those nations at the global economic periphery, for people growing up during a period of economic instability, *social* narratives of fear entrench themselves very quickly, and it should not be surprising to both see them manifested in popular storytelling, and to connect themselves to existing fear narratives in popular culture.

On a smaller scale, one example from outside the horror genre itself is a resurgence in documentaries and docudramas about the financial and corporate side of the crisis. Films like *Inside Job* (2010), *The Big Short* (2015), and Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) all attempt to define a narrative of the economic downturn and the housing market crash. A deep analysis of these texts is outside of the scope of this project, but it is worth noting that one substantive difference between films like these and horror media more strictly defined is in the

place of the political. As films at least somewhat based in non-fiction, documentaries function much more within the allegorical vein of storytelling, and even beyond, with certain aspects entering into an aestheticization of a material reality. As such, this means that none of these films can fully relate a story, because they must also relate a message. Because their basis is in a complex set of events and interpretations thereof, their positioning as stories masks the beliefs of the writers rather than revealing them, even if by accident. One could think of the difference in positionality as follows: horror's narratives do not involve convincing the audience that something is true, instead relying on shared truths that ostensibly come from the audience/public. The mentioned docudramas assert that the audience doesn't know the *real* truth. This assertion can be fairly overt and even antagonistic, but need not be. The introduction of *The Big Short* for example, toes the line, as the narrator muses, "In the end Lewis Ranieri's Mortgage Backed Security mutated into a monstrosity that collapsed the whole world economy. And none of the experts or leaders or talking heads had a clue it was coming. I'm guessing most of you still don't really know what happened. Yeah, you got a sound bite you repeat so you don't sound dumb but come on..." (Randolph & McKay 6). While it would be wrong to say that these works have nothing to offer in terms of insights on speaking trauma, I would argue that these self-declared documentaries aestheticize suffering and defuse politics much more than the most commercial, half-baked horror film. Rancière writes of a similar relationship to this one, between bourgeois poets and working class aspiring writers, in the first chapter of *Nights of Labor*. He proposes a dialectic in which there are "real sufferings of the workday" and "poets who know hell only in their imagination." Rancière concludes that, "the untruth of the poet does not lie in being unaware of the worker's sorrows but in voicing them without realizing it...If the laborer alone

experiences the truth of what the poet says, he recognizes only his own nothingness in that truth” (17). Although perhaps in a somewhat roundabout way, I find that again, Rancière helps us think about art and the masses in a way that gets to the politics of the matter, and in this case, can explain a perhaps unorthodox take on financial docudramas. I would not go as far as Rancière in claiming to know what these documentary filmmakers take from experience, and what political issues are more callously aestheticized, but what is important is the kinds of potential audience interaction that these films versus horror films allow. In this realm, “apolitical” horror once again provides insights that seemingly more explicit film meditations on political issues do not.

Returning for a moment to Professor Fukuda-Parr’s analysis of global financial recovery plans, it is important to note that she also draws on the Argentine example, pointing to recovery from a financial crisis that took place in 2001, which had at its center currency instability, and significant long-term growth of government debt, which began substantially under the early neo-liberal policies of the dictatorship’s Economy Minister José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz. She argues that “their [Argentina’s] policies included among others, pro-poor public expenditure policies focusing on long-term development priorities such as building infrastructure and human investments” (6). For our purposes, arguments like Fukuda-Parr’s on the futility of neo-liberal policies to stabilize economies are not central in themselves, but are helpful in supporting a type of knowledge that parallels implicit views on political economy present in horror, albeit in a very different discursive context. They also support the point that this economic crisis faced by the U.S. in 2008 should not be analyzed in a vacuum, or in the equally unhelpful context of U.S.-centric history. Similar financial downturns have had similar effects on horror media and cultural narratives not just in Argentina but also in South Korea and Japan, both of which are

now internationally recognized for horror filmmaking in particular. Horror movies in both of these cultures have been noted for their relationship to cultural narratives of fear, especially surrounding aspects of the economy, such as work culture, expectations of success for children, and social conformity. In this case, similarities in trends and conventions point us to similarities in material conditions, and vice versa. Both of these facts conjure the specter of changing discourse, which of course begs the question of what kind of change is expected.

Indeed, as part of a volume on *Japanese Horror Cinema*, Tony Williams writes about the reception and, in his view, misunderstanding of, Fukasaku Kinji's *Battle Royale* (2000). Like many of the pieces we have studied, *Battle Royale* was criticized upon its release for "mindless and gratuitous violence" and having "no redeeming value" both in Japan and the United States (Williams, ed. McRoy, 130). Immediately, Williams makes the connection between political economy, capitalist interest in efficiency, and a misunderstood anti-capitalist negativity represented in the film. He writes,

Over the past twenty years, western politicians have extolled the virtues of the South-East Asian 'tiger economy', despite the clear evidence of economic and psychological problems which have affected once-booming bastions of late capitalism such as Hong Kong and Taiwan...Despite the clear evidence of psychological stress involving mental strain, classroom violence and teacher/student suicide, especially in Japan, the new world order millennium sees more of an extension rather than the removal of such harmful practices (131).

This leads directly to a re-interpretation of *Battle Royale*'s premise not as an excuse for gratuitous violence, but an intentional reflection of a society's use of violence in the name of

order and economic growth. Williams emphasizes the importance of various aspects of Japanese history, from post-war mindsets to Meiji-era “militarism,” but it is clear that the dominant image that premises both the creation and internal logic of the film is Japan’s so-called “Lost Decade” of the 1990s, prompted by the bursting of the asset price bubble in 1992 (131). Based on Williams’ interpretation, it is reasonable to think of *Battle Royal* as similar to allegorical horror and science fiction works that explicitly criticize capitalist policies and social structures. And yet it is curious to note that neoliberal thought seems to fight to misinterpret even a movie where authorial intent is definitively present as a political view, and to erase the overtly political elements of the narrative. It should not seem implausible then, that similar dynamics have befallen horror narratives in the United States, especially when the argument for a political interpretation is not actively made by a writer or director.

In the same geopolitical region as Japan, South Korea demonstrates many of the same factors and effects in terms of cultural narratives, although the South Korean timeline for horror film is shorter than Japan and the U.S.’s due to a period of strict government involvement and censorship of locally produced cinema. Since the ending of that censorship, South Korean horror cinema has gained international recognition, often by engaging in political/social discourse. One of the most recent examples is Yeon Sang-ho’s close-quarters zombie thriller, *Busanhaeng* (*Train to Busan*) (2016). Even more so than *Battle Royale*, *Train to Busan* relies on cultural images to establish character dynamics and the conflicts that the story then works to resolve. Interestingly, while in many ways, *Train to Busan* is indebted to a lineage of overtly political zombie horror, on certain levels it shares more with some of the haunting movies from Chapter 3, in the way that the protagonists’ arcs are presented and the overall hopeful trajectory of the

film. The story follows Seok-woo, a fund manager and rather absentee father on his young daughter's birthday, as he grants her birthday wish of taking the titular train down to Busan to see her mother. As they are departing the station, a zombie-infected girl boards the train, with a larger horde close behind. In the ensuing action, the initially somewhat misanthropic father is able to bond with other survivors and protect his daughter in various dangerous situations. In the end, it is those bonds that redeem the protagonists, as the father and a fellow traveler, worker Sang-hwa both die to save their daughter and pregnant wife respectively, who themselves eventually arrive at a safe zone, only to be threatened by soldiers who at first suspect that they are infected. However, Su-an, Seok-woo's daughter, saves their lives as she begins to sing a song that she had meant to show her father at the beginning of the film, and the soldiers realize that they are still human. This question of what defines "humanity" pervades the narrative, suggesting, as many zombie stories do, that there is some aspect of society that dehumanizes (one might even say, alienates) adults through a glorification of work and individual success over community and family. What is particularly interesting in *Train to Busan* is how readily an outsider to South Korean society can notice culturally specific conversations taking place. Narratives (albeit sometimes stereotypical ones) of overwork and a cultural obsession with quantitative success in South-East Asia are salient within the cultures themselves as well as outside of them, but it would be difficult to argue that such a narrative exists in the same way in the United States. What *Train to Busan* can clarify is discourse on the interaction between political economy and culture, where culture is more clearly defined, in this case because of how it is otherized in Western cultures.

Part 2: Repeating Histories and Unresolved Endings

There is a trope that crosses many subgenres of horror, from slashers like *You're Next*, *Halloween*, and *Friday the 13th*, to haunting narratives like *The Conjuring*, *The Amityville Horror*, and *Ringu*, that falls right at the start of the narrative. It functions more or less as a false (or perhaps the truest) beginning, following a character or characters doing normal things, either having sex, traveling, sleeping, etc. The twist in this case is that rather than being one of the protagonists, the character we are following is a way of introducing the antagonist, and as such almost inevitably dies. Even in stories like *The Amityville Horror*, where none of the protagonists die at all, the Defeo murders, shown at the beginning, establish for the audience what the demonic antagonist is "capable of," and thus what the stakes of the story are²³. The crises and struggles to voice trauma in public discourse we have previously examined might well be thought of as fitting into this convention. In a less American-centric model, they are also reminiscent of the parallel survival narratives that make up Max Brooks' sprawling zombie epic, *World War Z*. Regardless, the question at hand is as follows: can the United States be said to suffer from the same kind of capitalist trauma as countries that have been victims of hegemonic violence, and if so, do the experiences of those nations provide a way of working through a deeply repressed skepticism of liberalism in the public sphere? Moreover, is a moment like the 2008 financial crisis similar discursively to other periods of economic and cultural instability, such as those in South Korea and Japan?

²³ The premise of *The Amityville Horror* is that a family called the Defeos lived in a house in Amityville, and one night the eldest son murdered the rest of his family with a shotgun, later claiming that "voices" told him to do it. The story of *Amityville Horror* itself actually follows the Lutzes, who move into the same house several years after the Defeo murders.

Instead of beginning with my own opinion, I want to tie this question to one of the central questions of the horror genre, which is: are you afraid, and should you be? If all horror ended the way most action/adventure movies do, with a totalizing victory over the antagonist, the answer would reasonably be that there is nothing to be afraid of. There is no need to fear if victory is certain, even if there are struggles along the way. But of course one of the defining aspects of horror is the final scene or shot meant to re-instill doubt, and thus fear into the audience even after the main conflict has been resolved. Examples of this can be found in Brian de Palma's film version of Stephen King's *Carrie*, when just as the film is ending, Carrie's hand bursts from out of her grave to re-traumatize one of her classmates, or in James Wong's *Final Destination*, when just as the characters believe that they have figured out Death's design and cheated fate, a neon sign breaks, swings down, and kills one of the protagonists before the film smash cuts to black. These open endings signify that evil and fear are still "out there" and as such the audience should not just leave their fear in the movie theatre. Politically speaking, the inference I draw from this concluding dynamic is that horror constantly refers to its connection with the material world. Are we afraid? Yes. This is part of the reason for telling horror stories at all. *Should we be afraid?* Yes as well. The narrative structures of these films push back against attempts to distinguish between horror consumed and horror identified with or recognized. Returning to the initial question about anti-capitalist skepticism, a clear dialectic emerges when thinking about horror film endings and the political impact of fear narratives. On one hand, it is surprising to see that these popular stories so strongly resist the movement towards narrative resolution and "the sentimental and melodramatic aesthetics of [pre-Second World War] neorealism" (Ravetto 25).

On the other, it is hard to discount the cynical view that these unresolved endings leave the door open to that most capitalist of artistic projects, the sequel.

Content here is just as important as form in evaluating audience interaction with horror media. This is especially the case given our suggested dynamic of sedimented knowledges allowing for anti-capitalist readings of works that did not intend them. As we have seen, the skeptical content is present in conventions, such that not just one movie or novel contains anti-capitalist sentiments, but entire genres of media. To emphasize this point, I want to examine one notably strange and unconventional horror film, the 2010 remake of *The Crazies*, directed by Breck Eisner, and executive produced by the director of the original film version, George A. Romero. The film is a curiosity in horror film because it is a no-holds barred politically reactionary story. As mentioned, it is not my position that most American and European horror movies are being made with an anti-capitalist agenda, but that such elements come from folk common senses. That said, there is no such question in the case of *The Crazies*, which establishes a firmly American-conservative premise. In the film, the U.S. government is transporting a weaponized virus, and the plane carrying the pathogen crashes into a river that provides water to the small town of Ogden Marsh, Iowa. As the virus seeps into the water supply, residents become inexplicably violent, and eventually the National Guard moves in to cover up the mistake and quarantine the growing number of infected. The situation devolves into chaos as the heroic small-town sheriff, his wife and his deputy attempt to make their way out of the grasp of the bumbling, evil federal government's quarantine. Generally speaking, this film fits into the mold of an 'allegorical' political film, in that the symbolism is straightforward enough that an audience could be expected to understand that the film is engaging in political

discourse. As horror blogger Jackson Leverone notes, “if you elect to read Romero's original [*The Crazies* (1973)] film as part of post-Vietnam disillusionment and a critique of government and military...it kind of makes sense that the new American radicals, conservatives and Tea Partiers, take up the same protest imagery to convey their impressions of ‘big government’” (1). In many ways, the allegorical nature of this film, as well as the political messaging that can be described as a far end of dominant belief systems, (e.g., pro-individualism, limited government, belief in a good/evil binary) makes it an exception that proves the rule in terms of sedimentation of knowledge. Any understanding of American history underscores the fact that the ideological underpinnings of the United States are deeply rooted and entrenched. Their dominance in political and public discourse is not really in question at all, and certainly there is no lack of media that essentializes capitalist/neoliberal/American ideology both purposefully and unwittingly. However, popular narratives of fear are not, curiously enough, an ideal vehicle for dominant Western ideology. Although this may seem counter to the prevalence of effective uses of fear in maintaining capitalist hegemony, the reasons for this circumstance are straightforward.

Firstly, horror typically involves interplay between the taboo and the normative, which even by invoking the non-normative at all, sanctions it, and undermines the discursive totality of the normative. This on its own is not enough to establish counter-hegemonic knowledge, but, to use Deleuzian terminology, it deterritorializes familiar concepts (such as the suburb, the child's doll, the nuclear family) as much as it reterritorializes them. However, the second issue is that hegemonic discourse, being inherently ideological, connects far less to material reality, and thus, does not as easily spring from the same sources as the more complex and contradictory beliefs of the subaltern classes. In *The Crazies*, the roles played by the government and the small-town

protagonists are ideologically formed, but even in an ideologically conservative work of art, complicating knowledges still exist, even if peripherally. One such assumption is that the U.S. government has biological weapons. The film certainly does not pursue these questions, but one might reasonably note that even such a decontextualized truism as this points to the long shadow of American imperialist violence, by merely acknowledging the U.S. military's interest in new, experimental weaponry. The tamping down of this kind of contradictory knowledge gives away the organizational role of ideology in a film like *The Crazies*, demonstrating the fascist impulse toward completeness and lack of contradiction.

And yet, as Marxian scholar David Harvey muses, “contradictions have the nasty habit of not being resolved but merely moved around” (Harvey 4). In contrast to *The Crazies*' ideologically pure narrative arc, most horror narratives delve into contradiction, and into a concept that Harvey relates to contradiction, which is crisis (Harvey 3). We have already addressed how haunting narratives conflate mundane crises with supernatural ones, but the added layer here is the social one. That is to say, in a period of real social crisis, the crises of individuals, families and communities take on a new significance. This is visible in more explicit parabolic narratives like the *Purge* series, which centers a diverse group of working class characters fighting a bloodthirsty collection of oligarchs called the “New Founding Fathers” whose stated goal (at least from the second film onward) is to use the yearly “purge” to massacre the poor. However, site-specific horror like *The Belko Experiment*, *Devil* and even Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, also satirize and defamiliarize human interactions in capitalist space, in this case in the corporate office or metropolitan downtown, remaking it as a site of horror.

The same defamiliarization occurs with the home in Sam Raimi's 2015 remake of Tobe Hooper and Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist* (1982). The remake follows in the footsteps of the original as an exploration of suburban life, providing an eerie update to Spielberg's 1982 vision. The introductory scene is notable for the emptiness that pervades both the tract of houses that the family visits, and the house they finally purchase itself. In particular, the house, rather than being surrounded by other properties, is flanked on one side by an old tree, and to the back by a fallow field surrounding a string of power lines. Visually, this emptiness mirrors the narrative 'emptiness' faced by the family in terms of opportunities to work. Although it does not figure much into the plot of the film, the fact that the father is recently laid off from John Deere contrasts with the successful real estate agent father from the 1982 version, as a surprisingly poignant juxtaposition of archetypes (Raimi 0:4:18). We can read an intriguing dynamic into this contrast, where a detail like the father's profession is ostensibly irrelevant, and yet reflects a deeply painful cultural narrative. The choice of what the employment status of the father should be speaks to the sedimentation of knowledge that we have touched on several times now. It is not important that such a choice carry any weight in terms of plot, but its presence reveals the inescapable nature of fear and uncertainty surrounding housing and employment in the years following the Great Recession.

If we compare *The Crazies* to Raimi's *Poltergeist*, the distinction between allegorical and conventional interpolations of politics into narrative become starkly clear. In general, I argue that the ambiguity and nebulosity of folkloric discourse has been both a weakness in its inability to be recognized as discourse, and a strength in its durability and ability to navigate hostile and heavily surveilled media such as the corporate film environment. What *The Crazies* and

Poltergeist represent (along with the many other texts that we have thus far examined) is a renewed interplay between an American form of mythmaking as ideological indoctrination and a version of postmodern ‘distracting’ entertainment that unknowingly makes space for subaltern discourse. Indeed, there is a strong argument to be made that the conceptualizations put forth in this project fit into narratives about the movement away from modernity since the end of the Second World War, although in the context of this project, what this reinforces is the dialectical nature of political reading.

Conclusion

Dialectics have pervaded this project, and so as we conclude, it would not do to fall into narratives of mythic completeness at so late an hour. And yet there is always a context to a dialectic. In this case, to say that capital can appropriate almost any resistance that threatens it is to state the obvious. To assert that horror films are products of a capitalist enterprise, that produces them without a thought to their content or artistic value, as long as they make money is a basic knowledge of the world we live in.

The other side of this dialectic is not so obvious, and its obscurity is the reason for our interest in it. Looking into the revolutionary discursive possibilities in horror media brings into discussion a set of formal and narrative elements that have gone unstudied and undiscussed both in the academy and the public sphere. There is much that the academy knows about political economy, narrative and history, and I have striven to avail myself to as much of it as I could read over the course of this project. Just the same, this project would not exist if not for amateur knowledge. Blog posts, video essays and podcasts have informed this work as much as any theorist. I have worked to make something new from two sources of knowledge that often feel completely apart, with the hope that such knowledges can grow closer, in a way that values them equally and to the extent that they deserve. If this trend does not continue, then who can say what will happen? Uncertainty has driven us this far, but if oppressed knowledges are not given the chance to come to the fore, uncertainty, suffering and of course, fear, will be the lot of all societies, until death comes for us as well.

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