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Demystifying Hammer
The Influence of Transnational Hollywood Financing

Peter Arne Johnson

Various cultural approaches to Hammer Film Productions, the British production company best known for its mid-century Gothic horror pictures and rich house style, contextualize it within post-war British culture and suggest that its primary historical significance lies in its subtextual ideologies that are uniquely "British." Scholars like Peter Hutchings and David Pirie, for example, explore how Hammer's early horror and sci-fi output allegorically betray cultural issues in the United Kingdom during the post-war period, including critiques of imperiled British masculinity amid second-wave feminism and refractions of labor union tensions (Hutchings 1993, 45; Pirie 1973, 38). Although some approaches to Hammer focus on the cultural aspects of the institution and its texts, this paper aims to bridge the gap between the cultural significance of Hammer's cinematic products and the minutiae of film financing in order to foreground the interrelationship between economic structures and culture. Hutchings (1993), for one, admits that institutions like Hammer and their products should be understood as both cultural *and* economic entities (15). As this paper's findings suggest, case studies that consider financing, ownership, and management add valuable insight into not just matters of economics but also issues of culture, society, and transnational power. As Richard Nowell (2014) points out, "media industry studies" is not simply a framework that reduces cultural output to the "profit-seeking motive" of capitalist pursuits (1). In truth, media industry studies, including studies of financing documents, offers a multiperspectival framework that can interrogate a particular production company or studio's internal microeconomic logic, dissect the socio-cultural complexities of its financing and greenlight process, and address the autonomy and contestation

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of individual stakeholders.

In the case of Hammer in the 1950s, a *transnational* industrial approach is necessary to identify how U.S. entities and a hegemonic Hollywood system may have manipulated Hammer's content and, in many ways, usurped its revenue. Therefore, to argue that Hammer is strictly a British/English phenomenon is to ignore Hammer's mode of production and Hollywood's pivotal role in disrupting the autonomy of U.K. cinema after World War II. Although far from totalizing, this American manipulation was able to occur for several reasons: inefficient regulatory policies in the U.K., higher foreign and domestic demand for low-budget "B" pictures, and Hammer's "paycheck to paycheck," assembly-line production strategy. In this case study, I leverage historical accounts of post-war U.K. regulation and the production details from Hammer films like *The Quatermass Xperiment* (Val Guest, 1955) to highlight Hollywood's tampering in post-war British cinema, on both a financial and textual level.

Revisionist Histories of Hammer

Despite the validity of a media industry studies approach to Hammer, some of the historical discourses surrounding Hammer risk oversimplifying its history into a reductively dichotomous narrative that glosses over the company's complex evolution. In one respect, this paper demonstrates how some studies (Barnett 2014; Meikle 1996) implicitly split the company's history into pre-*Frankenstein* and post-*Frankenstein*; in other words, the focus on *Frankenstein* suggests that everything in Hammer's history was deterministically leading up to the success of *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957), and all of its subsequent films were reflective of the same type of lush horror style that *Frankenstein* popularized.[1] Revisionist histories of Hammer, and even comments from Hammer producers, suggest that the company's financial

[1] For example, Vincent Barnett (2014) provides a detailed political economy of various Hammer contracts, but examines the distribution agreements for only *Frankenstein* and *Dracula,* rather than for other productions like *Quatermass* or Hammer's earlier films from the 1930s or 1940s, such as the first installment of the popular *Dick Barton* trilogy, *Dick Barton: Special Agent* (Alfred J. Goulding, 1948). Barnett's focus only on *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* may be the product of archival limitations and other methodological challenges that limit the ability to focus on other less popular films from the Hammer vault. However, if this assumption is correct, it nonetheless reflects how Hammer's Gothic pictures and their historical documents were still considered worth saving, as part of our collective memory, versus other Hammer B pictures.

success after *Frankenstein* in the late 1950s launched the company into a newfound period of flourishing assembly-line production, something akin to a Poverty Row studio in Hollywood (Barnett 2014, 233). In another respect, it may be tempting to instead mark *Quatermass* as a new phase of Hammer's history because it was the studio's first popular "horror" film, as Hammer producer James Carreras suggested (Meikle 1996, 1). However, both of these frameworks are oversimplifications; Hammer—a production and distribution company founded in 1934—had implemented a mass production model well before *Quatermass* and *Frankenstein*. Still, Hammer's post-1957 Gothic output—rather than its post-*Frankenstein* B productions or its eclectic output pre-*Quatermass*/*Frankenstein*—tends to receive the majority of attention from academic and mainstream sources.

While a focus on late Hammer does not automatically invalidate studies on *Quatermass* or *Frankenstein*, the paucity of literature on Hammer's full financial history foregrounds the need to consider the studio more holistically. These before/after historical dichotomies elide Hammer's complex history, not to mention the enigmatic producers and financiers that shaped its success. Indeed, this assembly-line style was embedded in the DNA of Hammer and its miserly production boss, James Carreras, who instituted a factory-like approach to production well before 1955. Therefore, Hammer was distinctly "Fordian"—a term referring to the mass production strategies of automaker Henry Ford—well before *Quatermass* and *The Curse of Frankenstein,* let alone *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958). Moreover**,** Meikle (1996) points out, "even the success of *The Quatermass 'Experiment* would not be enough to convince James Carreras to put all Hammer's eggs into one basket, and this scattergun approach [to production] was to remain the order of the day" (26). Thus, the assembly-line model not only predated *Quatermass* but would continue to be a key to Hammer's strategy. In other words, Hammer continued to produce a number of non-horror B films during its run of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* sequels. Accordingly, this paper seeks to dispel the oversimplifications placed on Hammer's filmography and instead contends that the studio's "house style" and Fordian production model were embedded in its business practices throughout the post-war years. Due to this production model, Hammer's output was subject to American influence and thereby was not simply a product of contemporaneous socio-cultural trends and events in mid-century England. Indeed, it was Hammer's assembly-line model and Carreras's closefisted business philosophy that, coupled with ineffectual U.K. regulation, opened the door for American financiers to acquire substantial equity in (and influence over) Hammer.

Ineffectual Regulation and the Rise of International Financing in the 1940s and 1950s

While the production details of *Quatermass* and other Hammer films are certainly vital to contextualize the influence of American investors, the shifting regulatory policies, the Labor party's ineffective self-financing attempts, and the swelling demand from U.S. exhibitors all set the stage for myriad American investors to enter the U.K. market and monopolize Hammer's output in the 1950s. Some of the first cultural regulations after World War II were policies sympathetic to the U.K. film industry in order to protect it from foreign entrants.[2] Generally, the government was pro-business after World War II and was not concerned with breaking up the film industry, as its U.S. counterparts were; in fact, the U.K. was hoping to *replicate* the vertically integrated structure that had made Hollywood studios so dominant and successful. At the time, regulators believed that the country needed strong action to "counter" these much larger and more powerful Hollywood studios (Street 1997, 16).

Despite the government's best efforts to foster local production to counter Hollywood's hegemony, American lobbyists and other economic entities manipulated the post-war political landscape for their financial advantage. In 1947, for example, the U.K. was rightfully concerned that American imports were sending British pounds out of the domestic market, so regulators imposed the Dalton Duty, which was a 75% tax on all imported American films (Street 1997, 16). However, when the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) responded by boycotting the distribution of American films in the U.K. altogether, lawmakers swiftly reversed the Dalton Duty and instituted a less severe measure that simply limited U.S. studios to a maximum annual box office return for their American-produced pictures (Street 1997, 17). Thereafter, regulators tried to increase the domestic quota to 45%, whereby nearly half of all films exhibited in the U.K. needed to be "primarily" produced within the country (Street 1997, 8). However, Hollywood studios and U.K. exhibitors complained that this measure was also too restrictive, so they pressured regulators to decrease the quota to 30%

[2] There were certainly earlier policies that addressed the demand for domestic products. For example, the Cinematograph Films Act 1927, also known as the Quota Act, set the domestic quota at 7.5% for distributors. This minimum was increased to 20% in 1935 (Chibnall 2007, 3).

(effectively as an amendment to the Quota Act) (Street 1997, 8).[3] Once again attempting to regain control from Hollywood and other imports, legislators instituted the 1950 Eadie Levy, a voluntary tax rebate scheme that divided a proportion of box office rebates between domestic exhibitors and producers if a film qualified as "British" (Street 1997, 19). Similar to the Dalton Duty, this effort to counter Hollywood was only marginally successful; as Sarah Street notes, the Eadie Levy was abolished in 1985 because it was widely accepted that American producers were the primary beneficiaries of the code (1997, 19). Overall, the impotence of particular policies and the erosion of potentially beneficial measures reflected Hollywood's continuing influence over not only content but also politics in the U.K. Though measures like the domestic quota, the Dalton Duty, and the Eadie Levy were designed to encourage more homegrown productions, they were ultimately softened, or taken advantage of, by hegemonic U.S. forces.

Even if these measures had been effective and limited the competition from Hollywood, the British market still did not have enough local capital to completely self-finance its pictures. The 1950s domestic quota, even at 30%, required a substantial increase in local production that the U.K. capital market could not support. In other words, in this type of environment, it would have been challenging for an independent production company like Hammer to succeed *without* foreign capital. Effectively, postwar legislation, particularly the domestic quota, created a critical supply gap in capital that forced companies like Hammer to turn to both mass-production models and American financiers, who would eventually leverage their financial position to strong-arm Hammer into accepting unfavorable terms (Street 1997, 18). Indeed, from 1945 to 1960, Hammer produced an average of four to seven films annually, and to finance these pictures, even at low production costs, producers like James Carreras needed to foster relationships with American producers who had connections to studio financiers and distributors. Therefore, at least on a financial level, U.S. influence was present in Hammer's productions in the 1940s—well before the company's Universal-inspired monster films in the late 1950s.

Despite the U.S. influence over industry legislation and an increasing number of international co-productions, the British government nonetheless

[3] It is worth noting that even at 30%, the quota led to a spike in independent production. Indeed, Hammer was just one of many small and medium-sized production companies that had emerged, hoping to fulfill the demand created by the Quota Act and its subsequent amendments; though, many independents quickly went out of business due to the harsh economics of independent film production (Chibnall 2007, 1–6).

continued to provide domestic financing policies aimed at discouraging American alternatives. In 1949, for example, the Labor government created the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC), which provided institutional loans to British distribution companies, who could then pass on this capital onto independent production companies (Street 1997, 18). However, NFFC loans typically only funded a portion of a film's production budget, so assistance from other sources, typically international financiers, was often still necessary. Moreover, NFFC loans were rarely repaid in full back to the government because state loan balances were secondary to private investments. Also, even if the principal amount was returned to the state, the NFFC received only a marginal interest payment on top of the principal, rather than an equity share (Barnett 2014, 243). As a result, international financiers from the United States and elsewhere did not need to compete with British institutional investors for a piece of gross profits/equity. Whereas the NFFC only took a small fee in proportion to the loan, American investors earned a percentage of a film's total profit. Like other government quotas and taxes, the NFFC's effort to counter Hollywood was only partially successful, and its success was limited because it did not take equity ownership in its investments. In this political economy, the financial success and autonomy of Hammer, and by extension the U.K. film industry, was limited from the outset.

A New Demand in United States Exhibition

In addition to increased quota requirements, a new demand for independent B pictures in the United States further accelerated Hammer's incentive to mass-produce low-budget pictures in the early 1950s. Indeed, a recent shift in the political economy of the Hollywood studio system manufactured this need for more B pictures from European and independent American producers. For the previous three decades, vertically integrated Hollywood studios had prevented foreign and independent producers from meaningfully entering the U.S. market, as studio moguls completely controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of cinematic products (Street 1997, 8). However, in the aftermath of the consequential *United States v. Paramount Case* in 1948, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling effectively led the Hollywood studios to divest their theater interests and end their block

booking practices[4], both of which significantly weakened their hegemony of U.S. distribution (Davis 2012, 67). With the *Paramount* decision and the end of block booking, the major studios had little incentive to continue producing in-house B films. However, this decrease in B pictures disrupted the equilibrium between the supply and demand for cinematic products in the U.S. and abroad, as B pictures had previously provided many small and medium theaters with the volume necessary to fill up their weekly showtime schedules and ensure sufficient variety, beyond just big-budget A pictures (Davis 2012, 67).

This critical supply gap—estimated to be an annual deficit of 150 films per year for most non-urban U.S. theaters—provided independent producers, both U.S. and non-U.S., with an opportunity to accelerate production and ascertain more distribution/exhibition deals for their films (Davis 2012, 71). As B movie scholar Blair Davis (2012) notes, smaller production companies like Hammer "were seeking deals with several of the major Hollywood studios, using the industry's trend toward obtaining independently made B-movie product to fullest advantage" (97). These commercial developments occurring across the Atlantic thus provided Hammer with an incentive to mass-produce content without overwhelming regard for budget or quality. It also incentivized a weakened Hollywood system to shift its attention to international markets, where it could acquire and invest in these inexpensive films. As illustrated by the production details of *Quatermass, Frankenstein,* and *Dracula* in the following sections*,* American producers and distributors held considerable influence over many production details and retained a considerable portion of each film's total profit, which limited Hammer's long-term success, enterprise value, and cash on hand.

A Political Economy of *Quatermass*

The financing details of *Quatermass* highlight the diverse investment interests that Hammer turned to, in the 1950s, after weak legislative reforms and limited state financing. A variety of eclectic interests, including the BBC, American producer James Lippert, the NFFC, and the U.S. distributor United Artists (UA), all had their hands in financing *Quatermass* and siphoning

[4] Block booking was a popular strategy among the major U.S. studios that forced independent (and international) exhibitors to buy a studio's entire annual output, regardless of quality or local demand. In other words, in order to exhibit the popular "A" pictures, exhibitors also needed to buy the often less popular "B" pictures.

Hammer's potential profitability. Many of these financiers put a financial strain on Hammer and limited its ability to reinvest *Quatermass*'s profits back into the company for future projects.

Before seeking financing and initiating the pre-production process, Hammer had to first acquire the intellectual property rights to *Quatermass*. *Quatermass* was based on a popular BBC television series, *The Quatermass Experiment* (1953), created by writer Nigel Kneale. At that time, Hammer had already turned several BBC radio and television programs into low-budget programmer films (i.e., B films) (Meikle 1996, 2). Recognizing the popularity of the six-episode BBC series, Hammer producer Anthony Hinds quickly negotiated the terms for the *Quatermass* film rights with the BBC (Thompson 1987). Still relatively unknown at the time, Hammer offered the BBC a shockingly generous 50/50 profit split, which the network quickly accepted; this was a much more favorable arrangement than what other mainstream producers were offering the BCC and the other rights holders at the time (Thompson 1987). This arrangement reveals that, before Hammer had even obtained financing, the content rights for *Quatermass* put the company in a vulnerable economic position, in that it was already less likely to turn a profit or be able to reinvest in future projects.

Unable to fully finance its pictures on its own, Hammer typically turned to outside parties for production funding. In the case of *Quatermass* and several other 1950s productions, Hammer turned to the enigmatic American producer Robert Lippert, who was known for producing "twelve-day quickies" and owned several independent American theaters (Meikle 1996, 10–11). According to industry lore, Lippert was also known to operate as an "invisible agent" on behalf of 20th Century Fox and other Hollywood studios (Meikle 1996, 10–11). Steve Chibnall and Brian McFarlane (2009) note how deals like those between Hammer and American financiers "transformed the economics" of B productions in the U.K. (49). Hoping to leverage this relationship with Lippert to get closer to Hollywood studios, Hammer entered into a four-year, multi-picture deal with the American producer in 1951 (Meikle 1996, 11–13). Per the terms of the contract, Lippert would finance a portion of Hammer's productions and find distribution for its films in the United States (Meikle 1996, 12–13). In exchange, Exclusive, Hammer's parent company and distribution arm, would also distribute Lippert's American films in the United Kingdom (Meikle 1996, 12–13). Overall, the terms of this partnership and Lippert's tenuous connection to major Hollywood studios illustrate Hollywood's new backdoor strategies to control global content production and distribution after the damaging effects of the 1948 Paramount

Decrees. Although Chibnall and McFarlane conclude that deals like these increased Hammer's budgets and ultimately improved the production values of its films—at least above those of other independent B productions in the 1950s—this case study suggests that the deals with Lippert and others were hardly beneficial for Hammer (2009, 49).

In addition to financing *Quatermass*, Lippert also had a say in several aspects of production, including commenting on the film's tone, script, marketing, and casting. First, Lippert and his American partners insisted on the casting of American actor, Brian Donlevy, for the part of the grizzled lead, Professor Bernard Quatermass, even though the character was English and represented a uniquely middle-class English persona in the original television series (Meikle 1996, 13). Although scholars like Pirie and Julian Petley point out how Hammer films often reflected domestic middle-class struggles, Hutchings (1993) observes that, in this case, Donlevy's performance as a "bullying authority figure" and his American accent made Professor Quatermass "cosmopolitan" and "classless" in the film adaptation (49). Meikle also notes how Hollywood scriptwriter Richard Landau "Americanized" several of the character names during the pre-production process (1996, 21). In addition to these casting choices, *Quatermass*'s narrative is also "relentlessly *noir* in ... tone" and thereby reflective of Hollywood genre constructions (Meikle 1996, 13). In several scenes in *Quatermass*, the sets are draped in expressionist, low-contrast lighting, with characters lurking in alleyways or dimly lit streets; these elements embodied 1940s Hollywood film noir—a genre cycle popular in post-war America. This style and tone, coupled with the grizzled American lead who evoked the hardboiled detectives familiar to film noir, foreground Lippert's Americanized input and perhaps his desire to consider what type of content would appeal to non-U.K. markets—namely, the United States.

Additionally, the *Quatermass* television narrative was reworked to fit into the needs of U.S. and U.K. exhibition practices. After Landau's pass on the screenplay, director Val Guest further revised the script and reduced much of the exposition to provide the film with a compact narrative and a runtime short enough so it could play alongside other American B movies on a double-bill (Meikle 1996, 22). Therefore, the film's creators seemingly put more thought into the film's U.S. distribution and audience than that of its U.K. release. However, despite the valuable funding that these Hollywood stakeholders provided, Hammer producers openly disliked the American control over *Quatermass* (Meikle 1996, 15); this insinuates that perhaps Hammer producers did not fully anticipate the extent to which their American

partners would control the film at a textual level. Examining the horror production company Amicus, Peter Hutchings (2002) rightly points out that industrial factors like these complicate our understanding of British horror as a "discrete national object" (133).

Overall, Hammer's co-financing agreements with Hollywood stakeholders and this mix of American/English genres/tastes seemingly made the studio's post-war filmography distinct from other "quota quickies" during the period. Steve Chibnall (2007) documents how quota quickies have been met with ire and neglect in both industrial and academic discourses. Indeed, American financing and distribution behind many of these quota quickies have made them easier to dismiss in cultural histories of British cinema. Chibnall counters that these dismissals of B pictures and quota quickies belie the fact that the films were made by British producers for British audiences. In fact, according to Chibnall, these films offered the opportunity to engage directly with uniquely British concerns. As this case study on *Quatermass* suggests, however, much of Hammer's output, particularly in the 1950s, did not fall into this category. If anything, the mix of British and American involvement made Hammer pictures an ambivalent combination of American and British tastes and genre traditions.

In terms of U.S. distribution, Lippert initially wanted Columbia Pictures to distribute *Quatermass*, but the film was too similar to Columbia's contemporaneous "monster vehicle" *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (Robert Gordon, 1955), so the Columbia passed (Meikle 1996, 28). After some back and forth, United Artists eventually agreed to pick up the film in exchange for a flat $125,000 distribution fee, presumably taken off the top of gross receipts (Meikle 1996, 28). This high fee represented UA's lack of confidence in the film. Indeed, UA's decision to take a significant upfront fee to distribute *Quatermass,* rather than taking a larger portion of the back-end profits, suggests that the studio did not believe the project would break even. Though this goes unacknowledged by Hammer producers, investors, and historians, it is possible that United Artists agreed to distribute the film only as a favor to Lippert, who wanted to please Exclusive/Hammer, the company responsible for distributing his films in a key market: the U.K. If United Artists had truly believed the film was going to be successful, it would have requested the more advantageous option: a box office split, which would have provided the studio with significant upside if the film were successful (which it was) (Meikle 1996, 28).

After the completion of the film, United Artists also changed the film's U.S. title to *The Creeping Unknown* in order to appeal to a growing U.S. teen

audience that was demanding more monster pictures (Meikle 1996, 28). Indeed, American audiences were ultimately drawn to the film—it was hugely successful in the United States—because of these horror elements, not necessarily its noir or sci-fi elements (Thompson 1987). This demonstrates, on the one hand, how *Quatermass's* success and its place in the cultural memory were not exclusively tied to British culture and, on the other hand, how the success of the film was by no means the result of a highly calculated plan on the part of Hammer producers. At first, the company was simply trying to capitalize on the popularity of the eponymous BBC television series in the U.K. and later on the mainstream success of American monster/sci-fi films like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) and *Devil Girl from Mars* (David MacDonald, 1954). Instead of yielding a calculated success that foretold the company's future as a lush horror production house, Hammer's rapid four-week production schedule and mass production techniques provided it with an opportunity to create enough B pictures, such that at least one would align with the interests of a particular audience or a popular trend. Although largely known today for its splashy Gothic pictures, Hammer produced and distributed many other films that spanned an eclectic array of genres, including sci-fi, comedy, detective, drama, war, and "pre-historic" films. Moreover, the fact that *Quatermass* was put on a double-bill with the French heist noir *Rififi* (Jules Dassin, 1955) in the U.K., and then with the independent horror film *The Black Sleep* (Reginald Le Borg, 1956) in the U.S., points to the ambivalent genre strategies of Hammer and its distributors in the mid-1950s (Meikle 1996, 315). Therefore, the success of *Quatermass* did not necessarily indicate that Hammer was intentionally tapping

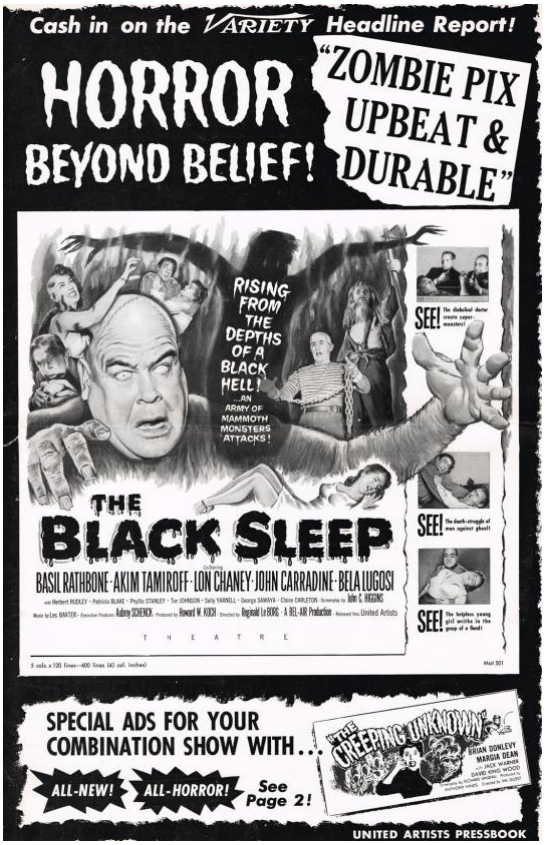

Figure 1: 1955 ad for the double-bill of *The Black Sheep* and *The Creeping Unknown* (the U.S. title for *The Quatermass Xperiment*) (United Artists Pressbook)

into some popular genre trend. Regardless of whether it was individual genius or happenstance, *Quatermass* nonetheless did indicate to Hammer's producers that this brand of horror was both marketable and popular, which provided the studio with enough incentive to continue applying its past Fordian logic to a smattering of future horror projects.

Many, including Hammer's founders and producers, have identified *Quatermass* as the production company's clear transition into horror after an eclectic output of quota quickies in the 1940s and 1950s. Senior producer Michael Carreras even noted, "the film that must take all the credit for the whole Hammer series of horror films was really *The Quatermass Experiment*" (Meikle 1996, 1). However, the overlapping generic tones found in *Quatermass* and Hammer's other films in the 1950s contradict Carreras's simple assessment. Although there were certainly horror semantic elements in *Quatermass*, such as eerie musical leitmotifs and an amorphic monster villain, the film also contains sci-fi semantic elements, such as space travel, aliens, and advanced technologies, not to mention noir elements, such as a grizzled detective, gritty nighttime cinematography, and what Meikle calls a noir-esque "dark psychology" (1996, 13). This lack of generic identity reflects Hammer's ambivalent economic logic in the 1950s: mass produce as many quota quickies as possible to take advantage of an open U.S. market and ensure Exclusive hit its domestic quota requirements. The multiplicity of genres in *Quatermass* also suggests that Hammer producers wanted to keep their options open and follow whatever cultural trend was popular. As the horror elements in *Quatermass* were largely incidental, the tendency to position it as Hammer's complete transition into horror ignores the political economy of the production company in the 1950s and the involvement of American and British writers, directors, and producers. This is further supported by the fact that producers were, surprisingly, hesitant to make *The Curse of Frankenstein* when they first read the script (shortly after *Quatermass*'s release) due to what they perceived as "poor writing" and their general aversion to the Gothic subject matter (Thompson 1987). It is unclear why, if the horror elements of *Quatermass* were as popular as Hammer's producers had claimed, a film like *Frankenstein* was not an automatic green light. Considering Hammer's production strategies during this period, the subsequent financial success of *Frankenstein* was likely circumstantial and another bit of stray luck amid Hammer's eclectic mix of quota quickies after World War II.

Continued American Influence: *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula*

It may be tempting to mark *The Curse of Frankenstein* or *Dracula* as Hammer's full transition into horror or to historicize these films as inevitable or part of a conscious effort to transition into lush Gothic adaptations. However, this assessment is reductive and reflects a desire in media historiography to celebrate "visionary" artistic creations in order to provide an institution with a unique identity; in reality, Hammer's foray into horror was part of a multilayered production process amidst a diverse post-war filmography that included thrillers, comedies, and dramas, rather than an all-out conscious revolution of the company. With an eclectic output of four to seven films annually, Hammer had hoped that its films would make just enough money to cover production costs, with maybe even a little bit left over to partially finance the next film. In other words, the studio had no clear long-term strategy. Indeed, even *Dracula* operates under the same assembly-line logic of past quota quickies and, more importantly, is paradigmatic of how foreign stakeholders influenced Hammer content. Both of these factors problematize the oversimplified arguments that Hammer's horror success was predestined after "this" or "that" film.

Similar to *Quatermass*, *Dracula* relied on American investors, who influenced the film's content and ultimately hoarded its profits. At the end of its four-year agreement with Lippert, Hammer turned to another American producer, Eliot Hyman, who was considered "the most significant of Hammer's silent partners" and, similar to Lippert, served as the middleman between Hammer and Hollywood studios (Barnett 2014, 234). In the case of *Dracula*, Hyman funded approximately half of the film's production budget through his company, Seven Arts, while Hammer needed to self-finance the other half (Barnett 2014, 238). Revealing the tenuous financial condition of Hammer at the time, Barnett claims that Hammer's budgetary contribution to *Dracula* was provided by the NFFC (2014, 237). Absent from the financing of the film was Universal, who would later distribute the film in the United States. Hedging its bets, Universal refused to provide upfront financing for *Dracula* and did not sign a distribution contract until *after* the film was completed (Barnett 2014, 237–241). Therefore, as Hammer would have still needed to court the studio during production, Universal's delayed involvement forced Hammer producers to develop a product that simultaneously appealed to American audiences, Universal executives, Hyman, and British audiences. Also, even though Hyman, Hammer, and the NFFC absorbed the majority of the risk in financing *Dracula*, Universal was still positioned to profit the most.

According to a U.S. distribution contract for *Dracula*, Universal recouped its distribution costs first, and then profits were split among Hyman, Universal, and Hammer (Barnett 2014, 242). This, effectively, put all of the risk on Hammer and provided Universal with most of the upside. Moreover, the NFFC, and thereby U.K. taxpayers, were in a far less advantageous financial position, as the NFFC "did not ... receive a percentage of the box-office for providing finance" and instead only "receive[d] interest … in the region of 4% or 5%" (Barnett 2014, 243). Therefore, the political economy of *Dracula*'s financing suggests that hegemonic American stakeholders not only influenced Hammer's production but also benefited financially at the expense of other parties.

Although *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula* did not rely on the BBC's intellectual property as Hammer had for *Quatermass*, Hammer still needed to consider Universal's original adaptations of *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) and *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and alter their content just enough to avoid copyright claims from the studio. Although seemingly stifling, this aversion to copyright litigation provided Hammer with an idiosyncratic approach to the underlying intellectual property, which allowed Hammer to pursue its famous "house style" that was strikingly different from the original Universal adaptations. For Hammer, necessity was the mother of invention. Whether through the distinct look of Frankenstein's monster in *Frankenstein*, which departs from the hulking monster of Universal's incarnations, or the debonair English Count in *Dracula*, which departs from Bela Lugosi's portly "foreign" Dracula (or the very fact that these films were in color and featured vibrant production designs), Hammer found its artistic originality largely *because of* this economic and legal restriction, not in spite of it. Despite these departures from the Universal originals, Hutchings (2002) points out that Hammer was not only "heavily dependent on American financing throughout the 1950s and most of the 1960s" but also that "the Hammer film-makers took as much inspiration from 1930s and 1940s American horror as they did from more obviously British sources" (133). While both of these Gothic films are closely analyzed for their distinctly British connotations, the threat of suit from Universal and the inspiration taken from the original adaptations, at least in part, led to the artistry and idiosyncratic style that late-1950s Hammer became known for. Therefore, just as cultural trends and social allegories can illuminate a film's textual elements, industrial considerations can elucidate the artistic meaning and aesthetics within a particular text.

Conclusion

Although Hammer was somewhat the product of British culture and domestic social trends, the financing details and political economy of its productions suggest that its post-war output cannot be separated from American industrial influence and various economic circumstances. In the immediate post-war years, constantly changing cinematic regulation reflected not only American manipulation of British policies but also how the U.K. government unintentionally led independent producers to turn to international financiers to meet their domestic quota requirements. Furthermore, the production details of *The Quatermass Xperiment* foreground how American producers influenced the narratives, casting, and generic tones of Hammer's output. The details of *Quatermass* also indicate that Hammer never had a genuine opportunity to turn a profit or pursue a long-term business strategy, as foreign influences strong-armed the company into accepting unfavorable contractual terms. *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* further reflect this hegemonic capture and suggest that Hammer's unique house style may have come from an American industrial factor: an aversion to copyright litigation. The intention of this analysis is not to recontextualize a distinct national cinema through a reductive or strictly American framework; rather, it is to identify the unequal, and at times unseen, power relationships between two national cinemas—in this case, between a hegemonic Hollywood system and a recovering post-war U.K. cinema. Even though Hollywood was not necessarily in active opposition to British cinema in a political sense, its commercial logic and calcified economic structures ambivalently restricted the financial and artistic autonomy of independent producers.

Furthermore, the findings in this paper suggest that media industries scholarship should turn to the fine print of distribution contacts and legal agreements to see who truly *owns* a particular production, as this is where true wealth creation, autonomy, and/or resistance to hegemonic entities can be found. Often, artistry and the "visionary" status of writers and directors like Val Guest or of Hammer's other producers are used to pull genres like horror above their discursively "low" status in generic taste hierarchies. However, these types of perspectives elide the banal realities of film development, financing, and productions, not to mention the multiplicity of unseen financial stakeholders and craftspeople that contribute to a film's final output.

When speaking of mid-century British cinema, David Pirie (1973) claims that horror is "the only staple cinematic myth which Britain can properly claim as its own" (9). Pirie's claim suggests that U.K. horror is

connected to a uniquely British experience. Although ideological, social, and historical investigations are undoubtedly valid and deftly deconstruct the complexity of American/British hybridities, these analyses should also be contextualized within industrial lenses and, in this case, informed by the specific terms of transnational financing. In the case of Hammer in the 1950s, an industrial framework can unravel the true story of Hammer's post-war years and trace the multiplicity of financial entities that may have influenced its output and perhaps even helped create its legendary "style."

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FEATURE INTERVIEW

The Hybrid Influences of *Strangeland*

Talking Horror, Mythology, Game Design and Aesthetics

with Writer and Game Developer Mark Yohalem and Artist Victor Pflug

Jeffery Klaehn

This article presents an interview with writer and game developer Mark Yohalem (b. 1980) discussing horror and mythology in relation to *Strangeland,* a psychological horror game released in 2021 from Wormwood Studios in which players explore the haunted mindscape of a man consumed by self-loathing and grief. Thematic, aesthetic, cultural and production-related frameworks are explored, in addition to the topic of games and metacognition. Mythology, as well as works by Ray Bradbury, Francisco Goya, and Franz von Stuck are discussed, all within the context of the macabre. The article then presents an interview with artist Victor Pflug (b. 1982) who cites the 1967 British television series *The Prisoner* as an influence on his work for *Strangeland* and shares his thoughts and reflections on *Strangeland*'s art and sound design, *Twin Peaks*, H.R. Giger and other horror and dark fantasy inspirations and influences. The article concludes with a discussion with Mark Yohalem about *Strangeland,* horror and games within the context of perceptions and empathy.

I. Talking *Strangeland,* Mythology, Art and Horror with Mark Yohalem

Introduction

Mark Yohalem co-founded Wormwood Studios with two friends, artist Victor Pflug and programmer James Spanos. In 2012, they released *Primordia*, which has sold over a quarter-million copies and was, for years, the highest-rated adventure game on Steam. In 2021 they released *Strangeland,* a psychological horror game in which players explore the haunted mindscape of a man consumed by self-loathing and grief. In addition to his own projects, Mark has worked as a senior writer/designer for Bioware, inXile Entertainment, TimeGate Studios, and other companies. By day, he is a lawyer, and was rated

one of the Top 40 Attorneys Under 40 in California. This interview was conducted via Google Docs in June 2021.

JEFFERY KLAEHN: Please tell me about *Strangeland.*

MARK YOHALEM: *Strangeland* is a horror adventure game. Unlike *Primordia*, which presents a fairly traditional hero's journey, *Strangeland* is an inward-looking story in which you explore someone's memories and feelings through the surreal, nightmarish carnival that is his grieving mind. En route to self-awareness, the player will need to conjure the spirits of the dead, feed a ten-legged teratoma, ride a cicada into the abyss, bring a hideous Feejee Mermaid her name, and do battle with a massive crab made of black lightning. You know, the usual Tuesday.

JK: How did you approach theme, story, and gameplay elements, with a view toward players and how they experience the game?

Mark Yohalem: We began with horror. Horror is an incredibly powerful genre for shaking us from our conventional moorings and sweeping us into dark, deep waters that we would rather not think about. *Strangeland* uses the dislocation of horror to open the player up to themes of loss, love, loneliness, self-doubt (even self-loathing), and redemption. These are universal feelings, but the game takes you on a surreal journey through a very particular and personal manifestation of them.

JK: Can you elaborate on what you mean by "universal" versus "particular"?

Mark Yohalem: For instance, I think everyone knows the feeling of groping through the darkness, only to have a moment of lucidity in which bright new vistas open to us and we are transformed by joy. (Quite often in horror this might come from bursting out of a tunnel into the light of day, or making it through a harrowing night and seeing the dawn break over the horizon.) The use of a *cicada* as a metaphor for that moment, however, is particular and comes from my own childhood experience with the 17-year cyclical Brood X, now conveniently resurging.

Likewise, everyone has felt that kind of powerlessness when you know exactly where you need to go, but somehow can't get in (or get out). In nightmares, this

often takes the form of sleep paralysis. *Strangeland* uses the more idiosyncratic metaphor of needing to cut your way into a circus tent but only having a dull knife that can't slash the canvas.

For a final example, everyone hears the voice of self-doubt in his or her head from time to time, but the specific words used by the *Strangeland* antagonist who calls you on the phone are particular to what I have heard (over and over again) in my own head.

So when we say that these feelings are universal, we don't mean that the yearning the Stranger [*Strangeland*'s self-hating protagonist] feels for the Woman [an image of his lost love] represents how everyone experiences loving, being loved, losing, and being lost. What we mean is that all of us have lights in our lives that help us through the darkness, and when those lights go out, we all can fall into terrible pits of despair and horror. Our *particular* story about grief and redemption will, I hope, connect with others (with their own particular stories) and help them feel less alone.

JK: Empathy and connection?

Mark Yohalem: Every game connects with players somehow. With *Strangeland*, I wanted to forge a kinship of hope in the face of horror and despair, precisely because such kinship would give *me* hope in the face of horror and despair. *Strangeland* is autobiographical in various ways (not the specific loss it involves, though), and I wanted to say: "This is my darkness; this is my light; and this is the peace I hope I would ultimately find if I thought that light had gone out." When players find a connection with that message, it affirms my own hope.

JK: The game includes commentary and annotation features. Why was it important for you to include this information within the game, to make it available for players?

Mark Yohalem: The game is about exploring a disturbed psyche that has been imprinted with certain patterns, images, and metaphors. That psyche is basically mine (at least as far as the narrative goes, Vic mixed his own psyche with the audiovisual elements). There's no reason why any particular player would share my specific interests in Goya, Shakespeare, [the fantasy video game] *Planescape: Torment* [1999], my great-aunt's poetry, *Being John Malkovich* [1999], T.S. Eliot, *The Great Dictator* [1940, Charles Chaplin], Norse mythology, etymology,

Ecclesiastes, Bradburian carnivals, deranged starfish… etc. So I thought it would be nice to provide annotations for the myriad references from which the game is woven. Dante got Virgil as his tour guide through hell; sadly, the best we can offer as your tour guide through the hellscape of our team's darkest thoughts are our own annotations and comments.

JK: For those reading this who may have yet to play the game, can you give one or two examples from the commentary on how elements of the game converge with horror?

Figure 1: The Feejee Mermaid as envisioned by P.T. Barnum

Mark Yohalem: For instance, while there is nothing incongruous about a Feejee Mermaid (Figures 1 and 2) in a carnival, there's a commentary track that explains how her particular body horror fits within the game's larger themes. When I was a boy, we visited the father of a friend who had been afflicted by leukemia, underwent drastic chemotherapy, suffered a stroke, and lost his marriage in the midst of this. He had been my baseball coach, and our two families spent a lot of time together. But cancer and its treatment had robbed him of his strength and clarity of thought, the stroke had impaired his ability to eat and speak, the chemotherapy had taken all of his hair (including his eyebrows), and the agony and despair and rage had destroyed his marriage. Nothing could be more terrifying: an evil that is *lurking in your bones*, strong enough to

Figure 2: The Feejee Mermaid as incarnated in *Strangeland*

dehumanize and destroy the ultimate totem of strength and stability for a child (a father, a coach, etc.).

Another experience I talk about is a moonless night when a friend of mine and I stayed out too late and then tried to take a shortcut home, only to find ourselves hounded by a huge stray dog, and how I used that memory and the metaphor of the black dog of depression to create one of the adversaries you face in the game.

JK: On the achievements of artist Victor Pflug and programmer James Spanos with *Strangeland?*

Mark Yohalem: Inestimable. They say a picture is worth a thousand words; but no words, at least none of mine, could do what Vic's visuals do in a game. Nor can my words do justice to his work here. But it is important to understand that Vic's *audio* work was just as important. Much of the sense of dread, the sense of *space* (sometimes vast, sometimes cramped), the sense of disgust in the game comes from the soundscape, which is astonishing.

And none of this, *none of it*, could have been done without Jim [Spanos]. On a technical level, he achieved things with our engine that no one believed it could do, things that not only made possible Vic's audio and visual brilliance, but also permitted narrative techniques (like the montage sequences) that couldn't be done in *Primordia*. And Jim wasn't just a technowizard. At various times in the project, each of us became a leader, but I would say that Jim became a leader when one was needed most. Finally, he contributed the music in the "good" ending, without which that scene would have much less impact.

JK: Please tell me about the game's influences.

Mark Yohalem: It is nothing *but* influences, but I can rattle off some of the primary ones. From books, I would say [Ray] Bradbury (in particular "The Dwarf" — a very tender, very terrifying story [originally published in 1955 in *The October Country*] that strikes an open nerve for anyone who was ever an ashamed outsider) and [Mervyn] Peake (the very first sentence I wrote about the game was that it should be "Gormenghastian," by which I meant that there should be this gothic setting that is a character of its own). From classic literature, *The Divine Comedy*, Ecclesiastes, and Snorri Sturluson's Norse mythological works. From art, I would say Goya (in particular *Los caprichos* and

his more famous painting "Saturn Devouring His Son") and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (you know, the short film where the eye gets cut open). From poetry, T.S. Elliot's "Hollow Men," Poe's "The Raven," and the works of my own great aunt, Virginia Hardman. From games, probably *Planescape: Torment* and *Psychonauts* (2005) though many players compare *Strangeland* to *Sanitarium* (1998),which is fair enough. From movies, *Being John Malkovich* and *Dark City* (1998).

Figure 3: *Strangeland*

JK: What "horror" was most influential for you, growing up?

Mark Yohalem: Honestly? *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* [Alvin Schwartz, 1981; illustrated by Stephen Gammell]. Man, there was a lot of very dark stuff in that, macabre, unsettling—a sense of the grotesque seething just beneath the skin of the world. Turn the wrong corner, pick the wrong scab, pet the wrong dog, look the wrong way, anything awful could happen. Would happen. But also, when I was too young, I saw an episode of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* TV show (*Freddy's Nightmares* [1988-90]), and that left me shaken for months. Some kinds of horror just plant a seed in the fertile soil of a child's imagination, and from there it grows. It doesn't even need to be a good seed. By the time you're older, it's harder to have the same impact, no matter how good the seed.

JK: Your thoughts on the contemporary relevance of Goya, mythology, and Ray Bradbury?

Mark Yohalem: It seems like Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son" became kind of a meme at some point, so I guess he has some contemporary relevance in that sense. That painting is certainly one of his most powerful (as I mention in the commentary tracks, it is incredible to think it was a mural in Goya's breakfast room or whatever), but I don't particularly like its meme-ification, which somehow reduces a heart-wrenching image of a shameless, omnipotent deity caught in a look of shame and weakness. Goya's works as a whole highlight the grotesqueness all around us—things we get desensitized or willfully blind to. He compels us to empathy even while he compels us to revulsion. At some age, everyone should at least flip through *Los caprichos*.

Turning to Norse mythology (the primary mythology referenced in the game, though the Greeks get some air time), thanks to Marvel movies, video games, and Neil Gaiman, it is more popular than ever—probably more popular, by head-count, than it was when those myths formed the religion of an entire region. I'm not sure this popularized version captures everything in the source material, but popularization never hurts—those who want to learn more easily can. One scholar of Norse mythology said in a lecture I once listened to that the Norse gods were wise enough to see the end of the world, but not wise enough to know how to avert it. That seems more relevant than ever.

As for Bradbury, his relevance seems to have faded a bit (notwithstanding a lovely biography by Sam Weller published in the last decade)[1] since his passing. I think he still has a lot to teach us. Many of his stories struck a deep chord in me, regardless of the time of life in which I read them. In particular, "The Dwarf" [1955] speaks to that experience that I (and I think many outsiders) know very well, when your tormentors find your source of solace and turn it against you.

Despite his vast imagination and deep humanism, Bradbury's vision was limited by the time and place in which he lived, so aspects of his writing may not have "aged well." But I think the core of his writing is the lesson that there is decency and dignity even in those we might be inclined to dismiss as monstrous, and there can be monstrousness hiding behind decorum. The Bradbury of my mind

[1] *The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury* (Harper Perennial, 2006)

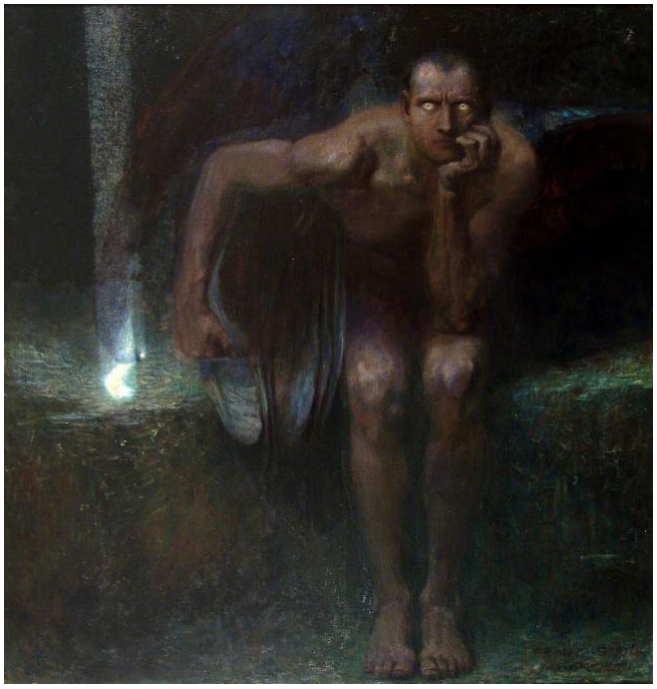
is like T.H. White's Merlin, and I love both those characters very much, even if neither is necessarily real. Like Merlin, this Bradbury of mine is timeless.

JK: Which aspects are you thinking of, in terms of Bradbury being of his time?

Mark Yohalem: Ultimately, what he wants to preserve in Greentown is the best of his own childhood. But I doubt that everyone would have experienced Greentown as an idyll. Bradbury was very progressive, but you can only see so far into the future, and our vision gets worse as we age.

JK: Your thoughts on understanding Goya's art as commentary on hopelessness, strife, pain and social-political conditions of life?

Mark Yohlem: I think Goya reminds us that the abuse of power deforms both the abuser and the abused, but he still manages to see the humanity in people even when we are deformed. I don't know if Goya's works are hopeful, per se, but by preserving the human even in his monsters, there is at least the suggestion that the monsters might preserve the capacity for redemption back to humane conduct. And he makes us see ourselves in these monsters, and recognize our own capacity for monstrousness.



JK: What are your thoughts on Franz von Stuck's "Lucifer" (1890) painting (Figure 4)?

Mark Yohalem: Those eyes! As Milton wrote, "All is not lost; the unconquerable will / And study of revenge, immortal hate, / And courage never to submit or yield: / And what is else not to be overcome?"

Figure 4: *Lucifer* (1890), Franz von Stuck

JK: Your thoughts on von Stuck's "Medusa" (1892) painting (Figure 5)?

Figure 5: *Medusa* (1892), Franz von Stuck

Mark Yohalem: It surely is the moment of Medusa locking eyes with Theseus via his shield, no? Look at the horror in her eyes, the gasp escaping her lips. She realizes that someone has figured it out. The game is up. Compare von Stuck's Medusa to Böcklin's; the exact same idea, but Böcklin's is saggy, gaping; a face that could neither give nor perceive horror. Von Stuck's is dynamic, horrific.

The Medusa myth makes a small appearance in *Strangeland*. What can we take from the fact that Theseus can look at her reflection and not die? That a reflection doesn't show us everything. Medusa likewise can look at her own reflection (the video game-y mirror-to-kill Medusa trope makes no sense); but she can never see herself through another's eyes. She has no sense of how she is perceived. Early myths made her wholly monstrous; later myths suggested she was beautiful; but either way, Medusa couldn't know. But then in that fateful fight with Theseus, they meet eyes in the mirror. She sees his fear and fearful determination to kill her. She gasps. The sword swings.

We could do a whole interview on how it is that Pegasus wriggles himself from her severed neck as if it were a birth canal, but it seems to me that this winged white wonder emerging from a monster's ruptured flesh surely must have had

its genesis in the life cycle of the cicada, a life cycle the Greeks took very seriously.

JK: What do you feel are some of the most frightening stories or horrific ideas from mythology? The story of Orpheus and Eurydice would be on my list. Sisyphus also. I feel that myth can be read as a parable about inequalities, including but not limited to class, race and gender, still so relevant now, to contemporary society, as they have been experienced and felt throughout history.

Mark Yohalem: Prometheus. He is the one genuine good guy of Greek mythology, and he winds up in an exquisite torture, rivaled only by Loki's fate in the Norse mythos.

Also, the small story of Demophon, the baby who Demeter, when mourning the loss of her daughter to Hades, tries to make immortal by putting him in a fire. The goddess is disguised as an old woman hired as a nursemaid. Demophon's mother catches Demeter and thinks she's trying to kill the baby, so she stops the ritual, and Demeter is enraged. In some versions, the baby then burns alive, in others, Demophon lives on as a hero but ultimately falls, undone by the bungling of his immortalization. Either way, the story has such a strange, uncertain moral—in effect, that a parent's instinctive desire to protect a child can prove the child's undoing. But the circumstances are so extreme that the moral seems to be, "You will never know whether what you are doing will save your child or doom it. Good luck."

JK: In contrast to horrific themes of futility, absurdity, suffering, and powerlessness, fate, what about agency, heroism, happiness, empowerment or beauty? What's the first image or metaphor that perhaps comes to mind for you that inspires feelings of joy, or serenity, when thinking of mythology?

Mark Yohalem: Athena. Of all the mythological gods, is there any other you would rather have proud of you? There are a thousand moments in the myths where Athena is remarkable, but the most remarkable to me comes at the end of the *Odyssey*. Athena watches to see if Odysseus still wants the woman who has waited for him all these long years. Remember, Calypso has already baited him with the fact that she, a nymph, is far comelier than the old wife waiting back home. And unlike the unbreakably faithful Penelope, Odysseus has a

roving eye (among other body parts). Odysseus passes the test. So what does Athena do? For that first night together, she lays a glamour on Odysseus, so he is again the man who Penelope was waiting for, the Odysseus of two decades past, not the seaworn, grizzled vagabond he has become. And she lays a glamour on Penelope, so she is again the wife that Odyseuss left behind. She permits them that night, one night, of rewinding time and slaking their physical yearning on their tree-rooted marital bed.

Athena. The Industrious. The Tireless. She Who Fights at the Front. Bright-Eyed. The inventor of the bridle and the wagon. Master weaver. Wise warrior. The shipwright. Patron of heroic endeavor. Symbol of democracy and learning. What more could you want? Amidst all the cruelty, rape, violence, pettiness, debauchery, and megalomania, there stands Athena with her aegis. The other Greek gods are, I guess, a reasonable projection of a human-like being who simply advanced up the mountain of power to a peak beyond the clouds—the Greeks knew plenty about tyrants and plutocrats and the like. But Athena seems not a projection or prediction of what an even-more-powerful tyrant would be; she is an idealization of what the powerful ought to aspire to.

Perhaps Athena would have liked adventure games, where you overcome your foes through outlandish cleverness, not brute force. Maybe she is proud of *Strangeland*, then.

II. Talking *Strangeland*'s Influences with Victor Pflug, from Surrealist Art to *The Prisoner* and *Twin Peaks*

Introduction

Victor Pflug is Wormwood Studios' lead concept artist and art director, and is an artist in numerous media, ranging from large-scale murals to ornate miniature metalworking, from portraiture to pixel art. In music, he is an accomplished circuit-bender and synth composer, as well as a hip-hop performer. In addition to *Primordia* and *Strangeland*, he has worked on numerous other games, some experimental and some traditional adventures. He cites the 1967 British television series *The Prisoner* as an influence on *Strangeland* and herein shares his thoughts and reflections on *Strangeland*'s art and sound design, and horror and dark fantasy influences—David Lynch and *Twin Peaks,* Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Brian Froud, and Swiss artist Hans Ruedi Giger among them.

Figure 6: *Strangeland*

JK: Please tell me about your contributions to *Strangeland*, and about how you approached your art for the game? Also please discuss any influences, anything you might like to touch upon and share.

VICTOR PFLUG [Vic]: *Strangeland,* unlike our first game *Primordia,* began solely as an idea of Mark's, so while I was for a large part painting a world he had initially conceived of, I thankfully got to call a lot of the shots conceptually. I also got to inject a lot of the surreality and macabre imagery I didn't get a chance to let loose in *Primordia,* which was very satisfying, even if my work in *Strangeland* did get censored from time to time, hehe.

Games like Cyberdream's *Dark Seed* (1992) and also titles like *Sanitarium* and *Weird Dreams* (1988) on C64 [Commodore 64] informed a lot of my artistic (and soundscape) decisions in *Strangeland.* From my end, I wanted to make a game like *Dark Seed,* but better. More atmospheric, darker, more disturbing. I really did set out visually and auditorily to create something that might become more than a sum of its parts, and really create a moody atmosphere of surreal gloom and forgotten mystery. But hopefully with an odd playfulness at times, too.

My approaches to the art and sound were very much like one would approach painting a landscape with oil paint. I began with very simple, rather drab daubs of landscape and soundscape in the first year or two of production, and then later on, once themes had become fully developed, I started to introduce some colour, and melody. That was definitely the fun part, the highlights; the vivid

purples and mauve clouds, the punchy reverberating drums and chittering sound glitches, that all got added later on in the process.

JK: With *Strangeland,* can you please share details on what was censored and why?

Vic: Oh I just grumble when Mark says my psycho-sexual imagery is too overt. So I used a lot of 19th century medical illustrations as reference for the vision scenes in *Strangeland.* Very, very, gruesome stuff, but beautiful, in a way, too. I think it was my image of crustaceans replacing a foetus in the image of a haphazard birth autopsy where he drew the line. I mean, fair enough. I snuck it into the credits though.

JK: What does surreal horror mean for you?

Vic: To me surreal horror means something, an image or a sound, perhaps a few words - that conjures up an instantaneous feeling of dread. The feeling that things are off kilter in the worst way possible. I've always been fascinated with the imagery of fear too ... . I like to think of it in terms of the origins of humankind. When the Earth was not all mapped out and catalogued. Where the dark *could* contain the unspeakable. The kind of primordial images of fear that tickle the same spots as those dark strange nights must have, in prehistory. I think we make horror because we miss that fear. We need it to help us grow.

JK: In what ways do you feel *The Prisoner* remains relevant still today?

Vic: *The Prisoner* remains an incredibly sophisticated, intriguing and succinctly put together as it was when it was made, in 1967. It was far, far ahead of its time then … I love how surreal and yet clever and grounded it is at the same time, much like *Twin Peaks* is, in my opinion. I feel like those two shows set a lot of the groundwork for modern television, but don't often get the recognition or inspirational research they deserve.

I fully admit to "borrowing" the basic concept of our Dark Thing from *The Prisoner*'s Rover design. Although to be fair, the Rover is just a large white balloon.

JK: What about horror and dark fantasy resonates with you, as a person and as an artist and creative?

Vic: David Lynch and specifically *Twin Peaks* I feel always resonated very much with me. I hope some of that bleeds over into my work. I think I love *Dark Seed II* simply because the author of that game was also a *Twin Peaks* fan. Brian Froud, Max Ernst and Giger have always been very big inspirations for me. Also Dali. Especially the late, great Josh Kirby, whom some of you may know as the original illustrator for the *Discworld* novels, but he also did some very dark and quite racy work too, like *Voyage of the Ayeguy* and his early fantasy novel cover art work.

JK: For those reading this who may be as of yet unfamiliar with the work of Brian Froud [e.g., *The Dark Crystal*], Max Ernst, and Josh Kirby, what draws you to their work? What do you find especially inspiring in terms of horror and the macabre?

Vic: I think one thing all these artists have in common, probably at least threefold, is unique vision, technical skills to back that up, and, first and foremost, I think, is world-building. Brian Froud's "Goblins" and "Faeries" books are not only incredible compendiums of fine watercolour illustration but also complete worlds unto themselves. Ernst's 'Une Semaine de Bonte' takes industrial age lithographs and splices bird and human, with a little BDSM thrown in for good measure, into a landscape of weirdness. Kirby's 'Voyage of the Ayeguy'stands alone. It's hard to describe - they say a picture is worth a thousand words, that's not true in Josh Kirby's case. His masterpiece space opera oil canvases have landscapes and denizens so wildly detailed and flamboyant, they speak volumes in every square inch.

JK: For you, what are some of the most disturbing elements of *Strangeland?*

Vic: To me, it's Mark's writing. Some of the cutscenes never fail to send shivers down my spine. I think my work on the game is creepy, but taken alone they're just macabre images. They can tell a story on their own but you have to look for it or be open to it. When Mark writes a scene, I'm just putting together the mechanics to make it happen usually, and the results I think are much more impressive than just one of my still pieces. I suppose that's why I got into game art over just painting in the first place though.

III. Conclusion: Talking Games, Emotion, Empathy and Horror with Mark Yohalem

JK: Did any other games influence *Strangeland?*

MARK YOHALEM: Too many to count. I'll never exorcise *Planescape: Torment*'s influence, or the influence of the many adventure games I've loved over the years.

JK: The word "love" appears in the Wormwood Studios "Credo" on the game's Steam page, in your post on the "Developer-Player Relationship," and in many of your responses to fans (see Yohalem, 2021). How does love fit with games? With horror?

Mark Yohalem: I think we tend to be overly careful about using the word "love"—popular culture has made it almost a taboo, such that, for instance, the moment a character uses the word in a movie is some watershed. As a consequence, too many people feel unloved, or underloved, and that produces a protective mechanism of becoming jaded, sarcastic, and closed-off, which feeds a vicious cycle.

I've been blessed by watching my daughters grow for over a decade. Children certainly seem to understand what love is; maybe the time we get the most love directed our way is when we are children, after all. And they express their love without reservation. They love us. They love each other. They love candy. They loved *Wild Kratts* and Legos until they loved *Harry Potter* and karate until they loved *Survivor* and soccer, etc., etc. They love animals. They love their friends. Colors. Places. And not for a minute did this unbridled expression of love cheapen their loving sentiments toward the things that "really matter." It's just, they let themselves love all sorts of things, and *admit* that love.

Of course, Corinthians teaches there is a time to stop thinking like a child and talking like a child, and that's true. But the same book tells us that *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. I don't cite this as a doctrine of faith, but as an expression of poetic wisdom that has stood the long test of time: we need to develop maturity, but grace lies in finding a way to do that without closing our hearts to love.

Games have an incredible capacity to evoke powerful feelings in players: thrills, fears, camaraderie, determination, etc. In making *Strangeland*, and in talking about it, I've tried to tie those feelings to deeper emotions that we sometimes are less comfortable talking about. Like I said earlier, one of the great things

about horror is that it can jolt us out of our normal comfort zone—horror is taboo-breaking. Here, the taboo is not against something unpleasant, but against something wonderful: opening your heart to others.

Figure 7: *Strangeland*

JK: I feel games can inspire players to think about different approaches and ways of progressing within games, can inspire thinking about potentiality, creative ways of resolving problems and even, more broadly, inspiring players to think in new ways, to learn, not strictly in terms of mechanics but also in relation to empathy, seeing and feeling, in response to art and narrative. And as a writer and game developer, what are your thoughts on the possibilities games offer in relation to other media, especially in relation to horror?

Mark Yohalem: As I wrote on *Strangeland*'s Steam page, I think horror is a guide and a light, maybe a kind of will-o-wisp that can lead us into the terrifying darkness inside of us, then help us emerge out of it with greater self-knowledge and even self-forgiveness. (I realize this is now, what, the third metaphor I've mixed into what horror is? The fourth?) Because the player in a game is always going on a journey, and becomes immersed in that journey, the *agent* of it and not merely the audience to it, this impact can be especially powerful. While I often found catharsis in shooting games like *Left 4 Dead* (2008), I think there is also capacity for games (particularly adventure games) to offer something more

to players—symbols and frameworks that can enhance our understanding of ourselves.

The relationship between horror (which can make us more emotionally open and unsettled) and gaming (where we can try on new roles and become immersed in them) creates the possibility for epiphanies. For instance, *Psychonauts* presents as a slapstick children's cartoon, but I think it's a sophisticated horror game about psychosis and pain, and it is hard to emerge from it without greater empathy.

JK: Why do you think horror continues to enjoy popularity, both as a genre, in literature, cinema, television and games, and in terms of resonance and meaning, with audiences?

Mark Yohalem: There is the Lovecraft cliché that fear [of the unknown] is the oldest and strongest emotion. I don't know if that's true, but I think horror will always be with us. The Greeks taught that our very efforts to impose control over the things we fear simply hastens us toward our doom. All of human history is an effort to control primordial horrors, but our "war to end all wars" yielded a hecatomb like no other, our green revolution against famine created the specter of an unnaturally brittle food supply, and our miracle cures have bred prodigiously resistant diseases. I truly believe our striving is noble and has generally made the world a better place, but the lesson here is that we cannot conquer the things we fear; they are protean and eternal; hubris summons nemesis. So we will never be free of these terrors.

That means we need horror. Horror is a way of manifesting our primordial dreads (including the fear of powerlessness and loss of control) in forms that we can wrestle with. Just as nightmares help us process fears while we're asleep, horror helps us process those fears while we're awake. As long as life is a chaotic mess that resolves only in death, we will turn to horror to help us survive.

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To Abort, Vomit, or Faint

(*Avorter, vomir, ou s'évanouir*)[1]

Agnès Pierron

Translated from the French by Charlie Ellbé

Three verbs[2] in which the feminine "v" takes its form, a "v" bound not only to gender but also to victory. They express the very special effects of the Grand-Guignol in its best moments.

One of José de Bérys'[3] neighbours, was fond of noting: "Every time I am pregnant, I go to the Grand-Guignol." This cryptic remark left her audience perplexed. Unconsciously, this extreme spectator was joining her sisters of the Antiquity, who spontaneously aborted[4] at the at the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus (460 years before our era).

To abort out of terror or to vomit out of disgust. Denise Dax[5], the last victim of what was known as the *Theatre de l'impasse Chaptal*,[6] and one of Eddie Ghilain's[7] most privileged performers (along with Germaine Duclos) testifies: "Women in the audience would throw up when the tips of my breasts were cut off." When I was at the Conservatoire de Nancy in the mid-'70s, I did not suspect that my drama teacher, Suzanne Fleurant—and here I take the opportunity to evoke the memory of this lovely woman, who only knew how to give instructions by smiling—also had had the tips of her breasts cut off. It

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Agnès Pierron is a linguist and historian of the performing arts, and the international specialist on the Grand-Guignol. She edited *Le Grand Guignol : Le Théâtre des peurs de la Belle Époque* (*The Grand Guignol: The Theatre of Fears of the Belle Époque*) (Laffont, 1995), and wrote *Les Nuits Blanches du Grand-Guignol* (*White Nights of the Grand Guignol*) (Seuil, 2002), as well as *Maxa, la femme la plus assassinée du monde* (*Maxa, the most assassinated woman in the world*) (L'entretmps, 2011). She is also the author of several reference works including *Le Dictionnaire de la langue du théâtre* (*The Dictionary of the Language of the Theatre*) (Le Robert, 2002) which won her the Critics' Prize in France.

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is coincidentally through a picture reprinted in a program found in a flea market that I found out. She who would only refer to the Odéon Theatre and to the sweet Bussang Theatre, sitting in the middle of silver firs in a quiet area, had had her breasts cut off on the Pigalle stage, as if she was a new Agatha of Sicily.[8]

The sight of dripping blood turns the stomachs of the audience, makes their eyes roll back in their heads, and faint. But do they faint because the sight is unbearable or because their pleasure is too great? Do they faint because they cannot continue to watch or because the pleasure of watching would be too great? In any case, director Max Maurey—owner of the space from 1899 to 1914—rubs his hands backstage: two, five, seven, nine … fifteen folding seats slam shut: It's a success. It brings delight to everyone at the bar: a fainting corresponds to several glasses of port wine—not some Ricqlès[9] like that served on Air France! Generally speaking, it is the women who faint. Men, on their end, shout: "Enough!", "I cannot watch this anymore!" In the best circumstances, women swoon in the arms of their future partners. Flirting Grand-Guignol style: an effective and time-saving method.

Echoing the three "v"s, are the three "s"s: sweat, blood [*sang*], sperm. "S": an erect serpentine shape. The Grand-Guignol is a theatre of spirits and liqueurs. The "s" has the arrogance of being at the beginning of these words. Cold sweat of the frightened spectator; sweat of the actor energetically performing. New blood leaking from the wounds or coagulated blood from old wounds—the composition is not the same. If the colours change[10], the audience members consequently topple over …. The products used to make blood – of course, it is not fresh blood, which would cause problems with preservation and odour – are more or less well supported by delicate skin. These mixtures of Vaseline and liquid carmine[11] risk causing allergies. I imagine Maxa[12], known as "the most assassinated woman in the world," putting on powders, creams, and ointments to get rid of the itches, burns, and redness. Using redcurrant jelly or rosehip purée leads to other issues: The actors use it as a spread on bread … Eating bloody bread … Only at the Grand-Guignol can one engage in such debauchery! Redcurrants and rosehips, forerunners of ketchup!

These are only backstage games. In the auditorium, thanks to the box seats, some of the audience members can move on to a more serious game … surrendering to the extreme pleasures that were permitted in other rooms of Pigalle, which our puritan epoch has rushed to demolish. I dare say that the Grand-Guignol proposes a secular echo of the Carmel fence[13]. I allow myself to consider it as the conspiratorial other side of the covenants' sacredness with

its tied-up actresses. For that matter, was the Grand-Guignol not a chapel where the fervent patriot Father Didon used to preach? Up until the late 1960s, the Grand-Guignol kept traces of its primitive function, which imparted it with all of its appeal and originality: stalls, neo-gothic woodwork, two gigantic angels, a rostrum accessible through a secret staircase, and, most importantly, the famous box seats, all of which alluded to confessionals.

Nothing is better than a shower to get rid of the traces of sweat, blood, and sperm. As Denise Dax quipped: "I was dead, all I had left to do is to go wash myself!" In a splendid text (see Robert Laffont, p.1381–1395),[14] Maxa insists on the laundry room aspect of the Grand-Guignol backstage. Actors had only to stop thinking of washing themselves and let their costumes dry. While touring actors obsess over laundry baskets, Grand-Guignol actors obsess over clotheslines. But some stains persist; a deep wash cannot overcome them. Thus, the actors find themselves in the street with bloody stains in the folds of their skin. Which can have a bad effect. But the Grand-Guignol was not created to have a good effect; rather, to have *an* effect. The funny part is, in order to wash themselves, the actors only had the parsimonious flow of the quasi-stagnate water of a sink installed on the floor. Since the Grand-Guignol space was not conceived to be a theatre, it did not have dressing rooms.

The blood flowing on stage corresponds to the tight and dry throats of the audience members. Through a very distinctive system of free-flowing sensation, the saliva is pulled out of the audience's mouths while blood flows on the stage. Grand-Guignol is physiology. In order to rehydrate themselves, the audience rushes to the bar. They put themselves back together with port wine while the actors perk themselves up with quinquina.[15] Performing the Grand-Guignol repertoire leaves one bloodless. One must bring the fire back to one's cheeks by ingesting Mariani wine,[16] for example. André de Lorde, in-house playwright, the "Prince of terror[,]" goes so far as to praise its merits in the press: "Mariani wine has magic virtues, which made it famous around the world. It is—without a doubt—both the most enjoyable and the most powerful of restorative tonics…." Actor René Chimier, the "king of fear" who died in May of 1997, would speak of himself as a privileged consumer: "There are consequences to performing the roles of madmen, lunatics or sadists. Exhausted, I got to the point where I no longer had control over my own nerves. I feared I would become neurasthenic." The positive effects of Mariani tonic wine, made from Peruvian coca extract – the ancestor of Coca-Cola – were praised by the end of the nineteenth century. Only one single

performance by a mime of *The Flower of Coca*, by Paul Arène and Gustave Goetchy, took place on June 29, 1892, at the Mariani Theatre with Miss Dowe in the role of Colombine and Séverin in the role of Pierrot:

> *And yet coca is living gold, fluid gold*
> *Which turns into a thoroughbred the exhausted stallion;*
> *The mistress holds out the cup for the lover to drink.*
> Ecce Pierrot redivivus! *Pierrot drank.*
>
> [Original French:
> *Or, la coca, c'est l'or vivan, c'est l'or fluide*
> *Qui refait un pur-sang de l'étalon fourbu ;*
> *L'amante tend la coupe et l'amoureux la vide.*
> Ecce Pierrot redivivus ! *Pierrot a bu*]

Strange that Séverin, the mime, was among the first artists to perform at the Grand-Guignol Theatre back in 1896 when it was called Théâtre Salon.

In fact, during an evening at the Grand-Guignol, the sensorial safety valve would alternate between comedic and dramatic plays to avoid that a too great tension would leave the spectator shaken and without support. This explains why an evening would be composed of four to six plays. For example, here is how an evening of October 1921—while the genre was at its peak—was composed: an opening (*Un troisième acte* (*A Third Act*) by Serge Veber), a comedy (*Mado* by Marice Level), a drama (*L'Homme de la nuit* (*The Man of the Night*) by André de Lorde), another drama (*Le Rapide n° 13* (*Rapid N° 13*) by Jean Sartène), a comedy (*La Dame de bronze et le Monsieur de cristal* (*The Bronze Lady and the Crystal Man*) by Henri Duvernois). I would say that Grand-Guignol is terror shaped like a gloved hand.[17] Laughter is visceral in the same way that terror is. Faces can become congested or contorted as much from laughter as they can from terror. Don't we laugh until we cry and can't we laugh ourselves to death?

Let's not forget that the two registers—comedic and dramatic—are divided. No laughter in dramas or else they could fall flat. As for comedies, they are functional and can only find reason for their existence as alternatives to dramas. With them, the spectator can relax only to get more tense, as in hot and cold showers, which itself offers a dramatic turn of events.

In order to get to such immediate and violent effects as abort, vomit, faint, or to become congested, repulsed, contorted, the Grand-Guignol—a

simple, elementary theatre—uses certain tricks of direct dramaturgy. The lines are ordered like manuscript paper. Contrary to a false preconceived idea, the Grand-Guignol is neither a *théâtre de canvas*[18] nor of improvisation. The plays are not presented like scenarios on which it is impossible to embroider. They appear as true pieces of clockmaking. Didn't a neighbour of the Théâtre de l'impasse Chaptal say that it was possible to set one's watch to the sound of the gunshot that closed each play? The surprise endings were nearly timed like a pre-recorded tape. When I was a kid, we would go to bed at the moment of death of Stanislas[19], which was mentioned in a sound and light show. I can still hear the melodramatic voice coming from the Lunéville castle, announcing "the death that consumes and kills." The Grand-Guignolesque death of a king: his dressing gown, bordered by the flames from the fireplace where he fell asleep, pulled him into the blaze and into a "horrible," "dreadful," "atrocious" death—to borrow the descriptive words of predilection of the genre.[20] And the Grand-Guignol is all the more frightening as its action takes place in confined spaces: a lighthouse, an operation room, an asylum, a ship's hold, an opium den.

The positioning of all of the dramatic elements at the Grand-Guignol theatre is close to surgical precision. It is no coincidence that André de Lorde requested that it be a genre within a genre: a "medical theatre" and that he wrote a play so violent towards surgeons (*The Butchers* (*Les Charcuteurs*))—which was published but not performed—at least not during his lifetime.

Anguish must be put in place before the terror can emerge. In addition, the preparation can be a bit slow—especially in order to satisfy the spectators of today. Some plays make use of affectations in the style of vaudeville—among the best (*Le Laboratoire des hallucinations* (*The Laboratory of Hallucinations*), *L'Horrible Expérience* (*The Horrible Experience*) by André de Lorde)—before getting into the thick of it. The critics of the time called it "atmospheric drama." A theatre director must mislead the audience—bring the attention to stage left, while the danger will come from stage right, and arrange the lights to emphasize where nothing will take place, while the danger will occur where no one expects it. The Grand-Guignol is a theatre of sudden appearance and of prestidigitation. It functions with the dramatic turn of events, minus the *deus ex machina*: no happy endings—it can only end badly.

How could a theatre with such precarious balance manage to gain such success? Because it belongs to the "specialty theatre" that was eliminated by "public service theatre." The "specialty theatre" is to be connected to the brothel, where girls have their specialty. We discussed confined atmospheres: let's also mention the brothel. Let's not forget that we are in the Pigalle

district, where the connection between art and the brothel is obvious. One is the sublimation of the other. Think of Beaubourg, constructed in the district of St-Denis Street, considered the hottest street in Paris. It is the same people who went to see the whores[21] and who today contemplate paintings and often visit art galleries. One must not obsess over the posterity of the Grand-Guignol via gore cinema: it is much more on the side of creative arts, performances or environments. It is also found in hard rock. Think of performances by Marylin Manson, which were made in the tradition of Alice Cooper at the Bataclan.

Audiences of the Grand-Guignol know the detours and secret passages to access their pleasure. The junkies—those who take in the performance as a form of addiction—know where to sit in an auditorium. Aroused by a compulsion for repetition, they position themselves in the same place so they can get a look from below. Denise Dax retells how a member of the audience would always sit in the same seat in order to see the woman tied up to the torture pole. If the Grand-Guignol has a connection to art galleries today, it is by the intermediary of bondage: think of the works of Grégoire Desprele in a gallery of the Villette neighbourhood; "his" women with garrotted breasts, a lump in their throat, and tied hands.

For about 20 years, Maxa is an outpost of Grand-Guignol martyrology. She abandons the vibrations of her own voice; she seduces herself when she delivers the screams that made her famous. It is at this moment that she enters the trance of a stage performance resembling that of the shaman more than that of the stage performer. She behaves like a great priestess of horror—a vaticinating priestess.[22]

And the audience, forgetting itself like she forgets herself, asks only to follow her, without reservations or reluctance.[23]

Notes

[1] Originally published in *Revue Europe Litteraire Mensuelle* 836 (1998), pp. 101-107. *Monstrum* thanks the editors of *Revue Europe* for permission to publish this first English translation of Pierron's essay.

[2] Referring, of course, to the titular *avorter, vomir, ou s'évanouir*.

[3] Pseudonym of Josep Bloch (1883-1957), French writer who worked for the Grand-Guignol theatre.

[4] Pierron's term "avorter" means literally "to abort"; here the sense is "to miscarry" or "to have a miscarriage." The literal translation was retained to keep intact the visceral sense of the word "abort" in English.

[5] French actress who performed at the Grand Guignol Theatre in its last years of existence

[6] That is, *Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol*, or the Grand-Guignol Theatre, 1897-1962.

[7] French Playwright (1902-1974) who wrote several plays that were performed at the Grand-Guignol theatre.

[8] A Christian saint, martyred circa 251.

[9] A French brand of mint-flavoured beverage.

[10] Here, Pierron uses the expression "les couleurs virent," which is comparable to the idea of milk turning sour. The poetry of the original sentence, going from "virer" (turn) to "chavirer" (topple), has no equivalence in English.

[11] A red dye used in food colouring.

[12] Paula Maxa (Marie-Thérèse Beau) (1892 – 1970), French Actress who performed regularly at the Grand-Guignol between 1917 and 1933.

[13] Reference to the Carmelites, a Roman Catholic religious order

[14] *Le Grand Guignol: Le Théâtre des peurs de la Belle Époque*, edited and published by Robert Laffont (1995)

[15] An aperitif, or aromatised wine, that contains quinine.

[16] Another aperitif wine, this one containing coca.

[17] Pierron here uses the expression "en doigts de gants," which can also translate as "thermowell," or a tapered pressure-regulating barrier around a temperature-measuring instrument. That is, another barrier that, like a safety valve, manages degrees of pressure, like the alternating mixture of comical and dramatic Grand-Guignol plays.

[18] The canvas is used in theatre to provide a synopsis of the story without getting into details about actors' blocking and dialogue. Pierron uses the term "théâtre de canvas" to refer to a type of semi-improvised theatre.

[19] Stanisław I Leszczyński (1677 – 1766), King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania.

[20] [Pierron's note: It is worth mentioning that Stanislas did not die instantly but after many months of suffering.]

[21] This is a direct translation of the French term, *putes*.

[22] That is, a soothsayer or prophetess.

[23] With thanks to Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare for valuable editorial suggestions in this translation.

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Selling "Silence" in Contemporary Horror: Krasinski's Quiet Consumers

Selma A. Purac

John Krasinski's 2018 horror film *A Quiet Place* broke through the noise of a box office dominated by blockbusters and pre-existing properties.[1] Acclaimed by critics, the relatively modest production, which cost only 17 million dollars to make, went on to gross over 340 million dollars worldwide (AQP *Numbers*). In part, this success is rooted in the film's focus on the horror soundscape, which is central to its very premise. *A Quiet Place* opens eighty-nine days after an alien invasion has decimated the world's population. The invading creatures are sightless monsters with hypersensitive hearing and hunt using sound. We follow one family's struggle to keep silent and stay alive. The Abbotts seem especially well equipped for survival in this world; because their eldest child, Regan, is deaf, they can already communicate silently using American Sign Language. Regan's supposed disability therefore serves as a tool for family survival. However, in a world where sound is deadly, Regan's deafness would also seem to intensify her vulnerability. Because she does not hear, she is likelier to find herself in a compromising position, unaware when a sound has endangered her or when the creatures are close. This threat is highlighted in the film's opening sequence, when Regan gives her little brother a toy rocket which he recklessly activates. Failing to understand the necessity of silence, he is promptly killed off.

The family's grief is literally unspeakable, and the need to keep quiet amplifies the breakdown of communication that they experience while in

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[1] An earlier version of this essay was presented as a video lecture for the Montreal Monstrum Society in December 2020. The lecture is available online through the society's website: https://www.monstrum-society.ca/.

mourning.[2] In this respect, the film is fundamentally a meditation on the complexity of communication—whether signed, spoken, or left unsaid. However, this thematic concern extends beyond the film's narrative; much like the Abbotts, the creators behind *A Quiet Place* had to figure out how to communicate with prospective audiences using a limited range of tools. The film's script and its marketing represent the difficulty of telling a story, and of selling it, when quiet is key. Focusing on the movie's original speculative screenplay and the marketing of the finished feature, I explore the ways in which this largely dialogue-free film navigates the sonic conventions of horror, reading it as a work that exploits the strategies of both silent and sound cinema to communicate horror to the audience.

Critics commonly frame the film in terms of its relationship to silence. *A Quiet Place* has been called a "silent movie in the twenty-first century" (O'Reilly 2018), an example of the "new silent era" in cinema (Gilbey 2018), a film that "plays like a silent movie" (Howell 2018), a "silent horror" (Fedak 2018), a "nearly silent thriller" (Rao 2018), and "the closest thing to a silent movie since *The Artist*" (LaSalle 2018). These phrases highlight the film's complex relationship to sound, with some critics remarking upon how the movie plays with the conventions of silent cinema and others identifying it *as* silent. Indeed, the work's original screenwriters, Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, locate its origins in "the silent film era" (Sargent 2018), noting the influence of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and F.W. Murnau. In interviews, they identify the work as a "silent film" (Beck and Woods 2018), even referring to it as "*Our Silent Film*" (Mulcahey 2018). However, while the film's soundscape is notably subdued, it is anything but silent, containing diegetic ambient sound, carefully planted sound effects, and an affective non-diegetic musical score by Marco Beltrami. These comments, as misleading as some of them may be, serve as a tacit acknowledgement that the film leans into the traditions of the silent era. More important perhaps is the way in which this horror movie draws our attention to the genre's long-standing experimentation with sound. *A Quiet Place* borrows heavily from the sonic conventions of the horror genre—and many of these conventions stretch back to the silent era.

[2] Ironically, while the father, Lee, seeks to connect with other survivors through the radio, he has trouble connecting with Regan. Her feelings of guilt, combined with both Lee's stoicism and his well-intentioned but problematic effort to 'fix' Regan's hearing aid—and thus her—distance the two characters. In one of the film's few spoken lines, Lee is admonished by his remaining son, Marcus: "You still love her, right?...You should tell her" (Beck, Woods, and Krasinski, 35-36). Only in his final moments does Lee manage to find the words.

While movies of the silent period were routinely accompanied by live music and sound effects,[3] Murnau identified the distinct importance of sound in horror when he subtitled his silent classic *Nosferatu*: *A Symphony of Horror* (1922).[4] Accordingly, Hans Erdmann's soundtrack for the film consisted of pieces with titles like "Ghostly," "Unchained," and "Distraught," designed to reinforce the emotional tenor of the film (Patalas 2001).[5] Thus, even the silent film era recognized sound's ability to disturb audiences. Unsurprisingly, the rise of talkies expanded this role.

In *Uncanny Bodies* (2007), Robert Spadoni examines the impact of this new filmmaking technology on horror movies of the sound transition period, such as Tod Browning's 1931 *Dracula*. Released only three-and-a-half years after the coming of synchronized sound, Browning's film exploits the disturbing uncanniness of this relatively new cinematic form. For audiences of the time, the combination of the still strange phenomenon of synchronous sound and the movie's supernatural themes made for a particularly potent experience. The eeriness of *Dracula*'s "voluminously empty soundscape" (Spadoni 78), the "sensuous strangeness" (63) of Bela Lugosi's speech, and moments in which characters' voices are divorced from onscreen speakers, all unsettled early moviegoers. Poor recording technologies of the time, which resulted in grainy sound that seemed to come from a great distance, also had the effect of "*re-estranging* synchronized speech," making onscreen characters seem "cold and lifeless" (Spadoni 60). Spadoni argues that this temporary peculiarity of sound is deeply etched in the horror genre itself.

Recognizing the significance of the horror soundscape, Kevin J. Donnelly (2005) points out that horror films tend to offer less a traditional film score than "a coherent atmospheric package that embraces both music and

[3] For more information on sound accompaniment and silent-era cinema, see *Music and Sound in Silent Film: From the Nickelodeon to The Artist*, edited by Ruth Barton and Simon Trezisa.

[4] Murnau's awareness of sound's importance is also evidenced in his titling of his 1927 film *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*; however, only *Nosferatu* recognizes an explicit link between sound and genre.

[5] The same is true of other silent horror films. Upon its 1920 release, *The Golem: How He Came into the World*, co-directed by Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, was accompanied by an opulent orchestral score composed by Hans Landsberger specifically for the film. David Robinson (1997) notes that Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) was similarly accompanied by music designed to match the movie's dark mood. When the film came to America, the theatrical entrepreneur Samuel Lionel Rothafel hired a conductor to score the film, saying that the music needed to make listeners "eligible for citizenship in a nightmare country" (49).

sound effects" (94). He writes that horror films "are created as whole environments that the audience enters, equating a mental state with a sonic construct. Indeed, more than any other film genre, they construct a whole sound system, a musicscape, as well as embodying a distinct sound effects iconography of horror. In fact, this is distinct in much the same way as the image repertoire of horror films" (Donnelly 94). The sonic repertoire to which Donnelly refers is instantly recognizable: in horror, quiet often acts as the platform for startling sounds. Jump scares, stingers, and music that amplifies tension through drones and ostinato are common codes of the horror soundscape, though other genres use these strategies as well.[6]

In "Horror Sound Design," William Whittington (2014) expands upon some of the genre's more distinctive sonic characteristics.[7] Calling upon the work of Linda Williams (2009), who identifies horror as a "body genre" that exploits our fear of physical vulnerability through spectacles of "excess" (602-3), Whittington notes that sound in horror is designed to induce a visceral, physical response in audiences, which it often achieves through an evocation of the body. Sounds such as heartbeats, breathing, cracking bones, and punctured flesh are used to "acoustically get beneath the skin of both characters on the screen and filmgoers, and render an understanding about the fragility of the human body" (176). This sonic grammar is neurologically motivated: terror, Whittington explains, is registered in the amygdala, which triggers our fight-or-flight response, resulting in "increased adrenaline flow, rapid breathing, and an elevated blood pressure and heart rate" (176). By incorporating sounds that

[6] Interestingly, the 'horror' designation didn't exist until Universal's 1930s horror cycle. Both Ian Conrich (2004) and Rhona J. Berenstein (1996) note that earlier films that would be categorized as 'horror' today were at the time labelled 'uncanny,' 'thriller,' 'mystery,' and 'gothique' (see Conrich 46). These origins point to the close relationship between horror and other cinematic genres even today, most particularly between 'horror' and 'thriller.' [Editor's note: See also Gary Rhodes, "'Horror Film': How the Term Came to Be," in *Monstrum* 1 (April 2018), pp. 90-115 (https://www.monstrum-society.ca/monstrum-1-2018.html).]

[7] Whittington points out that the sonic grammar of early sound horror films was born of necessity: small budgets and postproduction time constraints meant that films often relied on a library of stock sounds—such as the 'castle thunder' sound of 1930s Universal horror movies or, later, the famed 'Wilhelm scream' (175). Early on, sonic distortion and claustrophobic sound design were the result of recording technologies which nonetheless added to the disorientation of horror cinema. More recently, multichannel mixing is used in the genre to increase the immersive terror of the theatre environment, and such sonic strategies are further complicated by horror's thematic interest in the afterlife: "Within the horror genre, disembodied voices and ghosts linger in the surround channels" (Whittington 2014, 179).

evoke the body, horror sound designers "preemptively trigger the physical pathways in the filmgoers' brains and cause a perceptual matching telling the body acoustically to feel fear" (Whittington 177). Because it can unsettle us on a primal, physiological level, sound is an especially potent tool in the horror genre, where it can be paired with images that are equally unsettling or shocking.[8]

In keeping with these sonic conventions, Beck acknowledges that in the horror genre, there is no better tool to scare an audience than sound. Recounting the origins of *A Quiet Place*, he explains that he and Woods were "talking about how cool it would be to do a silent film. We also felt like we could weaponize that specific tool against the audience. If we could turn sound itself into the shark from *Jaws*, that would be potentially really terrifying" (Larned 2018). Beck effectively articulates a strategy that is used by most horror films here, wherein sound becomes a weapon wielded against the vulnerable: characters are startled by the unseen thing that goes bump in the night, as in Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963), or their location is given away through some unintended noise, as in John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). Long before *A Quiet Place*, horror has shown us that in a hushed environment, the slightest sound can become deafening.

Numerous critics have framed *A Quiet Place*'s relationship to sound in terms of its innovation, commenting on the film's "unique soundscape" (Desowitz), claiming that its sonic experimentation has resulted in "a unique and unsettling horror" (Crouse), and also calling it a film that "broke the mold of the traditional horror movie" (Bitette), an "innovative addition to the horror genre" (Palmer), and "the most innovative horror film since *Blair Witch Project*" (Commandeur). However, rather than innovate and invent, what *A Quiet Place* does is heighten our awareness of horror's abiding sonic strategies.

It is worth noting, however, that there are three distinct moments of silence in the film. The movie includes what Krasinski calls "sonic envelopes"

[8] These claims align with the work of evolutionary biologist Daniel T. Blumstein (2010), who examines the effective incorporation of nonlinear sound in horror films to trigger audiences on a primal level. Because we are hardwired to associate sounds such as crying infants, distressed animal calls, and screaming females with danger and duress, our instinctual fear response is triggered when we hear not only such noises but large wavelength analogues that have been altered and distorted—and which are often included in horror films. See Mark Evans (2009) "Rhythms of Evil: Exorcising Sound from *The Exorcist*" for a handling of horror's use of such sounds. Additionally, Steve Goodman (2009) examines the unsettling impact of infrasound on us—low-frequency sounds that we cannot hear but which are elicited by natural phenomenon such as wind and earthquakes, which humans are wired to associate with impending danger. Such sounds are occasionally incorporated in films.

(Trenholm 2019)—these are discrete 'pockets' of sound in which the film's viewers are granted access to a character's sonic perspective. Most notable is Regan's sonic perspective wherein the hearing audience is given temporary access to her unique experience of the world, allowing them to empathize with her. When her cochlear implant is in place, the audience hears a low muffled hum punctuated by Regan's heartbeat. However, when Regan turns the implant off, we experience a rarity in cinema: "total digital silence" (Walden 2018). Whittington points out that this kind of complete silence is rare; instead, we tend to find quiet which "is filled with both noise and meaning"; thus, "'silence' is often represented by ambient footfall recorded at a distance or 'white noise' culled from the sounds of traffic, wind, or air conditioning" (183). Whittington writes that in horror, this quiet "is still cause for alarm. When the wind stops or the footfalls cease, death is near. So now more than ever, characters must listen if they are to survive" (138). These comments highlight not only the genre's sonic patterns, but also the scarcity of complete digital silence. *A Quiet Place's* veteran sound designers, Erik Aadahl and Ethan Van der Ryn, draw our attention to the rarity of this approach when they point that they have never done this before, but they acknowledge that the technique allows for "the most shocking and in many ways the most intimate moments in the movie" (VanDerWerff 2018).[9] Despite the emotional impact of these sequences, they are but discrete moments of silence in a film that otherwise resonates with sound.

What *A Quiet Place* lacks is not sound but spoken dialogue. Only nine minutes of its ninety-minute runtime include dialogue—the majority of which is signed and subtitled. Here, we witness the work's indebtedness to silent cinema, where dialogue is limited and is often visualized through intertitles.[10] The film critic Roger Ebert (1997) notes that the lack of dialogue in classic silent horror cinema adds to our sense of dread. *Nosferatu*'s characters, he writes, "are confronted with alarming images and denied the freedom to talk them away. There is no repartee in nightmares. Human speech dissipates the shadows."

[9] It is worth noting that the highest-grossing film of 2017, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, incorporates a moment of total digital silence. During what is now known as the 'Holdo Maneuver' sequence, as two ships collide in the vacuum of space, the film is stripped of sound for 5 seconds. Because explosions that occur in space are routinely heard in the film franchise, this unique moment of silence highlights the emotional impact of Holdo's sacrifice. The inclusion of this technique in the film, alongside *A Quiet Place*, perhaps gestures towards the more mainstream incorporation of what has otherwise been a relatively rare practice.

[10] Of course, intertitles were not restricted to dialogue alone, since they could also serve a narrative function. For an in-depth consideration of their role, see Katherine Nagels (2012).

Muteness, then, amplifies the horror, and *A Quiet Place* uses this idea to its advantage. In creating the screenplay, Beck and Woods (2018) "wondered if you could fold the silent visual techniques of the early twentieth century into the context of a modern-day genre film." As a *sound* homage to silent cinema, *A Quite Place* plays with a sonically stripped-down environment as a means of heightening tension. That so many critics have persisted in characterizing the film in terms of its 'silence' shows us the extent to which contemporary cinema is reliant upon the spoken word.

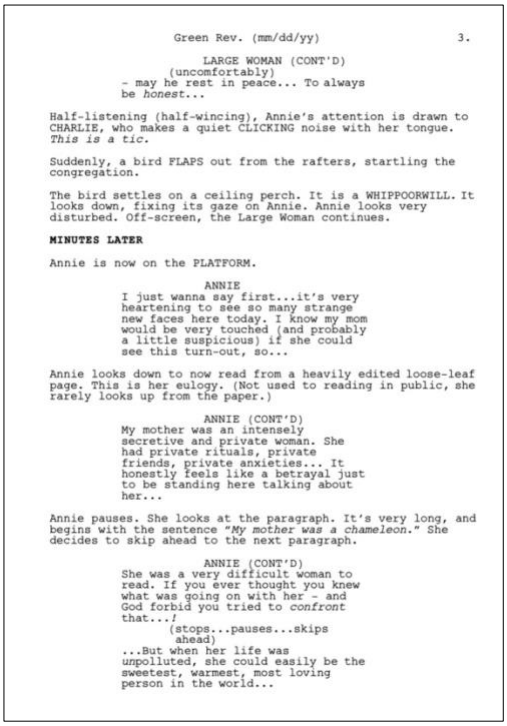
In his consideration of sound in cinema, Michel Chion (2007) notes that our sonic attention is fundamentally "voice-centered"; the voice, he claims, "attracts and centers our attention" in the same way "as the human face in the image of a film" (206). Chion explains that the voice "is also the main, if not the exclusive vehicle for the text … most of the time in cinema the presence of language is central. It is a determining and privileged component … language can determine, regulate and justify the overall structure of a film" (207). Given Chion's claims, it is perhaps unsurprising that early sound films were called "talkies."[11] Since the advent of sound cinema, dialogue has been a central means of telling the story; however, before the film is even released, dialogue is a key ingredient in selling the film as well. Accordingly, its relative absence in *A Quiet Place* posed challenges both in terms of the film's script and its marketing. While the film's lack of dialogue heightens the audience's awareness of the genre's abiding experimentation with sound and silence, its initial script and marketing prove to be less traditional. Ultimately, these unique paratexts succeed in selling—first to producers and then to the public—what was otherwise a conventional, albeit intriguing, film, and they did so through their own experimentation with sound.

A "Silent" Script

In interviews, Beck and Woods (2018) have noted the struggles of writing a script with little dialogue: "Writing a silent movie isn't easy," they claim. "You can't use dialogue as a crutch. And you can't bore the reader with blocks of description." Woods points out that "Usually in a screenplay, dialogue is the easiest to breeze through. It's smaller on the page. It's confined. You can

[11] In Billy Wilder's 1950 classic, *Sunset Boulevard*, the silent film actress Norma Desmond famously decries the rise of talkies by asserting, "We didn't need dialogue. We had faces!" Desmond expresses her disdain towards an industry that has reoriented itself around the human voice.

kind of flip through the pages" (Sargent). Woods refers to the standard formatting of dialogue in screenplays wherein spoken language is indented on the page and widely spaced, making it immediately identifiable when flipping through the pages of a script (Figure 1). Without the ease of communication offered by dialogue, the writers of *A Quiet Place* were concerned that theirs "would not be a readable screenplay" (Mulcahey). Woods adds, "How do you communicate backstory, motivation and theme without dialogue?" (Mulcahey). The original screenplay for the film demonstrates how the writers grappled with these challenges; in doing so, they created a script that is visually distinct from the Hollywood standard (Figure 2).



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LARGE WOMAN (CONT'D)
(uncomfortably)
- may he rest in peace... To always be *honest*...

Half-listening (half-wincing), Annie's attention is drawn to CHARLIE, who makes a quiet CLICKING noise with her tongue. *This is a tic.*

Suddenly, a bird FLAPS out from the rafters, startling the congregation.

The bird settles on a ceiling perch. It is a WHIPPOORWILL. It looks down, fixing its gaze on Annie. Annie looks very disturbed. Off-screen, the Large Woman continues.

MINUTES LATER

Annie is now on the PLATFORM.

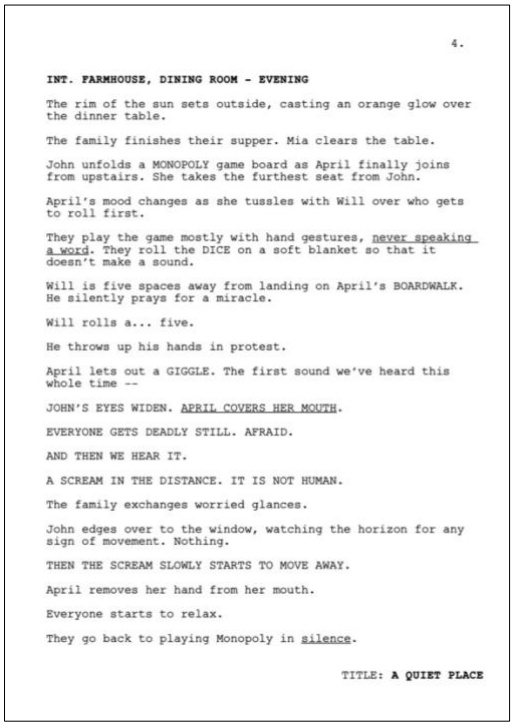
ANNIE
I just wanna say first...it's very heartening to see so many strange new faces here today. I know my mom would be very touched (and probably a little suspicious) if she could see this turn-out, so...

Annie looks down to now read from a heavily edited loose-leaf page. This is her eulogy. (Not used to reading in public, she rarely looks up from the paper.)

ANNIE (CONT'D)
My mother was an intensely secretive and private woman. She had private rituals, private friends, private anxieties... It honestly feels like a betrayal just to be standing here talking about her...

Annie pauses. She looks at the paragraph. It's very long, and begins with the sentence *"My mother was a chameleon."* She decides to skip ahead to the next paragraph.

ANNIE (CONT'D)
She was a very difficult woman to read. If you ever thought you knew what was going on with her - and God forbid you tried to *confront* that...!
(stops...pauses...skips ahead)
...But when her life was *unpolluted*, she could easily be the sweetest, warmest, most loving person in the world...



4.

INT. FARMHOUSE, DINING ROOM - EVENING

The rim of the sun sets outside, casting an orange glow over the dinner table.

The family finishes their supper. Mia clears the table.

John unfolds a MONOPOLY game board as April finally joins from upstairs. She takes the furthest seat from John.

April's mood changes as she tussles with Will over who gets to roll first.

They play the game mostly with hand gestures, never speaking a word. They roll the DICE on a soft blanket so that it doesn't make a sound.

Will is five spaces away from landing on April's BOARDWALK. He silently prays for a miracle.

Will rolls a... five.

He throws up his hands in protest.

April lets out a GIGGLE. The first sound we've heard this whole time --

JOHN'S EYES WIDEN. APRIL COVERS HER MOUTH.

EVERYONE GETS DEADLY STILL. AFRAID.

AND THEN WE HEAR IT.

A SCREAM IN THE DISTANCE. IT IS NOT HUMAN.

The family exchanges worried glances.

John edges over to the window, watching the horizon for any sign of movement. Nothing.

THEN THE SCREAM SLOWLY STARTS TO MOVE AWAY.

April removes her hand from her mouth.

Everyone starts to relax.

They go back to playing Monopoly in silence.

TITLE: **A QUIET PLACE**

Figures 1 and 2: On the left, page three from Ari Aster's *Hereditary* screenplay demonstrates the typical formatting of the medium, wherein spoken words are offset on the page and minimal sound cues appear. On the right, page 4 from Beck and Woods' speculative screenplay shows how the work breaks from conventional formatting.

Working from an idea they had in college, Beck and Woods wrote a short sixty-seven-page speculative screenplay or 'spec script.' The purpose of the spec script is to showcase the story through action, structure, and dialogue. Unlike shooting scripts, these streamlined screenplays do not include the technical details necessary to film the story, such as numbered scenes, camera work, and

sound effects, as well as other details that are determined by the creative vision of the director. Rather, the spec script offers a lean, simplified version of the story; written with no guarantee of a readership, they are designed to hook the attention of producers or executives who may go on to purchase and greenlight the production.

The speculative screenplay for *A Quiet Place* marks a departure from the convention of dialogue-driven scripts which contain minimal details, very few sound cues, and no images. Much like the characters that Beck and Woods have created, the writers themselves were forced to rely upon alternative modes of communication. Not only does the screenplay's narrative raise the issue of communication challenges, but the screenplay itself also exemplifies it. Because the script is stripped of dialogue, it compensates by placing a greater emphasis on sound design and visuals to communicate the story. Ebert notes that such a strategy is common to silent cinema more generally. "Silent films," he claims, "like black-and-white films, add by subtracting. What they do not have enhances what is there, by focusing on it and making it do more work" (1997).

Ebert's claim recalls Rudolf Arnheim's (1969) assertion in *Film as Art* that silent film concentrates "the spectator's attention more closely on the visible" (110). He writes, "From its very silence film received the impetus as well as the power to achieve excellent artistic effects" (106). In the absence of recorded sound, silent cinema developed a visual vernacular that amplified the expressive potential of what is shown onscreen, allowing spectators to surrender themselves to the power of the image.[12] For this reason, Arnheim praises silent film's "great artistic purity of expression" (cited in Grundmann, 2001)—a phrase that aligns with what Beck and Woods (2018) say of the silent era: "Cinema had never felt so pure." In part, it is this 'purity' that the writers sought to capture in their spec script. Because it shifts attention away from dialogue, the script to *A Quiet Place* focuses on visuals and elements of sound design that do not include speech. Thus, the work consciously deviates from the accepted practice of standard screenplay formatting.

[12] Arnheim (1969) uses the example of unheard music in a silent film: the music is conveyed by how the characters react to it. The audience focuses their attention on the human response to the music, not the music itself, thereby highlighting the most "important part of this music—its rhythm, its power to unite and 'move' men" (108). Thus, Arnheim claims that where silence expands the "artistic potentialities" (109) of film by forcing filmmakers to express themselves visually in unique and creative ways, spoken dialogue "narrows the world of the film" (226)—it "paralyzes visual action" (228) by "interfer[ing] with the expression of the image" (228), acting as an expedient shorthand. Arnheim therefore contrasts the "visually fruitful image of man in action" to "the sterile one of the man who talks" (229).

Sound cues in spec scripts tend to be rare, restricted to only what is necessary to the story. Michael Tucker (2018), the filmmaker behind the YouTube channel "Lessons from the Screenplay," points out that, consequently, "most screenwriting material has very little to say on the subject of sound." For instance, he cites Syd Field's *Screenplay: The Foundation of Screenwriting* (1979) in which sound is dismissed as a final post-production step in the filmmaking process. Accordingly, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2012) note that we tend to frame our discussions of film in terms of visual attention. They write, "we speak of 'watching' a film and of being movie 'viewers' or 'spectators'—all terms which suggest that the soundtrack is a secondary factor. We are strongly inclined to think of sound as simply an accompaniment to the real basis of cinema, the moving images" (292). However, the *A Quiet Place* screenplay demonstrates the extent to which sound is built into the very blueprint of the film. Beck and Woods offset the script's lack of dialogue by elevating the role of this often-overlooked cinematic tool—certainly as far as screenplays go—and in doing so, they create a unique script that highlights the remarkable significance of sound in horror.

In the spec script, the film's pre-title sequence, which contains no dialogue, is four pages long and includes over fifteen details pertaining to sound design. Taking viewers through a single day on the Abbott farm, the sequence gestures towards the ways in which quiet has been integrated into their daily lives. As is standard in screenplay formatting, significant details—including necessary sound cues—appear in full caps. In this spec script, many sonic details are further accentuated through underlining, stressing the core importance of sound design. We discover that the family wears "SHOE COVERS" (Beck and Woods n.d., 1), Regan wears a "HEARING AID" (1), and the dog wears a "MUZZLE" (1). They ensure that their actions do not "make even the slightest sound" (1) as they move about "quietly" (2) in a home with walls covered in "THICK PADDING … FOAM … WOOL INSULATION" (3). The father "MIMES" eating to his daughter to indicate that she should join their meal—a meal that they eat with "plastic" cutlery (3). These script details emphasize the conscious need for quiet in the world of the film—an idea that is highlighted at the end of the sequence when the daughter "GIGGLE[S]" during a silent game of Monopoly, thereby making the "first sound we've heard this whole time" (4). In response to this sound, "[THE FATHER'S] EYES WIDEN. [THE DAUGHTER] COVERS HER MOUTH. EVERYONE GETS DEADLY STILL. AFRAID" (4). The scene is based upon the principle of the sonic disruption: a quiet moment of family bonding is unexpectedly unsettled by sound. This pattern of quiet followed by the sudden intrusion of sound has the

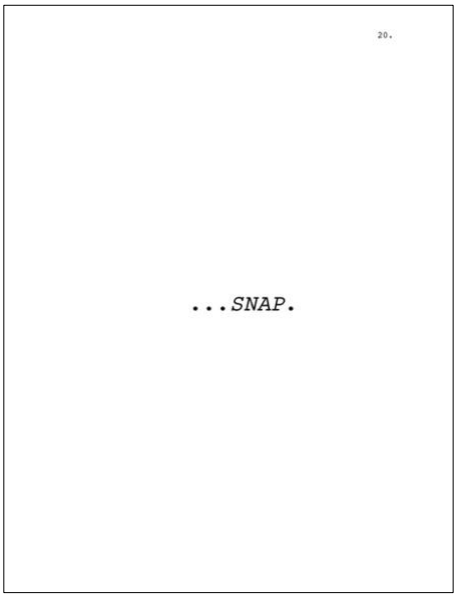
effect of rendering familiar noises, such as a joyful giggle, threatening, and the act of muzzling oneself reminds us of the need to control sound in this world. The script's lack of dialogue is an extension of this idea; so fearful is the family of making any noise that they do not speak. As the script makes clear, *A Quiet Place* encourages its audience to fear the basic soundscape of everyday life—including dialogue.

Sarah Kozloff (2000) identifies dialogue as "the most important aspect of film sound" (6), arguing that it anchors a film's characters and diegesis and is a key means of communicating narrative causality. Bordwell and Thompson similarly assert that in most cinema, sound effects and music are "subordinate to dialogue," calling dialogue the primary "transmitter of story information" (298). While such critics as Spadoni and Donnelly would dispute these claims, there is much scholarship that highlights the centrality of dialogue in cinema. In the 2013 collection *Film Dialogue*, Jeff Jaeckle takes a more measured approach, pointing out the importance of understanding cinematic language for its aesthetic, narrative, and cultural dimensions; he writes that in film, "the look has its equal in listening" and "images are understood and appreciated through their interaction with words" (1). Jennifer O'Meara makes a similar claim in *Engaging Dialogue* (2018), focusing on what she calls "cinematic verbalism" (2) in the work of individual writer-directors. As this verbalism often originates in the script, it is perhaps unsurprising that screenwriters should remark upon the particular significance of dialogue in film. For instance, in his guidebook on screenwriting, William Miller (1997) notes that dialogue "provides information and advances the story. It manages time through rhythm, tempo, and pacing. It defines characters … it reveals characters … it reveals emotion" (193). Such statements, while debatable, nonetheless draw our attention to dialogue as a multi-faceted cinematic tool.

In their script, Beck and Woods met the challenge of conveying these story elements without dialogue by experimenting with page formatting and typography. This incredibly uncommon practice immediately distinguishes their screenplay from others, which follow a rather rigid industry standard. For instance, a striking example of the script's control of pacing occurs during one particularly tense sequence. The father (who is called 'John' in the spec script) finds himself in a perilous position: he must get from the house to the shed to help his family, but one of the monsters blocks his path. As he makes his way towards the shed, the creature senses his presence but cannot hear him. The sequence begins by explicitly drawing our attention to ambient sound, such as the blowing wind and rustling leaves which muffle John's footsteps. To emphasize the tension of this moment, the phrase "THIS IS THE LONGEST

WALK OF HIS LIFE" (Beck and Woods n.d., 15) is both capitalized and underlined. As we turn the page, John's walk towards the shed begins, but his coverage of these seemingly meagre thirty feet unfolds in a series of five pages, each page containing a single line of text which appears in an increasingly larger font:

> John is 30 feet away from the shed… (16)
>
> 20 feet away… (17)
>
> 10 feet… (18)
>
> 5… (19)
>
> …*SNAP*. (20) (Figure 3)



This unique strategy allows the screenplay to visualize John's "longest walk" by stretching it across multiple pages, literally extending its length. The increasing font size both parallels John's perspective as he gets closer to his destination and makes the sudden intrusion of sound all the more striking, for it suggests that his long walk is interrupted by not just any sound, but a *loud* one. Without dialogue, the pacing and tension of this sequence is visualized on the page, building towards a sonic breaking point. Such strategies transform the screenplay into a more three-dimensional experience, which is uncommon in the medium. As Beck and Woods state, "we determined the script must feel as cinematic as the best version of the final film"; this process, they explain, forced them to "[throw] formatting styles to the wind" (2018).

Accordingly, the spec script does something extraordinarily rare: beyond the fact that its typography and formatting suggest such elements as rhythm, pacing, volume, and even lighting (Figure 4), the script also incorporates actual images. Most screenplays are only visually suggestive, allowing the director's vision to take precedence; however, the speculative screenplay for *A Quiet Place* is filled with images. Some of these consist of stylized text, such as handwritten notes, overlapping newspaper headlines, and even a sequence that resembles concrete poetry (Figure 5), while others are more pronounced.

INT. TURBINE, PLATFORM THREE - DAY

John arrives at the top of the turbine. Closes and locks the final gate.

He listens in TOTAL DARKNESS:

HEARS THE MONSTER BELOW. ITS BIO SONAR PULSE ENGULFING ALL THE SOUND AROUND US. THRASHING AND FIGHTING ITS WAY UP THE WALLS - BREAKING THROUGH EACH GATE ALONG THE WAY - AS JOHN REALIZES IT CAN SEE PERFECTLY IN THE DARK.

EXT. CREEK - DAY

The creek is too wide to cross over. John and April race along the bank on opposite sides.

The creek starts to narrow bringing them

CLOSER CLOSER

CLOSER CLOSER

CLOSER CLOSER

CLOSER

John jumps over the narrow part of the creek and catches his daughter. The momentum carries him and April into a mountain of crops.

Excerpts from script pages 57 (Figure 4, top) and 60 (Figure 5, bottom)

For instance, page twenty-eight features an image of the family's Monopoly boardgame, which has been converted into a make-shift map, picturing the layout of the family's environment, complete with their house and shed, as well as the nearby lake and turbine (Figure 6). This hacked game board is a tool that John uses to hatch a plan; unable to explain his ideas to his family through dialogue, he uses the board as an alternative to spoken words. In this instance, the screenplay itself enacts the family's struggle to communicate without dialogue.

28.

EXT. CORN FIELD, CLEARING - NIGHT

April carries the SCARECROW through the harvest tract.

Her face is looking pale from the cold. Her fingers are purple and stiff.

April sets the SCARECROW down and begins removing its CLOTHES...

ELKSKIN WORK GLOVES

FLANNEL JACKET

AVIATOR SUNGLASSES

Underneath the clothes, attached to the scarecrow's spine, is a **SIGNAL GENERATOR**; a small device used for generating electronic sounds. It appears broken, with thin circuits that unravel from each side, and a frequency DIAL that ranges from a few kilohertz (kHz) to hundreds of gigahertz (GHz).

It has the look of something that was abandoned long ago.

April shivers.

Figure 6

Later in the script, the screenwriters use images to convey the gravity of a task John faces. He must scale the heights of a wind turbine before a pre-set alarm goes off. The script explains that the turbine is "just an abandoned

monolith that stretches an astounding 330 ft into the sky" (Beck and Woods n.d., 53). "To put this in perspective" (53), however, the screenplay includes a diagram that dominates the page, comparing the size of the turbine to notable landmarks (Figure 7). Without dialogue to impress upon the script-reader the pressure of John's undertaking, Beck and Woods convey the urgency visually.

Figure 7

Recall Ebert's (1997) claim that silent films 'add by subtracting'. Ebert notes that what they lack "enhances what is there, by focusing on it and making it do more work." In part, he refers to the fact that visuals carry more weight in silent cinema—an idea that is echoed by Beck and Woods (2018) who call silent-era filmmakers "masters of visual storytelling, needing not one line of dialogue

to communicate character, emotion, or intent."[13] Beck points out that it was important "to communicate that kind of silent film experience on the page" of their own script (Sargent). Through its incorporation of actual images, the spec script for *A Quiet Place* reflects the greater prominence that visuals take in cinema that lacks spoken dialogue. Beck calls their unique screenplay a "roadmap for essentially what is a dialogue-free movie that is still going to convey a very visual but also a sonic adventure" (Boone 2019). Here, he highlights the two ingredients—image and sound—that take on a more significant role in both the film and its screenplay due to their dearth of dialogue. In this regard, both the film and the script are exercises in communication.

The spec script also highlights *A Quiet Place's* role within a larger horror tradition. As a prototype for the film, the original screenplay emphasizes the significance not just of visuals in cinema, but of sound and silence in the horror genre more specifically. As I have noted, horror films have long recognized the importance of sound design, but in keeping with convention, this significance is downplayed in film scripts. By flouting the conventions of the script medium, Beck and Woods produce a unique screenplay that is in many ways more innovative than the film based upon it.[14] They have acknowledged the challenges of writing the screenplay, calling their script "unorthodox," "odd," and "weird" (Beck and Woods 2018). They worried that it would be a "really tough read" (Renee 2018) and asked themselves, "Is this script going to bore people to tears?" (Sargent). These concerns are rooted in the difficulty of telling the story, but also of selling it. Spec scripts are notably also known as 'selling scripts.' As I have already noted, these works are written with the hope that they will be purchased by independent producers or studios who may then go on to

[13] Notably, we once again see the equation of sound with dialogue here—a misconception that both the script and the marketing of *A Quiet Place* play into.

[14] After numerous rejections, Beck and Woods' agent sent their speculative screenplay to Michael Bay's Platinum Dunes, and Bay agreed to produce the film on the strength of the spec. With Bay attached, Paramount purchased the script, which Krasinski then read. His wife, actress Emily Blunt, had just given birth to their second child, so this script about trying to protect your children in a dangerous world resonated with him. Krasinski revised the script to emphasize the family's struggle, hence his co-writing credit on the shooting script, and he went on to direct and star in the film, alongside his wife. It is worth noting that the revised screenplay is more conventional than the original spec script; the rewritten script contains no images, it does away with much of the unique formatting that I discuss in my essay, and it incorporates dialogue that is both signed and spoken. The finished film, which is based upon the revised script, is accordingly itself more conventional, pulling not only from the traditions of horror cinema, but also of sci-fi and B-movie creature features.

greenlight the productions. The concern that Beck and Woods express regarding the script's readability is therefore a concern regarding its salability as well. Just as the screenwriters turned the absence of dialogue into an advantage, so too did the film's marketers. Quiet is indeed the film's currency.

Marketing "Silence"

Of all the tools that a film has to promote itself, the trailer is perhaps the most important, particularly as digital platforms have expanded both their shelf-life and dissemination. As Jonathan Gray (2010) puts it in his study of film promos, "If a film triumphs in its opening week, good promos will have played a significant role in this victory" (49). *A Quiet Place* was expected to gross roughly 20 million dollars in its opening weekend; however, it made a triumphant debut at the box office, earning over 50 million dollars (AQP *Numbers*). In part, this strong opening points to the trailer's success in enticing the buying public.[15]

Stephen Garrett (2012)—the founder of Jump Cut—an advertising company that specializes in film promotion—summarizes the role of the movie trailer by claiming that it "pitches the promise of the premise."[16] These

[15] To understand the importance of marketing to the success of a film, one need look no further than the amount of money invested in it. While *A Quiet Place* cost only seventeen-million dollars to make, it was released by a major studio (Paramount Pictures) and allotted an impressive marketing budget of eighty-six-million dollars (D'Alessandro 2018). This money funded the film's wide ranging social media campaigns, its custom promos and trailers, and their placement in coveted time-spots. For example, the trailer played in theatres during previews for the highest-grossing film of 2017—Rian Johnson's *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*—and new teaser footage debuted during the 2018 Superbowl pregame, which was watched by over 100 million viewers.

[16] In their qualitative and quantitative research on film trailer audiences, Fred L. Greene, Keith M. Johnston, and Ed Vollans (2016) question the reading of trailers as linear paratexts that exist only in relation to the feature films they are intended to sell. Rather, the researchers recognize the significance of the trailer today as a complex media form in its own right, noting that audiences interact with trailers in ways that differ from other promotional materials: newspapers such as *The Guardian*, media websites such as *Den of Geek*, and industry publications such as *The Wrap* all commonly feature breakdowns of new trailers. Industry award shows like the Golden Trailer Awards and the Clio Key Art Awards recognize these works as "creative artefacts" (58), and sites such as *Honest Trailers* and *Trailers from Hell* reframe the media as a form of cult entertainment that is analyzed and deconstructed. Moreover, trailers that have been recut or spoofed are a popular feature of YouTube, Vimeo, and other social media platforms (58). Yet, despite this complexity, Greene et al. acknowledge the surprising "ferocity" with which respondents clung to the idea that trailers offer "an accurate 'free

promotional clips build anticipation for the film by offering a sampling of its emotional experience, but their short run-time—usually about two-minutes in length—means that they must rely upon recognizable tropes to convey the film's emotional core quickly and effectively. In her work on this media form, Charlotte Jensen (2014) points out that trailers consequently prioritize genre, incorporating familiar visual hooks and sound cues so that the audience knows what to expect from the finished film (123). Lisa Kernan (2004) claims that this focus on genre facilitates "the film's positioning as a commodity" as it allows audiences to clearly understand the nature of the product for sale (14). The first trailer for *A Quiet Place*, however, resists this clarity by deliberately blurring the line between horror, thriller, and suspense in order to move its appeal beyond fans of a single genre. By knowingly playing with the conventions of its own medium, the trailer stands out in an oversaturated market of movie promos. The trailer for *A Quiet Place* is one facet of a unique marketing campaign that plays into the film's relationship with sound and dialogue.

Click the image above to view the 2018 teaser trailer on YouTube.

Garrett (2012) claims that trailers are cut around two basic building blocks: a "dialogue string" and a "visual string." These components allow the trailer to advance the story, set the mood, and share emotion. However, Garrett's formulation poses a challenge for *A Quiet Place*. The film's lack of dialogue means that the marketing department did not have the usual tools that

sample' of the future film" (79), thereby recognizing the link between the trailer and the film it sells.

are used to sell a movie at their disposal. As the film's producer, Brad Fuller, put it, "The movie doesn't have the classic genre exposition, a couple of minutes of dialogue which you would always see in the marketing of the movie to hang your hat on" (Schwerdtfeger 2018). The first trailer's 'visual string' is similarly restrained, for it strategically denies viewers any glimpse of the film's antagonists. Brice Tidwell, vice-president of brand strategy at Paramount, explains, "We said from early on: 'Let's not show what this monster looks like.' That becomes the price of admission" (Bitette 2018). Lacking both dialogue and identifiable antagonists, the debut trailer holds back more information than it conveys;[17] we only know that a family is hunted by a pervasive menace that is vaguely identified by the pronoun "they" in intertitles. The cryptic nature of the threat makes the trailer an 'open-text,' straddling the boundaries of horror, thriller, and suspense, while also making it difficult to categorize the film in terms of a specific horror subgenre. Where Kernan (2004) identifies genre as the key to commodifying movies, with *A Quiet Place*, it is the trailer's hybridity that widens the pool of the film's potential viewership. The promo's genre-bending is ultimately rooted in its marketability. Kozloff (2000) also makes the point that genre is the most powerful force that shapes film dialogue. She claims that certain genres, such as Westerns and melodramas, "evince verbal patterns" (136), using dialogue in distinctive and recognizable ways. If we apply this logic to the first trailer for *A Quiet Place*, then its lack of dialogue would contribute to the difficulty of locating the film's genre. The absence of spoken words plays another significant role, however: it amplifies the film's soundscape. Without dialogue to command our attention, even the slightest sound is granted a new potency. The privileging of muteness over silence allows the trailer—like the film it is designed to promote—to foreground sound's significance.

The film's first trailer was released in November 2017, six months in advance of the film itself. The trailer opens on a note of quiet; though viewers do not yet realize it, they momentarily occupy the deaf daughter's sonic envelope. Low, unsettling non-diegetic sounds, such as strings and clicking, then begin as the trailer moves viewers through scenes of the family's routines. We see them laying sand trails, tiptoeing around the house, eating dinner while they sign to one another, and playing a board game with soft pieces. Despite the calm of these moments, additional images—alongside non-diegetic sound—suggest

[17] Two key narrative details are withheld from the audience here: Regan's deafness and her mother's pregnancy—details that would undoubtably add to the tension of the trailer. However, by withholding this information, the trailer allows sound/visuals, rather than narrative, to bear the weight of the audience's anxieties. The focus consequently remains on the high concept of the film.

that something is awry: abandoned buildings, a rudimentary memorial, and enormous scratches etched into the plaster of a wall. Between these sequences are intertitles that lay out the rules of this world for us: "Listen closely. Move carefully. And never make a sound. If they can't hear you, they can't hunt you" (AQP Teaser).

The trailer highlights the film's sonic strategies, including the weaponization of sound. The lack of diegetic sound as the family moves through their day lends the trailer an air of quiet which is broken over halfway through by the jarring diegetic smash of a knocked over gas-lamp. In response to the noise, the family hush themselves in fear; the trailer holds the quiet of the diegesis for a beat before banging emanates from an unseen threat.[18] After another tense silent pause, both the pace and the volume of the trailer pick up, but it denies viewers an expected jump scare. Instead, a series of quick-cuts cycle the viewer from shot-to-shot, accompanied by a staccato rhythm of non-diegetic strings and drumming. This combination creates a flashing effect that builds intensity over the latter half of the trailer. As we shift between shots in this final sequence, the sound is slightly offbeat with the visuals, and this dysrhythm adds to the viewer's sense of disorientation.

Many horror trailers end with a short sequence after the title card—a final jump scare or unsettling image designed to invoke fear. However, this trailer concludes on a note of quiet, with intertitles that announce the film's name, release date, and the phrase "Silence is survival" (AQP Teaser). Though it ends by asserting the importance of silence, the trailer itself demonstrates just how effective sound is in unnerving an audience. Indeed, what is sold here is less a film 'narrative' than a 'concept' revolving around the need for quiet. These deviations from the standard horror trailer—the lack of dialogue and exposition, the visual restraint, and the subdued conclusion—paired with the trailer's genre-hybridity, expand the film's potential viewership.

As Paramount's president of domestic distribution, Kyle Davies, puts it, the film—and its trailer—was "playing to everyone" (Barnes 2018). Where the horror genre tends to attract viewers between the ages of eighteen and thirty (Smith 2018)[19], thrillers and suspense films appeal to the fifty-plus moviegoer—

[18] Chion (2009) identifies this technique as "acousmatic," which he defines as "the auditory situation in which we hear sounds without seeing their cause or source" (465). Because it remains enigmatic, acousmatic sound creates feelings of unease, confusion, dread, and terror in audiences.

[19] Movio is a marketing data analytics company specializing in moviegoer data. Based upon the attendance history of over 100 million US moviegoers in 2018, Movio finds that the average age of horror audiences is younger than the overall moviegoing crowd. Movio divides

a moviegoer who is much less likely to see a horror film than other age groups, but far more likely to see an art-house film or a family drama (Smith 2017, 8). The trailer for *A Quiet Place* was designed to appeal to both of these audiences. Its hybrid approach to genre, which is supported by its lack of dialogue, therefore acts as a clever marketing tool. Additionally, dialogue-free trailers are often used to promote dramas and thrillers that are coded as being more 'sophisticated' or intellectually complex. In other words, because they lack dialogue, such trailers demonstrate a faith in their audience's intelligence by withholding exposition and trusting viewers to fill in the gaps on their own. For instance, the teaser trailers for Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) and *Tenet* (2020) are free of dialogue, as are the trailers for David Fincher's *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013), and Luca Guadagnino's art-house remake of *Suspiria* (2018).[20]

Gray points out that trailers set up and frame our interaction with films; he explains that "these promos will have already begun the process of creating textual meaning, serving as the first outpost of interpretation" (2010, 48). Thus, trailers become an integral part of the films that they promote, coding the way in which viewers read the finished product.[21] The dialogue-free trailer for *A*

horror fans into two distinct audiences: Paranormal Horror fans (who tend to be younger, with an interest in titles such as *The Nun, Slender Man*, and *The First Purge*) and Sci-Fi Horror fans (who tend to be older, with an interest in films such as *Annihilation, It Comes at Night*, and *Life*). According to their data, Paranormal Horror tends to attract a younger audience, and there is a near gender parity: 49% female and 51% male. This gender division becomes more pronounced with Sci-Fi horror, however, with 33% of the audience being female and 67% male. By comparison, blockbuster films tend to attract an audience that is 56% male and 44% female. In their report on *A Quiet Place,* Movio notes that the film "broke out by attracting a wider audience compared to more traditional horror movies, behaving and evolving in a similar way to most blockbusters" (Smith 2018).

[20] These filmmakers/films are known for their complexity (see reviews of these works). It is also worth noting that there are a number of horror teasers that lack dialogue; these works amplify feelings of dread by providing no exposition. The teasers to critically-acclaimed horrors such as Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) feature no dialogue, which sets the promotion of these movies apart from trailers for other genre films released at the same time, which are narrator-driven (i.e. trailers for *The Amityville Horror* [1979], *Salem's Lot* [1979], *Dracula* [1979], and *Friday the 13th* [1980], among others). More recently, the trailers to *The Omen* (2007) and *The Hills Have Eyes II* (2007) are dialogue-free. As these films are remakes and sequels (much like Guadagnino's *Suspiria*), they recycle already known storylines, making the lack of exposition less innovative than it may otherwise seem.

[21] Greene, Johnston, and Vollans (2016) point out that "cinema has been usurped by individual online viewing in current trailer viewing habits" (63). Of the respondents in their study of film trailer viewership, 60% admitted to watching film trailers online, where only 27.7% watch

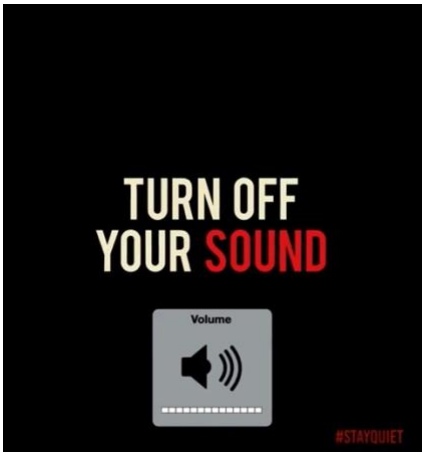
Quiet Place is a masterclass in tension, lacking gore, focusing on the plight of a single family, and highlighting the importance of sound design. Its distinctiveness is evident in comparison to the promo for *Blumhouse's Truth or Dare* (2018)—the other horror release in theatres at the same time as Krasinski's film. This trailer, which features college-aged characters, dialogue-heavy exposition, jump scares, gore, and violence, clearly abides by the conventions of the slasher subgenre. While both films are PG-13 horrors, the trailer for *A Quiet Place* plays a role in producing and performing what we might term 'sophistication' in order to attract an audience that extends beyond the standard consumer of horror.[22] Accordingly, twenty percent of the film's viewers were over the age of fifty (Bitette). Paired with a record of advance ticket sales and a

trailers in theatres. While these numbers gesture to the dominance of online trailer viewership, they also indicate that 87.7% of respondents watch trailers, highlighting the significance of these media texts. Indeed, the original full-length trailer for *A Quiet Place* has over 19 million views on YouTube, and the second trailer over 30 million views. Greene et al. point out that online trailers raise the issue of "individual impetus" (63): viewers specifically seek out trailers to watch online. In their study, respondents offered 4 primary reasons for this impetus: 1) to develop/deepen their knowledge of a film, 2) to judge the quality/aesthetics of the film, 3) external recommendations (personal or via social media), 4) preference for a pre-existing element (star, director, or story). The researchers point out that the smallest proportion of participants listed a preference for pre-existing elements in the film as a reason for watching a trailer, where recommendations were "a strong force in the individual impetus" (65) of respondents. These details draw our attention to the complexity of contemporary viewership, where the film and trailer experience is no longer restricted to theatres and TV screens. One must therefore ask the question whether or not these paratexts change for a film when it is no longer viewed in a crowded theatre.

[22] In interviews, Krasinski uses the rather loaded qualifier "elevated" to describe the horror films that influenced *A Quiet Place*. The screenwriter April Wolfe points out that this term is often used in Hollywood to distinguish recent horror films from the shock value and graphic violence of the much maligned slasher subgenre; Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014), Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) have all been labelled 'elevated horror'—however, other tags are also used: 'post-horror,' 'smart-horror' and 'horror-adjacent,' among them. Wolfe notes that the 'elevated' label represents an attempt to distance films from their horror lineage—a practice that belies the long-standing prejudice against horror, which is often framed by critics as cheap, exploitative fare. In fact, William Friedkin famously insisted that *The Exorcist* (1973) was 'a film about the mystery of faith' rather than a horror, much as Ari Aster pitched *Hereditary* as a "family tragedy that curdles into a nightmare" (Mallory 2018). As Nicholas Barber asserts, these labels are often a means of framing the horror as a prestige production. In distancing themselves from the negative connotations of the genre, such films may find it easier to secure not only funding and wider distribution, but critical acclaim and industry awards as well.

strong performance in matinees, these consumer patterns are uncommon for horror audiences (Schwartzel 2018). As Davies claims, "the film broke free of any genre box. The story about family is what's connecting. With adults, it's that primeval need to protect your family" (Schwartzel).

This attempt to broaden *A Quiet Place*'s audience continued with its second official trailer. Initially teased during the 2018 Superbowl pre-game, the full trailer made its debut on the daytime talk show *Ellen Degeneres*, ensuring that the promo would reach a vast and varied audience. Featuring the hashtag #stayquiet, this trailer heralds one of the innovations in the film's marketing: its interactivity. While promotional language for the movie consistently used direct address and the imperative voice, social media amplified this participatory approach. The film's official twitter account implored audiences to "Stop talking" (@quietplacemovie, March 27, 2018) and to "STFU" (@quietplacemovie, April 3, 2018). "Sssh……" (@johnkrasinski, November 16, 2017), it warned, and the feed asked viewers, "Could you survive?" (@quietplacemovie, February 4, 2018). To connect with a younger demographic, Paramount released a range of social media teasers and mini-trailers. The absence of spoken dialogue in the majority of these promos allowed them to highlight the ways in which the film plays with sound, exposing a new generation of fans to horror's sonic strategies.



Figures 8 (top) and 9 (bottom)

For instance, one twenty-second ad which was posted on Instagram begins with an intertitle asking the viewer to "Turn off your sound" (AQP Turn Off); the phrase appears onscreen alongside the volume app, which shows that the volume is currently turned up—a fact that is confirmed by a non-diegetic ringing sound (Figure 8). The ad continues by performing this action for us, muting itself. Accordingly, the app shows that the volume has now been muted as images from the film begin to play in complete silence (Figure 9) along with the phrase "Because if they hear you." However, despite suggesting that the sound

has been turned off, loud music and sound effects suddenly overtake the silence as the phrase "They hunt you" appears onscreen. This ad teases viewers into a false sense of security, assuring them that the device is muted, only to subvert the safety offered by silence. The ad cleverly transforms our own devices into dangers. Viewers are pulled into the premise of the film only to be compromised by the eruption of sound through silence, rendering both terrifying.

This strategy of participating in the film's premise is one of the key features of its sound design. Horror films—like comedies and thrillers—are largely defined by the reactions they are intended to elicit in audiences and therefore rely upon engaging their audiences to a greater degree. In the case of horror cinema, we are meant to feel the fear of the characters onscreen. Such films are participatory experiences, and sound is one of the devices through which horror achieves this participation. Audiences hold their breath, hush themselves, and gasp alongside the film's characters. Aadahl and Van der Ryn explain how they achieve this sense of sonic involvement in *A Quiet Place*: in designing the film's sound, they started the movie with a more traditional sound level, which they achieved by raising the first reel by several decibels (VanDerWerff). Then, that sound level was slowly pulled back to a lower baseline. This shift occurs during the film's opening sequence; as the audience is settling in, opening their bags of candy, and rustling through their popcorn, the film enters a sonically spartan environment. Suddenly, every noise stands out—not just onscreen, but in the theatre as well. This technique enforces an awareness of the noise that the audience itself is making.

Aadahl and Van der Ryn assert that sound and volume is "like a security blanket. What happens is, people lean back in their movie-theatre seats, and the sound can push the audience back a little bit. When you take away that security blanket, when you get so quiet, people start to lean forward, and they start to hold their breath and get quiet themselves and become aware of the sounds they are making" (Bishop 2018).[23] Thus, the audience mirrors the behavior of the film's characters, and the boundary between what is happening onscreen versus

[23] Aadahl and Van der Ryn frame the film in terms of its intended viewing format: as a theatrical release, *A Quiet Place* was intended to be watched in quiet movie theatres where advanced multichannel sound technologies showcase the film's sound design best. In his tellingly titled article "Yes, 'A Quiet Place' Is Effective Home Viewing, But You Have to Do Your Part" (2018), Joe Reid notes that the film's VOD release demands that home viewers create a dark, silent, distraction-free atmosphere for the film to retain its power of sonic engagement. Looking forward—particularly in a COVID-era environment—as more and more audiences watch releases from home and on varied devices, studios may need to rethink these strategies for sonic engagement beyond the theatrical environment.

in the theatre becomes blurred. Chion (2009) draws our attention to this participatory experience when he writes that "every instance of silence is disarming since it seems to expose our faculty of hearing; it's as if a giant ear were turned toward us ready to pick up the tiniest sounds we make. We are no longer just listening to the film; we are being listened to by it" (148). The hearing audience is pulled into the conceit; because they are both listening and *being listened to*, they fear to make a sound lest they attract the monsters. The lower volume and lack of dialogue in *A Quiet Place* deprives the audience of their security, forcing them to readjust their own sonic baseline.

This participatory feature of the film—and of horror more generally—was captured in the film's online marketing. For instance, the film's promotion included the 'Quiet Place Detector,' an interactive web application which allows users to test their own environment to determine if they would be safe or hunted (Figure 10). In the digital age, when the timbre of daily life is accompanied by a cacophony of rings, beeps, and chirps, this message of quiet is particularly potent. The app works through the user's microphone, activating it so that the device reads the average volume of the user's environment, which it sets as a baseline (Lee 2018). Users are then challenged to stay quiet for a period of time, and based upon the results, one either lives or dies. If they die, they are given the option to try again, but users are also prompted to share what caused the sound that killed them. Conversely, if they were safe, the app asked them to take a photo of their quiet place and share it on social media. Essentially a simple web game, the app had users actively participate in the film's central concept, making them as aware of sound as the Abbotts. In keeping with Woods' claim that the screenwriters sought to weaponize sound against the audience, this app weaponizes the sound of one's actual environment in real-time. Creative

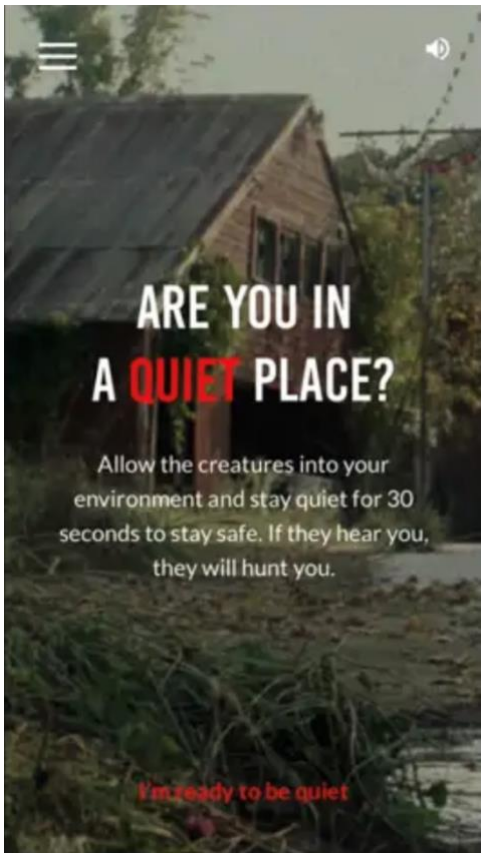


Figure 10

marketing gave audiences a sampling of the film experience before the movie had even been released.

Krasinski says that he sought to create a "tense, emotional and *participatory* experience for audiences" of the film: "I want the audience to be asking the whole way: What would I do in this situation? How would I stay quiet?" (AQP Pressbook 2018, 2, 14). The app, and the marketing of the movie more generally, actualizes this element of the film, literalizing Chion's claim that instances of 'silence' in cinema position the audience as figures who both listen and are listened to. The film's marketing therefore heightens our awareness of sound's importance in horror.

While *A Quiet Place's* lack of dialogue may seem like an innovation, this strategy draws our attention to the film's indebtedness to horror cinema's long sonic legacy—a legacy that spans the silent era. Of all the genres, horror is the one that most sustains the aesthetics of the silent period; its soundscapes—however sparse they may be—are tools to unsettle and disturb, and *A Quiet Place* capitalizes on this tradition. The film's promotional paratexts do something similar, but the legacy of sonic experimentation in scriptwriting and digital marketing is much shorter, granting these works a greater uniqueness. Yet, the film, the script, and the movie's transmedial marketing all revolve around the central role that sound plays in the communication of horror. By recognizing this fact, *A Quiet Place* managed to connect with audiences and speak volumes at the box office.

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Seeing Red from the Depths: Daria Nicolodi's Secret Revenge

Anne Young

On a moonlit Italian evening, an actress leaves a giallo film set complaining to her husband, "that man is no director—he's a butcher!" Working with her director husband—"King of the Spaghetti Thrillers"—is different, she claims as they get into the car, but their lighthearted banter on the way home is tinged with resentment about their working relationship. They play a game: she asks him to "identify" a line from a film they've seen together. He incorrectly guesses George Burns.

She replies, "you're infuriating—you know damn well it was Gracie Allen!"

"Feminist!" he scoffs.

"Pig," she retorts.

They laugh, and she soothes his insecurities about his problems as a big-shot director. They seem the image of domestic bliss, but later she will turn into a witch and her resentment will turn to revenge.

The dialogue in this scene from Luigi Cozzi's *De Profundis* (1989) was co-written with Daria Nicolodi, best known as an actress and the long-time common-law partner of the real "King of the Spaghetti thrillers," Dario Argento. It dramatizes feminist theorist and literary critic Dale Spender's claim that there is a cultural tradition of male appropriation of women's creativity and a corresponding collective forgetting of women's contributions. Spender argues "that in a male-dominated society, women are denied the right to their own creative resources and that these resources are taken by men to augment their own" (1986, 22). Citing numerous examples of women's creativity becoming the property of male artists, particularly partners and relatives, Spender suggests that this view of artistic and literary creation is tied to a cultural narrative of male

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agency and authorship in human reproduction (i.e., children take on their father's name). Many feminist theorists, including Silvia Federici (2004), have gone further to describe the source of this phenomenon, pointing to women's dual position in the economy: while they may participate in the paid labour force, women are also figured as a natural resource (2004). This devaluation of women's work is progressive, beginning most obviously with reproductive labour (bearing and giving birth to the director's child), and pulses outward in a radial spectrum, from the nebulous 'emotional labour' (soothing the director's anxieties),[1] to more murky questions of who came up with a particular idea while talking about a film project "in the bedroom,"[2]—to, in some cases, surprisingly significant bodies of work. That is to say, the problem of under-crediting women's contributions is not entirely solved by eschewing auteurism and reading films as collaborative works (although it is certainly an important component).

As the example from *De Profundis* illustrates, the theme of creative appropriation appears in Nicolodi's (often uncredited) screenwriting and is a theme which captures the nature of her working relationship with Argento. While her work on *Suspiria* (1977) is now widely acknowledged (although not fully recognized), her lesser-known work with Cozzi has been largely ignored. Expressing revenge fantasies directed at Argento, the Cozzi collaborations critique masculine auteurism and meta-critically comment on the inevitability of its (uncredited) writer's disappearance, while not-so-subtly caricaturing Argento's public persona. Considering Nicolodi as a screenwriter and comparing the Cozzi/Nicolodi films with the Argento/Nicolodi films challenges existing criticism of these works, particularly *Suspiria* (1977).

Nicolodi and Argento first worked together on *Profundo Rosso/Deep Red* (1975), in traditional actress/director roles. It is well-known (although, again, not widely acknowledged) that Nicolodi also introduced Argento to the band whose signature sound is now associated with his films, Goblin (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 113; Martin 1997, 7). Nicolodi even claims that she "personally supervised the mixing of the soundtrack" (Palmerini and Mistretto, 113). Argento corroborates this claim in his recent autobiography, remarking that "She has an incredible musical background [. . .] so she was able to give me

[1] Argento writes of his experience working with Nicolodi as an actress on the set of *Deep Red*: "She understood my needs and anticipated my every mood. She was able to tolerate my anger and make light of the nonsense that seemed insurmountable to me" (2019, 157).

[2] "[O]n the big mattress thrown on the floor," Argento reminisces on the co-creation of *Suspiria* (2019, 166).

some important advice on the soundtrack during post-production" (Argento 2019, 157). By all accounts, this was the height of their romance, which culminated in not only the production of the acclaimed film, but the production of their daughter, actress and filmmaker Asia Argento.

Their next project, and Nicolodi's first writing credit, *Suspiria* (1977), takes place in the feminine world of a German ballet school. The American heroine, Suzy Banyon (Jessica Harper), finds her new home strange and her competitive classmates cliquish, but she makes one friend who alludes to a secret at the heart of the school—a secret she is determined to uncover. Shortly after whispering her suspicions to Suzy, the girl disappears under mysterious circumstances and Suzy is left to continue her friend's investigation, embarking on a psychological quest to escape the forces of black magic. Suzy discovers that the dark secret lurking at the heart of the school is witchcraft. Led by the ancient witch, Helena Markos, the teachers at the school lash out violently at anyone who discovers their occult rituals. After a terrifying confrontation with the evil crone, Suzy apparently escapes.

Except as a biographical footnote (McDonagh 1991; Reich 2001) or interesting anecdote (McDonagh; Paul 2005; Thrower 2001; Knee 1996), Nicolodi's role in conceiving and co-writing the story is not given much consideration. Instead, the film is traditionally read as male-authored and an expression of Argento's signature misogyny or fragile masculinity (Creed 1993; Gallant 2001; Reich 2001). But this view does not hold up if we consider female creators and fans. Reflecting on her role in the film, lead actress Jessica Harper remarked that "It was completely dominated by women. [. . .] That was very unusual at the time. [. . .] . It was rather nice working with a mainly female ensemble for a change" (Jones 2004, 91). This female-focus, Bridget Cherry notes in her analysis of *Suspiria* fandom, is one reason for the film's enduring popularity with women. Cherry speculates that "it is the feminine and perhaps Gothic elements of the film that allow the female fans to elide any perceived misogynistic themes in Argento's work" (2012, 32). But Cherry also notes that *Suspiria* is typically seen as having a very "authorial" stamp as "the work of Dario Argento" (26, 32). This perception has perhaps blinded critics to not only female fandoms, but the participation of female creators, particularly co-writer Nicolodi.

According to Nicolodi, her idea for *Suspiria* was influenced by her grandmother's story of life in a boarding school and the three mothers of Thomas de Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (which form the organizing principle for Argento's trilogy):

> I was reading Thomas De Quincey's 'Confessions of an Opium Eater' at the time and I put my finger on the story of the Three mothers—Mater Suspiriorum, Mater Tenebrarum and Mater Lachrymorum—and told Dario that **Suspiria**, named after the Mother of Sighs, would be an astonishing title for a film and he agreed. (Jones 2004, 72)[3]

Claiming she had to fight to have her name in the credits, Nicolodi has said "Everything belongs to me in SUSPIRIA, even the individual quotations [from Jung and Saint Augustine]" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114). However, Nicolodi remarks that "Dario isn't that forthcoming when it comes to giving other artists credit for his movies. He is the ultimate auteur in that respect" (Jones 2004, 73, 74). Nicolodi compares herself to Mary Shelley, whose *Frankenstein* was first published anonymously and later misattributed to her husband, Percy (Jones 74). She recounts a particularly painful moment when Argento's mythologizing removed all trace of female influence, recasting her grandmother's story as his own experience: "I couldn't believe it when he told my story to the press passing it off as his memory. I was horrified and upset by his actions and ran away for a year because I was so angry" (Jones 74).

It was during this time apart that Nicolodi starred in Mario Bava's *Shock*, playing a woman "haunted and spiritually tortured by the ghost of her first husband" (Jones 2004, 75). Of her experience in this role, she says "I was emerging from the madness of SUSPIRIA and Mario helped me a lot . . . he could put me perfectly at ease" (Martin 1997, 32). Nicolodi praises Bava's ability to work with actors, a talent Argento—even by his own admission—lacks. More specifically, of her work with Bava, she remarks, "I knew he appreciated my contributions" (Jones, 76).

While Nicolodi focused on this project, and her own recovery, Argento began work on a sequel to *Suspiria*, *Inferno* (1980), "[w]orking from Nicolodi's central concept" (Lucas 2007, 1011).[4] However, although she stars in the film, Nicolodi would not help him complete the script they had begun together, and Argento laboured under a curse: he became severely ill, delaying his progress, and was ultimately less than satisfied with the resulting film (Lucas, 1011), which recalls the aesthetic of *Suspiria* but lacks a compelling narrative structure.

[3] I have maintained my sources' original font choices for highlighting titles throughout.

[4] Incidentally, Bava's special effects for *Inferno* were also uncredited, although Bava—a well-known auteur himself—does not seemed to have suffered for it (Lucas, 2007: 1010; Cooper, 2012: 99]. It matters who is being appropriated, as John Martin describes Bava "agreeing (with characteristic self-effacement) to leave his name off the picture, so as not to steal his disciple's thunder" (1997: 11).

Although she apparently declined to work on the script any further,[5] Nicolodi stars in *Inferno*, playing the final amateur detective protagonist, who like her predecessors, is violently killed before she can stop the powerful witch who terrorizes the city. But while Argento has Nicolodi tortured and killed onscreen (in *Inferno* [1980], *Tenebrae* [1982], *Phenomena* [1984], and *Opera* [1988]),[6] she is writing powerful and immortal women off-screen.

Around this time, Nicolodi also collaborated with director Luigi Cozzi on *Paganini Horror* and *Demons 6: De Profundis* (*Il Gatto Nero*) (1989), re-appropriating her material for *Suspiria* to critique the notion of male genius, gendered power dynamics between artists, and Argento himself. Although Cozzi is more generous than Argento when it comes to giving credit in interviews, Nicolodi—who also stars in *Paganini Horror*—was still initially uncredited as a writer.[7] While these films suffer from budgetary constraints, even Cozzi, although disappointed with the completed product and lamenting *Paganini Horror*'s many problems, notes that it had a "beautiful, ambitious script" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 37).[8]

Paganini Horror (1989) is reminiscent of Argento's *Demons* (1985), which itself seems to re-make Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1983). Argento wrote and produced *Demons*, which was directed by Lamberto Bava as "a tribute to one of the most important horror films of all time, [Lamberto's] father Mario's *La Maschera del demonio/ Black Sunday* (1960)" (Argent 2019, 209). In both meta-films—*Paganini Horror* and *Demons*—an evil mask (as in *Black Sunday*), a dead genius (Paganini and Nostradamus, respectively), and a haunted artifact enable art to come to life in terrifying and deadly ways. But while *Demons* presents women's sexuality as a conduit for evil (two sex workers spread the demon plague), *Paganini Horror* warns of the dangers of male 'genius,' especially for creative women.

Despite being uncredited as a writer, Daria Nicolodi dominates the opening credits as the biggest star in the cast of *Paganini Horror*. It begins with a

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[5] At one point, she explains, "I only wrote the ending and esoteric passages of INFERNO" (Martin 1997, 39), but also stated that even the portions written by Argento contained her "ideas" and "knowledge" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114).

[6] Gavin Hurley remarks that after this period, his films "are forgettable and uninspired," (2017, 144), and this is consistent with fan opinion and academic interest (e.g., Paul 2005, 51).

[7] Martin also suggests that, because of the poor quality of these films, Nicolodi preferred to remain uncredited.

[8] Nicolodi is less generous, calling the film "cheaply made and unsatisfying" and remarking that "Cozzi is not Mario Bava" (Martin 1997, 17).

little girl carrying a violin. She is dressed in an antiquated style evoking Paganini's era. When she arrives at her Venice home, she practices one of the virtuoso's pieces, "The Witches Dance." She then kills her mother for no obvious reason, and from this violent scene we are transported to a present-day (1980s) recording studio where a pop-rock group and their manager, Lavinia, work on a song that—like every other musical number in this film—sounds distinctively plagiarized. The nearly all-female rock group is experiencing a creative slump, and their manager is dissatisfied.

To cope with their inability to come up with original material, the band's male drummer finds a lost composition by Paganini through a creepy old man (Donald Pleasence of *Halloween*) and suggests they make it their own. The band's lead singer, Kate, decides to call the song "Paganini Horror" and, excited by the prospect of a hit song with a gothic backstory, exclaims "no one has ever done anything remotely like it—except for Michael Jackson with 'Thriller' and his fantastic video clip!"[9] The drummer, Daniel, chimes in: "We could do the same!" There might not be anything remarkable about referencing Michael Jackson's influential music video, but given its similarity with Argento's *Demons*, this scene could also be casting suspicion on Argento's originality.[10]

Their manager is so impressed with "Paganini Horror" that she arranges for a music video, renting an old house from Silvia (Nicolodi), who we later learn was the young girl who killed her mother after violin practice. Their manager also hires a famous horror director who is supposedly "the King of Horror" and "a genius." The music video he makes has the drummer playing Paganini, and the lead singer playing Paganini's bride. (Although Paganini is dressed in period clothing, his bride wears a poufy 1980s gown.) After an extended soft-focus, dreamy, gothic-style montage, Paganini bursts out of a coffin and murders his bride by repeatedly stabbing her. Then, the fourth wall breaks, and we are once again at the scene of movie making. The "genius" director excitedly instructs a masked Daniel to stab his co-star: "hit her again, harder!" Pan out to Nicolodi's character, Silvia, explaining the scene to the band's manager:

> According to the legend, it was right here, in this Venetian house, that Paganini sealed his agreement with the devil, and then, killed his bride,

[9] Music videos are consistently referred to as "clips" in the English dubbing.

[10] When questioned about whether Argento copies other directors, Nicolodi is vague in his defense, and references copying as "one of the rules of filmmaking" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996: 118).

> Antonia, and used her intestines as strings for the violin that he played from then on. In fact, Paganini's violin had really a unique sound, maybe because the strings played forever the screams of his poor bride.

As she speaks, the camera focuses on a close-up of her face (Figure 1), and it is hard not to read this moment as a statement about the real "King of Horror," especially considering Nicolodi's career as a famous screamer (Figure 2).[11]

Figure 1: "Paganini's violin […] played forever the screams of his poor bride."

Figure 2: The iconic scream that ends *Tenebrae*.

[11] Martin emphasizes her "epic screaming fit at the end of TENEBRAE" which both Nicolodi and her daughter remark on (1997, 18, 13-14), and which Nicolodi in interviews claims represents "resentment [. . .] rage" and "frustration" over her dealings with Argento (Jones 2004, 75; Martin 1997, 13-14).

Although this was directed and partially written by Cozzi, he notes that in their collaboration, "Mainly, [Nicolodi] wrote all the esoteric[12] scenes, like the one about the pact with the devil" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 37). Scenes such as this one, perhaps. Intentional or not, this close-up mini monologue speaks to Nicolodi's struggles with a "genius" husband and his notorious cruelty. Not only did he use her ideas, but, as James Gracey observes, "While appearing as a radiant heroine in *Deep Red,* the characters Nicolodi would later portray all met with increasingly violent and bloody deaths" (2010, 16). Nicolodi herself has complained of her poor working conditions on Argento's sets, which included "dangerous" stunts and general cruelty (Jones 2004, 75; Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114; Martin 1997, 14).[13] In a sense, Argento's "unique" films contain "the screams of his poor bride," both literally and figuratively.

Repeating Paganini's crime of 'selling their souls for money and success,' the band's downfall can be traced to their drummer, who in turn is corrupted by the mysterious man who sells him the Paganini manuscript, and by extension, Paganini himself. Apparent 'genius' turns out to be nothing more than clever appropriation: the rock group steals the work of other artists, including Paganini himself, just as Paganini steals the voice "of his poor bride." The notion of credit is expanded to include not only metaphorical debts, but literal ones. Mirroring the struggles Cozzi faced in making the movie, payment is also a theme in *Paganini Horror.*[14] After Silvia explains the story behind the music video, the manager, Lavinia, laments her role as one who must "pay, pay, pay," and a zoom in on her lascivious expression suggests she would like to cut a different deal with the expensive director. But it is not only financial repayment that dogs the rock band. A debt to other creator's ideas must be paid, including the suffering of Paganini's wife. As the revenant Paganini comes to collect, lurking in the shadows preparing to slaughter them all, the manager foreshadows their demise, telling the director "I told them you were a genius before—this time I'll scream it!"[15]

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[12] I believe Cozzi is using the term to refer to the occult.

[13] In his autobiography, Argento confirms, although seemingly without regret, that his sets could be painful and unsafe, citing in particular the wire scene in *Suspiria* in which Stefania Casini was really hurt and scared (Argento 2019, 177), and an occasion when he bit a child actress to elicit a better performance (163).

[14] Incidentally, no one was paid for their work on this film (Jones 2004, 52).

[15] At this point, the pace of the film actually decreases, but one of the seemingly nonsensical details of this plodding segment is a lingering view of a poster of Einstein: another 'genius' whose wife is rumoured to have contributed more his work than hot meals and childcare.

Ironically, Cozzi was accused of stealing from Argento with *De Profundis* (1989) (alternately titled *Demons 6* and *The Black Cat* [all three titles eerily similar to projects Argento had been involved with]). However, this film raises the question of who is copying whom. Alan Jones, despite disparaging the film as an "insult" to Argento, remarks that "It began life as Daria Nicolodi's setting-the-record-straight take on Levana, the Mother of Tears, from Thomas De Quincey's 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater' titled *Out of the Darkness*" (2004, 52). Nicolodi's distinctive voice[16] comes through in *De Profundis*, as does a thinly disguised representation of her relationship with Argento, and perhaps instead of Cozzi copying Argento, Nicolodi is re-claiming her own material. Another meta-film about making horror movies, like *Paganini Horror*, *De Profundis* also thematically addresses creative copying and stealing, this time through a series of doubles.

The film centres around the couple whose playfully barbed banter leads to a spat over mis-attributing Gracie Allen's line to George Burns. But their conversation takes a more serious tone on the drive home. Mark, the director, is anxious about finding a producer for his latest project, co-created by writer Dan. His wife, Anne, naively thinks he ought to "just concentrate on saying things in a way no one's ever thought of before"; that is, the idea of creativity speaking for itself, as Nicolodi said of her uncredited work on *Inferno*, "the story will talk for me because I wrote it" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114). Mark reminds Anne that that approach will not work in the tough movie industry, as he says, you need to "blow your own horn." The film depicts producers as all-powerful, but directors are next in line. As a writer, Dan is low in the hierarchy, and he barely suppresses his resentment. In addition, Dan's wife Nora, another actress, is having an affair with Mark.

At a candlelight dinner, both couples discuss the movie project about the witch Levana, a character from *Suspiria de Profundis* which Dan and Mark mistakenly attribute to Baudelaire. The men explain their idea, and the women ask leading questions:

> "Didn't someone already make this movie?"
> "Yes, Dario Argento directed it: *Suspiria*"
> "So why make it again?"
> "We're not! There's enough material in *Suspiria de Profundis* for ten movies—twenty!
> And our story is called *De Profundis*."

[16] Further analysis of this voice—Nicolodi's narrative style—is the next step.

This scene both overtly references the connection between Cozzi's film, the film-within-the-film, and Argento's *Suspiria.* In case the dinner party reference was too subtle, Mark insists his wife Anne read for the lead role of Levana, and when she does, the theme music for *Suspiria* plays. We see her holding the script: *Suspiria de Profundis* is written in the same font as *Suspiria*'s credits. The script meta-fictionally narrates the action of the scene (e.g., "opens to the first page and starts reading out loud"). Life imitates art, as this film production revives the spirit of the witch, and the lead actress finds herself battling her good and evil sides, just as Nicolodi remarks in an interview, "I am a multiple personality: Lightness and Darkness" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 112).

Meanwhile, Dan and Mark are unaware of what their adaptation has conjured. They consult a professor, Esther Semerani, an expert in "Occult Studies," who they want to hire as a consultant on the film. She asks incredulously "you want to make a film about Levana, and you don't know what the source is?!" As it happens, she has the original text. Correcting them as to the authorship of *Suspiria de Profundis* (De Quincey not Baudelaire), she sounds a bit like Nicolodi herself, who once complained that "Dario only had a superficial knowledge of De Quincey's literature, but I was reading it intently in that period and so I suggested it to him" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114). Semerani warns the film makers not to use the name "Levana" because that would summon her. As she tells the story of the witch, *Suspiria* theme music again plays in the background. According to Dr. Semerani, Levana "can take over the body of anyone who concentrates on her hard enough." Discovering that Levana has already been activated, Semerani meets an untimely demise before she can warn the filmmakers.

Privately, Nora and Dan fight because Nora wants the part that Mark has already insisted go to Anne (although Anne has not been consulted). Dan, the weak writer, is unable to stand up to his wife, but we see him type "bitch" in the script he is writing after their argument, during which he explains to her that "there's only one female role." Both women are upset about the casting: one wants the role, but doesn't get it, while the one who gets it, doesn't want it. Nora is also having an affair with Mark and has convinced him to eventually give her the role.[17] Not satisfied with this—and also under the influence of Levana—she tries to drive Anne crazy, unleashing the full force of the ancient witch. Although Professor Semerani has already indicated that concentrating on

[17] While it may be a coincidence, Nicolodi, who had wanted the lead role in *Suspiria,* then turned down the secondary role eventually played by Casini. Argento admits that he "had a brief affair with another actress" on the set of *Suspiria*, who he does not identify except to say that it was not Jessica Harper (Argento, 2019: 179).

Levana—for example playing the role in a film—could awaken the witch, it also seems to be the stresses Anne is subjected to that cause her to become Levana. She learns that she possesses the spirit of both Levana and a good fairy within herself, but the stresses of her life led her towards her darker half. As her fairy spirit tells her, "There's little difference between a fairy and a witch." Anne faces a choice: her dark double or her light side. Once she has confirmed that her husband is cheating on her and gaslighting her, as well as discovering that the producer, Mr. Levan, is evil, her good fairy brings her back to balance. But first, she chooses Levana, the witch who protects her. She finally stands up to her husband, stabbing him furiously while exclaiming "I don't need your direction anymore—I can direct myself!" But it turns out to only be a dream, and everything is as it was.

Aside from the direct references to *Suspiria*, there are undeniable parallels with Nicolodi's ill-fated relationship with her director, co-writer, and life partner. John Martin describes the main characters, the Burns and Allen fans Anne and Mark, as "Argento and Nicolodi clones" (1997, 16). Whether or not *De Profundis* is an attempt at the three mother's trilogy finale or a story about the making of *Suspiria* is unclear. Nicolodi tells Alan Jones that

> I did write a treatment for the conclusion ages ago. It was titled *Out of the Depths*, and concerned Levana, the third mother's name actually mentioned by De Quincey in 'Confessions of an Opium Eater.' It concerned a neurotic horror film director, the break-up of a long relationship with his lover, and their monstrous daughter who turns out to be the third mother reborn. Sound familiar? It was all the tears I've cried over the years that gave me the idea. (Jones 2004, 74)

It does sound familiar: this is the premise for *De Profundis*. Although Cozzi had already made the film, Nicolodi proposes Tim Burton as a possible director for this horror story (Jones, 74). In the same interview, she also claims that "[Dario] can't ever complete the trilogy now without my help" (Jones, 74). However, Argento did conclude the trilogy with the long-awaited yet disappointing *Mother of Tears* (2007), starring their daughter Asia. Apparently having resolved their differences, Nicolodi appears in the film as the ghost of Asia's character's deceased mother.[18]

Although their animosity subsided in the years before Nicolodi's death in November of 2020, and Argento has begun to openly reflect on her

[18] Argento claims that it was Asia's idea to have her real mother play her fictional mother (2019: 262).

contributions, Nicolodi's expressions of resentment about her involvement in Argento's films, as well as critical descriptions of her involvement, offer us valuable information and is worth a second look. This seemingly personal aspect gives us greater insight into these films as well as criticism, although it is typically treated as interesting trivia. Nicolodi's stages of grief begin with what she describes as a generous mood of love quickly followed by heartbreak. Despite struggling to receive credit for her work on *Suspiria*, she says, it was "a gift-wrapped present to Dario" (Jones 2004, 74). She also cites "love" and the painful struggle to have her lover credit her for *Suspiria* as reasons for not insisting on a writing credit for *Inferno*. Interviewed by Caroline Vie about her lack of credit for *Inferno*, Nicolodi says that

> I didn't take a writing credit for INFERNO [sic], instead the producers paid me with a trip to the Caribbean. That's how I wanted it, I didn't want to be too visible . . . I just wanted to disappear! For a long time I only wanted to be Dario's shadow, but since we separated, I would like some recognition of what I have contributed to his work. (qtd. in Martin 1997, 11).

This resentment period[19] gives us much of what we know about Nicolodi's work on Argento's films in the way of interviews and seems to have influenced her writing for Cozzi.

Nicolodi herself did not promote herself in a way that makes her recognizable to serious criticism, academic or popular; in effect, despite appearing in 'masculine' roles, she often presented herself in stereotypically feminine ways which potentially undercut any serious consideration of her under-the-table contributions. Asked, in response to her bitterness about being overlooked, if she had aspirations to direct her own movies, Nicolodi responded, "No, because to quote Wim Wenders, 'Directors are all gangsters,' and I prefer to remain a softer figure, i.e. an actress" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 117). Her daughter Asia repeats this gendered characterization of actors and directors, although she herself has chosen to play both roles. Having spoken openly about her father's hatred of actors (for example, in *Dario Argento: An Eye for Horror*), even as she acted in his films, Asia describes the role of director as more satisfying: "I became a real totalitarian on set [. . .] I screamed 'Silence' and everyone stopped. [. . .] It was fabulous. No one ever took any notice of me as an actress when I did that!" (Jones 2004, 277). With a critical eye on both parents, Asia describes her parent's battle as extending for her entire life, and

[19] On Nicolodi's more recent claims of authorship, see Shearer (2020).

rooted in a director/actress conflict that features feminine vanity and masculine authority:

> If I was [sic] to pinpoint the exact moment I knew it was over between them I'd say it was when Dario didn't give Daria the lead in **Suspiria**. I got sick of hearing her say, your father stole **Suspiria** from me. But when you write a script with someone, as she did with my father, you can't accuse that person of stealing what is essentially a collaborative effort. She also hated the fact that Dario only offered her a supporting role in the movie. That mortally wounded Daria's pride and actress ego. If she had played a ballerina she wouldn't have said anything. However, she veiled how upset she was by accusing him of stealing her ideas instead. How Hollywood-pathetic is that? I know in my heart that's really what it was all about. But now **Suspiria** has entered movie folklore as the masterpiece my father dragged screaming away from my mother. Nothing is ever that simple. (Jones, 271-272)

Earlier, in her interview for *Spaghetti Nightmares*, Nicolodi admits to her resentment over not being cast in the film (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 144) and has admitted to having an actor's ego when she does not get the part she wants (Martin 1997, 39). She laments that "the thing was that I'd written Suzy's part for myself" (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114), and Argento later (partially) corroborates this, explaining that "we had built Suzy's character together" (Argento 2019, 171). ("I wrote it for you!" Mark tells his wife in *De Profundis*.) Yet, Nicolodi maintained that Argento failed to acknowledge her writing contributions. For Asia, at least at the time of her interview with Jones, her mother's writing was not meant to play a starring role in *Suspiria*. But, as depicted in *De Profundis*, although writers are less often credited for a film's success (and more often women), strangely, Argento's screenwriting has bolstered his fame.

Before now, discussions of Argento's work that mentioned Nicolodi typically described her as his 'muse.' Nicolodi herself has portrayed herself in a feminine role not inconsistent with this gendered description. Her stepdaughter, Fiore Argento, gives a definition that might help us to understand the term, saying of Nicolodi, "she was the muse—lots of poets and artists love her because she makes you think about things" (*Dario Argento: An Eye for Horror*, 2000). More than an object of adoration, the muse in Fiore's description is an active partner in creation, but not the author. In this sense, Nicolodi, at times, seemed content to adopt a traditionally feminine role in relation to creative

endeavors, leaving the genius to the men, almost resigned to her role as uncredited creator, simply wanting to be acknowledged in her role as what Alan Jones introduces her as: "Argento's lover and muse" (2004, 69). Despite her claim to desire credit for *Suspiria* (and to a lesser extent, *Inferno* and *Phenomena* [Martin 1997, 39; Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114]), she seems to consider appropriation a director's prerogative. Despite complaining about unacknowledged work, Nicolodi has also subscribed to narrative and rhetorical tropes that categorize her as a muse and feminine supporting influence. This feminine persona has a resentful side, however, and, like the three mothers, this vengeful femininity is expressed in her other screenwriting efforts. Just as Levana emerges at a time when the protagonist of *De Profundis* is most wronged, Nicolodi's "dark side" demands recognition, even revenge.

More recently, the word has gotten out that Nicolodi did more for Argento than serve as a 'muse,' and today, there is a general understanding that she was significantly involved in *Suspiria*. But the personal nature of her creative contribution and its corresponding disappearance is a barrier to true recognition and critical engagement. Unlike other Argento Collaborations, the co-writing of *Suspiria* was a date-night activity.[20] L. Andrew Cooper suggests this difference between Nicolodi and other collaborators in his call to read Argento's films as collaborative works, remarking that there is "a thin, permeable boundary between Dario Argento's personal life and his artistic work" and that "the most significant collaboration of his career has arguably been with Daria Nicolodi" (2012: 3). However, although he urges us to consider these types of collaborations, Cooper himself "does not focus on the sort of biographical criticism that Argento's collaborative relationships invite" (Cooper 2012, 3). It is one thing to pay closer attention to the work of collaborators on the payroll and in the credits, and a different (if related) project to unearth women's unpaid, uncredited labour. (This difference may also partly explain why Nicolodi is simultaneously disregarded as a writer but celebrated as an actress.) We might also remember that even in recent history a common-law partnership was socially less valued than legal marriage, and that this could have influenced critical perception. That is to say, without the official legal status, their relationship is even more *personal*.

As their relationship is personal as well as professional, Nicolodi has been relegated to the popular realm of gossip, trivia, and biographical anecdote,

[20] Argento recalls the initial stage of the project, the "discuss[ion]": "I remember we were in the bedroom on the big mattress thrown on the floor […] [Daria] was fascinated by the occult and I must admit she knew a lot more about it than I did. So *we* started *our* research" (2019: 166-167) [italics mine].

and much of the information concerning her creative involvement in Argento's films comes from popular sources, such as fan publications (for example, Martin). As a result, academics not only steer clear of discussing her, but in fact are prone to error when they do. For example, Louis Paul misattributes Asia's maternity to Argento's ex-wife (2005, 48), and Adam Knee calls her "a long-time friend" of Argento (1996, 225) (while not untrue, this description downplays and misconstrues their relationship). Knee, however, is one of the few to suggest Nicolodi was creatively involved in Argento's films. To be fair, as Jacqueline Reich points out, Argento himself, at least in earlier interviews, downplays the role of women in his life in interviews (2001, 92). But it does not excuse Jones' descriptions of Nicolodi as a scandalous woman whose looks have faded (2004, 72), despite the fact that he praises her in *Daria Argento: An Eye for Horror*, admitting that "Daria Nicolodi put Dario on a completely different track. If it had not been for their relationship, at that particular time, we would not get *Suspiria*" (2000).

But aside from such general statements, criticism of Argento's films have generally ignored Nicolodi as a significant factor in their *interpretations*. Critics typically treat Argento as the author and his films are often described as misogynist. For example, Jacqueline Reich notes that "There was a struggle between Argento and Nicolodi over the authorship of *Suspiria*" (2001, 104), but she does not discuss this further in her argument that *Suspiria* primarily represents male anxieties. Although Argento himself may be guilty of misogyny and anxieties about women (Asia also remarks on "The problem my father has with women" [Jones 2004, 272]), his films contain more voices than one. While on the one hand, biography is considered passé, and Nicolodi is often considered too personal to be significant, sometimes it seems as if critics biographize under the guise of merely analyzing the text. While it is commonplace to say that "Daria Nicolodi's contribution to shaping *Suspiria* needs to be taken into account" (McDonagh 1991, 137), that is usually where it ends.

For example, in a recent issue of *Horror Studies*, Joshua Schulze notes Nicolodi's co-writing role, crediting her with the female-dominated script (2019, 74). However, he then goes on to explain that this is irrelevant to his discussion of the film, since he is analyzing only the visual aspects, including a scene "coded as masculine" to reinforce his argument that *Suspiria* depicts modernity as masculine and art nouveau styles as feminine (80). The scene in question is one in which Suzy Banyon travels to the nearby university to discuss the problem of witchcraft with a professor of psychiatry. It includes the quotes by Jung and St.

Augustine that Nicolodi claims to have contributed (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114; Martin 1997, 12). Martin explains that "she is responsible for inserting some of [*Suspiria*'s] most well-remembered lines, e.g. 'broken mirrors… broken minds' and 'magic is all around us' (quotes from Jung and St. Augustine, respectively)" (12).[21] In her interview for *Spaghetti Nightmares*, Nicolodi sounds a little like Esther Semerani, the professor of the occult in Cozzi's *De Profundis*, noting the actor's incorrect delivery in this scene:

> Everything belongs to me in SUSPIRIA, even the individual quotations such as Jung's phrase, "There are no cracked mirrors, only cracked minds," that the young psychiatrist (Udo Kier) addresses to Susy, or the famous quotations by Saint Augustine, "Quoddam ubique, quoddam semper, quoddam ab omnibus creditum est," which, however, is wrong because the actor had lost his lines sheet during the shooting…the exact sentence is "Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est." (Palmerini and Mistretto 1996, 114)

Of course, these quotes are from male thinkers, which may bolster Schulze's argument, but it seems ironic that he chooses this scene, particularly "the expository dialogue, correlating knowledge with masculinity," that Nicolodi was so invested in, to discuss a supposed patriarchal theme in the film (Schulze 2019, 80). While Schultze's claim about gendered architectural space is convincing, like Reich, he ultimately makes the broader argument that the film is rooted in anxious masculinity, claiming that "*Suspiria* [. . .] demonstrates man's complicated relationship with the feminine in art" (83). Perhaps, as Adam Knee suggests, Argento's films are not reducible to a simplistic gender binary (1996). But more than that, criticism needs to move beyond the notion that man creates and woman appears, that the artist is male (and immune to influence), and that representations of women necessarily always represent 'male fears and desire' (to use a cliché phrase). To seriously consider Nicolodi's work as a writer would be to disrupt established scholarship on Argento and perhaps even on horror film studies in general. This break with tradition may even be happening now, as very recently Martha Shearer has published a critique of *Suspiria* that considers Nicolodi's role as co-creator (2020).

Perhaps one reason that critics—aside from Shearer—have failed to investigate Nicolodi's work more closely is that they see her role as a cipher for Argento. That is to say, while they acknowledge she did work, or that, as

[21] Argento (2019: 175) attributes the latter quote to Vincent of Lérins; I cannot confirm the source.

Stephen Thrower remarks, she was "the most important woman in Argento's creative and personal life" (2001, 141), they do not consider her distinctive creative voice or her critical and inventive capacity. This is in keeping with Spender's argument that women's creativity, relegated to the role of helping and supporting, slips into the property of men, who are more likely to be viewed as individual creators. Argento himself, despite finally revealing in his autobiography some of Nicolodi's considerable contributions, seems to have succumbed to this view. When he describes their research trip together, during a good period in their relationship, it sounds as if they are one person with a single goal: "we formed a precise plan" [for *Inferno*] (Argento 2019, 187). Once this unity dissolves, he does not mention her contributions to *Inferno* any further. His relationship with Asia seems to follow a similar pattern, and he describes a struggle when she decides to stop being his on-call actress and follow her own life path (Argento 2019, 254). Discussing his writing on *The Stendhal Syndrome,* he says that "together with my daughters, [. . .] I had come up with the lead character [. . .] Every evening after dinner we would sit at the writing desk and work on the psychology of Anna Manni" (Argento 2019, 244). Notice the shift in attribution: "together [. . .] I." As head of the family, the man organizes family labour. Likewise, critics acknowledge that Nicolodi did work, "co-wrote," and helped in specifically feminized ways. For example, Schulze, above, credits her with the female characters in *Suspiria* (in effect, adding women). They may credit her grandmother's fairy tale as a resource she provides for inspiration, just as De Quincey is cited as an inspiration for Argento, although it was Nicolodi's critical mind that in fact revealed these stories to him, complete with musical details ("strange noises [. . .] like a slow samba" marks the witches presence, according to her re-telling of her grandmother's story [Jones 2004, 72]). Too, Nicolodi's mischievous sense of humour and flamboyant storytelling style she displays in interviews is often taken seriously, and critics take her clever teasing about witchcraft—like Shirley Jackson before her—at face value. For example, Thrower cites Nicolodi's supposed belief in magic as another source of inspiration for Argento (2001, 141). In general, her male interviewers seem confused by Nicolodi and her jokes, and their accounts depict her as full of feminine resources that are passively transmitted to the male artist.

While these critical problems may sound antiquated, they remain stubbornly entrenched, continuing to obscure women's creative work. They are also problems that persist across the board, plaguing feminist, anti-feminist, and post-feminist critique.

This raises question: how can we correct it? Moving away from auteurism and combating overt sexism are important steps, of course, but that

is not where it ends. Recuperative scholarship is important, but so is a theoretical understanding of the processes of erasure, as well as adopting methodologies for recovery. Otherwise, the cycle of forgetting goes on for eternity. Feminist critics have long recognized the value of biography. It might be time to overcome our critical squeamishness and look into the abyss of the personal, which—surely, we know by now—is political.

Meanwhile, a tendency to ignore women's contributions continues in both the production and interpretation of contemporary films, including the 2018 *Suspiria r*emake. Director Luca Guadagnino's most well-known gaffe is his outright plagiarism of feminist artist Ana Mendieta, copying her photographic arrangements in his film (Maddeus 2018; Cills 2018). But, in claiming his film is feminist ("a great feminist film" [Douglas 2018]), Guadagnino has also appropriated feminism itself, particularly the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s he cites as inspiration, peddling a false image of second-wave Italian feminism that relies on equivocation: he insists that the movement was more concerned with "difference" than with "equality" (a notion Dakota Johnson also promulgates in television interviews, citing Guadagnino as her source), although for example, Silvia Federici has explained numerous times why they were not fighting for 'equality' in the sense that being *equal to men* was not the goal, but rather the role of men might also be challenged instead of upheld as a model to aspire to. In fact, a primary focus of this movement was women's unpaid labour.[22] In mischaracterizing an entire movement, Guadagnino adds insult to the injury of appropriation. In effect, he has perpetuated a hoax on film critics, who, familiar with feminism only as a buzzword, took his word for it and peppered their praise with vague notions of "empowerment." When pressed repeatedly in an interview for a popular feminist website to explain why he thinks his film is feminist, Guadagnino was unable to answer coherently, except to note that "I really don't have any problems about expressing my own femininity" and "man is created by a woman" (Juzwiak 2018). Incidentally, some attendees of the 2018 *Suspiria* premier wore "Weinstein is Innocent" t-shirts in protest of #metoo, a movement with which Asia Argento has been actively involved.[23] The media frenzy surrounding the remake was unconcerned with Asia's mother's work on the original film, the woman's story that inspired it, or

[22] For example, *The Wages for Housework* campaign grew out of this movement.

[23] And, in response to both her activism and public perception of her personal life, commenters on online media featuring Asia accuse her of witchcraft with astonishing frequency, ironically echoing the second-wave Italian feminist movement's identification with witches.

any specific, meaningful account of how the remake can be said to be "feminist."

But, despite the silence, it is not a secret that Nicolodi wrote the original *Suspiria* and influenced Argento's work in many ways. The evidence I have brought forward to make my case is widely known; this is, after all, as Asia notes, "folklore" and there has been some formal acknowledgment of Nicolodi's contributions more recently, including Argento's. But what have we done with this evidence? Scholarly and popular analysis of Argento's oeuvre has not taken these facts to be meaningful. Argento is the official author, and studies of 'his' films are still organized this way. However, as Janet Staiger points out, "another outcome in liberal sociology is to shift authorship to another worker in the system, often the producer or the scriptwriter" (2003: 42). I do not wish to claim that Nicolodi is the 'real' author of Argento's films. That would, in some way, still subscribe to traditional notions of authorship.

Reducing the importance of masculinity for authorship has not re-valued women's roles; instead, it has merely made masculinity an implicit, rather than explicit, feature of the *auteur*. Similarly, recent attempts to draw attention to the lack of gender parity in *directorship* of films is too limited in scope, since it is yet another attempt to fill a masculine role with token women rather than reconsider the nature of the role itself. As Mark Jancovich argues, "Rather than simply reproduce this marginalization, there is a need to actively search out practitioners that have been forgotten" and perform "research that addresses the contribution of women when they are present" (2019, 45, 3). In a sense, we might go back to the basics of feminist research and to the very same problems that Spender and others have attempted to address. These problems have not gone away. In shifting our focus from explicitly masculine authorship images to gender-neutral or even female ones, we may in fact ignore or reinforce real-world power dynamics that may prevent women's voices from being heard—that is, besides those echoing screams of Paganini's bride.

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Allegories of Passion*: Ta'ziyeh* and the Allegorical Moment in Shahram Mokri's *Fish and Cat*

Max Bledstein

An image in *Fish and Cat* (Shahram Mokri, 2013) immediately catches the eye: a patch of blood (Figure 1). Although it may seem minor, the blood illustrates the Iranian film's unique combination of well-trodden traditions in Iran's national cinema with surprising and unexpected novelties. It appears on the shirt of Babak, who, like his friend Saeed, works as a cook at a restaurant adjacent to a campground outside of Tehran. *Fish and Cat* tells the story of a group of university students who participate in a kite-flying competition held at the campground, and who interact with Babak and Saeed throughout the film. A title card at the beginning contextualizes these interactions: in 1998, a restaurant had been shut down due to a health code violation. The chefs were later imprisoned for serving inedible meat, rumoured to have been human flesh. This information suggests impending doom throughout the film. As the viewer watches, she wonders if and when the characters will die. Images such as the blood on Babak's shirt intensify this morbid affect, as do menacing set pieces in which he and Saeed pursue the students. Although no acts of violence are shown onscreen, these intimations of death more than earn *Fish and Cat* its designation as "Iran's first slasher film."[1] However, the lack of graphic violence also troubles generic categorization. This troubling continues through the tension between the film's single, unbroken take, which suggests the linear passage

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[1] The phrase appears in the following profile of Mokri: Ben Sachs, "Meet Shahram Mokri, Director of Iran's First Slasher Film," *Chicago Reader*, Feb 19, 2015. https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2015/02/19/meet-shahram-mokri-director-of-irans-first-slasher-film. However, an earlier example of an Iranian slasher can be found in the film *Girls' Dormitory* (Mohammed Hossein Latifi, 2004). For more on *Girls' Dormitory,* see: Pedram Partovi, "*Girls' Dormitory:* Women's Islam and Iranian Horror," *Visual Anthropology Review* 25.2 (2009): 186-207.

of time, with the repetition of images and dialogue, which suggests circularity. Dialogue occasionally overlaps with voiceovers, which seem to inhabit a different time period.

Figure 1: Blood on Babak's shirt.

These temporal conflicts exemplify the "allegorical moment," a term Adam Lowenstein coins to describe the operation of temporality in horror films that engage in sociocultural commentary or critique. Lowenstein defines the allegorical moment "as a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined" (Lowenstein 2005, 3). For Lowenstein, the allegorical moment is "situated at the unpredictable and often painful juncture where past and present collide" (Lowenstein 2005, 5). Horror films with allegorical moments, in other words, present intersections between their filmic texts, historical context, and the viewers experiencing the connections between the two. Past and present interact fluidly, unburdened by the restrictions of linear temporality. The sociocultural commentary of *Fish and Cat* concerns the divide between Iranians of what Shahram Khosravi calls the First and Second Generations, who were between the ages of early adolescence and their twenties at the time of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, with those of the Third Generation, born just before or after the revolution (Khosravi 2005, 5). The allegorical moments of *Fish and Cat* put this conflict into dialogue with the film's complex temporality, inextricably entangled with Babak's blood-stained shirt and other suggestions of the students' deaths.

While *Fish and Cat*'s uses of elements of the horror genre (which does not appear frequently in Iranian cinema, with a few notable exceptions, including *Girls' Dormitory*) highlight the film's novelty, it also has important

points of continuity with the arthouse cinema which has been the focus of the vast majority of Western scholarship on Iran's rich filmic tradition.[2] Director Shahram Mokri even makes explicit references to the films of Abbas Kiarostami and Asghar Farhadi, two of Iran's most well-known auteurs, whose bodies of work have been the subject of much of the literature.[3] *Fish and Cat* continues traditions of artistic practice in Iranian cinema by using aesthetic traits reminiscent of the *ta'ziyeh*, a traditional Iranian passion play mourning the martyrdom of Husayn (though the plays themselves tell a range of stories). Kiarostami has cited the influence of the *ta'ziyeh* on his work, as has the filmmaker Bahram Bayza'i. Alongside these connections to Iranian art cinema, Babak's bloody shirt and other comparable images remind the viewer of Mokri's affinity with the horror film.

This juxtaposition exists within the lineage of Iranian films such as Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997), which Kiarostami himself and critics have described as containing transfigurations of qualities of the *ta'ziyeh* into cinema. Indeed, Mokri himself has acknowledged the influence of the *ta'ziyeh* on his follow-up film *Invasion* (2017) (Fahim 2018). The approach to time in the *ta'ziyeh* connects the performances of the present with historical figures of the past, which disrupts the audience's sense of chronological temporality. The sense of disruption also marks the allegorical moment, evoked throughout *Fish and Cat*'s destabilizations of temporal continuity, themselves rooted in gruesome images such as the blood on Babak's shirt. I argue that the interaction between the single take, formal elements of the horror film, and the *ta'ziyeh* in *Fish and Cat* engenders a unique example of allegorical horror.

Ta'ziyeh Time

The aesthetics of *Fish and Cat* evoke the *ta'ziyeh*, which re-enacts the martyrdom of Husayn and related events. In 680 CE, Husayn and his

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[2] For more on Iranian horror, see: Laura Fish, "The Disappearing Body: Poe and the Logics of Iranian Horror Films," *Poe Studies* 53 (2020): 86–104; Farshid Kazemi, *Interpreter of Desires: Iranian Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2019, 186-226; Zahra Khosroshahi, "Vampires, Jinn and the Magical in Iranian Horror Films," *Frames* 16 (2019), https://framescinemajournal.com/article/vampires-jinn-and-the-magical-in-iranian-horror-films/.

[3] Some notable examples of scholarship on Kiarostami and Farhadi include: Mathew Abbott, *Abbas Kiarostami and Film-Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, translated by Belinda Coombes (London: Saqi, 2005); Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Michelle Langford, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 193-233; and Daniele Rugo, "Asghar Farhadi: Acknowledging Hybrid Traditions: Iran, Hollywood and Transnational Cinema," *Third Text* 30.3-4 (2016): 173-187.

followers were killed in battle against the caliphate in Karbala, a key moment for the divide between Shiite and Sunni Muslims (Mottahedeh 2008a, 17). Shiites saw this incident as "the ultimate example of sacrifice" (Chelkowski 2005, 16). Accordingly, Michael Fischer describes the event as having inspired the "Karbala paradigm," which consists of "models for living and a mnemonic for thinking about how to live…to which almost all of life's problems can be referred" (Fischer 1980, 21). The *ta'ziyeh* is arguably the most prominent cultural manifestation of the Karbala paradigm (Aghaie 2005, 46). *Ta'ziyeh* plays tend to show Husayn as a weeping man who proclaims his innocence, which encourages audience members to ruminate on their own woes (Gaffary 1984, 368). Audience involvement is a fundamental aspect of *ta'ziyeh* performance, as spectators' identification with Husayn codifies their religious and ideological commitments (Beeman 2011, 150-5).

The *ta'ziyeh* can be understood as a lens through which elements of Iranian culture, particularly cinema, become clear. Into the present day, the *ta'ziyeh* continues to show values and ideas fundamental to "the essential Iranian moral order" (Beeman 2011, 142). These themes revolve around a Manichaean conflict between good and evil (Ale-Mohammed 2001, 56). The juxtaposition of past and present temporalities also central to the *ta'ziyeh* has cultural resonances beyond the drama itself (Dabashi 2005, 95). Reza Ale-Mohammed describes the *ta'ziyeh* as "fused with literary tradition, mythical action, legend, and religious hagiography" (Ale-Mohammed 2001, 54). In addition to these elements, Negar Mottahedeh has identified the influence of the *ta'ziyeh* on formal aspects of post-revolutionary Iranian film (Mottahedeh 2008a, 15-88). Filmmakers have staged *ta'ziyeh* plays themselves; for example, Kiarostami directed an Iranian troupe in Rome in *The Martyrdom of Husayn* in July 2003 (Chelkowski 2009). Focusing on the work of Bayza'i, but intending the argument to be applicable to other Iranian filmmakers as well, Mottahedeh suggests that the *ta'ziyeh*'s non-linearity and chronological collision present "the spatial and temporal tropes for Iranian cinema's post-Revolutionary address" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 20). The temporality of *Fish and Cat* results from the contact between these tropes and generic properties of the horror film.

A prior example of cinematic inspiration from the *ta'ziyeh* appears in the final scene of *Taste of Cherry*. For most of the film's running time, a man named Baadi drives around Tehran, looking for someone to bury him after he commits suicide. Once he finds someone willing to help, the film's closing moments depict Baadi sitting in the hole he has dug for himself. Following a lengthy blackout, *Taste of Cherry* ends with grainy camcorder footage showing Kiarostami, lead actor Homayoun Ershadi, and the crew shooting the film. An interviewer asked Kiarostami if the ending was inspired by

Brecht, to which he responded that the real influence was the self-reflexivity of the *ta'ziyeh* (Pak-Shiraz 2011, 159). An example of that self-reflexivity can be seen in the play's director, known as the *ta'ziyeh gardan*, who appears onstage and narrates for the audience (Dabashi 2005, 94). *Ta'ziyeh* actors traditionally use a stylized form of acting, in which they distance themselves from the characters they portray, to the point of reading lines from crib sheets (Chelkowski 2005, 21). The stages have minimal decor, instead relying on actors and the *ta'ziyeh gardan* to convey the setting to the audience (Chelkowski 2005, 17). Thus, the self-reflexivity and foregrounding of subjectivity seen in the final scene of *Taste of Cherry* and a number of films by Kiarostami and other prominent Iranian filmmakers evidence the influence of the *ta'ziyeh* on Iranian cinema.

Taste of Cherry specifically evokes the *ta'ziyeh*'s use of such self-reflexivity to tell a story about death. Although the film does not make Baadi's morbid fate as apparent and inevitable throughout as the *ta'ziyeh* does with the death of Husayn and his followers, Kiarostami's narrative shares the centrality of death with the play. Furthermore, Michael Price argues that the final scene links Baadi with martyrdom: "If an Islamic martyr lives forever, Baadi's cinematic existence comes into play. Like an Islamic martyr, in the form and body of the film, he does not technically die and his existence transforms from a physical embodiment to some sort of image intended for interpretation" (Price 2001). The scene's overt artifice thereby functions, like similar methods of depiction in the *ta'ziyeh*, to show death. The influence Kiarostami describes is evident not only in the film's self-reflexivity, but in the use of that self-reflexivity to depict the protagonist's death, within a film focused on death in a manner comparable to the *ta'ziyeh*.

A similar convergence between self-reflexivity and death reappears in *Fish and Cat*'s final scene, albeit transformed in accordance with contrasts between the two films. The sequence begins with the handheld cinematography seen throughout the rest of the film, now showing for the first time a conversation between Hamid, another cook, and Maral, one of the students.[4] Both characters have been referenced in earlier dialogue. Babak and Saeed refer to Hamid in their first conversation, in which they discuss him being shot. The discussion is one of several repeated word for word throughout the film, but the final interaction with Maral and the moments immediately prior show Hamid's visual appearance. In contrast, she is only referenced in one prior conversation between two of the students,

[4] Here and throughout this essay, I distinguish individual shots, even though the entire film appears as a single shot. For example, I note the clear crane shot here, although Mokri mostly uses handheld cinematography earlier in the unbroken take. This method of description allows me to differentiate individual moments in the film, which, I argue, do distinguish themselves.

Mina and Kambiz. Mina informs him that Maral has gone to a restaurant for lunch and not returned. Mina jokes, "About Maral," a reference to the film *About Elly* (Asghar Farhadi, 2009), in which the titular character also goes missing. Mokri finally shows Maral when Hamid approaches her reading under a tree. She gives him one of her earphones to listen, at which point a voiceover from Maral begins, in which she narrates her murder at Hamid's hands. As she explains, the song heard in the earphones is "Fish and Cat" by the band Pallett, and it begins to play as Hamid pulls a knife from his sleeve, presumably to carry out the killing. The camera then pans 180º to show Pallett in long shot playing the song, followed by a crane out showing kites flying over their heads (Figure 2).

Figure 2: A performance by Pallet.

The overt artifice of this sequence contrasts with the naturalism of the rest of the film, much like the contrast created by the final scene in *Taste of Cherry*. But *Fish and Cat* reverses the two sides of the contrast: whereas *Taste of Cherry* proceeds for most of its running time as perhaps Kiarostami's least self-reflexive film and ends with a declaration of authorship, *Fish and Cat* initially appears documentary-like in its handheld cinematography and casual dialogue, ending with the stylization of the crane, band, and kites. However, the stylization similarly acknowledges artifice; although Kiarostami's visual appearance distinguishes *Taste of Cherry*, a clear authorial presence can likewise be discerned through the explicit constructedness of *Fish and Cat*'s conclusion. The twin authorial endings also both follow the implication of a character's death, which, in the case of *Taste of Cherry*, has been linked by its creator with the *ta'ziyeh*. Regarding the reference to *About Elly*, moreover, Michelle Langford likewise discusses the film in dialogue with the *ta'ziyeh*. Langford links the association between *About Elly* and the

ta'ziyeh with Iranians' capacity for "appropriating these signifying systems—symbols, slogans, iconography—and using them for their own purposes" in opposition to the government in the 2009 Green Movement protests (Langford 2019, 237). I suggest that a connection between the traits of the *ta'ziyeh* and the depiction of death similar to *Taste of Cherry* can also be seen in *Fish and Cat*.

The artifice acknowledged through the ending builds on the self-reflexivity of the preceding voiceovers. After an opening voiceover reads a title card explaining the rumours around the cannibalistic restaurant owners, audible narration disappears to instead show the conversations between the chefs and their interactions with the students. But after Kambiz's father finishes a phone conversation, we hear Kambiz's voice discussing his relationship with his parents before we have seen him onscreen. The voiceover says, "My father always calls," after which the father calls out: "Kambiz, Kambiz!" Once Kambiz enters, we hear their discussions, but the voiceover also reappears sporadically, offering commentary on the interaction. In a particularly striking moment, the voiceover overlaps with both Kambiz's voice in the conversation and that of his father, suggesting that the Kambiz speaking in the voiceover already knows what him and his father will say to each other. The use of voiceover, both with Kambiz and Maral, implies the audience addressed by that voice: an acknowledgment of the spectator, much as the artifice of the final scene recognizes the film's authorship. Like the narration of the *ta'ziyeh gardan*, the voiceover speaks directly to the viewer.

The different voices show the intermingling of temporalities characteristic of the *ta'ziyeh*. From the *ta'ziyeh*'s high point of popularity in the nineteenth century into the present, the passion play has re-enacted a historical event from the seventh century in the present day (Mottahedeh 2008b, 11). As William O. Beeman explains, audience members "are both on the plains of Karbala, representing symbolically the forces surrounding Husayn and his followers, and simultaneously in the present-day world mourning on the occasion of the event" (Beeman 2011, 150). The *ta'ziyeh* chronology thereby engenders the unity of disparate time periods. Mottahedeh states that the "integration of time and space, of past and present, of here and there, sets the tone of a performance in which the blurring of eras and spheres ensures the blurring of the differences...that establish an actual historical happening as separate from the time of its performative transformation" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 18-19). I contend that the convergent time periods evoked by the voiceovers in *Fish and Cat* suggest a similar blurring. As Kambiz's voiceover clashes with the conversation, the film disrupts the dialogue's ostensible present tense with the voiceovers' more ambiguous temporality. Throughout *Fish and Cat*, the present of the

dialogue and the ambiguous chronology of the voiceovers cannot be disentangled with ease.

The film's entanglements blur boundaries between life and death. Mokri introduces the concept of communicating with the dead in the initial discussion between Babak and Saeed. He explains that Hamid's nephew has recorded a disc of classical music, and offers to share headphones for listening. Babak responds in confusion: "Do you know that Hamid's nephew is dead?" Prior to this question, the score's strings enter as Babak stops walking at Saeed's mention of the nephew, again suggesting the significance of the moment and emphasizing Babak being taken aback. Although he agrees to listen, he continues to ask how Saeed could have received the music from a dead person. Saeed then agrees that the nephew is dead, says that it explains the whispering sound on the recording, and implores Babak to listen once again. The camera moves from long shot to medium close-up as the two men share the earphones, again highlighting the importance of the exchange (Figure 3). As they listen, we hear a faint whooshing sound, and Saeed continues to ask Babak if he hears it, to which he responds that he does not.

Figure 3: Babak and Saeed listen to music

This exchange, although inconclusive, brings to the film the theme of communication between the living and the dead. Mokri does not reveal whether or not Hamid's nephew truly is dead, nor does he explain how Saeed could have gotten the disc from a dead person. Hamid's appearance onscreen in the film's conclusion plays with this ambiguity but does not clarify it. He confirms for Saeed that the nephew has recorded the disc, but does not address the death. This suggestion of communication influences the viewer's understanding of the voiceovers, which, although not explicitly

labelled as the voices of the dead students speaking from the afterlife, have a ghostly affect due to the implication of their fate at the start of the film. The ambiguity evokes the "blurring of eras and spheres" Mottahedeh associates with the temporality of the *ta'ziyeh* (Mottahedeh 2008a, 18). Mottahedeh also links this blurring with the relationship between the living audience members and performers and the dead historical figures being represented:

> The *ta'ziyeh* structure, in reflecting on the past in the present, redeems the past in light of the cultural variables of its time. The *ta'ziyeh*'s structure, its temporal and spatial modes, more than its historical contents, produce this effect. While casting the audience as the mourners, mourning the events of the past, the eulogies' temporal and spatial tropes fit the *ta'ziyeh* participants into the mould of the supporters of Imam Husayn in the present and everyday. (Mottahedeh 2008b, 134)

The *ta'ziyeh* chronology thereby evinces a direct connection between the living and the dead, much as the suggestion of listening to music from the dead nephew links the present of the characters on screen with a possible death in the past. The possible death of the students, in contrast, would presumably occur after the events seen in the film. But Mokri avoids clear delineations of temporality, instead allowing the suggested time periods to blend together in a manner reminiscent of the temporal approach Mottahedeh attributes to the *ta'ziyeh*.

Death thereby looms throughout the film, feeling inescapable. After the opening title card's suggestion of the students' morbid fate, the inevitability of this fate colours everything we see. A key example lies in the patch of blood on Babak's shirt. The image corresponds with a bag containing a red substance Babak carries throughout the film. Although Mokri never clarifies the contents of the bag or the source of the shirt stain, the suggestion of cannibalism leads the viewer to suspect that Babak bears the mark of his victims. Mokri perhaps most explicitly plays with the suspicion in a scene in which Babak chases another of the students, Parvaneh, through the woods. The encounter begins with Babak sneaking up on her as she sits in her car, scaring her and establishing an ominous mood between them. He asks her to go into the woods with him to fix a valve; she cannot understand how she could possibly help, but ultimately agrees with reluctance after he continues to insist. She walks behind him, presumably hoping to keep her distance, but this becomes its own source of fear: after Parvaneh tells her friends that she will be right back, a medium shot shows her looking around, disturbed to find no one else in sight (Figure

4). She yells out, "Excuse me sir, where did you go?" His lack of response emphasizes the dread of the exchange. A following shot shows her looking for him with trepidation, and he finally reappears in a manner equally disconcerting to his introduction of himself to Parvaneh: we hear his heavy breathing, and only after Parvaneh's gasp at the sound does the camera move to show him in medium close-up. Although she leaves unscathed, dread permeates the encounter, furthered by the initial suggestion of the chef's murderousness.

Figure 4: Parvaneh in the woods.

This sequence thereby juxtaposes the inevitability of death suggested in the *ta'ziyeh* with the suspense of a horror film. As Ale-Mohammed explains, the performers and viewers' knowledge of the fate of the figures being portrayed alleviates tension: "Since both the actors and audience are aware of the events of Karbala, and are united in their condemnation, there is no illusion, suspense, or dramatic tension" (Ale-Mohammed 2001, 58). A similar foreknowledge of death shadows the viewing of *Fish and Cat* and leaves the viewer expecting the students' death throughout the film. The relative inconclusiveness provides the space for the tension of a horror film, most heavily emphasized in the scene between Parvaneh and Babak. Her statement to her friends that she will return recalls a similar line in the meta horror film *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), in which the character Randy notes the use of the line "I'll be right back" immediately before a character's death as a cliché of the genre, as well as the many similar moments in slasher films *Scream* parodies. In *Scream*, reporter Gale Weathers says this line, and does encounter the killer Ghostface afterwards. In one of the film's many inversions of horror conventions, however, she survives the exchange. Likewise, Parvaneh survives her interaction with Babak, much as Baadi returns in the coda of *Taste of Cherry* after the implication of his suicide. In

both of these cinematic evocations of *ta'ziyeh* aesthetics, then, the filmmakers use the feeling of death's inevitability and the expectation of death to strong dramatic effect.

Mokri further emphasizes the inescapability of death through circularity. Mottahedeh describes how the circular stage characteristic of the *ta'ziyeh* leads to circular movement by the performers: "To go from one place to another, the actor merely announces his intention to travel and often walks or rides on horseback once around the circular stage to arrive at 'the new location'" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 18). Circularity appears in *Fish and Cat* in several ways. The narrative itself loops, as seen in the repetition of conversations. The campground in which the conversations occur is a semicircle of sorts. Mokri uses the circular "stage" of the campground for a film in which characters move not forward but circularly, repeating actions and dialogue in ostensible perpetuity. Mokri brings the circularity of *ta'ziyeh* staging to cinema.

Horror Time

The circularity of *Fish and Cat* engenders evocations of Lowenstein's allegorical moment. Each chapter of Lowenstein's monograph examines films from a different national cinema as case studies of manifestations of the allegorical moment. The film Lowenstein uses to exemplify the allegorical moment in American cinema, *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), resembles *Fish and Cat*'s own relationship with its sociocultural context. Although the narrative of Craven's film closely follows that of *The Virgin Spring* (Ingmar Bergman, 1960), Lowenstein associates the violence of *Last House* with American intergenerational conflict in the Vietnam era, and particularly the 1970 killing of student anti-war demonstrators at Kent State University (Lowenstein 2005, 113-29). Indeed, *Last House* opens with teenage protagonist Mari being scolded by her parents for not wearing a bra, an evocation of disparaging attitudes towards the sexuality of American young adults of the era from older generations. After Mari tells them the name of the band she is going to see ("Bloodlust"), and her father reads aloud from a newspaper article about violence at their concerts, her mother responds in horror: "I thought you were supposed to be the love generation!" The scene ends with Mari's parents giving her a peace sign necklace, an important symbol of opposition to the Vietnam War amongst Americans of Mari's generation. This exchange leads the viewer to read the violence that follows in relation to the Vietnam era.

Fish and Cat illustrates comparable relations between a fictional film and its sociocultural context. *Fish and Cat* situates its own primary cultural issue, the conflict between Iranians of the first and second generations and those of the third, approximately at the time of the film's 2013 release. Indeed, the students belong to the third generation, which, according to

Khosravi, "has been totally formed under the rule of the Islamic regime" (Khosravi 2008, 5). In contrast, the cooks, who belong to the first and second generations, share the experiences of the Iranian Revolution and eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88). The intergenerational discrepancy becomes particularly apparent in the references to Hamid serving in the war, a conversation repeated throughout the film. Indeed, Langford argues that the film's many repetitions represent how "Mokri's film paints a picture of a generation wishing to transcend a world trained by the actions of an older generation, but instead being caught up in ever-repeating cycles that lead nowhere" (Langford 2019, 11). Langford thereby likens the film to the depiction of the third generation in *About Elly*, a film *Fish and Cat* explicitly cites through Mina's quotation. Mokri himself has emphasized the centrality of the generational divide to *Fish and Cat*: "People of that generation who were of fighting age during the war, they think that Iran is their place. The bad guys in *Fish & Cat* fought in the war, so they think of the woods as their zone. They don't understand why the students want to be there" (Sachs 2015). As with *Last House*, the ensuing violence is emblematic of the generational conflict of the film's milieu.

Furthermore, just as Lowenstein links the violence of *Last House* to the particular tragedy at Kent State, the violence of *Fish and Cat* can be associated with violence against the protestors of the Green Movement, which followed the 2009 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This marks an important point of contrast with *About Elly*: although Farhadi's film likewise depicts the experiences of the third generation, it was released in Iran days before the 2009 election (Langford 2019, 235). Thus, while *About Elly* does seem to foreshadow the generation's mass participation in the protests, they occurred after the film had already been completed and released. In contrast, Mokri explains that censors had asked him to edit Maral's voice-over "because it invokes an image of a girl who was killed in the protests following Ahmadinejad's reelection" (Sachs 2015). Mokri has confirmed elsewhere that the girl referred to is Neda Agha-Soltan, a twenty-six year old whose murder by state paramilitary *basij* was recorded in a viral video (Mottahedeh 2015, 4).[5] Mottahedeh explains the significance of this incident: "An injustice had been done. Hundreds of thousands of people watched the video online and reposted it. The video of a young Iranian woman's agonizing death went viral in a matter of hours. Her name…became the rallying cry for the Iranian opposition" (Mottahedeh 2015, 4). Whereas *Last House* alludes to Kent State, Mokri's film captures the injustice Mottahedeh describes.

Fish and Cat's relationship with its source material further evokes the allegorical moment. The film's opening title card explains the narrative's link

[5] My thanks to Mahsa Salamati for bringing this to my attention.

with the rumoured story of a restaurant having served human flesh. As a result, the film is "based on a true case," as the title card tells us just before providing the basics of the story with the restaurant. This explanation again links *Fish and Cat* with *Last House*, as Craven's film likewise begins with a declaration of authenticity: "The events you are about to witness are true. Names and locations have been changed to protect those individuals still living." Lowenstein correctly links this statement with the tradition of purported relationships to real events in exploitation films, regardless of the accuracy of the claims (Lowenstein 2005, 123-9). Yet Lowenstein argues that the film's most tangible connection to real events is not with any incidents closely aligning with the brutal murder of Mari and her friend Phyllis, around which the narrative revolves, but rather to Kent State. Similarly, the story of the restaurant provides *Fish and Cat* with its narrative impetus, but the connection to the 2009 post-election protests is perhaps more central to the film's significance.

The juxtaposition between the references to Iranian arthouse cinema and the nods to slasher movies likewise illustrates the allegorical moment. Lowenstein's interpretation of *Last House* calls for "a full consideration of the interconnections between art and exploitation that simultaneously produce and destabilize their distinctiveness. These interconnections contribute to the shock of the allegorical moment by implicating the spectator within and between the discourses of art and exploitation" (Lowenstein 2005, 137). This quotation refers to the contrast between *Last House*'s graphic violence and low budget and the esteem of its inspiration, *The Virgin Spring*, due to it having been directed by one of cinema's most acclaimed auteurs and having won the 1960 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film (Lowenstein 2005, 137). As Lowenstein points out, Robin Wood has also taken up this disparity: "*The Virgin Spring* is art; *Last House* is exploitation. One must return to that dichotomy because the difference between the two films in terms of the relationship set up between audience and action is inevitably bound up with it" (Wood 2018, 185). However, Wood also suggests that "it is the work of the best movies in either medium to transcend, or transgress, these limitations," and reads *Last House* as being emblematic of such transgression (Wood 2018, 185-6).

I argue that *Fish and Cat* functions similarly. Mokri constantly alludes to Iranian cinema's most internationally well-known auteur: Kiarostami. *Fish and Cat*'s characters repeatedly describe struggles to get cellphone reception, which recalls the similar issues of protagonist Behzad in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1999). The words of Kiarostami's film's title, itself being a line from the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad, reappear in the song played over *Fish and Cat*'s closing credits. The Kiarostami allusions align with the reference to *About Elly*, a film by Iran's first Academy Award winner.

The references to arthouse cinema collide with Mokri's evocations of less respected horror films.

Mokri's artistry can also be seen in the references to intergenerational conflict in contemporary Iran. He describes the overlap of social commentary and generic influence in *Fish and Cat* as being "two circles, one circle being the slasher movie and the other one being Iran today" (Sachs 2015). In a different interview, Mokri emphasizes his understanding of the longstanding relationship between horror cinema and sociocultural criticism: "I also believe that horror films refer to political and social conditions and the social approach is very important to me… I deliberately chose the horror genre due to Iran's political and social condition" (Ganjavie 2015). Where Bergman and exploitation meet Kent State in *Last House*, Kiarostami, Farhadi, and the slasher film meet the 2009 protests in *Fish and Cat*.

The different collisions enabled by the allegorical moment illustrate Walter Benjamin's concept of *Jetztzeit*. Benjamin defines *Jetztzeit* as "time filled by the present of the now" (Benjamin 1999, 261). Lowenstein argues that *Jetztzeit*'s "ability to arrest time, to reorganize relations between past and present, charges each moment with a potential future inflected by the politics of historical materialism, where the oppressed past no longer languishes unrecognised," and sees these abilities as being illustrated by the allegorical moment (Lowenstein 2005, 14). The allegorical moments of *Fish and Cat*, like those of *Last House*, exemplify the capacity of *Jetztzeit*. Barriers between genre and arthouse get transgressed. Distinctions between truth and fiction become questionable. Narratives about ostensibly unrelated subject matter speak to sociocultural conditions. In the *Jetztzeit* of the allegorical moment, mobilized by Mokri, the boundaries of linear temporality evaporate.

Mottahedeh likewise uses *Jetztzeit* as a theoretical framework for understanding temporality in the *ta'ziyeh*. According to Mottahedeh, "the ta'ziyeh stage sets up a situation in which the time and space of the past and the present coincide in a kind of *Jetztzeit*…so that the 'audience' become both the troops supporting Husayn in Karbala, and his mourners, mourning his death in the present" (Mottahedeh 2008b, 17). *Fish and Cat* evokes the situation that Mottahedeh describes in a number of ways. The circularity of the *ta'ziyeh* stage reappears in both the semi-circle of the film's campground and the circular narrative structure, in which events repeat. The deaths of the students become, like the death of Husayn, not finished moments in the past; rather, they return in the present through the actions of the performers and the audience. As with the allegorical moment, history becomes current, and *Jetztzeit* becomes the temporal perspective.

Fish and Cat presents this perspective through its unique combination of the allegorical moment with the aesthetics of the *ta'ziyeh*. Mottahedeh describes the effect of these aesthetics on post-revolutionary Iranian films,

which, she argues, "rely, sometimes exclusively, on a known tradition of temporal and spatial convergence that takes its cues from the ta'ziyeh's distinct and distinguishing mourning rituals" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 68). The collisions of dialogue and voiceovers throughout *Fish and Cat* illustrate the convergence Mottahedeh finds in the films of Bayza'i, borrowed from the *ta'ziyeh*. As the sounds interact, Mokri makes clear that *Fish and Cat* operates via a fluid logic. According to Mottahedeh, similar logic in Bayza'i's cinema, engendered by the convergences, offers the optimism of the future: "The collusion of times and spaces without prejudice in this tradition makes every moment in time an imaginal time in which a wished-for future arrives to redeem the wrongs of a lived past" (Mottahedeh 2008a, 68). Mokri's use of cinematic aesthetics comparable to those of Bayza'i, appropriated from the *ta'ziyeh*, suggests a future rife with possibilities for Iran's third generation. Where the events inspiring *Fish and Cat* tell the gruesome story of students falling victim to cannibals, Mokri's allegorical moments offer hope.

While the intimation of Hamid's murder of Maral, itself an allusion to the brutal slaying of Neda, might not seem hopeful, I would argue that the means by which Mokri depicts this act (or, rather, does not, as the killing does not actually appear onscreen), does offer optimism. As befits an essay on *Fish and Cat*, I will support this point by returning to my discussion of the final scene. I will also return to the conclusion of *Taste of Cherry*, which I likened earlier to the ending of *Fish and Cat*. In Kiarostami's film, the intimation of Baadi's death, followed by footage of actor Ershadi alive and well, suggests a resurrection: the film implies a suicide, but Baadi still lives on. The kites flying overhead, shown in the tender final moments of *Fish and Cat*'s closing crane shot, function similarly: we see the implication of Maral's death through the voiceover, but the kites suggest an afterlife for the students. Although Mokri implies their murders at the hands of the cooks, he follows this suggestion with signs of their ongoing presence in the kites. Both the crane shot and the appearance of Pallett mark a clear break with the rest of the film: in contrast to the handheld cinematography and naturalistic dialogue seen earlier, Mokri here emphasizes the artifice of the sequence. This emphasis enacts the students' rebirth—the artifice suggests a new temporal plane, in which the dead can be reborn. Mokri builds towards this suggestion throughout the film through the implications of communication with the dead via sound. Likewise, characters constantly defy death, such as in the scene with Babak and Parvaneh in the woods, in which Mokri leads the audience to expect her murder, but she escapes. The crane shot most fully realizes these implications by ascending skyward, showing a place for the students beyond the present. Although they die at the hands of the cooks in the present, Mokri's cinema, like Kiarostami's coda to *Taste of Cherry*, stages a resurrection.

The juxtaposition of Maral's voiceover and the kites thereby embodies Mokri's approach to temporality. After Maral describes her death for the viewer, the kites suggest her rebirth. We see that her death is not the conclusive end to a linear narrative, but rather a fluid moment in the circular *ta'ziyeh* stage evoked in *Fish and Cat*. The circularity thereby presents viewers with the hope Mottahedeh sees in the films of Bayza'i, in which the approach to death, influenced by the *ta'ziyeh,* likewise resists finality. This resistance provides hope by presenting possibilities for those limited by the barriers of the present through the voice-offs of Maral and the other students throughout the film. In the camera's final ascension, then, Mokri visualizes the defiance of death.

This visualization stems from the sense of *Jetzeit* seen in *Fish and Cat*, dually evoked through the mobilization of the allegorical moment and the *ta'ziyeh*. Mokri's evocations establish a cinematic temporality in which the past and present are inextricable. Indeed, even the most surface level reading of *Fish and Cat* would note that non-contemporaneity abounds in the film. As dialogue repeats, images reoccur, and voices overlap, Mokri unhinges the slasher film conventions he also suggests. In doing so, Mokri offers a plea for justice for the students, and Neda and Iran's third generation in the process. The allegorical moments of *Fish and Cat*, put into dialogue with the *ta'ziyeh*, depict the possibility of a rewriting of historical wrongs.[6]

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[6] As part of our commitment to developing scholars doing original work in horror studies, *MONSTRUM* is pleased to collaborate with the Horror Studies Scholarly Interest Group (SIG), part of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), in the selection and publication of this annual prize-winning graduate student essay for 2021, selected by a jury of SCMS-SIG scholars and the *MONSTRUM* editors.

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Book Review

Phases of the Moon: A Cultural History of the Werewolf Film

Craig Ian Mann
Edinburgh University Press, 2020

272pp.

In *Phases of the Moon: A Cultural History of the Werewolf Film*, Craig Ian Mann takes the reader on a rich exploration of the cinematic figure of the werewolf throughout the years predominantly in, but not restricted to, horror narratives. As indicated in the title of the book, Mann proposes a new approach to the study of the monster that departs from, what he calls, the ahistorical and reductive psychoanalytical interpretation of the werewolf as the "beast within" (10). Mann's conclusions are similar to those seen in zombie and vampire scholarship (Auerbach 1995; Waller 1986; Abbott 2007); however, as he writes throughout, the main goal of the book is not to provide original conclusions regarding the films' subtext, but to show that the lupine monster can be read as more than a monstrous eruption of the psyche and that it can be a versatile metaphor to explore contemporary, culturally-based anxieties and fears.

Mann recognises the work that has already been done on the cultural reading of the werewolf, citing many studies, such as Hannah Priest's *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* (2015) and Sam Gaorge and Bill Hughes's *In the Company of Wolves: Werewolves, Wolves and Wild Children* (2020), but he identifies gaps in the literature—especially in that no such book focuses solely on the cinematic form of the monster, which he indicates is a "particular problem in Film Studies" (8).

As mentioned above, the approach Mann chooses is not particularly new. Nor is his departure from the psychoanalytical reading of the werewolf absolute, since he recognises the theory of "the beast within" as a suitable analysis for many narratives. He sees werewolf films as malleable, offering themselves to multiple readings (10-11). He takes into consideration interviews, filmmaker's commentaries and their larger body of work and thematic concerns. By doing this, the book broadens the scope of cinematic analysis of the werewolf film to include the possibility of psychoanalytical (depicting the werewolf as the beast within), historical

and cultural (the werewolf as the product of its time), artistic and industrial (as the product of a creative vision within the context of production) (212). One example is *Wolf* (1994), which sees the protagonist in constant conflict with his inner self while also belonging to a group of films which, in Mann's terms, deal with the "dramatisation of a white male recapturing his masculinity" in the 1990s (159).

One of the largest contributions of *Phases of the Moon* to studies of cinematic horror (and of cinema more generally), is its construction of a broad history of the lupine creature in cinema from its beginning. Indeed, a substantial part of the first chapter is dedicated to the first films to depict a werewolf, *The Werewolf* (1913) and *The White Wolf* (1914). While he is not able to offer an exhaustive reading of these films, as they have been lost, nevertheless Mann marks their historical significance. In the introduction Mann makes a case for his study by tracing the werewolf's origins back to the rise of Christianity before examining its different meanings throughout the years and locating the start of the psychologised werewolf in 19th century literature, with fictional works such as George W. M. Reynolds's *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* (1846-7). He then groups his corpus into thematic cycles in order to understand them in a specific context—therefore the chapters are roughly in a chronological order, which follows the book's initial genealogical framing. Some of the themes explored in the book are: werewolves of foreign descent in chapter 2; she-wolves in chapters 2, 6 and 8; wolves as rebellious teenagers in chapter 3; alpha male wolves in chapter 7; and pack films in chapter 3 and 8.

The "cultural history" Mann sets out to explore is focused on North America and Europe. Although he cites British films throughout, other European films feature in only two chapters: chapter 4's analysis of British, Italian and Spanish films from the 70s; and chapter 8's brief investigation of other national cinemas, such as Canada, Denmark and New Zealand, with the films *WolfCop*, *When Animals Dream* and *What We Do In The Shadows* (all 2014), respectively. He analyses the Canadian film within a new trend of socio-political films, and the Danish within a feminist trend to depict female oppression—but he is all too brief when turning to the New Zealand film, which he cites only while listing other films. Mann explains the reason for his geographical focus by arguing that Europe and North America are the most prolific continental cinemas; however, he does acknowledge the need for further work beyond these regions.

The two most in-depth chapters are 5 ("What Big Teeth You Have") and 6 ("The Better to Eat You With"), both centering on the ascension of Reagan-era politics in the United States. Mann explains in chapter 5 that the preoccupation with bodies during the Reagan

administration (due to the growth of diet-culture, the exercise craze, and the AIDS epidemic) translated into the advances in practical effects. Mann uses *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) as an example of these trends due to its scenes of bodily transformation and decay. He later identifies the distinction between films that, in his analysis, supported conservative politics (*The Beast Within* and *Cat People*, both 1982) and those which critiqued conservatism (*Silver Bullet*, 1985). Chapter 6 picks up here and furthers each argument by devoting significant time to key historical events and then turning to the cinematic response's they evoked through satirical films such as *Teen Wolf* (1985) and *My Mom is a Werewolf* (1989), as well as outright horror films, such as *Howling IV: The Original Nightmare* (1988).

It is in chapter 8 ("Shapeshifters") that Mann makes fresher conclusions. By looking at films released after the 2010s, he argues that contemporary films are updating themes and forming transnational cycles. He notes, for example, that post-9/11 films offer new takes on the war on terror (*Dog Soldiers*[2002], *War Wolves* [2009], *Battledogs* [2013]). And he sees the theme of gender identity and gender crisis being reworked in such films as *Big Bad Wolf* (2006), *Blood and Chocolate* (2007), *Female Werewolf* (2015), and *Wildling* (2018)—arguing that the former two update the pack films and that the latter two depict she-wolves to comment on the problematic nature of patriarchal society.

Mann closes his book reiterating the need for further academic study on the werewolf outside of psychological discourse and the need for further scholarly study mainly focused in other countries and other genres beyond horror. The extensive and encyclopaedic knowledge Mann has laid out in his book works towards this goal, and in doing so Mann equates the werewolf with the vampire and zombie as an enduring and versatile monster/metaphor. Mann relies on in-depth film analyses as well as setting historical background in each chapter, but his descriptions are far from pedantic, allowing Mann to elaborate on the book's strengths: its extensive knowledge of the lupine genealogy, its delving into the Reagan era, and its new analyses of the contemporary werewolf. His accessible language, helpful index and notes sections augment a book that is a dynamic page-turner while still being an important academic study.

— Bruna Foletto Lucas

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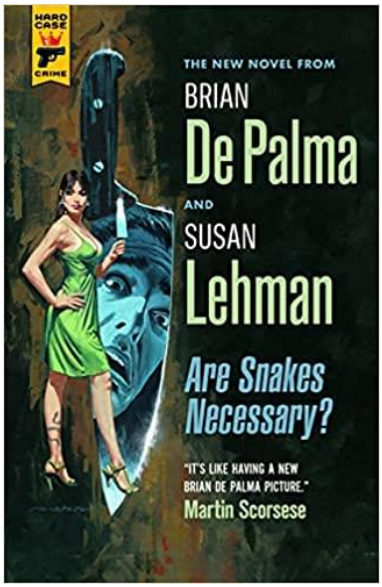
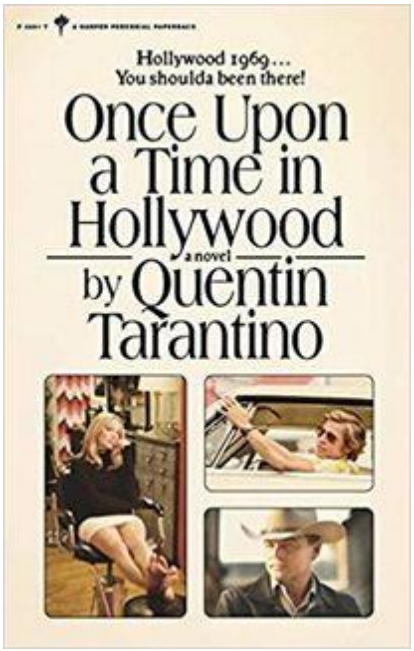
BOOK REVIEW



Are Snakes Necessary?

By Brian De Palma and Susan Lehman
Titan Books Press, 2020

224 pp.



Once Upon a Time in Hollywood

By Quentin Tarantino

Harper Perennial, 2021

400 pp.

"How Old Are You?"

Both Brian De Palma and Quentin Tarantino have recently written their first novels. In Tarantino's case, the immediate reasoning is easy to discern: *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2021) is a novelization of *Once Upon a Time…in Hollywood* (2019), and it largely elaborates on the film's lore and characters in several intriguing ways. For De Palma, *Are Snakes Necessary?* (2020), co-written with former *New York Times* editor Susan Lehman, also a first-time novelist, is more curious. Its terse prose and bite-sized chapters (most run for only a few pages) suggest little of De Palma's predilection for an elongated, set-piece-

driven visual grammar, given that long takes and dialogue-free sequences are a staple of his cinematic style. In fact, if the story elements didn't indicate something bordering on a parody of De Palma's narrative obsession with voyeurism, political corruption, and gullible male protagonists, it would be difficult to detect De Palma's authorial hand at all.

Each filmmaker has been taken to task at times for their questionable treatment of women as characters. It is worth noting, then, that both filmmakers are taking turns toward considering how Hollywood has historically treated women as dispensable. De Palma was arguably the central American filmmaker that feminist activists targeted in the 1980s, with picket lines and vitriol hurled in equal measure toward films such as *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Body Double* (1984). His works, like those of Alfred Hitchcock and Dario Argento before him, were thought by these activists to deliberately punish women, using them as victims to be carved up by, respectively, a razor-wielding psychopath and a driller-killer wielding psychopath. As Carol Clover and a host of other commentators have shown, these sorts of moral dismissals are shallow at best because they perceive a direct correlation between the cinematic image and reality. De Palma, being a formalist, uses genre, narrative, and plotting to stage acrobatic and operatic uses of the camera. Therefore, to boil De Palma's films down to their perceived misogyny is to overlook how cinema functions as a medium. The filmmaker is in the process of making a new film titled either *Predator* (no, not *that* one) or *Catch and Kill* depending on which news site you trust more, which is said to be "a horror film set in Hollywood and featuring a predatory movie mogul." Whatever De Palma is up to, it's difficult to see this development as anything other than a probable questioning of his own participation in the Hollywood machine, its consumptive nature, and why monsters like Harvey Weinstein were able to advance on their prey for so long before someone finally blew the whistle.

Tarantino's latest film, *Once Upon a Time…in Hollywood* (2019), is set in 1969 and conducts a covert commentary on how the Hollywood machine takes female child stars, places them in prominent, but vulnerable positions of early stardom, and then snatches it away from them before they've turned twenty-five. The core characters in this regard are Trudi Fraser (Julia Butters), an eight-year-old "actor" (she claims the term "actress" is nonsensical), and Squeaky Fromme, played by former child star Dakota Fanning. Seeing Fanning as Fromme, dirt and sweat caking her face, recalls her earlier, controversial role in *Hounddog* (Deborah Kampmeier, 2007), in which she plays a pre-adolescent girl who is raped by an older boy. Critics complained that Fanning was too young for such a difficult role and that by even allowing her to play a victim of sexual

abuse, the film itself was tantamount to abuse. The matter of age and being of an appropriate age is, in fact, the underlying concern of Tarantino's film; not only does it plague Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio), who fears that he's getting too old to remain a leading man in Hollywood, but Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt) invokes it directly after picking up Pussycat (Margaret Qualley), asking her: "How old are you?" In this instance, it's a strict matter of legality; he goes on to say, "What I'm too old to do is go to jail for poontang."

The novelization retains these conversations in their entirely, though without Fanning giving a face to Fromme, the subtext of child stardom is lost. What takes its place, though, is an assortment of expansions that consider Hollywood as a space where ongoing discussions happen across generations, culminating in the final chapter, in which Rick and Trudi run lines together over the phone late at night. "Wow, Rick, isn't our job great? We're so lucky, ain't we?" she asks him. Rick responds: "Yes we are, Trudi. We're real lucky." While the film ends with the bloody retribution that's typical of Tarantino's filmography, the novel omits these events entirely and instead focuses on a small moment of agreement and graciousness shared between two co-workers. The age-gap implication of the conversation, though, is not lost on Tarantino, who has Rick say, "Trudi, you can't call me at this hour…it's *not* appropriate." In Tarantino's revised milieu, the interaction culminates not in endangerment, fear, or harm, but cooperation and camaraderie. The exchange revises an early encounter between the two, in which Rick calls her "Pumpkin Puss" as she consoles him. In the film, Tarantino shoots this moment in a series of low-and-high angle shot-reverse-shots, with the high-angle shots of Trudi, down on her knees in front of Rick, visually connoting the potential for a pedophilic gaze. Rick takes on a monstrous quality in this moment through blocking alone: he's physically placed in the subject position of a child molester. That Trudi forecloses that gaze by standing up and verbally correcting Rick's language ("I don't like names like 'Pumpkin Puss.' But since you're upset, we'll talk about that some other time.") indicates the emergence of a feminist perspective within the Baby Boomer generation, and one that will become a central component of 1970s New Hollywood, even as the majority of films will still be directed by men.

In 1969, De Palma was completing his third feature film, *The Wedding Party*, and was on his way to becoming a central figure within the New Hollywood. It wasn't until 1973, with *Sisters*, that De Palma turned the majority of his creative focus to Hitchcockian riffs on noirish plotlines, in which men, typically, become obsessed with the identity of a woman. *Are Snakes Necessary?* is in many respects a riff on a riff—it's De Palma lightly sending up himself and

his thematic preoccupations while still piecing together a fully formed thriller storyline. Take Nick Sculley, a thirtysomething photographer, who will play witness to high-level political corruption and, eventually, tragedy. Not only is his name nearly identical to Jake Scully, the protagonist of De Palma's *Body Double*, but his circumstances neatly parallel that of Jack (John Travolta) in *Blow Out* (1981). Other characters will seem familiar to anyone acquainted with De Palma's films; there's Fanny Cours, an 18-year-old intern and "political junkie" who is, as De Palma and Lehman write it, "in the full flush of carnality," and who recalls Liz Blake (Nancy Allen) in *Dressed to Kill* for how her seductive charm is irresistible to men. Add in a pair of murderous male political figures and a shadowy woman that's essentially a redux of Rebecca Romijn's character in De Palma's *Femme Fatale* (2002), and the ingredients for pulpy delight are afoot. The novel's primary drawback, though, is how the economical prose cannot rival De Palma's audio-visual acumen; in fact, even as prose, one longs for the wilder, stranger metaphors of Elmore Leonard, who has written nearly a dozen novels in a comparable register and with more aplomb.

Still, saying *Are Snakes Necessary?* isn't up to the level of the crime genre's maestro shouldn't suggest it's inferior within its own contexts. Indeed, as the novel winds toward a close, De Palma and Lehman find a dark and amusing means of quite literally cutting into the heart of the reader's pent-up desire to see the back cover's promise of "a female revenge story" fulfilled. It delivers the goods. What's more engaging from a broader perspective is considering why De Palma and Tarantino have written novels at all. In an interview with the website *Crime Reads*, De Palma explains that, "As a director I like photographing women more than I like photographing men. As a writer, I like focusing on the woman's point of view."[1] Though De Palma ends his commentary there, the implication is that prose affords the author the chance to consider perspective in a manner that the director, faced with the immediacy of the moving image, cannot. But for anyone who's seen De Palma's films, we should recall that, quite often, scenes unfold from the perspective of women, and often in ways that complicate questions of POV. The opening of *Dressed to Kill* is the most complex case, in which Kate Miller (Angie Dickinson) masturbates in the shower while looking at a man, presumably her husband, shaving in the mirror. Her sense of pleasure is mirrored, too, by the camera's scanning of her naked body, which, if we're talking gazes, is an explicitly erotic and objectifying one, not least because

[1] "Brian De Palma and Susan Lehman Talk Noir, Scandals, and Pulpy Cover Art," *Crime Reads*. https://crimereads.com/brian-de-palma-and-susan-lehman-talk-noir-scandals-and-pulpy-cover-art/

the character's body is glimpsed in close-up, absent her face (in fact, this is not Dickinson's body, but a body double). Therefore, we have an instance, sans dialogue, in which the sequencing of images thematize the matter of looking and, to put it another way, *seeing*. In many ways, the control of the image is tantamount to the entire premise of New Hollywood's divergence from classical Hollywood's "genius of the system," as André Bazin called it. The individual—the auteur—holds the capacity to create, to manipulate, and to puppeteer from outside the frame.

Rick's solution to aging into obscurity in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is to work with then-burgeoning auteur Roman Polanski, a prospect that seems imminent by the film's end. Of course, in hindsight, Polanski's 1977 sexual-abuse case can't help but factor into a contemporary conversation about how men, as either directors or writers, are capable of communicating female presence and perspective. Tarantino was criticized during a Cannes press conference for not giving Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) more screen time in the film; his response in the novelization is almost defiant, as the character is minimized further in favor of expanding Cliff's background, in particular, into a wife-killing, bloodthirsty cinephile. If that sounds ridiculous, leave it to Tarantino to give his stuntman a knack for cinema, with extended sections on Cliff's response to *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (Vilgot Sjöman, 1967) and taste for titles that now comprise the fulcrum for the Criterion Collection's non-English language selections. There's also an entire chapter devoted to Cliff's encounter with Aldo Ray in Spain, in which the stuntman gets the veteran actor drunk. It concludes with Rick chastising him, saying, "When they give you your SAG card at the fuckin' union office, they give you three rules: One, they gotta give you turnaround. Two, don't do any nonunion shoots. And three, if you ever do a film with Aldo Ray, under no circumstances give him a bottle." To what extent one finds this amusing likely depends on one's tolerance for Tarantino's own self-indulgent cinephilia, particularly the sort that imagines film-history-as-fan-fiction worthy of entire chapters. Nevertheless, it also cuts to the heart of what's at stake in both of these novels as it pertains to Tarantino and De Palma: as artists aging into their later years (Tarantino claims he'll make just one more film), they're paradoxically intrigued by the question of artistic evolution while also stubbornly resolute in their thematic obsessions and artistic perspectives.

In *The Card Counter*, Paul Schrader's latest film, the protagonist, a blackjack sharp who spent eight and a half years in military prison for his role as an Abu Gharib torturer, offers this response to his protégé, who questions if there's any meaning in the monotony of doing the same thing over and over again: "You just go around and around until you work things out." Schrader,

who wrote the screenplay for De Palma's *Obsession* (1976), might as well be speaking through his character in this moment, and in many respects he speaks for De Palma and Tarantino, too: their filmographies suggest slight variations on a theme, explored through repetition. Though Schrader hasn't written a novel, his films are explorations that spring, in large part, from an early critical work of his own called *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972). Like De Palma, nearly fifty years later, the themes remain the same. In writing their first novels, De Palma and Tarantino implicitly ask us to grapple with how time affects our perceptions of ourselves and of the past. Forget snakes; the real question for both of these writer/directors becomes: is change necessary?

— Clayton Dillard

Brian DePalma is the director of many films, including *Blow Out* and *Carrie*.

Susan Lehman is a former editor of the *New York Times* and author whose writing has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Vogue*, *The New Yorker* and *Spy magazine*.

Quentin Tarantino is the director of ten films, including *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*.

Clayton Dillard recently completed his PhD in English from Oklahoma State University. His dissertation focuses on non-realist aesthetic trends in contemporary European art cinema. He is currently working on multiple projects and proposals, including a monograph on Italian horror's relationship to 1970s American cinema.

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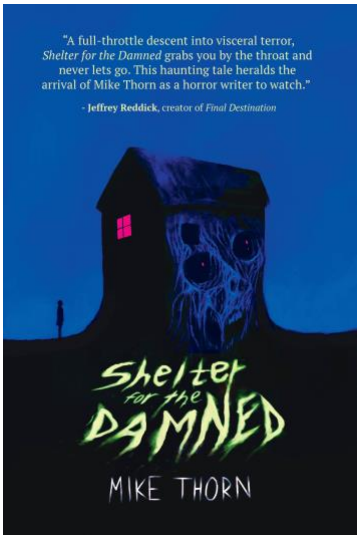

Book Review

Shelter for the Damned

By Mike Thorn
JournalStone, 2021

190pp.

[*Editor's Note: The following critical review discusses specific details of the novel's plot.*]

Shack and Awe

Shelter for the Damned, the first novel by Mike Thorn (2017's *Darkest Hours*), foregrounds a pervasive, ineffable monster that carries the brutal markings of fraught masculinity. The book highlights performances of maleness undertaken by three fathers who deal in different forms of violence, passing the trauma and lessons of their toxic masculinity to three teenage boys, Mark, Adam and Scott.

The sense of urgency in the novel is palpable, the intensity of adolescent yearning well defined. The shelter of the title is introduced on the first page and its pull on the main character Mark is immediate. The book moves at a fast pace to match these extremes. From early on, Thorn conjures the sense of all or nothing—the pull of chaos and the seesaw of emotional states.

Mark sees the shelter for the first time with his two friends, Adam and Scott. Each of them defines the structure they see before them differently. For Mark it is "something vaguely house-shaped" (11). For Adam it is "More like a shed" (11). For Scott, "It's a house" (11). In short order, we get a sense of the boys' personalities and the not-always good-natured ribbing that goes on between the three. Mark's idea that the shelter is "vaguely house-shaped" sets the tone for his own interactions with the structure. His description is open, uncategorical. He sees it as something that suggests or even performs 'house' but may not be what it seems. In Mark's assessment, the shed/shack/house "had the symmetry and structure of any beat-up old building, like a tool shed you might find in some forgotten industrial place—but there was something formless about it" (13). Mark finds that the shack palliates him, allows him to

forget his problems. He is the character who craves refuge; a place to go that is not school or the home he shares with his parents. And he is in its thrall immediately.

At the beginning of Chapter 2, Mark starts a fight at school with another boy named Clinton. Mark has a habit of fighting and has gotten into trouble before, but this fight begins without Mark remembering what he has said to provoke it. The shelter seems to be exerting its influence. It may have a fixed location, but the structure is an entity that expands beyond the confines of its location. It has tendrils.

There is elegant writing in *Shelter for the Damned*, especially when Thorn describes the house, hewing closely to Mark's sensibilities: "He set his eyes on a fissure between the door and the wall. A distant slit, a hair's worth of blackness. A teasing glimpse of inside" (13). The novel has other moments that are thrilling, quasi-erotic depictions of awe, that kind of reverence tinged with mingled wonder, fear and desire, as when Mark goes to the shack alone and feels and hears a presence:

> All his discomfort faded as he stepped inside. Not in an instant, no, but in smoothly subtle movements. His pain, now dim, disappeared with similar subtlety. He inhaled. Smelled the musty air. He walked further inside, trembling. He rested his back against a wall and slid to a sitting position, then set his hands on the floor, palms down. The dust and grit rubbed into his skin, and it excited him. (41)

When Mark begins a tentative relationship with Madeline, a girl who smiles at him, Thorn makes clear during their interactions that Mark is intrigued, unsure, anxious, inexperienced, and not always able to reciprocate Madeline's feelings in the moment. Mark is constantly on edge and he feels that the house is a place for him to experience something intensely, even if that something is fear. Mark always seems to be running or fleeing. And the titular shelter offers a welcoming, titillating embrace.

The fathers of the three main characters are particularly challenging antagonists. Mark's father is insistent to the point of intimidation, demanding the interaction required of a relationship but never quite getting the tone right. Mark's Dad doesn't know which of Mark's friends is Scott, an observation that comes up a few times and points to the general effacement (and ultimate disappearance) of Scott as a character. We learn that Scott is under constant surveillance from his parents and is even told how to dress. Adam's father is a mean drunk who regularly yells at his son and sometimes resorts to physical

violence. Through these almost mythically-styled father-son relationships, the author captures the intensity of being a teenager old enough to understand that life is complicated, but still too immature to envisage coping solutions. The shelter will change all that. Mark will bathe in the shifting atmosphere of the titular structure, take it in, absorb it, and begin to do its bidding.

The house/shack/shelter subsumes people. It alters them. It strips them of their bodies and, possibly, their lives. Mark craves it. There are no definitive answers to questions about the fates of the characters. *Shelter for the Damned* could be about the unraveling of Mark's mind, or a series of nightmares so real they encroach on "reality," or simply the recounting of the eerie influence of a shadowy, spectral space on those "damned" who come into contact with it. Whatever the solution, Thorn presents the unmooring of all the main characters, the destabilizing of those most in need of stability. The shack is multifarious, bringing and taking diverse things from each character. In the end, I thought of the shelter as a kind of portal to an uncanny version of Mark's world. What he finds on the other side of the shelter's boundary-crossing is a harrowing vision of "not-suburbia." The shelter is visited several times in the book and the experience is different on each occasion. The elusive, unknowable nature of the monster is key to Thorn's use of the shelter as a metaphor. One such scene crystallizes the ontological shiftiness of the novel's monster house. Mark, expelled from school for fighting, is ordered to stay home by his parents. As soon as his mother leaves, he heads for the shelter. It isn't there. Mark feels sick, retches and screams. A figure yells at him. The figure turns out to be the monster from his most recent nightmare. It gives chase.

Shelter for the Damned is reminiscent of Stephen King in its acute examination of the mysterious pull of place and atmosphere. The descriptions of the shelter are beautiful and evoke a sense of dread I associate with King's depiction of the Marsten House, the eerie mansion in *'Salem's Lot*. As King's work often does, Thorn's novel also echoes H.P. Lovecraft's sense of destabilizing "outer" forces (most explicitly when a decidedly Lovecraftian tentacular monster assails Mark in his bedroom). The book takes these elements of Weird fiction and angles them towards the metaphysical. Later, the novel's outre tentacular monster will stare back at Mark with a horrifyingly familiar face. And Mark's unique union with the mysterious structure stretches Gothic convention beyond a case of uncanny doubling to a more Weird case of uncanny mingling.

Thorn's writing during more intense sections of heightened violence reminds me of the setpieces of the slasher genre—those mini-films within a film that command attention in their own right. The novel marshalls and deploys the

formal aspects of the slasher film to feature an intense staging—a kind of pageantry—of death. The wonderful descriptions of metaphysical horror in *Shelter for the Damned* acknowledge this link to the slasher's cinematic death-staging:

> He thought of screaming. He thought of every frightening image in every frightening film he'd ever seen. He thought of the anxiety cause by unlocked doors, the body-locking paranoia of hiding from the predator, the animal dread of being hunted, the sick and lonely underthought that he would die, that all the names and addresses and spoken words sifted quietly through an infinite and indifferent turnstile, that the notion of a great beyond was romantic drivel masking impenetrable blankness. (183)

Thorn excels in these moments of keenly-written descriptions of chaotic, all-encompassing horror, making *Shelter for the Damned* a powerful dive into chilling suburban torment, teenage trauma and anxiety—and a promise of "shelter" that taps into each visitor's greatest need, only to trouble their fates.

— Anne Golden

Mike Thorn is the author of *Darkest Hours* (2017, expanded edition in 2021) and *Peel Back and See* (2021). His fiction has appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies and podcasts, including *Vastarien*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *The NoSleep Podcast*, and *Tales to Terrify*. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of New Brunswick.

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An Immersive Experience of Spectatorial In-Betweenness: The Corporeal Universe of *Taxi Driver*

Liliane Poulin-Dubé

Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) is a film that immerses the viewer in a universe of sensorial intensity. *Taxi Driver* traps the viewer with its protagonist Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in his taxicab suffocating them in an endless cycle of anger, exhaustion, and paranoia. The intense experience of viewing the film can be analyzed through the Deleuzian Time-image. According to Gilles Deleuze in the cinematic experience, images are not simply projected from a distance to the viewer. Instead, the viewer interacts with the images, which are overflowing with intensity, excess, and tactility. In the opening scene of the film, the camera lingers inside a taxicab driving aimlessly in a rainy cityscape. The viewer is isolated from their own reality and intertwined into the film. Throughout the film, the taxicab imprisons the viewer in the universe of the film creating sensorial experiences as the viewer affectively participates in the film's unfolding (Figure 1, next page). Each time the viewer returns to the taxicab they have been changed by the unpredictability of the images that have bombarded the screen. In exchange, by affecting the viewer the film gains potential lines of flight. In other words, *Taxi Driver* is not only defined by what is shown on the screen but the affect it has on the infinite imaginaries of its viewer. The film is no longer a dimensionally flat narrative but a three-dimensional universe which uses the taxicab as a mode to explore it. For instance, the film effectively introduces Travis' character, his desires and his frustrations, by lingering in every space he spends time in, his apartment, the taxi parking, the dirty streets of New York, the adult cinema. The film pulls the viewer into these spaces with Travis so

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they can experience his becoming. This allows the film to be effectively analyzed as a Deleuzian time-image. The film is an event that is continuously changing with the viewer or in Deleuzian terms becoming(-). The hyphen accompanying becoming further emphasises that it often does not have a beginning or an end in the development of the narrative. In other words, viewers and characters are so intertwined that there is no end, only becoming(-), a continual process of change. I utilize Deleuze's notion of the Time-Image to argue that *Taxi Driver* immerses the viewer in the anxieties of the on-screen bodies, particularly those of the lost and lonely Vietnam veteran, Travis Bickle, as the film lingers in the in-between of Travis becoming-hero and becoming-antihero.

Figure 1: The tactile taxi.

The Time-Image and the Haptic In-Between

Taxi Driver begins with blurred images of the gritty city of New York cloaked in radiant lights. Enter Travis Bickle, a loner who embodies a sense of alienation as he spends his days distanced from others. When he does attempt to come in contact with other people, it feels out of practice and awkward. Despite his attempts to make meaningful connections, he remains stuck in his isolation. He becomes an insomniac cabbie crawling the streets at night and spending his days chronicling his inner desires and frustrations in a journal. He writes: "The days go on and on …. They don't end. All my life needed was a sense of someplace to go." His journaling is portrayed through voice-

narration. The film uses the voice-narration as a strategy to conjure conventional narrative structures for understanding Travis Bickle's character while also subverting them. This unique use of voice-narration brings the viewer to wander into the in-betweenness of Travis. Travis and the viewer are both lingering endlessly as in-between passengers with no progress. They lack agency, imprisoned in the taxicab as they roam in the labyrinth of New York City streets. The taxicab allows Travis to fill his emptiness with routine all the while giving him the impression he is no longer alienated as he drives his fares around and watches people on the street. The viewer is made to accompany Travis as he idles in seedy cinemas watching pornography to feel visceral sensations in order to escape from his ennui. Soon he latches onto a beautiful presidential campaigner for Senator Palantine, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), after glimpsing her from his cab. The viewer participates in Travis' obsessive lust for her, which turns violent when she rejects him. Scorsese shows Travis's dangerous infatuation with Betsy through lingering shots, which zoom in on her, subtly invading her privacy. He will later release these suffocating emotions of anger, loneliness and hopelessness by intensifying his destructive becoming(-) through killing other people. The viewer is both his hostage and his accomplice as he first attempts to assassinate the senator and then resolves to rescue a 12-year-old prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster) from her pimp. As a vigilante, Travis believes himself to be a purifying agent. He says about NYC: "[s]ome day a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets." Travis is adrift in his loneliness, so he fantasizes about being a saviour like a cowboy in a western film. His delusions of superiority over the others in his city are driven by his desire to distance himself from his life of inhibition and isolation. *Taxi Driver*'s narrative requires a Time-Image treatment because it is not a film about a "hero's journey," but about wandering. The narrative "wanders" to evoke its subject's in-between-ness.

In *The Brain Is the Screen*, Gregory Flaxman describes Gilles Deleuze**'s** Time-Image in cinema as that which "eliminates the distinction between the subject and the image, realizing a radical immanence" (Flaxman 2000, 22-23). The screen becomes the viewer's reality as there is no longer a subject and object relation like in a video game. For instance, in first-person shooter games the player views the action through the eyes of the character they are controlling thus dissolving the separation between viewer and the electrons in the screen. *Taxi Driver's* filmography often positions the viewer in the eyes of Travis Bickle or in such proximity to his face it simulates the first-person shooter experience. The film embodies Travis' perspective. The Time-Image for Deleuze displays duration by lingering in the space of the on-screen body.

Often prioritizing longer shots rather than montage, it immerses the viewer in the experience of duration. Taxi Driver does not conform to the dogmatic narrative-based logic of the Movement-image. Scorsese does not map out a narrative his protagonist must follow to satisfy the viewer's expectations but instead allows the viewer to wander purposelessly in the universe reflecting Travis' unstable headspace, making him a relatable person. Despite a taxicab being constrained to the routes determined by its fares, Scorsese transforms it into a wandering entity through chaotic and nonsensical imagery of the city. The viewer can not follow the taxicab's movements, loses the thread to reality, and becomes utterly lost. This opposes the Movement-image which Deleuze defined as a pre-conceptualized linear and organic framework of narrative cinema restricting itself to a specific path from A to B through montage. The Movement-Image is confined to a "methodical, and ultimately normative, chain" (Flaxman 2000, 5). On the contrary, the Time-Image's universe is complex because it lies in-between allowing for the possibility of an infinite potential of becoming(-) since very few constraints govern the film's universe. Scorsese places as much importance on the center of the screen as the edges, which are bustling with life, allowing the universe to run free past the limits of conventional films. For instance, as Tom (Albert Brooks), a volunteer for senator Palantine, is on the phone, in the background two ladies bump into one another and start up a casual conversation. Instead of moving from one point to another, as in the structure of the Movement-Image, the Time-Image resides everywhere as a mode of in-betweenness. The Time-image engages the viewer in a space rather than a narrative. Therefore, there is none of the linear progress so prized by the Movement-Image structure. The Time-Image can properly embody the process of becoming(-). The bodies of the cinematic experience, both the viewer and characters of *Taxi Driver* are not simply given a function to further the narrative. Instead, Scorsese encourages the on-screen and off-screen bodies to idle in a universe of uncertainty and chance with a web of relations in a perpetual state of interchange. The taxicab connects these webs together. Through the taxicab, each of the on-screen and off-screen bodies either share a space or spaces in proximity to each other throughout the film. For example, Betsy, Iris and Senator Palantine all enter the space of the cab and other secondary characters such as Wizard, Tom and Sport come very close to it. All of these bodies share an experience of the becoming(-) since they inhabit the constructed cinematic space together. They remain attached in this web threaded by the film even as the credits roll. The universe of the Time-Image film creates lines of flight, other spaces off-screen, for the

viewer to creatively engage in different forms of spectatorship focused on the experience of in-betweenness.

Taxi Driver has many in-between spaces that the on-screen and off-screen bodies inhabit, giving the viewer the experience of being mutated into the film. As the camera lingers in Travis' ennui, the viewer is sucked into the screen vicariously through Travis, much to the same effect of the disturbing image, in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) of Max Renn (James Woods) trapped in a television screen possibly made of his own skin. The camera idles in these in-between spaces which function by embodying an "inaction, waiting, and exhaustion [which involutes] into the mind, opening up a whole new sense of mental duration" (Flaxman, 2000: 6). The term "inaction" expresses that there is no progress in Travis' journey in the conventional sense. However, there is still becoming(-), a process of being. Travis' taxi is an example of an in-between space prevalent in the film. The viewer is g(r)azing the taxi and the universe around it from the very first images of the film to the last. G(r)azing is a combination of gazing and grazing surfaces with an embodied eyeball. This allows the "audiovisual media [to evoke] other senses within [its] own constraints, in a manner more consonant with Deleuze's model of the time-image cinema" (Marks, 2000: 131). The haptic images evoke a kind of mimesis of the intense emotions of the on-screen bodies in the body of the viewer. According to Laura Marks "tactile visuality draws upon the mimetic knowledge that does not posit a gulf between subject and object or the viewer and the world and the film" (Marks, 2000: 151). Tactile sensations such as smell, touch and taste are embedded in the body to a higher degree than vision. The viewer's body is overpowered by these affective sensations "spread out over the surface of the image" (Marks, 2000: 13). The opening scene of the film is a close up shot of Travis' sleepless and glazed eyes as he stares longingly at people walking by his taxicab. *Taxi Driver* encourages the viewer's g(r)aze through bodily imagery overflowing the screen to embody Travis' yearning for connection.

In some images, the viewer lingers in Travis' perspective inside the cab. Travis stares at the bodies outside of his cab voyeuristically. The viewer perceives the world outside the cab as Travis does; through the dirty windows of an old Checker cab. The dirty windows act as a screen connecting the cinematic space to the viewer, merging the on-screen and off-screen world. Corporeal tactility leads the viewer to share the emotion of longing Travis feels towards couples embracing, aversion towards those he believes to be "scum" and excitement when he encounters the possibility of escape from his lonely and alienating life with Betsy and Iris, a young prostitute who enters his

cab one night to escape her abusive pimp. The bodily images are powerful enough to arouse intense feelings that transcend beyond the screen to the viewer. The viewer idles within the space of the taxi enduring long and focused shots of the streets (Figure 2).

Figure 2: In the taxi with Travis.

The viewer is submerged in the space of the taxi with Travis on his circular wanderings. This filmography technique means to provoke a sense of claustrophobia, anxiety, stress, frustration, and exasperation for the viewer. In order to manifest this intensely, the film uses techniques that blur visual perception, disorienting a viewer who is accustomed to relying on seeing to comprehend and control the world around them. Tom Gunning refers to this as dépaysement, part of the cinema of attractions. It is "the power of the apparatus to sweep away a prior and firmly entrenched sense of reality" (Gunning 2009, 121-122). Additionally, the film's storyline swerves and accelerates like a taxi, eschewing the linearity of the Movement-Image. The film also employs excessive repetition. The viewer is driving with Travis aimlessly around the same neighbourhoods, in the same bodily, "filthy" and "sewer" of the city, draped in the same intense neon lights to the sound of the lonely saxophone from Bernard Herrmann's melancholic score. The taxi roams in a city littered with the wastes of capitalism and marginalized people: sex workers, addicts, pimps, deemed as scum by Travis. The viewer is not immersed in the airbrushed post-Rudy Giuliani Manhattan usually portrayed in contemporary classical Hollywood cinema. Scorsese rightfully captures the

corporeal and chaotic city of New York of the 1970s. The repetition embodies a loop; people come in the cab, drive, people get out of the cab, drive and then repeat. This creates the hypnotic sense of moving in a circle with no hint of the linear progress or organic totality from the Movement-Image. The viewer is stuck in this grim limbo with Travis causing a sickening sensation like being trapped on a never-ending merry-go-round. The viewer gives themself to this experience of "unbearable pain within the pleasure of desire [since] cinema [is] a lover [the viewers] take, an image with which [the viewers] fold and to which [they] consent" (McCormack, 2010: 175). The viewer enters the cinematic space willingly by watching the film. The pleasure arises from the deeper connection the viewer builds with Travis and the becoming(-) they share in this constructed cinematic space.

Travis' apartment expresses in its textures Travis' becoming(-). The place where someone lives is imprinted with their habits, their mental and corporeal states, their sociability as well as their physical health. Each object in the frame has an affective dimension thanks to these textures. The entire apartment is painted a dreary color. The cracks in the walls age the apartment. The cheap and tired-looking furniture like his bed, are only there by necessity giving the impression he does not know how (or does not want) to indulge in his own comfort. The lack of decor could also be related to Travis' low income. By choosing to linger in a taxi driver's life, the film comments on social economic class. Junk food, trash and various items are scattered across the room. The only signs of decoration are the many posters hung up of his taxi routes, Palantine presidential campaigns, and a "one of these days I'm going to get organiz-ized" sign, all evidence of Travis' obsessive nature and search for a purpose. This tiny room embodies a sense of being lost. The viewer lingers inside of it for several extended moments during the film, gaining a sensorial epistemology of the apartment. The apartment is not simply a setting for the character. If it were a film, which inspired to be treated more as a Movement-Image, the apartment would have been defined by the limiting description and function the filmmaker attributed to it. According to Deleuze, it would have been ascribed a "molar" existence. The "molar" is a static two-dimensional representation of movement while the "molecular" is a three-dimensional space laboratory for movement. The "molar" essence, "is essentially immobile, [thus] its synthetic privilege is such as to engage in posturing (posing) as movement" (Flaxman, 2000: 18). Instead, the film *Taxi Driver*, can embody chaotic complexities of movement, in other words a "molecular" quality by emphasizing materiality in the sense expressed by Flaxman: "The automatic movement of the cinema propels sensation to a new

order, thereby realizing the ["molecular"] essence of the image" (Flaxman 2000, 19), which is especially powerful in the Time-Image. It is charged with lines of flight that allow the viewer to feel the "molecular" universe for themselves without "molar" intermediates. The apartment is part of a "molecular" universe, beyond being the place Travis inhabits. In a particular image from inside the apartment, the viewer is forced to watch Travis eat alone again. There is limited vision of one side of Travis through the reflection of a confining mirror, while the other side of Travis is also confined by metal grates on the window. This causes a feeling of claustrophobia. The light bulb and reflection of the light bulb elicits an impression of repetition, suggesting the viewer and Travis are again stuck in a loop. The surrounding walls are murky green and old, evoking a sort of nauseating bleakness. The apartment isolates the viewer and Travis in a becoming(-) space. Bowls, kitchen appliances, cereal boxes and other miscellaneous items are stacked in an attempt to be organized. Nothing in this setting gives an indication that there is a connection to other bodies from the world outside the apartment evoking a sense of isolation and loneliness in not only Travis, but encouraging it in the viewer as well (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Disconnection, isolation and loneliness in Travis's apartment.

Loneliness and longing in the cinematic space of the *Taxi Driver* are "sensations [that] traverse the membrane [...] breaking it down until [the viewer is] left with an in between" (Flaxman 2000, 14). *Taxi Driver* beautifully dwells and slowly sinks the viewer deeper into such images. When the frame

focuses on a certain image in the universe of *Taxi Driver* it is equivalent to the viewer interacting with the bodies in that image because, as Flaxman contends, "[t]he screen is a form of relation, of interchange, of mutual synthesis between the brain and the universe" (Flaxman 2000, 16). For instance, Travis sits down at the table of a few taxi drivers with whom he is acquainted. There is a noticeable distance between them physically and the viewer must endure the pauses and awkwardness in his communications with them. He stares with hostility at Black men across the restaurant. The combination of interactions that Travis has with the bodies surrounding him linger on and traverse through the screen into the body of the viewer, luring the viewer into a sense of complicated malaise created by the duration of the scene. Loneliness and isolation are experienced by the spectatorial body as the viewer is forced to experience Travis' routine. At the table, the screen lingers on an antacid dissolving in Travis' glass of water. The shot slowly zooms in until Travis and the viewer are completely dissociated from the world around them. The zoom embodies his everyday, a state of meaningless in-between, where Travis and the viewer are closed off to all bodies around them. An homage to the swirling coffee crema in *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967), this long take on the fizzing water is alien to systems of interpretation. The viewer can not control or understand it. They are lost in the affective in-between space with Travis. A space filled by pain, frustration, and exhaustion. The narrative structure of the Movement-Image is no longer relevant since the tactility of the image is in direct contact with the viewer, holding the viewer in its grasp. The mesmerizing images of sizzling bubbles "drown" the viewer in Travis's anxieties of loneliness and longing.

Similarly, on two different occasions, Travis, and the frame focus on images of bodies touching on his television which cause him, once again, to crave connection. The images on the television themselves carry textuality and personality in their pixels and blue hues. The first time, Travis is glaring intensely at the image of people dancing. The shot lingers on the closeness of their bodies as they sway and on a pair of small shoes. The shoes do not fit with the surroundings. They are separate from the dancers around them, so they seem out of place and abandoned. They embody a sense of not belonging. The shot sinks into the image projected on the television (Figures 3-5, next page). Focusing on this image has no symbolic or narrative purpose; instead, it generates an affective resonance. These images exist in excess to their usefulness for the narrative of the film; they are powerful in their evocation of a process of in-betweenness. The viewer inhabits, with Travis, this state of loneliness and longing for connection.

Figures 3-5: Sinking into the image, evoking in-betweenness.

Travis' Becoming(-) and Immersive Viewership

The viewer is brought back to Travis's apartment where he sits in front of the television. There is a more apparent anger and restlessness in his movements. Travis is watching a black-and-white soap opera. Onscreen, a woman is torn as she betrays a man's love, and the man attempts to cope and dissuade her. Travis gently and deliberately places the Television on its edge, in-between falling and standing, where the viewer has been throughout this film. By experiencing a becoming(-) together in the cinematic space of the film, the viewer has been immersed in Travis' precarity. The television's destruction once it falls to the ground allows a small release of Travis's pent-up mixture of aggression and depression. Travis is in relation with the materiality of the images portrayed on his television. Simultaneously, the viewer is in relation with their screen which portrays Travis' interaction with the images on his television. Therefore, the film viewing experience manifests a world within a world. This forms a never-ending loop, which places the on-screen and off-screen bodies in-between where there is no progress and no distinction between the reality of the film and that of the viewer. Another time in his apartment, Travis points a gun to his own head. Travis is gambling with the potential of an extremely violent and visceral action on his body which grants him a slight feeling of freedom amid the constraints of his angst and dread. By pointing the gun at his head, he raises the potential of blowing his brains out. He forces the viewer to linger and participate in this masochistic tinkering between continuing to be alive in his chair or having a bullet in his head and part of him splattered around his apartment. The film is successful in placing the viewer in a masochistic dynamic with Travis because of the deeper connection formed between the viewer and Travis, as they have an intertwined becoming(-). In the cinematic space, the viewer and Travis share his exhausted body, his desolate environment as well as his flirtation with suicide. These scenes have a powerful mental duration. The degree to which their duration exceeds narrative purpose embodies a sense of exhaustion and irritation. They have no progress or linear movement, forcing the viewer and Travis to bask in the image. These scenes end with the viewer accompanying Travis in his apartment just as trapped in his ennui as before. Both the viewer and Travis remain in an in-between space that is loathsome as they are caught in eternal stagnation.

As the film unfolds, Travis is a walking build up of suppressed affect. His underlying agitation—expressed through his constant wandering, his

contemplation of suicide, and his deflective interaction with objects like the TV—conveys the impression of a ticking time bomb. Travis' failed assassination attempt on the senator is a precursor to further and more extreme actions taken by Travis. He is very close to committing a politically motivated murder but not able to execute it, deepening his sensations of frustration. Later, Travis goes to challenge Sport (Harvey Keitel), Iris's pimp who plays the villain of Travis' delusions. This is the catalyst that leads to sparks flying. The fuse is lit. This is expressed through the materiality of film as Sport throws his lit cigarette on Travis and flares of red and orange bounce off Travis' chest. Travis has committed to this destiny to go out with a bang and embraces in entirety the hero persona he has created for himself as "a man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit." He wants to permanently escape the ennui, loneliness, and longing caused by his inability to connect with others properly. Throughout the entire sequence of his confrontation with gangsters to save Iris, the colors' hues appear to be degraded suggesting a more sinister and hopeless world. The darker shading also contributes to the viewer's disorientation. During the shoot-out in the apartment building between Travis and the gangsters the on-screen bodies seem to shoot at each other with no purpose. Instead of simply dying after being gruesomely shot, both Travis and the gangsters he is trying to destroy get up to exact revenge. These relations form a loop arresting the viewer in a state of in-between. The film lingers on and g(r)azes on the gore forcing the off-screen bodies to be trapped with on-screen bodies. This causes feelings of visceral discomfort. As the gun fight rages on, multiple cuts to Iris' distress, as she hides behind a couch, reflects and in turn amplifies the emotions of the viewer. The silence except for gunshots and screams during the entirety of the scene also adds power to montage, further immersing the viewer in a cycle composed solely of visceral violence. This scene is impactful because the excessive "sensations do not refer to anything outside themselves [they are] purposiveness without purpose" (Flaxman, 2000: 13). After killing the gangsters, Travis attempts to escape this state of limbo through suicide. Travis gently places the gun under his chin, the viewer's body clenches in anticipation as they expect to hear a bang and blood to spray out of his head, but unpredictably only receive the clicks of an empty gun. Travis and the viewer are left to sink even deeper in the duration of the image. In the aftermath, the film g(r)azes the consequences of the violence in Iris' room, the staircase, and the hallway. The viewer is brought outside of the building where crowds are forming. The film lingers on how these recent violent movements have affected the entire neighborhood. Additionally, in the edge of the frame there

is a hopscotch drawn on the pavement, one of many examples of textures of the urban environment that the film presents to the viewer. These textures give dimension to the urban landscape inside the universe of the film as well as a glimpse into on-screen bodies that surround Travis, regardless of their importance to the narrative.

Becoming(-) is the cinematic relationship of mutual interchange between viewer and the film, each contributing to the process of being of the other:"[If] the power of cinema does lie in the capacity to exile us from familiar conceptual terrain, then the system is tantamount to its own formation, a becoming(-) system, a process" (Flaxman, 2000: 10). Throughout the film, the viewer is sucked into the unfamiliar cinematic space and bombarded with unpredictable images. The viewer is immersed in Travis' becoming(-) through lingering shots which embody his failures, frustrations, neuroticism, and voyeurism. The beginning of the film is not only the introduction of Travis' story, but the Time-Image unfolding the universe of the film, a becoming(-) that often works against any sense of the progressive. The viewer is a participant in the becoming(-) of Travis since they are part of the same universe as him. Travis' transformation is not linear, but rather circular, as he is seen driving his cab again at the end. Travis adopts a persona as he attempts to play the role of the super-hero character with homemade gear. His identity mutates him, freeing him from his repetitive mundane life. This allows him to gain confidence. This is embodied in scenes where he meets Iris. Later on, when the two have breakfast together, he even lies to her, telling her he works for the government. The viewer is an accomplice since they also want to break free from his confining life. Travis has a fictive perception of himself within the reality of the film. Travis' transformation is revealed to the viewer just before his attempt to assassinate the senator in a pan up shot of Travis with a mohawk dressed in his old army jacket and sunglasses, a physical embodiment of his becoming(-). This physical mutation feeds his hero delusion.

Travis becomes what Deleuze calls a "body without organs," the pre-subjective state of materiality that is constant mutation. The plane of immanence, a "molecular" chaos of movement, is being produced "on the body-brain itself" (Flaxman, 2000: 22), bombarding and energizing its sensations with affect. Travis attempts to fasten his own narrative -- or any semblance of order -- from the chaos of the universe that surrounds him. When he asks Iris during their third encounter "don't you remember me," he reveals his misguided belief that their relationship is more profound and fate-driven than just a series of chance encounters. It is logical for Iris to not know

who he is considering that the first two encounters Travis was under the guise of a taxi cabbie, but this does not line up with Travis' egocentric delusions. Travis lies on his bed motionless, and eyes closed enveloped in his army jacket. The shot feels never-ending as if Travis and his jacket are permanently mutated into each other. The thin line between his lies and his truth blurs as the film unravels. The voice-over narration creates a blurring of Travis' fiction and nonfiction as there is a blurring of his reality and the viewer's perception of it. Unlike in a Movement-Image, the voice-over in *Taxi Driver* should not be treated as narrative. Travis' voice-over has limited importance to the unraveling narrative, instead its affect mostly auditorily amplifies the in-between space of ennui already built by the visual lingering of the filmography. Travis' voice-over disrupts the convention of a voice-over. Travis' ramblings are an extension of his delusions and frustrations rather than a proxy for the director's voice. On two occasions, the viewer witnesses Travis taking pills, however no information about their nature is given. They are simply a small glimpse into his becoming(-). Shooting Sport is Travis' breakout performance for a persona he is finally revealing to the world. However, his execution is very awkward as he pulls the gun out of his coat pocket with haste, and fumbles. Additionally, his catch line "suck on this" seems out of place. Earlier in the film, a chance encounter with a stranger in his cab, played by Scorsese himself, affects him and the viewer. The stranger angrily venting to Travis about his cheating wife's betrayal. Travis' frustration and anxiety are intensified. The neon green lights dominate the frame and trap Travis, the stranger, and the viewer in the cab. This is suffocating and causes a feeling of claustrophobia in the viewer. The viewer is anxious about the way this stranger has affectively steered Travis' becoming(-), charging and encouraging his anxieties into potential destructive action. The stranger's demented laugh drags into the next scene at the diner, harassing Travis' thoughts as well as the viewer. The stimulating green of the encounter with the stranger is contrasted with the intense red neon color of the STOP sign as Travis enters the diner. The STOP embodies how the viewer feels towards Travis' becoming(-). The viewer cares for Travis as they are linked. In similar fashion to the voice-over, this is another technique allowing substantially quasi-meta communication between the viewer and Travis.

Scorsese's use of the Time-Image aesthetic, particularly his focus on duration, suggests a documentary quality in the film. Deleuze chose cinema to discuss philosophy because in the Time-Image the on-screen bodies are no longer characters in a narrative representing something symbolically (molar), they are bodies in a universe that the viewer is sensually part of (molecular).

The "molecular" universe is "the expressed within the process of expressing" (Flaxman, 2000: 14). In other words, it is a state of becoming(-) that is in-between points A and B. Travis struggles to express his suffering to another cabbie called Wizard (Peter Boyle). Red hues drape everything around them. The sudden intense color contrasts an otherwise murky film placing importance on this moment for Travis' becoming(-). In this moment, Travis' becoming(-) has been magnified. A close-up shot of Travis as he is sharing his worries is ridiculed by the background movements and sounds of traffic and the city. The close-up is also immediately juxtaposed with a wide shot of Wizard embodying indifference especially as he responds, "Look at it this way. A man takes a job, you know. And that job-- I mean, like that--That becomes what he is". This impersonal advice only further anchors Travis in his frustration with his life lacking purpose and connection. The materiality of Travis' face manifests the heavy weight his suffering is having on him. This is shown in the severe pursing of his lips in pain, the drooping dark bags under his eyes, his slight perspiration, his messy hair and his longing stare lingering into nowhere. These are corporeal signs of his metamorphosis. His inability to communicate properly causes a lack of release of affect. Travis' thoughts involute and do not carry him anywhere. His thoughts keep him stuck in a loop, an in-between filled with desire for destruction and violence. For instance, Travis' voice-over is largely linked to his thought process, which like the film itself, does not have the main focus to progress towards a linear conclusion. The viewer leaves in Wizard's cab abandoning the silhouette of a broken Travis dressed in the tense red lights of the city around him.

Time-Image: Lingering and Waste

Taxi Driver's realism suggests Scorsese is paying homage to the Italian Neorealist style. Scorsese's shots linger on everything, no matter their weight in the narrative. The on-screen bodies in the film are also each walking affects thanks to how the Time-Image operates. The lingering aesthetic of the film allows the viewer to enter the intimate space of the onscreen body and vice-versa. All bodies are given a state of becoming(-) causing them to have the potential to affect the viewer. As Travis is phoning Betsy, the camera moves slowly away and lingers on the hallway leading outside. It lingers there on the emptiness of the corridor and on other on-screen bodies walking on the street in the distance, conveying to the viewer an awareness of Travis' isolation from others. Through glimpses the viewer acquires bits of knowledge and

understanding about the lives of the on-screen bodies. These glimpses are tiny haptic textures which are either visual, in sound or in dialogue. For example, Scorsese throughout the film uses the light emitted from the city streets in ways that encourage haptic and other sensorial responses in relation to abstraction to trap the viewer and Travis in the taxi. These fascinating colors are blurred into puzzling shapes creating an eerie aesthetic across the screen withdrawing the viewer from their reality. Isolated in this in-between space inside the taxicab, the viewer is more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and even longing, shared by Travis. Furthermore, fleeting glimpses create Deleuzian lines of flight, pointing the viewer to a sense of who these on-screen bodies are presently, their state of becoming(-), which is shaped by their past experiences, their memories, and their desires for the future. For instance, the viewer is teased with glimpses of Iris' past through dialogue but most importantly through her outfits, mannerisms, and habits. In *Taxi Driver*, during Travis and Iris's conversation at breakfast, Iris casually puts on green plastic glasses only to take them off and later replace them with blue shades. She also places importance in astrological signs and pours a large amount of sugar on her toast. These child-like, lively glimpses of freedom and spontaneity are contrasted with her occupation as a sex worker, which is portrayed as a grim, unsafe and decidedly adult occupation. Similarly, Travis' taxicab gives him freedom of movement but only within the parameters of New York City. Both Travis and Iris have delusions of being free and above the working class New York City street life even if in truth they are condemned to it.

The Time-Image creates a universe of in-between that is chaotic, unpredictable and operates by uncertainty and chance encounters. The Time-Image forms a plane of immanence in the on-screen and off-screen bodies, giving them the potentiality to affect and participate in each other's becoming(-). This reflects real life, unlike the predetermined symbolic narrative of the Movement-image. The Movement-image links its images in a "normative chain" (Flaxman, 2000: 5). The universe of the *Taxi Driver* or, as Deleuze described it, the whole, is "open, like a thread that weaves through all sets" (Flaxman, 2000: 20). The universe is a web of relations. A street-side drummer Travis and Betsy pass by on their date is one of those webs composing the universe. The viewer realises the soundtrack of the film has been the sound of his restless beating on his drum. The music is a permeance, but it has different degrees of intensity during the film. Thus, the music has its own becoming(-). The drummer, Gene Palmer, plays himself in the film. Palmer was an iconic New York street musician during the 1970s and 1980s.

His presence provides an extra dimension to the film and the in-between nature where there is no distinction between fiction and nonfiction. After Betsy rejects Travis and refuses to see him, he resigns to driving by her work to catch glimpses into her becoming(-). He is fuelled by his obsessive lust for Betsy. He has an insatiable need to know her, to obtain her. The beam of the building structure, the reflection in the window and the speed of traffic, prevents him from better seeing the space her *being* occupies. His suffering is caused by "... teetering on the brink of the abyss that is [his] own desire-a vacuum that is not empty, but outside, that does not exist to be thought or known" (McCormack, 2010: 171). Travis' desire to know beyond the known is what creates perpetual unfulfillment and suffering. He writes about Betsy in journal "She appeared like an angel. Out of this filthy mess, she is alone. They... cannot... touch... her". Betsy is part of the fantasy Travis cannot fulfill.

In the film's conclusion, Travis returns to his occupation as a taxi driver. Instead of being arrested as the viewer expected, Travis is praised as a hero who saved a lost girl from gangsters. He receives recognition not only from other taxi cabbies, from the entire city via newspapers but also from Betsy. Yet, it feels to the viewer as if they have just entered his fantasies as the narrative the film has been loosely following up to this point has now been turned upside down. The viewer cannot distinguish whether they now reside in the fiction of Travis' fantasies or the nonfiction of Travis' reality. Scorsese also uses a picture of his own parents on the wall to represent Iris' parents, giving the film a documentary-like aesthetic, a deeper layer, to the viewer who knows this information. Travis Bickle's world seems to have been restored to its initial state. His hair has grown back and is neat. He seems well adjusted. He is still slightly reserved but calm. This regression back to the "beginning" of the film gives the viewer a sense of moving in a circle without progress. It is as if the film is showing the viewer Travis' fantasy of his heroic feat, the final chapter in the delusional narrative he has constructed for himself. The only physical difference in Travis is a small scar on his neck that is revealed when he turns to see his fare, Betsy. The scar has texture and evokes disgust. This subtle glimpse shocks the viewer into recognition. The image of a larger scar of a similar kind on Travis' back was encoded earlier in the film when he was doing push-ups in his apartment. The viewer does not know where the first scar came from or the connection between the two scars. This loose thread in the narrative is not addressed leaving the viewer in a state of confusion and ambiguity. The dépaysement in this scene of, for example, Betsy's face floating in the rear-view mirror combined with the blurry neon lights of the city, brings the viewer back into their memories of the "beginning" of the film. However,

the film does not make this conclusive. Instead of using this moment to embellish the narrative, Scorsese keeps the scene enigmatic (Figure 7). Betsy is dropped off and the taxi drives away. The viewer watches as she turns and abandons them. The taxi embodies isolation, loneliness, and imprisonment. The limited vision of Travis' face confined in the rear-view mirror embodies this as well. The quick and sharp change in the imagery and music disturbs and confuses the viewer. The visuals seem to speed up and the smooth jazz is interrupted by an eerie sound. It is an editing style of experimental cinema which, "derails perception from its stable center, shuffling it along an unpredictable path of movements" (Flaxman, 22). This conveys the violent sensation that reality has collapsed for Travis. The viewer's reality is also distorted because they have been immersed in and interacting with the universe of the film. The viewer's reality is the film, similar to how Deleuze states that the brain is the screen. The film constantly affects the viewer in ways they did not consent to, since the images shown are unconventional and unexpected by the viewer. A does not move to B in a linear organic way. There is no distinction and therefore no progress. The viewer no longer even has the certainty that A was the beginning and B was the end. These temporal points of reference disappear.

Figure 7: Keeping things enigmatic.

Taxi Driver is a Time-image film that affectively immerses the viewer in the intense becoming(-) of its protagonist Travis. The film operates around the lingering long take, letting the viewer witness their own becoming(-). This

quality of the film opens it to the potentiality to form a universe instead of a narrative. This universe, a state of in-between points A and B is stuck in a circular motion with no linear progress. It has no purpose, which is the lifeblood of the Time-Image. The Time-Image film reflects a universe without category, order, or easy cause-and-effect chains; a universe that encourages embodied, affective responses as much or more than cognitive ones. Taxi Driver's narrative parallels this breakdown of conventional order in its structure and via Scorsese's reliance on repetition, liminality, lingering, haptic and other non-visual senses, and duration. The film unravels itself with materiality of the Time-Image expressing the anxieties of being stranded in someone's becoming(-), which in Travis' case is haunted by ennui and anxieties of loneliness, longing and isolation.[1]

[1] This essay was written for the course, "The Cinematic Body," taught by Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare at John Abbott College in the fall semester of 2019. It is presented here as part of our commitment to featuring original work in horror and related studies by students at the college level.

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