IMAGINAIRES#27

The "Elevated Horror" / "Post-Horror" Cycle

edited by VINCENT JAUNAS

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In this issue

Introduction
Post-Horror,
Horror for Non-Horror Fans?

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Horror is undoubtedly one of cinema's most multifaceted genres. Each decade, it seems, a new streak of films comes along which, while clearly subsumed within the overarching category of horror, feels so distinct from what preceded it that both fans and critics feel the need to categorize it as either a new cycle or a new subgenre: the 1980s notably saw the rise of slashers, and the 1990s that of postmodern horror. And while two widely discussed subcategories – torture porn and found footage – emerged in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s, it is safe to say that none of these cycles has been the subject of such heated taxonomic debates as the one that emerged in the mid-2010s. Following the release of such films as *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) or *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015), many fans and critics argued that the genre of horror was witnessing the birth of another cycle, yet no one seemed to agree as to how it should be named or defined – some even arguing that these films should not be considered as a distinct cycle at all.[1]

The purpose of this issue of *Imaginaires* is threefold. It aims at giving film scholars a chance to weigh in on this taxonomic debate which has thus far largely been held by fans and critics, with a few notable exceptions – chief of which David Church's only book-length study of the cycle (2021). It also purports to shed new light on the narrative and stylistic commonalities, as well as on the extrafilmic qualities, uniting the films of the corpus.

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1. In their recent book on contemporary American horror, Jean-Baptiste Carobolante and Philippe Ortoli write that "genre cinema – and horror cinema in particular – is a cinema of *auteurs* (plural). It has always been so, even though the current terms of *elevated horror* or of *post-horror,* following that of *art-horror,* try to convince us that some films do not merely seek to scare the viewers but intend to elevate them towards higher spheres of thought" (2024: 175. My translation). Philippe Ortoli further develops his take on the concept of post-horror in this issue.

Finally, it seeks to offer in-depth analyses of the films themselves, the study of which has often been overshadowed by the many generic and axiological questions raised by their categorization as instances of "post horror" or "elevated horror".

The taxonomic debate

It is not the object of this introduction to dwell too long on the various cultural implications of the taxonomic debate surrounding the films – they have already been analyzed at length (Church, 2021: 27-67). Nonetheless, since one may not study the cycle without first defining and circumscribing it, I shall briefly do so, keeping in mind that the various articles of this issue testify to the plurality of academic opinions as to how one should refer to this body of work and situate it within the broader category of horror – it is, I believe, one of the issue's main strengths – and that the following remarks therefore only reflect my personal views. Following an early state of semantic fluctuation during which many terms co-existed to refer to roughly the same body of work, two terms emerged as dominant in the late 2010s: "elevated horror" and "post-horror", the former being mostly used in the United States, while the latter – coined by *Guardian* columnist Steve Rose (Rose, 2017) – is more widely used in the United Kingdom. I fully share David Church's opinion that

> 'elevated' is a more accurate descriptor for the *aesthetic strategies* used in these films, but […] it comes freighted with elitist biases against the horror genre itself. Meanwhile, 'post-horror' is also problematic, since it could erroneously imply that these are not 'actual' horror films – yet its very vagueness as a term also makes it more reclaimable, for my purposes, as a ready-made placeholder label for the many tropes, themes, affects, and political concerns that together constitute the corpus. (Church, 2021: 3)

Ever since Rick Altman's influential study (1984), the term "genre" has been understood as one used to group together various films sharing similar "semantic" characteristics – thematic and formal elements – and "syntactic" characteristics – sets of relationships between semantic elements. Naturally, genre names tend to hint at the common semantic and syntactic characteristics of the films they serve to categorize – for instance, the term "western" refers to the dominant setting of the films belonging to this genre. While such terms obviously pose taxonomic difficulties of their own – not all westerns take place in the American West! – the term "horror" does not refer to a semantic or syntactic characteristic but, rather, to an affect films of this category are supposed to elicit in the viewers – a

much more elusive quality, which may account for the perceived difficulty to grasp what holds together a genre encompassing such a large variety of distinct subgenres and cycles (Leeder, 2018: 94). Nonetheless, the terms used to categorize most horror subgenres or cycles frequently do refer to a semantic or syntactic characteristic supposedly giving a body of films a distinct identity justifying their being grouped into a separate subcategory – i.e., slashers are horror films focusing on a blade-wielding killer and found footage refers to a striking formal and narrative device: suggesting the footage constituting the film was made by one or several diegetic amateur filmmakers. While some cycles tend to be referred to by the name of the studios behind their making (i.e., Universal horror films or Hammer horror films), the very name of these studios becomes evocative of a set of semantic or syntactic characteristics that justify grouping these films as a distinct subcategory – such as, say, the distinctive use of color in Hammer films for instance.

Here lies the main issue behind the term elevated horror: instead of evoking a group of films linked together by shared semantic and syntactic characteristics, it seems to evoke one linked together by shared axiological characteristics:[2] these films, the term implies, form a distinctive category within the overarching genre of horror because they are more "intelligent", more "artistic", or quite simply more "interesting" than regular horror films, thus perpetuating "classist attitudes towards popular culture that seek to categorize and grade art forms from 'low' to 'high'", as Eddie Falvey argues regarding yet another term – "art horror" (2021: 64). That the term elevated horror should raise the same concerns as art horror is no coincidence. Indeed, I agree with David Church that elevated or post-horror films may best be considered as a distinct category within the broader category of art horror (itself a subcategory of both horror and art cinema!):

> Some film critics have posited post-horror as a 'new genre' or 'new subgenre' – but it is far more accurately described as an aesthetically linked *cycle* within the longer and broader definition of art horror cinema. (Church, 2021: 4)

Following Church, one may argue that the term elevated horror, like art horror, is not purely axiological as it also refers to a set of semantic and syntactic characteristics proper to these films – characteristics close

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2. The reasons for the axiological implications of the term become apparent when considering the third dimension of genrification that Altman added to his theory in *Film/Genre*: pragmatics. Genres, Altman points out, tend to be considered as static and clearly defined artistic categories, yet they are above all labels co-created by a myriad of artists, producers, critics and fans who use them in discursive processes. Generic claims are "pronounced *by* someone and addressed *to* someone" (1999: 102, emphases by the author). The label "elevated horror" is indeed convenient for studios desirous to advertise their films to audiences more interested in art films than in horror films, as well as for non-specialized film critics and viewers desirous to label these films as more artful than the average horror movie.

enough to those of art horror but distinct enough so as to require a new term. It is safe to affirm that the dominant characteristics of elevated or post-horror films are also those that, according to Joan Hawkins – who coined the term in her influential study *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (2000) – characterize art horror films, i.e. hybridizing horror conventions with art film conventions.[3] Before wondering to what extent elevated or post-horror differs from the rest of art horror, then, let us first keep on peeling the onion of genres by examining what distinguishes art horror from traditional horror. To do that, one must first define art cinema. Both Joan Hawkins and David Church summon David Bordwell's seminal 1979 article "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice". Church summarizes Bordwell's characterization of art cinema as follows:

> David Bordwell influentially outlines art cinema as less a genre in its own right than a *mode* of filmmaking inspired by modernist art, and internationally popularized during the 1950s-70s with the spread of independently owned arthouse theaters. More formally challenging than classical Hollywood cinema (a far more populist filmmaking mode), modernist art films frequently include drifting, circular, and open-ended narratives; ambiguous and psychologically complex characters; and various forms of spatial and temporal manipulations (including deliberate continuity violations, durational realism, and so on). (Church, 2021: 8)

Such semantic and syntactic characteristics may indeed enable one to separate an art film like Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) from a classical Hollywood film like John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), just like they may help distinguish an art horror film like Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) from a more traditional horror film like Richard Donner's *The Omen* (1976), and an elevated or post-horror film like Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse* (2019) from David Gordon Green's *Halloween* (2018) – a contemporary take on the slasher –, Darren Lynn Bousman's *Spiral* (2021) – the 9th installment of the *Saw* franchise, emblematic of torture porn –, or William Eubank's *Paranormal Activity: Next of Kin* (2021) – the 7th installment of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, emblematic of found footage.

Were it possible to use the term "elevated horror" to refer only to such a set of semantic and syntactic characteristics, I would consider it a viable one, aptly describing the hybridizing process between horror cinema and

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3. Hawkins coined this term to refer to a specific set of avant-garde films seeking to shock, horrify and disgust while clearly belonging to the category of art cinema. However, the term "art horror" has since come to refer to all films hybridizing the conventions of art cinema and horror.

art cinema that determines the cycle. I would even argue that the fact "elevated" implies a more "intellectual" form of cinema is an accurate description of the semantic and syntactic characteristics of the films since, like art films, they do tend to raise overt philosophical, ethical and ideological issues more frequently than most horror films – which, as Carol J. Clover (1987) and Linda Williams (1991) have argued, may be thought of as constituting a "body genre" striving to elicit a physiological reaction from the viewers. Such a distinction would therefore seem acceptable, if not for the longstanding assumption that "intellectual" art equals "High" art, while body genres form the bulk of "Low" art – an assumption proved wrong by the aforementioned studies of Clover and Williams which demonstrate that appealing to the viewers' bodies does not preclude thematic depth and cognitively challenging content.

Keeping in mind that "elevated horror" may never be received as a purely descriptive term without any axiological implications, I therefore propose to privilege the term "post-horror". The latter may also be said to be somewhat elitist – post-horror films would have "outgrown" the primitive state of traditional horror films –, though it is less obvious, and adopting it remains preferable to further complexifying the terminological debate by proposing yet another term. A comparison might be drawn with the term *Giallo,* which emerged in the late 1960s to refer to the films of such directors as Mario Bava and Dario Argento. Rife with derogatory implications – *Gialli* originally evoked Italian literary pulp fiction, although some more respected books were also published as *Gialli* –, the term implied the films represent the lowest of Low art. Yet its continuous use among fans, critics and scholars means the term now alludes to the semantic and syntactic characteristics of the films rather than to their presumed quality, even though any new study of the subgenre must inevitably remind readers of the initial axiological implications of the term *Giallo* (Laguarda, 2021). It is my hope that by adopting the term "post-horror", this issue will similarly contribute to stripping it of most connotations.

Should post-horror be considered a distinct cycle?

Now that I may safely use the term post-horror, a question remains: why refer to post-horror as a specific cycle, instead of simply envisioning the films as new instances of art horror? In other words, do these films form a body of work distinct enough from other art horror films so as to require a new subcategory? In his book (2021), David Church argues that these films do bear certain common aesthetic and thematic characteristics which justify grouping them into a distinct cycle, among which:

- A rejection of jump scares, favoring a diffuse feeling of lingering dread instead

- Rhythms and tones influenced by slow cinema

- Recurrent themes such as grief and familial trauma

- Progressive perspectives on racism, sexism, and other social issues

Of course, the commonalities identified by Church can be debated. As he himself argues, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), a film frequently identified as one of the most successful instances of post-horror, shares few of the formal characteristics listed by the author – its rhythm and tone have little in common with slow cinema – and its being called post-horror mostly seems to stem from the way it uses "the horror genre as a timely platform to 'smartly' intervene in American racial-equality debates during the Black Lives Matter movement" (2021: 38-39). On the other hand, several films released prior to the mid-2010s seem to share most, if not all, of the characteristics attributed to post-horror films. For instance, M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense,* released in 1999, does favor lingering dread over jump scares. Its rhythm is particularly slow and it deals with themes such as grief, trauma, loss, and the difficulty of accepting our inherent mortality. Its focus on the family unit, and especially on a mother-son relationship, is also evocative of a key characteristic of post-horror. The film even stars Toni Collette, who would go on to play the leading role in Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2017), one of the most emblematic instances of post-horror!

It is therefore unsurprising that some scholars, such as Jean-Baptiste Carobolante and Philippe Ortoli (2024), refuse to envision post-horror as a distinct cycle. One could object that such is the lot of every attempt to categorize a group of films according to a shared set of semantic and syntactic characteristics – see, for instance, the endless debate as to whether film noir constitutes a specific genre (Naremore, 2008: 9-39). The fact remains that in the mid-2010s, a great number of films released within a few years exhibited enough shared characteristics so as to be perceived as representing a distinct cycle by many viewers and critics. And while it is essential to point out that post-horror films favor thematic and formal elements that several art horror films had already developed – as various articles of this issue do –, I believe it is nonetheless useful to envision them as forming a distinct cycle, even though doing so requires taking all the methodological precautions mentioned above. Just as slashers did not invent blade-wielding antagonists, post-horror films may not have invented many, if not all, of the semantic and syntactic elements which characterize them, but they

do represent a turning point in that for the first time, these elements have been shared by a large number of films released during a short timeframe, so that they have come to represent an alternative take on horror cinema, eliciting specific expectations and developing easily recognizable conventions. In other words, post-horror may be envisioned as a cycle, not because the films share characteristics that clearly sets them apart from all art horror films, but because the post-horror cycle represents the first time that art horror films formed a coherent body of work with some level of thematic and formal consistency.

Before post-horror, art horror films tended to be seen as isolated works made by *auteurs* desirous to toy with the genre to better distort it from within. With the possible exception of German expressionist films in the 1920s, art horror films were perceived as an inherently oppositional form of cinema – the works of maverick *auteurs* opposing the generic constraints of mainstream horror by integrating art film conventions into the genre. Art horror cinema was therefore liable to gain some level of critical recognition among non-specialized critics yet at the same time, it risked being rejected by traditional horror fans as looking down on the genre it attempted to transcend. See, for instance, the hostile reaction of a horror film buff such as Pauline Kael upon the release of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, which she saw as excessively cold and intellectual, a film made by a man incapable of appreciating the "true" appeal of horror cinema (Kael, 1980). In 1979, Robin Wood argued that the works that would come to be called art horror films frequently fail to attract viewers due to their perceived elitism – as many regular art films do: "most horror films make money; the ones that don't are those with overt intellectual pretensions, obviously 'difficult' works like *God Told Me To* (*Demon*) and *Exorcist II: The Heretic*" (Wood, 2018: 82).[4]

Like the 1970s films described by Wood, post-horror films also tend to be more critically acclaimed in non-specialized media than other horror films, and several of them have been rejected by the public as horror made for non-horror fans. Yet the large number of commercially successful films released in the 2010s – from *Get Out* to *Hereditary* – shows that post-horror may represent the first cycle of art horror films to have established art horror as a potentially profitable subgenre of horror. It therefore comes as no surprise that whereas most art horror films used to be made by filmmakers who had already established their reputations as *auteurs*

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4. Naturally, it would be erroneous to affirm, following Wood, that art horror films were never commercially successful before the post-horror cycle – films such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), or *The Sixth Sense* are obvious counterexamples. Nonetheless, these were all one-shot successes which never gave birth to a streak of profitable art horror films the way the first post-horror films did. In fact, whenever a cycle of films attempted to capitalize on the success of an art horror film, the resulting films tended to be perceived as exploitative B-horror bearing few of the art horror characteristics of their forebears. Cf., for instance, William Castle's *Psycho*-like 1961 *Homicidal*.

before turning to horror – Roman Polanski, Stanley Kubrick, Pier Paolo Pasolini, John Boorman –, many young directors – Jordan Peele, Ari Aster, Robert Eggers, Oz Perkins – were entrusted by the studios to make their first feature films a post-horror film.

Why did the mid-2010s see so many relatively successful art horror films? While it is impossible to say with certainty, I would mention two determining factors. It may notably be the result of the critical reevaluation of horror cinema from the 1990s onwards, giving birth to a new generation of scholars, viewers and filmmakers who grew up considering horror as a respectable genre – thus leading many young directors desirous to establish themselves as *auteurs* to invest the genre. Undoubtedly, this cycle also resulted from the willingness of several independent production and distribution companies – chief of which A24, the company behind the films of Ari Aster and Robert Eggers –[5] to make horror films while attempting to set their works apart from the rest of the production.

When does post-horror begin and end?

The centrality of A24 in the constitution of post-horror makes it relatively easy to approximately establish when post-horror started, as the birth of the cycle more or less coincides with the first commercial successes of the company. It was founded in 2012 – the year Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio* (sometimes regarded as a precursor to post-horror) came out. In 2014, A24 released *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer), a film which arguably bears some of the characteristics of post-horror, while two other non-A24 films released that year – *The Babadook* and *It Follows* – are now widely considered as the first landmarks of post-horror. A24 would then distribute *The Witch* in 2015, and a myriad of other horror films later on. Therefore, one could safely argue post-horror was born between 2012 and 2015. By 2022, it had become so easily recognizable as to be jokingly referred to in the fifth installment of *Scream* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett). However, in mid-2024, as I write this introduction, it is much less clear whether post-horror will continue to be one of horror's main current trends for much longer.

While 2022 has seen new horror films bearing most of the characteristics of post-horror – from Alex Garland's *Men* to Kyle Edward Ball's *Skinamarink* –, it seems fewer were released in 2023. In addition, many of the landmark directors associated with the cycle may now be steering away from horror. After releasing the horror comedy *Beau is Afraid* in 2023,

5. The pivotal role of A24 is examined in an article of this issue.

Ari Aster is set to direct a Western (Ruimy, 2023), while the last films of Robert Eggers (*The Northman,* 2022) and Jordan Peele (*Nope*, 2022) had little to do with post-horror – on the other hand, Eggers is about to come back to the genre with his planned remake of Friedrich W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu,* and David Robert Mitchell, who stepped away from post-horror after *It Follows,* has recently announced his intention to shoot a sequel entitled *They Follow.* And even though A24 keeps on producing numerous horror films, most of the company's most successful recent horrific releases – Ty West's *X* trilogy (2022-2024), Halina Rejin's *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022) or Danny and Michael Philippou's *Talk to Me* (2023) – are not easily identifiable as instances of post-horror. *Talk to Me,* for instance, does focus on a central theme of post-horror – grief – but the film relies heavily on jump scares and adopts a fast-paced rhythm, thus moving away from two of the main formal tenets of post-horror.[6] I do not wish to imply that such films are somehow inferior to "pure" post-horror films or in any way "derivative". As Janet Staiger pointed out (1997), the belief in the purity of a genre often rests on a selective interpretation of a genre's history and believing that one ought to distinguish between "core" and "peripheral" instances of a genre "can easily degenerate into a contest over 'purity'" (Leeder, 2018: 97). We have seen that *Get Out* may be as peripheral as *Talk to Me* from a stylistic point of view, and yet the former is usually considered one of the foremost instances of post-horror!

I simply wish to suggest that the departure of some of the leading post-horror directors to other genres, combined with the diversification of A24, means that starting in 2023, fewer films were released that could unambiguously be labelled as new instances of post-horror, so that it is likely future film historians may consider the core of the cycle spanned from the mid-2010s to the early to mid-2020s. Beyond the specific case of A24 productions, there seem to be more and more films mixing some of the core characteristics of post-horror (a focus on grief, racial or gender issues, dysfunctional family relationships) with some of the characteristics most antithetical to post-horror, such as a heavy reliance on jump scares. Let us mention *The Invisible Man* (Leigh Wannell, 2020), *Smile* (Parker Finn, 2022), or even *Halloween Ends* (David Gordon Green, 2022), whose focus on trauma adds a distinctly post-horror feel to the last installment of the celebrated slasher franchise.[7] This growing hybridization of "traditional" horror and post-horror may be interpreted as a sign that post-horror may cease to stand out as a distinct cycle in the next few years. Naturally, such an assertion is purely speculative.

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6. Unlike *X, Pearl* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies, Talk to Me* does, however, fit the definition of post-horror according to another characteristic – subverting the perceived formula – I develop below.
7. Jamie Lee Curtis insisted upon the film's focus on trauma in so many promotional interviews that her multiples utterances of the word were turned into a popular internet meme.

The horror of post-horror

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As previously mentioned, Church argues one of the key characteristics of post-horror is its focus on "lingering dread" over other horrific affects (Church, 2021: 1), also pointing out that the films tend to eschew "explicit gore" scenes (Church, 2021: 181). This may be a key reason explaining why the cycle has often been accused of reintroducing a hierarchy within the genre of horror. Indeed, dread has long been perceived as the most refined affect horror may produce. Throughout history, the genre of horror and its various siblings (the Gothic, the fantastic, etc.) have often been looked down on, and the artists working within these genres seeking critical recognition have frequently pitted the feeling of dread they strived to elicit against other horrific affects in order to distinguish their works from more "vulgar" counterparts.

In her essay "On the Supernatural", Ann Radcliffe, one of the first authors of Gothic fiction, famously opposed horror and terror (Radcliffe, 2017). While horror refers to the vulgar thrills felt when a character encounters a monster or is subjected to violence, terror describes the feeling of dread one feels when facing the unknown and fearing a dangerous or supernatural encounter. Terror, for Radcliffe, is a far more worthy affect to pursue, as it leads to the sublime, the most noble sentiment gothic fiction may produce. This hierarchizing of horror continues to impact the reception of the genre up to this day. In his 1978 *Danse Macabre,* Stephen King makes a distinction between terror (letting the readers imagine the monster), horror (describing the monster) and revulsion (describing the revulsive acts of the monster), and argues that producing terror is his ultimate goal, even though he sometimes reluctantly aims for horror or revulsion (King, 2012). So firmly established is this distinction that horror films privileging gore and graphic violence over dread are still considered by many as the least respectable form of horror. As Philippe Rouyer points out, even gore film directors sometimes refuse to acknowledge their interest in gore: "For a Herschell Gordon Lewis or a Peter Jackson claiming that "my motto is: 'the gorier, the better'", how many others rather think, like Tom Holland, that gore "is the last recourse of the talentless"" (Rouyer, 1997: 19). In the last few decades, however, fans and critics such as Philippe Rouyer have attempted to reevaluate graphic horror as a worthy pursuit.

One may therefore understand the frustration of such fans and critics against art horror[8] and post-horror films which tend to favor the

8. When coining the term art horror, Joan Hawkins actually referred to avant-garde films seeking to elicit revulsion and disgust through graphic images, like Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), as the purpose of her book was to discuss "the way that consumers of both low and high culture, during the postwar period, attempted to define themselves in opposition to a dominant mainstream taste aesthetic" (2000: 205) in

supposedly more noble dread. However, a closer look at post-horror films reveals that several directors of the cycle do not wholeheartedly reject gore and other forms of horrific imagery eliciting revulsion. From the rotting severed head of the family's daughter in *Hereditary* to the smashed corpses of the elders committing suicide in *Midsommar,* Ari Aster always includes lengthy gore shots in his work. In *The Lighthouse,* Robert Eggers repeatedly shows hallucinatory close-up shots of tentacular, slimy marine creatures liable to disgust viewers. In *Get Out,* Jordan Peele revels in filming the gory details of Chris killing his oppressors. One might therefore argue that despite their reputation for cultural elitism, post-horror directors often challenge the High/Low dichotomy of dread vs graphic horror. Nonetheless, this assertion is to be nuanced, as disgust and revulsion are never the dominant affects elicited by post-horror films, even during the most gruesome scenes. For instance, while the lengthy close-up shot of the daughter's rotting head in *Hereditary* may disgust viewers, this shot is part of a scene stressing the mother's suffering after losing her daughter, so that the feelings of grief and psychological turmoil trump that of revulsion throughout the whole scene.

Challenging the perceived formula

As we have seen, the thematic and formal commonalities previously identified as symptomatic of post-horror pose certain taxonomical problems, since some films are considered as belonging to the corpus for essentially thematic reasons, and others for essentially formal reasons. In both cases, however, it appears that for a film to be considered as an instance of post-horror, it needs be perceived as a horror film challenging the basic formula of horror cinema. Naturally, countless other horror films also challenge the characteristics seen as the genre's basic formula, and one might even argue that as soon as a genre is sufficiently codified for filmmakers and viewers to perceive a formulaic set of characteristics, any film released within that genre will, one way or another, seek to challenge it. It is therefore in the way post-horror films challenge the horrific formula that they may be recognized as a distinct horrific cycle. The various aforementioned formal and thematic characteristics – lack of jumpscare, focus on grief, etc. – all participate to fostering the feeling of a specifically "post-horror way" of challenging the formula. To finish this introduction, I will add two characteristics to the list. Here too, not all the films considered as post-horror share these characteristics, but enough of them do that these may be considered as symptomatic of the cycle.

order to argue that "low and high culture are always linked, always dialectically paired" (2000: 215). Beyond this specific form of avant-garde cinema, however, there is little doubt that many art horror films favor dread over gore.

The first one concerns both horror's archetypal narrative structure and its perceived ideological subtext. In his landmark 1979 article, Robin Wood attempted to identify the ideological underpinnings of horror cinema, which led him to come up with "a simple and basic formula for the horror film: normality is threatened by the monster" (Wood, 2018: 83). This formula, Wood argued, holds true for both the most progressive and the most reactionary of horror films, the difference between both extremes lying in the films' propensities to encourage the viewers to either identify with or reject a monster symbolizing the threatening emergence of an other standing for everything our society represses (79). And while he suggested that horror may be the most potentially subversive of all film genres, since "central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and that our moral conditioning teaches us to revere" (85), Wood also noted that horror films often contain a happy ending which typically signifies "the restoration of repression" (79). Wood's theory remains a pillar of horror studies which has profoundly influenced the perception of horror cinema. Adam Lowenstein recently challenged the theory, which he considers as too rigidly dichotomic, arguing that the relationship between normality and monstrous otherness developed in horror films is much more fluid than what Wood's analysis entails – an ongoing and constantly evolving struggle rather than a fixed opposition. For Lowenstein, "horror never settles into comforting solutions and certainties about 'progressive' or 'reactionary' approaches to otherness" (6). In addition, Lowenstein suggests, most horror films end up questioning the boundary between normality and monstrous otherness, as in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) in which, by the end of the film, there is "no easy way to distinguish between [zombies and humans]" (10).

In keeping with Lowenstein's understanding of the horrific formula, post-horror films all blur the boundary between monstrousness and normality. However, the narrative strategies employed to do so frequently differ from previous horror films, since post-horror films tend to reject the narrative dichotomy of normality/monstrous otherness altogether. In many post-horror films, the monster is not a repressed other threatening normality: the monster is an expression of normality itself.[9] According to Wood, normality "in horror films is in general boringly constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them" (Wood, 2018: 84). Lowenstein criticizes Wood's portrayal, suggesting that "normality and monstrosity are variations on self and other that cannot

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9. Naturally, there are obvious antecedents in which the monster also explicitly stems from normality, chief of which *Psycho*. However, in *Psycho*, Norman Bates' sexual repression and schizophrenia still allow for the character to be understood as a monstrous other, though one created by an apparently normal White middle-class household and, symbolically, by oppressive American sexual and social mores.

be fixed but are always shifting, always metamorphosing." (6). However, post-horror films often do focus on the archetypal instances of normality identified by Wood, yet they unambiguously depict them as inherently monstrous. Let us take the example of a fundamental unit of normality in American horror cinema: the white nuclear family. Earlier films such as *Rosemary's Baby* or *The Shining* already displaced monstrosity within the family unit itself, but the emergence of the monster was caused by some foreign influence (satanic neighbors or ghosts), thus establishing the traditional dichotomy of normality/monstrous otherness before complexifying it. In *Hereditary,* Paimon, the demon that tortures the white upper middle-class family, is summoned by the family's very matriarch (the dead grandmother) before inhabiting the daughter, the mother and the son. In *The Babadook,* in *The Witch* and in *Relic* (Natalie Erika James, 2020), the monster emerges as an outgrowth of the tensions, the frustrations and the traumas inherent to the family unit.

Another illustration of post-horror's portrayal of monstrous normality can be found in *The Blackcoat's Daughter* (Oz Perkins, 2015) which, like *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) focuses on another staple of normality – a young white girl – possessed by a demon. Unlike Friedkin's character, the young girl of Perkins's film wishes to be possessed, thus actively trying to become monstrous. Likewise, As David Church analyses, the monster of *It Follows* expresses the horror inherent to the sexual practice considered as the norm, heterosexual monogamy (Church, 2021: 181-212). Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) may prove a counterexample as it posits a more traditional opposition between normality and monstrous otherness: the monsters are underground doppelgangers spawned by the normal inhabitants living above ground. However, the way that initial dichotomy is eventually blurred is in keeping with the post-horror focus on monstrous normality. Rather than eventually suggest monsters and normal characters mirror one another, as *Night of the Living Dead* does, *Us* fully abolishes the distinction between the two since a twist eventually reveals the main protagonist was actually an underground dweller all along.

Some post-horror films retain a structural opposition between heroes and monsters, and never end up blurring the boundary between the two. But more often than not, those which do so define the heroes as members of social minorities, while the monsters yet again embody normality, here understood as the socially dominant group – be it Whites, men, or white men. Most prominently, *Get Out* shows a White liberal[10] American

10. The film's focus on a monstrous upstate New York liberal family is essential for the Armitages to embody a form of monstrous normality. As Claire Dutriaux points out, throughout the 20th century, films showing White monsters often focused on characters portrayed as rednecks, thus symbolically othering White monsters as backwards rural Southerners (2022).

family as monstrous.[11] In *Men,* as in *The Invisible Man* (Leigh Whannell, 2020) – a film often left out of the post-horror canon even though director Leigh Whannell himself stated his intention to make the film a work of "elevated horror" (Whannell, 2020) – the monster embodies a toxic form of heterosexual masculinity. Such a focus on monstrous normality may explain why post-horror has been perceived as a distinctly liberal cycle of films, in spite of the fact countless other horror films released before also developed liberal themes.[12]

In addition to challenging the normality/monster dichotomy, many post-horror films also seek to rework the very figure of the monster and to break away from past cinematic embodiments of monstrosity. Various films explore the possibility of horror without either supernatural or human monsters. In *It Comes at Night* (Trey Edward Shults, 2017), most of humankind has been wiped out by a disease, and the few survivors mistrust and kill all aliens for the sake of protecting their family; and even though the film's title and atmosphere suggest the disease has turned the victims into zombies or other monstrous figures, no such monster is ever shown throughout the film. On the other hand, *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017) does show its eponymous ghost in almost every scene, yet the ghost hardly fits the generic expectations of what a monster is, both formally – the creature is stereotypically represented as a man covered in a white sheet – and thematically – it does not haunt the living but simply observes them.

Like *A Ghost Story*, various films rework some of the most archetypal monsters of the horror genre. Witches (*The Witch*), demons (*Hereditary*), body snatchers (*Get Out*), boogeymen (*The Babadook*), possessed children (*The Blackcoat's Daughter*) and archaic communities (*Midsommar*) abound in post-horror. The films seeking to reinvest these archetypal figures purport to offer a fresh take on these creatures not by playing with previous filmic representations of these monsters, but by discarding these previous representations altogether. I do not mean to imply that no post-horror film draws any inspiration from previous filmic representations of monsters, although some indeed do not: as Jean-Baptiste Carobolante argues, "a film like *The Witch* does not seek to go back to

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11. In this regard, *Get Out* exemplifies post-horror's tendency to turn the monster into an expression of normality, and can be compared to *Candiman* (2021), directed by Nia DaCosta and produced by Peele. Both films similarly focus on the ravages of racism, yet treat it very differently. *Candiman* is in keeping with Wood's formula as the monster is indeed a repressed other – here, a Black Man. Tellingly, Da Costa's film is the remake of Bernard Rose's 1992 version, and therefore does not distort the normality/monstrous other dichotomy the way most post-horror films do.

12. Naturally, focusing on monstrous normality does not prevent the relation between normality and otherness in post-horror films from being developed with the same complexity and nuance that Lowenstein perceives in the horror genre as a whole and which, in his opinion, justifies rejecting the rigid binarity of Wood's opposition between progressive and conservative horror films. In fact, Lowenstein examines two post-horror films, *The Babadook* and *Get Out*, in his own book (2022: 129-182).

the roots of witch movies – rather, it seeks to go back to the roots of the archaic belief in witchcraft" (2024: 244).[13] Some, like *Midsommar,* clearly drew inspiration from previous films (in this case *The Wicker Man,* Robin Hardy, 1973) to portray their monsters. However, post-horror films tend to allow viewers to discard the weight of past filmic representations of archetypal monsters, developing a form of suspension of disbelief that allows viewers to engage with these monsters as if they were encountering such creatures for the first time. In this regard, post-horror films radically differ from postmodern horror films such as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), filled with intertextual references to previous filmic monsters and metafilmic acknowledgements that their monsters are indeed cultural archetypes. Carobolante's claim that "[Ari Aster] knows the history of horror cinema, but rather than winking at it, he chooses to absorb it and start anew" (2024: 244 – my translation) therefore seems fit to describe the work of several post-horror directors, and I fully share Carobolante's belief that in this regard, these directors develop a "neo-classical view of horror" (2024: 243 – my translation).[14]

Outline of the issue

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In this introduction, I have argued in favor of considering post-horror as a distinct cycle of films, but the first article of this issue offers a very welcome alternative perspective. In « *Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated Horror ? » (one of the two articles in French in this issue), Philippe Ortoli argues that if a genre or subgenre is to be defined by a set of aesthetic criteria, then the very concept of post-horror poses a problem, since none of the films' formal or thematic characteristics are unique to the cycle. On the other hand, in "A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?", Antoine Simms examines the status of the studio which, for many, is synonymous with post-horror, and wonders whether A24 films share a distinctive style. Simms argues that a "collective affect" emanates from A24 films, one that stems from the studio's "metamodern" sensibility.

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13. This might explain why vampires are so far absent from the post-horror cycle. Indeed, several films, from *Nosferatu The Vampyre* (Werner Herzog, 1976) to *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) had already sought to reinvent this figure by discarding previous filmic representations, long before post-horror. Nonetheless, this should soon change as Robert Eggers is set to release a new version of Friedrich W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu.* One may assume that, as in Herzog's version, adapting Murnau's seminal vampire film will enable Eggers to disregard the countless other filmic representations of the monster.

14. Which does not mean that post-horror films have no metafilmic ambitions. As various articles of this issue point out, post-horror films often develop a reflection upon the nature of images and upon the relationship between fiction and reality, thus fitting Patricia Waugh's definition of the metafilm (1984). However, as is apparent in the articles of these issues, their metafilmic reflections often entail little to no overt intertextual references to and overt quotations of specific horror films, unlike postmodern horror films.

The question of post-horror's place within contemporary audiovisual productions also infuses the next article of this issue, "Of Mothers and Witches: Performative Spaces of Femininity in "Post-Horror" Works, from *Antichrist* to *Sharp Objects*". Lucie Patronnat analyzes the topic of femininity and witchcraft in three post-horror films – *The Witch, Hereditary,* and *Hagazussa* (Lukas Feigelfeld, 2017) – as well as in an earlier film (Lars Von Trier's 2008 *Antichrist*) and a miniseries (*Sharp Objects*, Jean-Marc Vallée, 2018) – and highlights the works' thematic and aesthetic coherence in their portrayal of femininity. The following article, "Lee Haven Jones, *The Feast* (2021): a Tale of Retaliation", also focuses on the figure of the witch. Céline Crégut studies the character of the witch in Welsh film *The Feast* and highlights its ambiguous and multifaceted function, simultaneously a symbol of Welsh cultural resilience, an image of nature retaliating against modernity and industrialism, and a catalyst of modern flaws and weaknesses.

In my own article, "Embracing the Horrific Other: Problematizing Identification, Cultural Relativism and Empathy in Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019)", I examine the tendency of post-horror films to offer a fresh take on the normality/otherness dichotomy central to the horror genre. *Midsommar*, I argue, challenges the assumption that horror films enable viewers to identify with others, and metafilmically questions cinema's very capacity to enable viewers to embrace the worldviews of others. Gilles Menegaldo then focuses on another work considered a core film of the cycle, *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017). As the article's title points out, Lowery's film may indeed be deemed a "Quintessential Post-horror Film". However, Menegaldo argues that the film also blurs the generic boundaries between horror, gothic, fantasy, melodrama and even comedy. The following article focuses on another archetypal monster, the zombie. Zombie films create a form of corporeal horror that may seem antonymous with post-horror. Yet in "*The Girl with all the Gifts*, Colm McCarthy (2016), as post-horror, post-apocalyptic, post-modern and post-Romero zombie film", Hubert Le Boisselier, drawing on both ecocriticism and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, shows that Colm McCarthy's film develops a specific grotesque imagery that does connect the film to the post-horror cycle.

The next three articles all examine the work of one of post-horror's leading directors, Jordan Peele. In "You'd better look twice!: Annexation and De/Colonization of the Gaze in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017)", Isabelle Labrouillère sheds light on *Get Out*'s metafilmic dimension. Labrouillère shows that *Get Out* questions our gaze as well as the power of images in order to lay bare the clichés with which our societies have internalized the horror of racism. In doing so, she argues, Peele's film both decenters and decolonializes the viewers' gaze. In this issue's second article in French,

Georges Pillegand Le Rider then examines the intermedial links between Peele's films and Edgard Allan Poe's literary work. Pillegand Le Rider shows that not only do the films of Jordan Peele echo and pay tribute to the master of horror, they also intertextually adapt Poesque motifs to develop contemporary takes on race and gender. Finally, Yann Robloux's article, "Contemporary Trouble in America: *Us*, Jordan Peele, 2019", studies the complex portrayal of the United States developed in Peele's second feature film. Robloux suggests that by depicting what troubles the surface of America's representation of itself, *Us* makes apparent the nation's fractures and disconnections, while questioning its very identity.

While Jordan Peele is undoubtedly the most famous Black director whose work has been linked to post-horror, others have also contributed to cement the links between Black horror and post-horror. In the last article of this issue, Sophie Mantrant focuses on the first feature film of British director Remi Weekes, *His House*. In "Revisiting the Haunted House: Remi Weekes's *His House* (2020)", Mantrant studies the film's uncommon generic hybridization of horror cinema and social realism. Centered on an immigrant couple from South Sudan, *His House* revisits the *topos* of the haunted house and, Mantrant argues, develops a double narrative of liminality exploring the feeling of "(not)-at-homeness".

Together, these articles help shed light on the formal and thematic complexity of post-horror, while contributing to further situating the films within the broader history of horror cinema. That is why I want to thank all the authors for their rich and stimulating contributions to the issue. My thanks also go to David Church for his valued feedback on this introduction, as well as to all the reviewers who contributed to this issue and to Yannick Bellanger-Morvan for guiding me throughout the whole editorial process.

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Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post-horror* ?

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Résumé : Formule apparue vers 2014 pour désigner une production de films (de *Mr Badabook* jusqu'à *Long Legs* en 2024) aptes à effrayer le spectateur tout en manifestant une certaine qualité artistique, l'*elevated horror* (aussi nommée *post-horror*) entraîne une réflexion sur la manière dont on juge le cinéma d'horreur et, à travers lui, celui de genre. En revenant sur les catégories de l'*art-horror* ou de l'*art cinema*, l'article se propose de voir comment, un type de films, décrié pour la sollicitation des affects primaires qu'il manifeste, parvient à acquérir une valeur sociale et esthétique indubitable. Approche culturelle et approche esthétique sont ainsi convoquées pour discuter de la pérennité des dichotomies fondatrices (populaire/savant, genre/auteur…) dans la poursuite des conventions admises pour l'estimation d'une œuvre.

Mots-clés : horreur (film d'), *art-horror*, *post-horror*, *elevated horror*, *art cinema*, genre (cinéma de), mal, affect.

Abstract: The phrase elevated horror (or post-horror) was coined circa 2014 to define a trend of horror films that, while still intending to scare audiences, strove to display some artistic ambition. Such a label, which has been applied to films ranging from *The Babadook* (2014) to *Long Legs* (2024), raises issues about the critical reception and aesthetic appreciation of horror movies. Through an investigation of such categories as "art horror" or "art cinema", this paper studies how a certain kind of films, usually disparaged for supposedly targeting and triggering primary affects in the viewer, has managed to acquire an unquestionable social and artistic value. Combining a cultural and an aesthetic approach, it aims to uncover the lasting influence of long-established dichotomies (highbrow vs. lowbrow, art vs. entertainment, cinema vs. movies, authorship vs. genre…) on the construction of pseudo-consensual standards of appreciation, but it also gives evidence that this genre stubbornly resists any attempt to domesticate it.

Keywords: Art-Horror, Post-Horror, Elevated Horror, Art-Cinema, Horror Movies, Film Genre, Evil, Affects.

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

26

Introduction

Que la capacité de l'homme à donner des noms à des ensembles plus ou moins importants d'*items* soit très développée, est notable, mais, qu'il s'agisse des *studies* ou des genres, nul doute que cette tendance s'incarne admirablement chez les critiques et/ou chercheurs anglo-saxons toujours aptes à fixer de nouvelles appellations devant l'existence de quelques œuvres possédant des airs de familiarité remarqués par eux-mêmes ou par l'examen des réactions qu'elles ont pu susciter. Ainsi, on parle désormais d'*elevated horror* ou de *post-horror* et, dans leur ouvrage, *Rendez-vous avec la peur*, Bonnard et Bousquet n'hésitent pas, pour adapter la formule moins à la langue française qu'à celle employée par la cinéphilie, à choisir la dénomination « Horreur d'auteur[1] » (avec un point d'interrogation ; Bonnard, Bousquet, 2021 : 275), dévoilant assez justement la dimension du paradoxe implicite contenu dans l'expression américaine : comment un cinéma de genre peut-il aussi être un cinéma d'auteur ?

Il s'agirait donc de désigner une suite de longs métrages caractérisés par leur propension à ne pas jouer le jeu habituel de la catégorie dont ils semblent relever, en allant ouvertement s'inscrire dans la perspective de ce qui, depuis toujours, est considéré comme l'ennemi de celle-ci, voire de toutes ses camarades, à savoir une classe de produits cinématographiques dont les éléments communs restent implicitement marqués du sceau de la singularité artistique et non de l'application de conventions collectivement fixées. Nous pensons en avoir fini avec cette vieille opposition (Ortoli, 2021 : 44), mais, visiblement, elle revient encore nous hanter et le fera aussi longtemps qu'on jugera les films en tant que productions culturelles et non œuvres, et ce pour ne pas être tributaires de ce que Carroll appelle « l'idéologie de l'art autonome » (Carroll, 2015 : 292). On le voit, les discussions que soulève ce nouveau sous-genre, nanti d'un riche corpus[2] et, pour l'heure, de peu d'écrits théoriques (l'ouvrage de David Church, 2021, étant, à notre connaissance, le seul) entraînent avec elles des considérations sur l'estimation qualitative des films au nom de leur valeur sociale qu'il ne faut pas négliger, d'abord parce qu'elles sont en train de se constituer en évidences dans le champ des études universitaires sur l'art (et la multiplication des objets accolés aux *studies* – de *Contagion* à *Nostalgia*, en passant par *Fat* – montre bien que l'émiettement postmoderne s'est définitivement installé comme leur mètre étalon), ensuite parce qu'elles reconduisent la tendance actuelle de la pensée considérant, non pas que rien n'échappe au regard sociologique (c'est indubitable !), mais que tout ne peut s'envisager

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1. Symptomatiquement, c'est à la dernière page de l'ouvrage que le terme apparaît.
2. Pour plus de facilité de lecture, nous renvoyons à la filmographie que nous précisons en fin d'article : elle reprend les titres cités et s'y trouvent en gras ceux régulièrement mentionnés dans les textes utilisant les termes d'*elevated* et/ou de *post-horror* avec leur titre original, le nom de leur réalisateur et l'année de leur sortie dans leur pays d'origine.

Ortoli – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

27

que par lui, et, enfin, parce qu'elles réactivent un véritable problème philosophique, celui de la possibilité d'une évaluation objective d'un film.

Reprenons du début : si on reconnaît à cette classe de films les atouts de l'élévation et/ou de la nouveauté, on ne peut mesurer ces derniers qu'à l'aune du but affiché clairement par la matrice dont ils modifieraient les qualités habituelles, soit, en résumé, celles de provoquer un « violent saisissement d'effroi accompagné d'un recul physique ou mental, devant une chose hideuse, affreuse[3] », en convoquant les processus les plus primaires pour y parvenir. Il faut retrouver ces sources car, avant de nous pencher sur la question du caractère « *elevated* » et/ou « *post* » (Church, 2021 : 27 ; Carroll, Andrew, 2019) de cette nouvelle variété du film d'horreur, qui, après le *art-horror*, le *torture porn* ou le *found footage*, semble désormais donner les fruits les plus admirés de son arbre vénéneux, il nous paraît fondamental de revenir rapidement sur les racines de ce dernier.

Le film d'horreur : identité floutée d'un genre protéiforme

Provoquer peur et dégoût

Si le film d'horreur est une notion floue, c'est d'abord parce que, pour certains, et non des moindres (Bazin, 1997 : 68 ; Virmaux, 1994 ; Sadoul, 1979 : 243), il peut être remplacé par d'autres notions évoquant soit la peur que doivent susciter ses œuvres, soit le caractère surnaturel de leur déroulement narratif. Or, c'est là que réside une partie du problème : la nature des causes de l'effroi fait apparaître parfois « fantastique » comme synonyme, et place donc le critère distinctif sur le plan du contenu et du fameux principe d'hésitation qui préside à sa vérité fictionnelle (Todorov, 1970 : 46), principe qui, quand il est détruit, aboutit à deux autres notions, l'étrange et le merveilleux (suivant que l'on accepte l'outre-passement du naturel comme la vue de l'esprit d'un protagoniste ou, au contraire, comme la règle de l'univers filmique). L'autre souci semble résulter de la résolution du premier (où le fantastique ne serait, donc qu'un sous-genre horrifique) car ce qui relierait dès lors les trois termes ne pourrait être que la frayeur que les productions dont il délimite l'identité provoquent chez leurs spectateurs : peut-on convenir d'une définition psychologique pour une catégorie esthétique ? Éric Dufour, dans son *Cinéma d'horreur et ses figures* (2006 : 55), réfute cette possibilité, admise par Philippe Rouyer (1997 : 17), et, si l'on comprend son opposition (un genre doit se définir par son

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3.   https://www.cnrtl.fr/ (consulté le 02/06/2023).

Ortoli – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

28

dispositif sémantico-syntaxique [Altman, 1992 : 110], non par la sensation qu'il vise), on peut néanmoins écrire que c'est la recherche de l'obtention de cet état émotionnel de révulsion et d'angoisse par une combinaison relativement stable d'éléments formels et thématiques qui détermine le territoire de notre objet. Nous avons sciemment ajouté un mot évoquant le dégoût à côté d'un autre plus traditionnellement associé à la peur, car il nous semble, avec Rouyer, qu'il est crucial : le film d'horreur ne doit pas seulement provoquer un saisissement, il doit aussi écœurer (Carroll, 2015 : 243). C'est la raison pour laquelle, même quand le cadre pragmatique d'une fiction entend annoncer telle ou telle disposition surnaturelle comme valide, cette dernière aura du mal à se revêtir des oripeaux extraordinaires du merveilleux si, par exemple, les capacités corporelles des personnages leur permettent d'enfouir leur visage au fond de leur anus et de grimacer entre deux joues de fesses (*Society* de Brian Yuzna, 1989) : nous serons alors bien dans un film d'horreur et susciter cette réaction apparaît dès lors comme son fondement.

Le plaisir de l'effroyable et du révulsif

Comme le souligne Carroll, nourrir notre vie affective constitue le programme affiché de certains genres dont celui qui requiert notre présente attention (Carroll, 2015 : 209) ; mais provoquer cet affect (comme le frisson du *thriller*, les larmes du mélodrame, ou l'excitation sexuelle du cinéma pornographique) est effectivement un but dont l'ambition apparaît moindre que celle poursuivie par le documentaire historique ou le film social. C'est par l'importance culturelle accordée à certaines visées (révéler l'humanité, témoigner de la complexité du réel) que se hiérarchisent les catégories aux yeux de certains (au premier chef desquels la majorité des critiques des journaux non spécialisés, et Noël Carroll, 2015, se croisent) : de ce point de vue, le film d'horreur est bel et bien primaire et entre dans la famille précieuse des *Body genres* fondée par Linda Williams (1995 : 145). En outre, le dispositif par lequel il déclenche ces sentiments est régulièrement taxé d'obscène, d'ostentatoire, de complaisant, conjoignant les deux tares principales d'une œuvre cinématographique pour la critique française : celle de spectaculariser l'abject (l'axe Rivette-Daney [Ortoli, 2021 : 71-80]), et, complémentairement, celle de restreindre l'imagination en dévoilant ce qu'il faudrait suggérer (l'axe Leutrat-Tesson-Bonitzer, vigoureusement opposé aux effets spéciaux [Dufour, 2006 : 101-111]). C'est en cela que le genre a été longtemps déprécié à double titre par une certaine cinéphilie, qu'elle émarge au *Monde* ou aux *Cahiers du cinéma*[4], et défendu, *a contrario*, par des amateurs ayant parfois plus un discours de

4.   Sans parler, bien évidemment, de l'université où les études cinématographiques ont, pendant longtemps, banni la majorité des films d'horreur dans leur corpus.

Ortoli – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

29

fan que d'essayiste (*Midi-minuit Fantastique* ou *Starfix*). Nous ne tenons pas à rédiger un historique de ces oppositions, mais elles nous semblent au cœur de l'*elevated* ou du *post-horror* et les critiques qui, dans le numéro, interrogent la nature du label recroisent ces questions de valeur et de légitimité (qui sous-entendent aussi tout le discours sur le clivage culture populaire /culture savante, autre façon de parler de « cinéma de genre / cinéma d'auteur » (Ehrlich, David, 2019). Nous reviendrons plus loin sur ce qui fait que les films qui nous préoccupent bénéficient donc d'un statut spécial.

Ce qui nous intéresse, à ce stade, est ce que Carroll nomme, dans son classique *Philosophy of Horror*, « le paradoxe de l'horreur » (Carroll, 1990 : 10), mais que l'on trouve déjà chez Aristote : comment pouvons-nous prendre du plaisir devant des œuvres décrivant des situations, des actions ou des personnes qui, dans la vie quotidienne, nous feraient détourner le regard (Clemot, 2014) ? Question que l'on trouve résolue par le philosophe analytique à travers la recherche effrénée de l'inconnu pour laquelle nous serions prêts à suivre les récits les plus à même de nous terrifier, mais qui, chez le Stagirite (Aristote, 1990 : 1448b), requiert une explication plus esthétique : nous jouissons de l'effroyable parce que l'objet qui en est la cause résulte d'un processus d'imitation (et la fameuse dimension cathartique ne résulte que de cette « tendance » propre aux hommes).

Synthèse rapide (et très réductrice) : le film d'horreur plaît au plus grand nombre (son succès actuel, en salles ou sur plateformes, en témoigne) parce qu'il représente sous différentes formes ce qui nous terrifie dans la vie réelle et, par là même, nous renvoie à un inconnaissable fascinant, qu'avec Olivia Chevalier-Chandeigne (2014 : 9), nous identifions au mal sous tous ses aspects.

C'est bien ce dernier sous forme de symptôme qui imprègne le film d'horreur, y compris, d'ailleurs, lorsqu'on l'accuse de tout montrer, car il demeure toujours de l'invisible au sein du visible le plus cru (Mellier, 1996 : 154), et les structures (imageantes et narratives) mêmes de son dispositif, cycliques et non linéaires, engagent l'idée que nous ne sommes pas devant un film-vie dont le montage signerait la finitude (unité synthétique semblable à celle du roman) en lui donnant sa signification (Parente, 2006 : 58-59), mais bien dans la reprise incessante de la même situation : un être est victime d'une force terrifiante et ce processus ne s'arrêtera pas (sans même évoquer la grande tradition des sagas d'horreur, comme *Halloween*, des films aussi divers que *La Maison du diable*, *L'au-delà*, ou *Grave*, choisis entre cent, ne se clôturent pas). Il appartient à Éric Dufour d'avoir mis en avant cette caractéristique (2006 : 267), en parlant de « situation bloquée » : on pourrait, certes, l'étendre à l'ensemble des genres qui ne cessent de ressusciter sans cesse les mêmes éléments fondateurs (duel dans le *western*,

Ortoli – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

30

mort expiatoire du gangster, ébats saphiques dans le porno) en modifiant ou camouflant les circonstances qui les feront revenir (c'est leur dimension, jugée soit mythologique soit standardisée, suivant le regard qu'on leur porte), tant son principe même (introduire la différence par la répétition) possède une dimension ontologique (le dispositif premier du cinématographe ne consiste-t-il pas, avec ces vingt-quatre photogrammes à la seconde, projetés à une cadence telle qu'ils semblent constituer une seule et unique continuité, à promulguer la dissemblance dans la semblance comme principe actif ?). Mais, sans doute, que le cinéma d'horreur, par sa capacité à montrer que la force terrifiante (et ce qu'elle soit humaine ou inhumaine) perdure et est amenée à revenir, est le plus à même de désigner le film comme une ouverture biaisée, dans la mesure où il renvoie toujours au même sous la défroque de l'autre.

L'horreur de la mémoire

Ces propos nous amèneraient vers ce que Carroll nomme la solution classique pour établir la qualité d'un film, à savoir son caractère cinématique (Carroll, 2015 : 267) ou, si l'on préfère, la manière dont il exprime au mieux l'« essence » de son art (Cavell appelle cela des « automatismes », mais, sur ce point, c'est du même ordre [Cavell, 1999 : 144]). Or, cela nous semble insuffisant pour expliquer la permanence du film d'horreur que d'écrire que la réitération constante de ses mécanismes au sein de contenus divers mime la vie même du cinéma. Il y a un phénomène supplémentaire dans cette abolition de l'évolutif au profit du circulaire et c'est la vision du film comme incarnation du circuit mémoriel, revenant sur une image pour mieux la reconduire ou, plus exactement, la ressusciter à travers différentes reprises qui en sont autant de projets figuratifs et narratifs. On sait que cette conception est plus qu'obsolète et, d'un certain côté, c'est normal : non pas qu'on nous ait convaincus de la théorie marxiste, à savoir qu'un produit, fût-il artistique, dépend entièrement de son mode de production, mais plutôt que nous soutenons que l'original n'existe que par les copies qui le reproduisent, et l'essence par les accidents qui la manifestent. Autrement dit, ce n'est que par l'analyse des films que l'on peut construire le cinéma comme art. Or, le film d'horreur apparaît bien comme un genre moderne au sens cavellien, puisqu'il ne cesse de clamer la « revenance », puis la persistance de certaines images au sein d'autres. Lesquelles ? Celles qui consacrent la pulsion conservatrice entre toutes, poussant le vivant vers son état antérieur : le non-vivant (Freud, 1990 : 82).

Nous avons parlé du mal plus haut comme résumé synthétique de la force qui terrorise, agresse, mutile, torture, démembre, découpe,

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

31

poignarde[5] l'individu à laquelle la fiction nous demande implicitement de nous identifier parce qu'il possède cette émotion primaire qui nous submerge aussi (la peur), et nous pensons qu'effectivement, ce dernier sous toutes ses formes (des plus mythologiques – les sorcières de *The Witch* – aux plus triviales – le violeur aux allures de quidam « bobo » dans *The Eyes of my Mother* –) ne cesse de nous rappeler d'où nous venons et où nous allons : le gouffre. Peu importe qu'il soit désigné comme l'état de mort physique (l'assassinat de l'enfant dans *It comes at Night*) ou comme un purgatoire (les enfers dans *Le Rituel*) : il est ce qui gronde sous les images animées et qu'elles ne cessent de suggérer. Le film parcourt ainsi des circuits, et le genre avec lui, au cours desquels il ne cesse de buter sur les mêmes constantes. Effectivement, difficile d'y échapper.

Pour rappeler ainsi au spectateur que nous sommes ce danger et cette promesse, le film d'horreur posséderait donc des procédés faciles et grossiers (les *Jump Scare*, la surabondance descriptive de violences organiques, l'affichage délibéré de la monstruosité physique et morale), tout comme il réduirait les personnages les subissant à des figures plus ou moins stéréotypées, dont les plus éloquentes ont constitué l'épicentre des études sociologiques tournées vers le cinéma populaire (dont une des plus célèbres reste Clover, 1992). Et, parfois, il le ferait de façon plus subtile, dans une démarche qui rejoindrait ce que les Américains, à la suite de Bordwell (2008 : 151), appellent « *The Art Cinema* » et qui entend ce que nous, français, estimons généralement comme « cinéma d'auteur ». On le voit donc, il ne s'agit pas seulement d'opposer le vieux combat de l'objet industriel standardisé contre la création unique, l'un étant détourné ou transcendé par l'autre suivant la Geste critique, mais également celui du vulgaire contre le distingué, de l'exhibitionnisme contre la retenue, du bas corporel contre le haut spirituel : regardons donc de plus près désormais ce qui autorise les critiques à distinguer ainsi un « sous-genre » défini, soit comme plus élevé que, soit comme venant après (et signant donc par le fait la fin de ce qu'il clôture) le genre qu'il réduit soudain à la dépréciation (« *the decreased horror* » ?).

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5.   Nous arrêtons là la liste des verbes désignant les actions par lesquelles se manifeste le mal dans les films d'horreur, car son exhaustivité prendrait largement plusieurs pages.

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

32

Spécificités formelles et importance culturelle

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Le corpus en question

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Notre article voulant se contenir dans des proportions raisonnables, nous avons retreint notre corpus aux films anglo-saxons, ce qui veut dire que nous n'évoquerons pas les films allemands, espagnols, français, thaïlandais ou iraniens qui auraient pu (avec d'autres nationalités sans nul doute) se trouver regroupés sous la dénomination susnommée, pas plus que les séries télévisées dont la place aurait été tout aussi pertinente. Un problème subsiste, *Mister Badabook* qui est un film australo-canadien, même si on y parle anglais : on le conservera, autant pour la légitimation linguistique de sa présence que pour le fait qu'il apparaisse régulièrement comme un des piliers de cette nouvelle catégorie. De fait, si l'on considère, non pas qu'un genre existe à partir du moment où il est surnommé (Leutrat, 1973 : 127), mais qu'une appellation n'est qu'une définition « nominale » et non « réelle et causale » (pour reprendre les précieux termes leibniziens [Leibniz, 1966 : 18]), un ouvrage, sans doute, devrait être réalisé pour intégrer tout ce qui semblerait relever de l'*elevated* et/ou de la *post-horror* (celui de Church est précieux, mais nous voulons dire par là qu'il en faudrait d'autres, creusant plus en amont ce que cette appellation suppose).

Un genre est déjà présent avant sa cristallisation sémantique et peut se manifester hors des champs de son émergence. C'est dans cet esprit, mais en respectant le critère inclusif de la langue, anglaise et/ou américaine, que nous évoquerons aussi quelques films issus de ce que l'on nomme le *art-horror* (sous-catégorie plus ancienne, puisque subsumant des métrages des années 1970 et 1980), et d'autres tournés dans une contemporanéité proche des titres-phares de Aster, Eggers ou Peele, mais, à notre connaissance, non homologués.

Nous commencerons par une remarque contextuelle : au même moment où émergent *Get out*, *The Witch*, *It comes at night* ou *A Ghost Story* (pour prendre les titres les plus indiscutablement élevés à la distinction nominale), écrans de cinéma, de télévision et d'ordinateur continuent de voir s'exposer des films d'horreur ne requérant pas de nouvelle qualification : certains particulièrement « *gore* » (*Terrifier 1*, *2* et *3*), d'autres renouant avec l'épouvante classique (les franchises James Wan : *Conjuring*, *Insidious*, *Anabelle, etc...* ou les deux *Ça*), déclinant des sagas (*Halloween*, *Scream*) déjà bien installées dans l'imaginaire spectatoriel, ou en créant d'autres, d'anticipation plus (*Resident Evil* : sept titres) ou

moins (les *American Nightmare* : cinq films) post-apocalyptiques, tandis que quelques-uns continuent à entretenir la flamme des deux précédents courants horrifiques identifiés au début du siècle, à savoir le faux-documentaire d'épouvante ou *found footage* (Bex, 2016) (*Paranormal Activity* sort son septième opus) et le *Torture-porn* (Françaix, 2016) (*Saw* en est à son dixième). Si nous tenions à préciser ce paysage global (d'où nous avons exclu les séries : Carobolante, Ortoli, 2023), c'est pour affirmer la vitalité quantitative du genre dans lequel les productions qui nous importent s'incluent et au sein duquel elles manifestent cette spécificité remarquée. Nous le tenions d'autant plus que, pour beaucoup d'internautes (pour peu que l'on s'intéresse aux critiques 2.0 des spectateurs, lorsqu'on s'interroge sur la réception d'un film, même si l'on peut considérer que seules celles émanant de plumes professionnelles sont réellement légitimes), ces productions peuvent être considérées comme prétentieuses et non affiliables véritablement au genre qui les fédère. On en a un exemple relevé par Steve Rose (2017):

> *DO NOT GO SEE IT COMES AT NIGHT, ITS SO NOT WORTH WATCHING, WORST MOVIE EVER HANDS DOWN". Twitter was filled with countless such posts after the US release of It Comes at Night last month. Mainstream moviegoers went in expecting a straight-up horror; they came out unsure about what they'd seen, and they didn't like it. Critics, and a certain section of viewers, have loved the film, but its Cinemascore rating – determined by moviegoers' opening-night reactions – is a D.*

L'exemple nous semble éloquent (il y en aurait d'autres), non pas tant parce qu'il révèle la pérennité de l'attitude conservatrice des fans d'un genre face à celle, toujours un peu tartuffe des tenants de l'auteurisme et/ou de l'art-et-essai affichés (dans notre cas, les déclarations de cinéastes, comme Trey Edward Shults, Jordan Peele, Aris Aster ou Robert Eggers, expliquant tous, à un moment donné, ne pas avoir voulu faire de film d'horreur ou pas seulement : Rose, 2017 ; Eherlich, 2017), mais en ce qu'il confirme le caractère éruptif de *It comes at Night* (ou d'autres, mais tel est notre exemple) qui représenterait donc la fameuse dilatation de l'horizon d'attente (Jauss, 1970 : 41) à laquelle tout genre est soumis dans son histoire, sous peine de mourir. Il importe désormais d'en distinguer les modalités.

Le prisme de la modernité

Quand Bordwell détermine les principes déterminants du « film d'art », il rejoint certains motifs déjà évoqués, sous une autre forme par

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

34

Deleuze pour définir la crise de l'image-action notamment en arborant la présence de personnages complexes psychologiquement dont les visées semblent incertaines (opposées au schème sensori-moteur / cause-effet que suivent les héros du cinéma classique/image-action), et l'intrusion d'un réel, aussi hasardeux qu'imprévisible, au sein de leurs recherches erratiques (Bordwell, 2008 : 153-154 ; Deleuze, 1983 : 277-28). C'est en cela que nous pourrions plutôt parler d'une conception de la modernité à laquelle Bordwell rajoute un élément important : la conscience que manifeste le film d'être la signature de son auteur, là où, dans le classicisme, ce dernier aurait tendance à s'effacer. Bien sûr, tout cela peut sembler quelque peu rudimentaire, mais si l'on se penche sur des œuvres-phares de cette modernité (*Huit et demi, Persona* ou *Pierrot le fou*), on peut tenir pour générales ces considérations (qui n'ont par contre pas grand-chose à voir avec ce que l'on pourrait nommer le « film d'art » en France et dont *Guernica* de Flaherty [1948-1949] pourrait être une illustration). Church voit dans l'application de ces « critères » à un genre qui, donc, est initialement connoté par des personnages aux objectifs et aux actions clairs (chercher à trouver le, puis à survivre face au terrifiant pour les « héros »/ terrifier, puis occire avec diverses subtilités les « héros » pour les forces du mal), un dispositif axé sur la mise en scène de l'irruption violente masquant ses traces pour mieux promouvoir la vérité de la fiction (surtout si elle est d'inspiration surnaturelle), et déclencher la peur, la singularité de l'*elevated* ou *post-horror* dont la valeur culturelle dépasserait celle dévolue au seul souci de transir. L'examen approfondi des œuvres nous engagerait à acquiescer à ces remarques : le très long plan durant lequel M (Rooney Mara) mange une tarte goulûment puis va la vomir, sous le regard de son invisible mari-fantôme (Casey Aflleck) dans *A Ghost Story*, ou celui, plus court, mais très étiré, durant lequel nous suivons à la place visuelle du conducteur de *pick-up* le lent cheminement de son véhicule vers la découverte d'un corps sur la route dans *The Eyes of my Mother*, renvoient à toute une conception du plan-séquence comme possibilité d'exprimer la vie sans la fragmenter qui est bien celle d'un certain réalisme ontologique. La lenteur relevée un peu partout (y compris dans le livre de Church) comme une impression globalement ressentie devant ces films (et valorisée face aux films d'horreur traditionnels coupables de suivre un rythme saccadé et de ne valoriser que les attractions au détriment du cheminement qui les propose) l'est moins pour sa visée contemplative de l'anodin que par l'impression de latence, associée à l'installation de l'élément terrifiant dans le paysage, qu'elle autorise. Cette perception temporelle de la continuité est poussée au paroxysme dans une œuvre récente, *The House*, au cours de laquelle, à leur hauteur et sur un support évoquant un vieux super 8, envahi de scories, nous suivons deux enfants aux prises avec une force démoniaque manifestant sa présence au sein de leur maison dès leur réveil, à travers des détails parfois difficilement appréhensibles. Symptomatiquement, le goût du trivial le plus intime semble participer aussi de cette volonté : la

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

35

séance de masturbation d'Amelia (Essie Davis) interrompue par l'arrivée de son fils (Noah Wiseman) qui a fait un cauchemar (*Mister Badabook*), la mère (Michelle Monaghan) regardant Aisha (Anna Diop) soigneusement se laver les mains (*Nanny*), ou la longue conversation entre les trois amis (Will Poulter, Jack Reynor, William Jackson, dans le dîner du début de *Midsommar*) autour de la vie de couple de Mark, témoignent du souci de montrer des actions du quotidien dans une banalité communicative. Même les moments destinés à susciter la frayeur ont la teneur commune de l'accidentel : la décapitation de Charlie (Milly Shapiro) dans *Hérédité* possède la promptitude du casuel le plus épouvantable (et la vision, un peu plus tard, de sa tête déjà recouverte de fourmis renvoie à la même atrocité ordinaire), comme le clou que se plante dans le pied Evelyn (Emily Blunt) dans *Sans un bruit*, l'accident qui causera la mort de Joseph (Steve Oram) dans *Le Rituel* ou le suicide de Long Legs (Nicholas Cage) à coup de tête sur une table dans *Long Legs*). Les « effets de réel », au sens barthesien (Barthes, 1982 : 186) abondent et les descriptifs précis, parfois terriblement laborieux, de processus classiques des films d'horreur – l'appel aux esprits des morts dans *Le Rituel*, le sacrifice humain dans *Midsommar* ou l'entrée dans l'autre monde dans *Berberian Sound Studio* – tendent vers une forme de méticulosité documentaire.

Cette première tendance, majeure, s'introduit donc au sein de films dont l'enjeu demeure néanmoins précisément conditionné à un récit dit « classique » du genre : si des scènes entières sont saisies dans la continuité même de leur déroulement réel, si les détails grotesques ou courants y apparaissent pour rappeler la mortelle vulgarité du vivant, c'est au sein d'un dispositif temporel tourné, lui, vers des objectifs clairs : se confronter à ce mal qui, diffus (*I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House*) ou pas (*It Follows*, *Long Legs*), étend son emprise sur des protagonistes cherchant, véritablement (*The Inkeepers*), ou confusément (*The Light House*), à s'y confronter. Il en résulte donc une impression de refus du spectaculaire et de la quête du sursaut (encore qu'on trouve un *Jump Scare* dans *It comes at Night* et un dans *Hérédité*) qui tend à installer un climat, une atmosphère d'étrangeté plutôt qu'à accumuler les moments fractionnés propices aux réflexes et aux émotions fortes. Pareillement, une certaine opacité semble présider à bon nombre de personnages, montrés comme obscurs, voire tortueux, dans la mesure où on a du mal à saisir la logique de leurs motivations : là aussi est moderne cette dimension d'opacité qui semble freiner une identification possible, aussi bien avec le médium du *Rituel* obtenant un spectacle érotique de sa cliente (dont le but est de rentrer en communication avec son fils mort) lui permettant de se donner du plaisir, le père de *The Eyes of my Mother* qui, après avoir enterré sa femme assassinée et capturé son meurtrier, regarde la télévision sans bruit, ou Thomas (Willem Dafoe) dont on pensait qu'il appréciait le travail d'Ephraim (Robert Pattinson) et dont on découvre combien il a accablé son second dans son

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post horror* ?

36

compte rendu destiné à leurs employeurs. Là aussi, on pourrait dire globalement qu'il s'agit de désorienter le spectateur en interdisant aux pensées, croyances ou désirs de certains protagonistes de s'exprimer d'une manière claire. Il est alors difficile de pouvoir véritablement se reconnaître dans cette nébulosité recherchée (proche de celle que prônaient Robbe-Grillet ou Nathalie Sarraute à la grande époque de la mort du personnage classique littéraire) qui favorise le caractère sourd de la terreur visée, renforcée par l'aspect parfois peu ragoûtant des gestes qui la caractérisent : voir Charlie dans *Hérédité* décapiter d'un coup sec un oiseau mort, Ephraim se masturber puis vomir frénétiquement au milieu de la tempête qui ravage le phare qu'il doit surveiller dans *The Light House*, ou Sarah (Alex Esso dans *Starry Eyes*) perdre ses cheveux provoque un certain écœurement tout à fait compatible avec l'émotion visée par le genre. Les motivations paraissent ainsi souvent vaporeuses, voire floues, alors que les signes d'appartenance à un vivant, par définition non inféodé aux seules fonctions capables de faire avancer le récit, se multiplient, l'ensemble donnant effectivement l'impression de jouer avec l'aspect réputé mécanique des autres productions : l'exemple du père (Ralph Ineson) blessé par la poudre de son fusil qui lui éclate en pleine figure alors qu'avec son fils (Harvey Scrimshaw), il est à la recherche du loup qui aurait enlevé son aînée et que, devant lui, le lapin qu'il visait s'enfuit (*The Witch*) est typique de cette tendance, mais on pourrait en dire autant de l'étouffement de Charlie produit par l'absorption du gâteau contenant la noisette à laquelle elle est allergique (ce qu'elle n'avait pas prévu, compte tenu du caractère récréatif qu'avait cette dégustation au cours d'une soirée où elle s'ennuyait ferme) dans *Hérédité* : de tels détails ont pour but de rappeler sans cesse le prosaïsme d'une matérialité/mortalité constitutive des personnages capturés par l'objectif, même s'ils ont été inventés pour tenir leur rôle dans une fiction. À cette indiscernabilité de surface, s'ajoute bien souvent leur caractère psychologique éminemment fragile : sans décliner un vocabulaire psychanalytique que nous n'avons pas, disons (entre une dizaine d'exemples) que Samuel (*Mr Badadook*), Charlie (*Hérédité*), Francisca (Kika Maghalaes dans *The Eyes of my Mother*), Mie (Mimy Latorrer dans *Run Rabbit run* !), Steve (Nathan Stewart-Jarrett dans *Mope*), Abbey (Melinda Page Hamilton dans *M.O.M.*), Lee Harker (Malika Monroe dans *Long Legs*) ou Ephraim (*The Light House*) semblent posséder des névroses considérables qui délimitent la nature parfois déconcertante de leurs actes. En masquant plus ou moins habilement les causes possibles de ces attitudes, les films développent ainsi les actes incohérents, qu'ils soient brutaux ou pas, comme modalités de présentation, ce qui, là encore, favorise le climat d'une étrangeté globale.

En outre, et ce sera le dernier point en accord avec le texte de Bordwell, l'autre rapprochement des films d'*elevated* et/ou de *post-horror* avec ceux du « film d'art » s'effectue par la reconnaissance des traits stylistiques

expressifs d'un auteur, conçu non pas dans sa réalité biographique mais bien comme une « composante formelle » (Bordwell, 2008 : 155) indispensable à l'appréhension de l'œuvre. Sans même parler, à ce stade, d'effets de signature (les réalisateurs des films précités en sont presque tous à leurs premières œuvres et n'ont pas encore un style suffisamment personnel pour qu'on les identifie clairement – à la manière, pour rester bordwellien, d'un Fellini, d'un Begman ou d'un Antonioni, lorsqu'ils deviennent les étendards de la caméra-stylo), nous pouvons tout de même évoquer des plans à valeur d'affirmation subjective et de révélation énonciative. Nous en mentionnerons trois types récurrents : le premier concerne celui d'étendues saisies dans une immensité silencieuse et statique (*Sans un bruit*, *The Witch*, *Midsommar*, *Le Rituel*), parfois en plongée (la route et son corps secouru par le camionneur au milieu des surfaces boisées de *The Eyes of my Mother*), parfois même avec un effet d'inversion très élégant (bas et haut dans *Midsommar*), ou la suggestion d'un volume dont l'exploration est implicitement terrifiante (*Mother !* ou *The Light House*). Le deuxième décline des compositions, en mouvement ou immobiles dans lesquelles les formes humaines sont encadrées, voire surcadrées et/ou décadrées par/ au profit des/de parois concrètement estimables : parcourir des couloirs étroits (*It comes at Night*, *A Ghost Story*, *Berberian Sound Studio*, *The Inkeepers*), se trouver réduit à un détail du coin gauche d'un champ dominé par les plinthes, les portes et les murs (*Le Rituel*, *A Ghost Story*) ou, au contraire, mis en valeur comme une cible soigneusement disposée sur un virtuel axe de symétrie (*It comes at Night*, *A Ghost Story*, *His House*) devient un programme formel et narratif, le plus éloquent résidant dans le jeu sur le format lui-même (les 4/3 de *A Ghost Story* avec ses bords arrondis qui évoquent des images en super-8 projetées sur un écran familial des années 1970, les imperceptibles changements de proportions de *It Comes at Night*, ceux plus appuyés de *Long Legs*, les 4/3 de *The Light House* et, bien sûr, le jeu d'écho entre la maison miniature et celle en grandeur réelle de *Hérédité* qui s'établit dès le générique). C'est dans le même esprit que s'exprime le travail très prononcé sur le clair-obscur : les ombres portées sont omniprésentes dans de nombreux exemples (*The Witch* ou *It comes at Night*), où la surface de la peau paraît toujours menacée d'un engloutissement dans les ténèbres (et les références picturales à Rembrandt ou au Caravage affluent, quand ce n'est pas Vermeer qui s'invite). Ces marques peuvent chaque fois être attribuées à la force qui menace et renvoyer à la notion d'une ocularisation zéro (et il faudrait également ajouter les divers effets sonores qui y participent) qui serait de l'ordre d'un discours indirect libre, mais nous avons néanmoins plutôt tendance à les identifier comme celles de la mise en scène elle-même, se reflétant dans son dispositif pour mieux, semble-t-il, lui apposer l'effet d'une signature.

Ortoli – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

38

La question thématique

Nous avons volontairement exclu de nos exemples les deux films de Jordan Peele, *Get out* et *Us* car ils nous semblent totalement différents des autres, non pas parce qu'ils ne mettent pas en forme les personnages de mère célibataire névrosée, d'enfant ou d'adolescente perturbée, voire de famille menacée dans ses fondements (globalement, à part *The Lighthouse* l'essentiel des personnages principaux des films d'*elevated* ou de *post-horror*), puisqu'après tout, ils peignent tous deux des cellules en crise, mais plutôt parce que leur dispositif ne semble pas recourir aux traits distinctifs établis plus haut. Ainsi, la semi-réification des domestiques dans *Get out* (surlignés par des cadrages éloquents, comme celui de la gouvernante (Betty Gabriel) regardant le héros [Daniel Kaluuya]), ou le statisme menaçant des doubles au seuil de la demeure des héros dans *Us* renvoient à un des plus vieux motifs du film d'horreur, celui qui consacre la fusion de l'animé et de l'inanimé (et dont le zombie est une des figures de proue), ainsi d'ailleurs que le médecin fou et la mère hypnotiseuse de *Get Out*, ou les doubles se mirant l'un dans l'autre dans *Us* : dans ces films, les personnages, d'ailleurs, effectuent des actions et réagissent à des situations toujours directement reliées à la fonction qu'ils occupent dans l'intrigue (défense, fuite, attaque) et n'ont que peu de temps pour laisser libre cours à l'expression de leur psyché torturée. Pourtant, ils apparaissent dans toutes les études consacrant ou critiquant le courant qui nous intéresse, présence justifiée chaque fois d'ailleurs par leur thème : le racisme ou, plus précisément, le regard porté par un Afro-américain sur la place de sa communauté dans la société américaine et les situations de rejet qu'elle suscite. De la même façon que les œuvres précitées favorisent un questionnement sur les femmes, jeunes ou mûres, et sur l'impuissance, voire l'inaptitude quasi globale de l'homme à réagir face aux forces démoniaques, il semblerait bien que ce critère (un film d'horreur qui parle des minorités ou, du moins, de celles qui requièrent l'intérêt de la société occidentale depuis quelques années) soit aussi prégnant dans la définition de l'*elevated* ou de la *post-horror*. La valeur culturelle de ces œuvres, et qui définit donc leur importance au-delà de leurs qualités formelles, tient aussi à la manière dont elles semblent épouser des problèmes contemporains liés à la reconnaissance des catégories sexuellement et racialement opprimées ainsi qu'à la condamnation d'un certain modèle, celui du mâle blanc hétérosexuel. Certains films que nous avons mentionnés, mais qui ne font pas partie des œuvres génitrices de l'appellation susnommée poursuivent d'ailleurs ce choix (*Nanny*, *His House*, *Candyman* ou *Master*, pour la question « noire », *Starry Eyes*, *Contracted*, *Run Rabit Run*, ou *Swalloled* pour celle du « féminisme » et de la « déconstruction » du masculin hétérosexuel). On voit donc, avec ces exemples, que les critères permettant d'inclure ces œuvres sous la même étiquette sont donc ceux qui mêlent une thématique

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

39

progressiste à une esthétique réaliste (au sens bazinien et bordwellien), ne dédaignant pas un certain formalisme affiché.

Pour autant, et même si certains critiques (Danielsen, 2018) voient dans ces exemples une rupture nette avec l'ordinaire et l'historique du film d'horreur, ils ne nous apparaissent que comme des jalons supplémentaires dans l'histoire du genre et qui, par ricochet, justement, mesurent combien ce dernier n'existe que parce que des créateurs, tels que Aster, Eggers ou Peele s'y inscrivent et marquent leur différence avec d'autres. En ce sens, et n'en déplaise aux fans comme aux esthètes, le film d'horreur lui-même porte en lui cette capacité « cinématique », parce qu'il prend en compte des objets au cœur même du projet cinématographique (le corps comme surface et profondeur, l'invisible dans et par le visible, le principe de métamorphose) et qu'en travaillant sur ce qui produit peur et écœurement il se construit sur la pérennisation de certaines figures, mais également sur la manière dont les discours d'une époque les actualisent. Sans aller jusqu'à la véhémence d'André Carroll,

> So, I'm writing this before some hard done by writer at Buzzfeed or GQ or VICE publishes an article entitled "Horror Only Meant Something After 2000". Do I blame them? Partly but the blame mostly falls on Google and Facebook for devouring the digital ad market and leaving hate clicks as one of the few ways for online media to survive. That's the real horror.

salutaire au demeurant (Caroll, 2019), on ne peut que constater combien ces titre nourrissent le genre au lieu de le dépasser : c'est toujours par le phénomène de l'écart que se mesure la création et, ici, on peut dire qu'il consiste à se focaliser sur des éléments que notre contemporanéité a consacrés comme fondamentalement importants pour notre construction sociale en même temps qu'à remettre, au cœur de la pensée du tout-à-l'image, l'idée que les films sont des œuvres, c'est-à-dire pensées, organisées et signées par une volonté. Mais est-ce si neuf ?

L'éternel retour des figures

Beaucoup d'articles sur la question (et l'ouvrage de Church) établissent le lien entre l'*elevated* ou la *post-horror* et ce que les Américains nommaient l'*art-horror*. Il est un fait qu'il est difficile, lorsqu'on voit les septuagénaires nus prononcer leurs incantations dans *Hérédité* ou les femmes, tout aussi dévêtues, accompagner la défloraison de Maja (Isabelle Grill) par Mark dans *Midsommar,* de ne pas songer à l'assemblée des

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

40

satanistes naturistes participant au viol de Rosemary (Mia Farrow) par son mari (John Cassavettes) dans *Rosemary's Baby*, comme il est indubitable que les sourires crispés des domestiques lobotomisés de *Get Out* renvoient aux épouses-robots des *Femmes de Stepford*, que les hallucinations auditives de Sophia (Catherine Walker) dans *Le Rituel* évoquent celles, visuelles, de John (Donald Sutherland) dans *Ne vous retournez pas !* portant sur le même objet (leur enfant mort), ou que les tentatives d'infanticide plus ou moins fantasmatiques d'*Hérédité* ou de *Mr Badabook* font écho à celle de Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) sur son fils Danny (Danny Lloyd) dans *Shining*. On évoque ces rapprochements à travers le rappel de ces quelques détails évidents, mais l'on pense aussi plus globalement à lier ces œuvres parce qu'elles participent du même souci : privilégier le climat à l'attraction, rendre la création artistique visible, introduire le réalisme dans l'immuable.

Mais c'est bien de ce dernier qu'il s'agit : il est frappant que les films appartenant à la « *smart horror* » ou étant perçus comme des « *subversive scare flicks* » (Rose, 2017) prennent à bras-le-corps des figures mythiques liées au patrimoine du genre (sorcière, sirène, démon, fantôme, secte diabolique, monstre, psychopathe, double, médium, contaminé, possédée) pour les reformuler. Frappant aussi que ce programme narratif et formel consiste à représenter des situations archétypales : accéder à l'au-delà, lutter contre les démons ou Satan lui-même, combattre des ennemis extraterrestres, un mystérieux virus ou des communautés meurtrières, se confronter aux fantômes et/ou aux vivants (suivant le point de vue choisi), torturer, tuer ou être torturé et tué. Autrement dit, ces films sont bien des films d'horreur et n'évoquent pas seulement ceux de Polanski, Forbes, Roeg ou Kubrick ! Ils ressuscitent ce qui nous effraye depuis toujours, la peur de la disparition, de la division, de la désagrégation mentale et/ou physique et même leur éventuel pouvoir subversif est compris dans un genre qui n'a eu de cesse de prouver que le mal avait bien souvent l'apparence de la normalité, voire de l'élite sociale (de ce point de vue, *Society* apparaît au moins aussi virulent que *Get out* !). Sans établir des listes, tellement elles seraient conséquentes, on peut dire qu'on a déjà vu des psychopathes être des héros (*Psychose*), des fantômes pénétrer le monde des vivants (*L'Aventure de Madame Muir*), une relation sexuelle être signe de propagation mortelle (*Rage*), des pervers lucifériens camouflés en voisins débonnaires (*Messiah of evil*), des sujets victimes d'hallucinations durables (*Carnival of Souls*), des citoyens découvrant que les agresseurs de leur demeure ont déjà envahi le monde (*Zombie*), des paisibles communautés pastorales se révéler sanguinaires (*2000 Maniacs*), des familles luttant contre un mal invisible (*Terre brûlée*), voire le diable proposer à des jeunes femmes des perspectives plus attirantes que celles promises par leur éducation (*La Maison du diable*)… La grande nouveauté tiendrait-elle alors dans la dimension culturelle ? Le fait de faire d'une femme l'héroïne

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

41

est un des plus vieux thèmes du cinéma d'horreur (comme en témoignent deux classiques *La Maison du diable* et *Les Innocents*), l'association entre le monde des esprits et la féminité étant un couple sur lequel l'histoire littéraire et sociologique a déjà beaucoup écrit (Ehrenreich, English, 2016 ; Edelman,1995), et la figure de la médium dans la saga *Insidious*, incarnée par Lin Shaye, en est une preuve récente. La faiblesse de l'homme, quant à elle, face aux attaques démoniaques est un motif très ancien, comme en témoigne la figure de Renfield dans *Dracula*… Peut-être alors l'originalité se tiendrait-elle dans le souci de donner aux afro-américains la place de héros-victime d'un purgatoire blanc ? Là encore, au-delà de *Blacula* ou de *Candyman*, on peut se souvenir de la fin de *La Nuit des morts-vivants* où le héros, noir, après avoir lutté toute une nuit contre les zombies, est abattu par des miliciens blancs venus le secourir (Mayard, 2020).

Comprenons-nous bien : il ne s'agit pas pour nous de dénier à ces films toute originalité, ni de dire qu'ils font du neuf avec du vieux, mais plutôt qu'ils ne peuvent apparaître comme novateurs qu'aux yeux de ceux qui, tributaires des œillères culturelles, continuent à regarder les films d'horreur avec la condescendance dévolue à l'émotion populaire, comme à ceux qui, se fiant à la quantité d'hémoglobine spectaculaire pour désigner le mètre étalon de leurs effrois, refusent de reconnaître qu'un plan dont la durée excéderait celle nécessaire à la révélation de son monstre grimaçant ne saurait appartenir à leur genre. Il n'y a donc pas plus d'horreur élevée que de post-horreur et, contrairement au *Found Footage* ou au *Torture Porn*, désignant, d'authentiques catégories thématico-formelles, les films que l'on classe ainsi rentreraient plutôt dans tout un courant, plus vaste, qui promulguerait l'étrangeté d'un fantastique diffus et angoissant comme condition expresse de l'horreur qu'il veut provoquer (courant dans lequel les films de Wan, par exemple, mais aussi les *Paranormal Activity* auraient leur place). Un cinéma allusif aux effets spéciaux parcimonieux, voire absents, qui, dans la lignée de celui d'un Lynch, d'un Nakata ou d'un Shyamalan, explore l'insolite pouvoir d'un quotidien hanté.

Conclusion : le genre comme catégorie esthétique

S'il y a une leçon à tirer de notre tentative de réflexion, et nous écrivons « tentative » car il faut rappeler qu'on ne peut jamais graver dans le marbre les règles d'un genre, sur cette énième sous-catégorie, c'est qu'elle confirme l'irréductibilité de l'approche esthétique à l'approche culturelle dans la question de l'évaluation. Là où la seconde sonde, en définitive, contenus et contenants au nom d'une certaine importance sociale et de sa hauteur de vues, rejoignant la conception topographique du sublime opposé au grotesque telle que développée par Bakhtine à propos de

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

42

Rabelais (Bakhtine, 1990 : 30), la première évalue les pouvoirs imageants et narratifs des films en cherchant ce qu'ils nous apprennent de leur condition d'existence, et, par mimétisme, de la façon dont ils pensent le monde. Si nous souhaitions terminer sur le rappel de cette opposition, c'est pour, en dernier lieu, clamer l'inanité des systèmes qui ne veulent pas voir que Pasolini et Roth participent tous deux du *Torture Porn*, que Fellini, Roeg et Wan nourrissent chacun le film de fantôme ou, plus globalement, qu'Ari Aster, Ti West, Roman Polanski, David Cronenberg, Julia Ducournau ou Damien Leone permettent au film d'horreur d'exister, comme ce dernier les autorise à affirmer leur propre style. Nous disions, en début d'article, plaider pour l'abolition de critères distinctifs auteur/genre, car ils empêchent, justement, de mesurer ce que Fellini doit à Bava, comme ce que Peele doit à Yuzna ou Polanski à Herk Harvey et ce, même si leurs liens ne sont pas prouvés historiquement et si leur place n'est pas la même dans les musées du cinéma : l'histoire des genres est avant tout celle de l'image. Elle déborde du dicible pour rejoindre le visuel, fluide comme l'écoulement de la vie rendu perceptible par l'exploration duelle de sa surface et de ses profondeurs. Il ne saurait donc rien avoir après l'horreur, car sa présence est par elle-même la promesse de l'éternel recommencement de la beauté des choses qu'elle menace.

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43

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Contracted, Eric England, 2013.

Grave, Julie Ducourneau, 2016.

February (*The black Coat's Daughter*), Osgood Perkins, 2015.

Femmes de Stepford (*les*) (*Stepford's Wives*), Bryan Forbes, 1975.

Get out, Jordan Peele, 2017.

Guernica (*Robert Flaherty's Guernica*), 1949.

Hérédité (*Hereditary*), Ari Aster, 2018.

His House, Remi Weekes, 2020.

I'm the pretty thing that lives in this House, Osgood Perkins, 2016.

Innocents (*les*) (*The Innocents*), Jack Clayton, 1961.

Insidious, James Wan, 2010.

It comes at night, Trey Edward Shults, 2017.

It follows, David Robert Mitchell, 2015.

Le rituel (*A dark Song*), Liam Gavin, 2017

Long Legs, Osgood Perkins, 2024.

Maison du Diable (*la*) (*The Haunting*), Robert Wise, 1963.

Master, Mariama Diallo, 2022.

Messiah of Evil, Willard Huyck et Gloria Katz, 1973.

Midsommar, Aris Aster, 2019.

Ortoli – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post horror* ?

44

Mister Badabook (*The Badabook*), Jennifer Kent, 2014.
M.O.M.- Mothers Of Monsters), Tucya Liman, 2020.
Mope, Lucas Heyne, 2019.
Mother!, Darren Aronofsky, 2017.
Nanny, Nikyatu Jusu, 2022.
Ne vous retournez pas (*Don't look now*), Nicolas Roeg, 1973.
Nuit des morts-vivants (*La*) (*Night of the Living Dead*), George A.Romero, 1968.
Paranormal Activity :Next of Kin, William Eubank, 2021.
Persona, Ingmar Bergman, 1966.
Pierrot le fou, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965.
Psychose (*Psycho*), Alfred Hitchcock, 1960.
Rage (*Rabid*), David Cronenberg, 1977.
Resident Evil, Paul W.S. Anderson, 2002.
Rosemary's Baby, Roman Polanski, 1968.
Run, Rabbit, run, Daina Reid, 2023.
Sans un bruit (*A quiet Place*), John Krasinsky, 2018.
Saw X, Kevin Greutert, 2023.
Shining (*The Shining*), Stanley Kubrick, 1980.
Society, Brian Yuzna, 1989.
Starry eyes, Kevin Kölsch et Dennis Widmye, 2014.
Swallowed, Carter Smith, 2023.
Terre brûlée (*No Blade of grass*), Cornel Wilde, 1970.
Terrifier, Damien Leone, 2016.
The Eyes of my Mother, Nicolas Pesce, 2016.
The House, Kyle Edward Ball, 2022.
The Innkeepers, Ti West, 2011.
The Light House, Robert Eggers, 2019.
The Witch, Robert Eggers, 2015.
Us, Jordan Peele, 2019.

ORTOLI – Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated/post Horror* ?

45

A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

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Abstract: This paper examines A24's hegemonic status within the post-horror cycle, exploring how the studio's distinct metamodern sensibility has contributed to its success. Through an analysis of A24's history, branding strategies and film content, this study argues that A24's metamodern approach — characterized by oscillations between sincerity and irony, pragmatism and idealism — has allowed it to position itself as a generational touchstone at the forefront of cultural relevance. Though A24's metamodern sensibility appears most evident in its marketing strategies and "mini-major" studio ethos, this research claims that it also permeates some of the recurring motifs of its post-horror catalogue — namely its treatment of the supernatural, use of jump scares and portrayal of nudity. Rather than defining metamodernism as central to post-horror however, the study suggests that it primarily shapes the "collective affect" surrounding A24's brand identity, which in turn resonates with some of the cycle's characteristic traits.

Keywords: A24, Post-Horror, Elevated Horror, Hollywood, Film Studios, Film Marketing, Metamodernism, Postmodernism, Post-Postmodernism, Cultural Studies, Fan Studies, Affect Theory, Robert Eggers, Ari Aster, David Lowery, Alex Garland, Jump Scares, Supernatural, Nudity

Résumé : Cet article s'interroge sur le statut hégémonique du studio A24 au sein du cycle du « *post-horror* » en explorant la manière dont sa sensibilité métamoderne a contribué à son succès. À travers une analyse de l'histoire de A24, de ses stratégies de *marketing* et du contenu de ses films, notre étude soutient que l'approche métamoderne de A24 – caractérisée par des oscillations entre sincérité et ironie, pragmatisme et idéalisme – lui a permis de se positionner en tant que fer de lance d'une nouvelle tendance culturelle dominante. Bien que la sensibilité métamoderne de A24 se manifeste le plus clairement dans ses stratégies marketing et son statut de « *mini-major* », cette recherche avance qu'elle imprègne également certains des motifs du catalogue « *post-horror* » de A24 – notamment dans son traitement du surnaturel, son

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

46

utilisation des « *jump scares* » et sa représentation de la nudité. Plutôt que de définir le métamodernisme comme une donnée centrale du « *post-horror* », l'étude suggère qu'il façonne principalement « l'affect collectif » émanant de l'identité de marque de A24, qui à son tour entre en résonance avec certains des motifs saillants du cycle.

Mots-clés : A24, Films d'horreur, Post-Horror, Elevated Horror, Hollywood, studios de cinéma, marketing du cinéma, métamodernisme, postmodernisme, post-postmodernisme, Cultural Studies, Fan Studies, Affect Theory, Robert Eggers, Ari Aster, David Lowery, Alex Garland, Jump Scares, surnaturel, nudité

Introduction

In July 2017, *Guardian* columnist Steve Rose coined the term "post-horror" to describe an emerging trend in horror cinema. In his article, he hinted at the importance of film studio A24, claiming that "if anyone's pushing horror into new realms, it's them" (Rose, 2017). However, he did not expand on the exact nature of A24's role or the extent of its involvement in said trend.

Four years later, David Church reclaimed Rose's neologism and published the first academic book on the topic, favoring the term "cycle" instead of "trend". Out of the eighteen films that he included in his list of primary texts for a provisional corpus of the cycle, eight were either produced and/or distributed by the film company A24 (Church, 2021: 14).[1] Such a number both confirms the importance of A24 and puts it in perspective. More than half of the post-horror films listed by Church are *not* affiliated with A24. An observation that may come off as sobering to those who would hold A24 and post-horror as synonymous.[2]

And yet, the idea of having a film studio be the powerhouse of a horror cycle would seem in keeping with tradition. Indeed, it could be argued that most horror cycles have been — in part or completely — "in-house cycles". Universal Studios' monster films in the 1930s, RKO's atmospheric, low-budget horror pictures of the 1940s, or Hammer Films' idiosyncratic

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1. The list includes: *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2014), *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2016), *The Blackcoat's Daughter* (Osgood Perkins, 2017), *It Comes at Night* (Trey Edward Shults, 2017), *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019) and *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019). At the time of writing, A24 has distributed at least two horror films — *Lamb* (Valdimar Jóhannsson, 2021) and *Men* (Alex Garland, 2022) — that would be likely candidates for an updated version of this corpus. *Saint-Maud* (Rose Glass, 2019), released just before the publication of Church's book, could also have been a fitting addition.
2. A good example of such a discourse can be found in an article written by Hannah Saab and Diego Pineda Pacheco for *Collider* which lists many of the films present in Church's corpus of post-horror films — including *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *Raw* (Julia Ducournau, 2016) and *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016) — as "films that may feel like they were produced by A24, but actually weren't", even going as far as to wonder if they maybe are "more A24 than A24" (Pineda Pacheco & Saab, 2023).

SIMMS – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

47

"Hammer horror" are just a few of the more famous, early examples of this phenomenon (Brannan, 2021: 2-10). In the case of post-horror however, such a concept is not without its own set of challenges and shortcomings. Most notably, because positing that a studio could serve as its primary catalyst seems to directly contradict the commonly accepted definition of the cycle as horror films with an auteurist approach.

How, then, has A24 earned its status as a leading figure within post-horror? And to what degree does this standing hold merit?

To answer these questions, this paper shall delve into A24's rich history as it relates to post-horror, paying particular attention to an aspect that has so far been left out of academic discourse: the shaping of A24's "niche branding strategies" (Brannan, 2021: 144).[3] In doing so, I will argue that a key element to understand the studio's place within the post-horror discourse lies in its distinct metamodern brand identity. Metamodernism, as defined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their essay *Notes on Metamodernism*, can be understood as "characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 2). It describes a dominant shift in sensibility emerging in the first decades of the 21st century, which not only coincides with the emergence of A24 and the post-horror cycle but has also been associated with — as well as claimed by — prominent A24-affiliated directors.[4] This specific structure of feeling, I contend, accounts for the studio's hegemonic position within post-horror, as it aligns with the dominant cultural paradigm of its time. Yet, to what extent does this sensibility — most evident in the studio's ethos and branding strategies — permeate and characterize post-horror cinema itself?

From "Indie" Distributor to "Mini-Major"

In the span of only one decade since its creation, A24 has transformed from an obscure distribution company to one of the most influential studios in Hollywood, garnering an impressive tally of forty-nine Oscar nominations, resulting in a remarkable sixteen victories. A success

3. As Alexander Joseph Brannan remarks at the end of his work on A24 and the elevated horror: "It would be worthwhile to examine A24's niche branding practices in more depth, particularly in relation to the practices of other contemporary independents. " (Brannan, 2021: 144)
4. Daniel Kwan, co-director of A24's biggest success to date *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), has described his own work as metamodern (Puchko, 2022). A24-affiliated films *Eight Grade* (dir. Bo Burnham, 2018) as well as *Ladybird* (dir. Greta Gerwig, 2017) have also been associated with the label (Dember, 2018; Roberts, 2019). Yet, to my knowledge, all of these associations have remained outside of the horror realm.

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

48

that seems far from waning, as eighteen of these nominations and nine of these victories were only just obtained at the 2023 Oscar ceremony, which according to the *Los Angeles Times* was a record for any independent distributor.[5] This edition's triumph was owed in large part to the presence of Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's[6] *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), which was also the company's biggest box office hit to date, exceeding $140 million in ticket sales worldwide on a mere $25 million investment (Sakoui, 2023). Such critical and commercial prowess coming from an independent studio is all the more noteworthy as only 3.4% of independent film companies in the U.S. generate profit, while a vast majority — 90% — fail to secure a theatrical deal (Gabriele, 2023).

Founded in 2012 by three American producers Daniel Katz, David Fenkel and John Hodges, A24 — or A24 Films — as it was initially called, began as a New York-based independent company working exclusively in distribution. Initially a startup, it is said to have adopted a Silicon Valley-inspired horizontal structure, encouraging bold and disruptive ideas (Gabriele, 2023; Barnes, 2018).

They achieved their first breakout success while working on the release of Harmonie Korine's experimental film *Spring Breakers* (2012), which they marketed as a mainstream teen comedy, using "memetic content" to lead a mostly online-based viral campaign. Since then, they have gained recognition for their penchant for unconventional publicity stunts and their utilization of cutting-edge digital techniques, including the strategic application of big data.[7] For the promotion of *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014), for instance, A24 used an A.I. generated bot to mislead or "catfish" suitors on a dating app by sending them a link to an Instagram account inviting them to go see the film in theaters (Goldszal, 2022).[8] Such tech-savvy strategies highly benefited the small studio, especially at a time when older, bigger studios were slow to adapt to the fast-evolving codes of online culture.

Concomitantly, A24 was able to limit its initial spending by focusing exclusively on the distribution of small arthouse films that were pre-selected in reputable independent film festivals like Sundance. This strategy

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5. At the time of writing, the 2023 Oscar ceremony was the latest edition. While the 2024 ceremony saw fewer accolades for A24, it was notable for the two awards won by the A24-distributed film *The Zone of Interest* (Jonathan Glazer, 2023).
6. Also known as "the Daniels".
7. As *New York Times* journalist Brooks Barnes details, A24 is estimated to spend around 95% of its marketing budget online. Watson/DG, a "web-focused marketing agency" as well as Operam, a "stealth data and marketing start-up" have helped A24 develop algorithms to target specific audiences on social media platforms "in ways that prompts movie lovers to feel a sense of discovery and pass the message on organically" (Barnes, 2018).
8. Similarly, for the promotion of *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015), A24 created Twitter (now X) accounts for the different characters of the film, including the satanic goat. For *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), they distributed eerie dolls to influencers and critics (Sanders, 2022).

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

49

also enabled them to develop the reputation of a company favoring the artistic over the commercial, while securing a strong following amongst a very select audience of cinephiles. Such a stance answered to a growing demand in a market dominated by sequels and reboots.

In 2016, a major turning point in A24's burgeoning history took place, as the company made its debut in film production with none other than *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) which caused a stir by surpassing Lionsgate's *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016) and winning the 2017 Oscar for best picture. From then on, A24 cemented its status as a key player in the industry both as a distribution and production studio.

Often dubbed a "*Miramax* for *millennials*" (Guédon, 2022), A24 has built its reputation by fostering relationships with a vast array of emerging young directors who have birthed some of the most critically acclaimed auteur films of the past decade, including Greta Gerwig, Sean Baker, Yorgos Lanthimos, Kelly Reichardt, the Safdie Brothers and the Daniels — just to name a few of their non-horror affiliated directors. It has also successfully supported the first directorial efforts of famous comedians like Jonah Hill (*Mid90s*, 2018) or Bo Burnham (*Eighth Grade,* 2018), as well as collaborated with pop and hip-hop superstars like Drake, Travis Scott and Megan Thee Stallion (Goldszal, 2022). Such collaborations account for A24 often being described as having its finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist and being a "trendsetter" for the rest of the industry (Lodge, 2023).

In 2019, A24 successfully transitioned to the production of TV series, with the Emmy-winning hit *Euphoria* for HBO.[9] It also made numerous deals with streaming platforms and is now operating worldwide. The current valuation of the studio — at the time of writing — is of $2.5 billion (Sakoui, 2023).

Much like Miramax in its heyday, A24 has grown so big and influential that it has earned the title of "mini-major", a kind of intermediary status attributed to large independent companies which compete directly with the Big Five Hollywood major studios. As journalist Nate Jones noted for *Vox*, A24 actually releases more films than certain major studios. In 2022 alone, it put out twenty films, which is two more than a major studio like Paramount (Vega, 2023).[10]

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9. Averaging 20 million viewers for its second season, *Euphoria* is HBO's "second-most-watched show since 1994, behind *Game of Thrones*" (Gabriele, 2019).
10. As Jones argues, A24 actually floods the market with films, but has a knack for having their more mediocre productions "fly off the radar" by selling them to online streaming platforms. Thus, A24 is able to maintain the illusion that a large portion of its catalog is of exceptionally high quality (Vega, 2023).

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

50

An Intrinsic Connection to Post-Horror

Hailing A24 as synonymous with post-horror may seem quite paradoxical when one considers that so far, the films or TV shows that I identified as instrumental to A24's ascent — *Moonlight* (2016), *Euphoria* (2019-), *Everything Every Where All at Once* (2022)… — do *not* belong to the cycle, let alone the horror genre in general. And yet, A24's surge to popularity coincides almost perfectly with that of the post-horror cycle. A correlation that, according to Alexander Joseph Brannan — who wrote his master's thesis on A24 and post-horror — is no coincidence:

> A24's rise to prominence in American independent cinema coincides with the rise in popularity of the elevated horror cycle. I believe this correlation is no coincidence. No company has done more to promote elevated horror and give filmmakers working with that aesthetic a platform to present their work (Brannan, 2021: 99).

As I have noted in my introduction, the horror genre has evolved mostly through "in-house cycles". In the 2000s, the two dominant cycles were the "neo-grindhouse" or "torture porn" cycle spearheaded by Lionsgate, and the "found footage" cycle, mostly produced by Paramount. By the late 2000s, both cycles were waning, and the market seemed to polarize around blockbuster franchises produced by the majors, like Warner's *The Conjuring* (Wan, 2013) or *Annabelle* (Leonetti, 2014) on the one hand, and independently produced, arthouse "post-horror" on the other (Brannan, 2021: 7). Demand and offer were developing around this niche, and it seemed natural that a company like A24 distribute these types of films. Indeed, as previously established, A24 was, in its beginnings, involved in the distribution of small arthouse films, and had developed innovative marketing strategies that could target niche audiences.

The first two films to spark a conversation about an emerging trend in horror films were *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) and *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014). Initially grouped under the umbrella term "mumblegore" (Brannan, 2021: 24), these two films were produced and distributed by independent companies unaffiliated with A24. However, it must be noted that a debate remains open regarding the true origins of the cycle. In Church's corpus, which was constituted retrospectively, the earliest film to appear in chronological order is *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), which was in fact distributed by A24.

In any case, it is unquestionable that A24 was a major distributor of post-horror films in the early days of the cycle. Most notably, it released the highly successful *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2016), which recouped

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

51

ten times its budget in box office revenue (Goldszal, 2022), making it, as Church claims, one of "the most influential films to inaugurate the post-horror cycle" (Church, 2021: 142).

In 2017, A24 produced its first post-horror film *It Comes at Night* (Trey Edward Shults, 2017) followed shortly after by Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018), which, to this day, holds the record for the highest-grossing horror film that A24 has ever produced (D'Alessandro, 2022). Another watershed moment, which affected both A24's trajectory and that of post-horror, took place in 2019, when A24 released, back-to-back, Ari Aster's *Midsommar* and Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse.* These two horror films proved profitable in theaters, despite their bold artistic choices (one is mostly shot in broad daylight while the other is in black and white) at a time when most post-horror films were distributed on streaming platforms. With these sophomore efforts, the two up-and-coming directors, chose again the horror genre, using the same distinctly auteurist approach, thus confirming a coherence in the trend of post-horror, and its maturing into a real cycle. In doing so, they also became the *de facto* spearheads of this trend, and A24 its stable.

This is not to say that A24 has been behind all of the post-horror hits. In fact, the box-office record held for a post-horror film belongs to Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), which was produced by Blumhouse and distributed by Universal. However, it could be argued, as Brannan has, that much of the media attention and commercial success stemmed from the film's original take on post-racial discourse, and less from its original approach to the horror genre (Brannan, 2021: 97-98). What is more, Peele's second release, *Us*, can be perceived as a return to a more conventional strand of horror[11] (Brannan, 2021: 20). Moreover, although Blumhouse does stand as the clearest rival to A24, as it also produced *The Invitation* (Karyn Kusama, 2015) and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2017) — two films included in Church's corpus — it must be noted that Blumhouse, unlike A24, had made a name for itself long before the emergence of post-horror. In fact, most of its horror catalog belongs to the found footage and neo-grindhouse cycles, which represent the very antithesis of post-horror.[12]

Another independent film company, Neon, which has distributed *The Lodge* (Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala, 2019) and *She Dies*

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11. It is worth mentioning however that other articles in this issue argue that *Us* does belong to the post-horror cycle, if only due to its intertextual depth making it more "savant" than traditional horror films.
12. Whereas neo-grindhouse is typically known for its raw, unpolished aesthetic and conventional narratives that emphasize sensationalism and action, post-horror is characterized by meticulous cinematography and slow-building, character-driven narratives that prioritize subtlety and complexity.

SIMMS – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

52

Tomorrow (Amy Seimetz, 2020), appears to be another potential contender for the title of post-horror powerhouse. Indeed, Neon's catalog both inside and outside the horror genre, so closely mimics that of A24, that it seems to be a competitor for A24 in general. However, its young age (it was launched in 2017) makes it stand out more as a byproduct of A24's success than anything else.

Regarding majors, it must be noted that Universal is not the only Big Five studio to have been involved in the release of post-horror films. Paramount Pictures, in particular, distributed *A Quiet Place* (John Krasinski, 2018) which was another stand-out post-horror box office hit.[13] Its involvement in Darren Aronofsky's *Mother!* (2017) and Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018), however, did not yield the same level of success, as both films struggled to find an audience in theaters. Eventually, *Annihilation*'s rights were sold to Netflix, following the example of Amazon which distributed *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016), and *Suspiria* (Luca Guadagnino, 2018) on its own streaming platform.

In that respect, A24 stands out as the only studio that was capable of repeatedly attracting audiences in theaters to watch post-horror films. A feat that it ironically seems to achieve partly by not marketing these films as post-horror. Indeed, time and time again, A24 has been accused of misleading audiences by marketing its slow-paced arthouse horror films as mainstream horror (Rose, 2022). Though many online reviews left by spectators express some confusion and frustration due to unmet expectations, it appears that this strategy helps boost ticket sales by reaching a wider audience. However, as we have established, A24 does not limit this strategy to post-horror. It resorted to it before the birth of the cycle and still does to this day. *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012), for instance, was marketed as a mainstream teen movie while *The Northman* (Robert Eggers, 2022) was sold as an action-packed blockbuster, instead of the arthouse — and to a large degree experimental — films that they are.

Regardless, A24's post-horror films have been, for the most part, met with critical acclaim — a phenomenon corroborated by Brannan's thorough examination of the media response to A24 horror films. In this study, he remarked that A24 films were consistently lauded by critics, including those known to reject conventional horror films (Brannan, 2021: 10). This shift in critical discourse can be partly attributed to A24's surge in popularity outside of the horror genre, which itself owes much to the studio's successes within the horror realm. Indeed, as Brannan contends, a film

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13.   It must be noted that *A Quiet Place*'s inclusion within the post-horror cycle is up for debate. It certainly is not widely regarded as a "core" post-horror film, unlike many of the A24 productions. The same could be said of the aforementioned *The Invitation* (Karyn Kusama, 2015).

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

53

like *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016)*,* which clinched the Oscar for best picture in 2017, likely benefitted from the attention garnered by *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2016) for its exceptional performance in 2016 (Brannan, 2021: 33).

A Metamodern Brand Identity

A final — yet crucial — element to appreciate A24's supremacy in the post-horror realm lies in its "incredible triumph of branding" (Sanders, 2022). Although A24's "niche branding practices" (Brannan, 2021: 144) have so far been overlooked by academic discourse, film critic Alison Willmore estimates that they account "perhaps more than anything else" for the company's success (Sanders, 2022). Indeed, A24 is widely acclaimed for having built a cult following around its distinctive brand identity. As of writing, A24 commands an impressive 3 million followers on Instagram, surpassing the combined followers of Blumhouse and Paramount. It also fosters an active community of film enthusiasts who engage in numerous acts of fan labor,[14] whether it be on the A24-dedicated subreddit boasting over 180,000 members, on the film-centric platform Letterboxd, or within the cinephile enclave of "Film Twitter" on social media platform X (formerly Twitter). A24 has capitalized on this devoted fanbase by introducing a highly successful line of apparel adorned with the A24 logo, as well as podcasts, magazines, books, collectibles, and even cosmetics. Emulating the business model of online streaming services, it has also launched a $5 per month "A24 All Access" (AAA24) online membership program, offering exclusive brand content to its most dedicated followers.

This growing popularity of the A24 brand has reached such heights that it is increasingly detached from its individual films. As Willmore remarks: "When moviegoers gush over an "A24 film," it can be hard to tell whether they're more excited about the "A24" part or the "film part" (Sanders, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly striking considering that such fervent devotion is seldom associated with film studios.[15] As humorously noted by *Guardian* journalist Chloe Mac Donnell: "There may be

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14. This section draws extensively on fan studies, and particularly on the work of Henry Jenkins, who observes that "fandom constitutes […] its own distinctive Art World founded less upon the consumption of pre-existing texts than on the production of fan texts which draw raw materials from the media as a basis for new forms of cultural creation" (Jenkins, 212). The concept of "fan labor" is used in this context to describe such forms of fan-made cultural creations. Jenkins further argues that fandoms operate as "a distinctive mode of reception", "a particular interpretative community", "a particular Art world", and "an alternative social community" (Jenkins, 209-213). Particularly within the framework of the latter two aspects, I argue that A24's fandom has played a crucial role in shaping the studio's unique brand identity.
15. A notable exception being of course The Walt Disney Company and to a lesser extent its subsidiary Pixar Animation Studios.

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

54

millions of Potterheads in the world, but how many have a tattoo of the Warner Bros logo?" (Mac Donnell, 2024).

What adds to the intrigue is that this craze precisely revolves around a studio renowned for the eclectic nature of its filmography, one that celebrates the unique visions of its directors. Nevertheless, both fans and critics alike have observed an ineffable yet distinct "aura" or "vibe" emanating from A24 films. As cultural commentator Mario Gabriele suggests: "though the [A24] titles mentioned differ in subject matter and style, they possess some shared DNA, an A24 allele, difficult to articulate but there nonetheless" (Gabriele, 2023). But how can we account for this elusive, yet ever-present "DNA"? And what are the reasons for its mass appeal?

As I shall argue, a significant aspect of A24's identity and broad cultural resonance may lie in its distinct metamodern sensibility. Metamodernism, as explained in my introduction, designates a dominant shift in culture emerging in the early 21st century, striving to move beyond modernism and postmodernism while negotiating between the two. As such, it is characterized by a movement similar to a "pendulum swinging between [...] innumerable poles":

> It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 6).

It is no coincidence that the term "metamodern" has been claimed by the Daniels themselves to qualify their film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), A24's biggest success to date, which has arguably contributed more than any other film towards making A24 a household name. Responding to a journalist who identified a "poignant form of postmodernism" in his film, Daniel Kwan declared:

> I think that's the version of post-postmodernism that we're hunting for — that metamodernism, if I'm going to be obnoxious. [...] We're so film-literate that it's really hard to surprise [the audience]. And this film is basically trying to acknowledge that weird thing that's happening right now, where we are at peak media saturation, peak story saturation. ... [But] it's not about references. It's more about what is honest and what is personal (Puchko, 2022).

More broadly, this term has also been used to define "the current generation's attitude" which can be thought of as "a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 5).

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

55

Though this structure of feeling is most apparent in A24's merchandising and branding strategies, which oscillate between sincerity and irony, I argue that it also reflects in A24's distinct "mini-major" ethos which oscillates between pragmatism and idealism. Ultimately, this overarching structure of feeling could likely explain why A24 was able to maintain an ineffable yet cohesive "aura" despite its highly heterogeneous filmography. It could also be understood as a factor that enabled A24 to establish itself as a generational touchstone at the forefront of cultural relevance. By aligning itself with prevailing cultural trends, A24 met a growing market demand, thereby cementing its hegemonic status within post-horror.

In the following sections, I will explore how exactly this metamodern sensibility is embedded in both A24's marketing strategies and "mini major" ethos, contributing to a broader metamodern "collective affect" that shapes the reception of its films.

A Cultural and Generational Marker

At first glance, A24 appears to be devoid of a fixed identity. Its name carries no real meaning (Vega, 2023).[16] As for its logo, it regularly changes its layout during opening credits to match the film's visual universe (see illustration "Some Layouts").[17]

The A24 podcast, launched in 2018, abides by three strict guiding principles ("no host, no ads, no rules") allowing for the spotlight to shine exclusively on its participants. Likewise, its fanzines are supervised by actors and directors who are invited as guest editors. As a result, the "zines" systematically adapt their aesthetic to fit the guest editors' sensibilities[18]. Similarly, A24's clothing line, which consists mostly of basic clothing essentials, like tee-shirts, socks, shorts, hoodies and caps, with no ornament other than the minimalist A24 logo, seem conspicuously neutral.[19]

However, a closer inspection of A24's website reveals a distinct brand identity tailored for a specific target demographic. Certain products available on its online store, such as a movie crosswords book, a movie-inspired cookbook, or a vintage tee-shirt with a logo of the 1996 Cannes

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16.   It is a reference to an Italian freeway whose name producer Daniel Katz deemed aesthetically pleasing.
17.   Redditor "u/wesreadit", "Some Layouts", 2022, A compilation of A24 layouts, http://tiny.cc/p4fszz.
18.   A Sample of A24's Fanzine catalog, 2023, https://shop.a24films.com/collections/zines.
19.   Such a neutral backdrop, it should be noted, also allows A24 to reinforce its reputation as an auteur-driven studio, one that always adapts to the unique artistic vision of its directors.

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

56

Film Festival, hint at the expected high cultural capital of their consumer, pertaining to the specific domain of cinema.[20]

As *Guardian* journalist Chloe Mac Donnel explains, A24 functions as a "club for cinephiles", answering to a longstanding demand in the market:

> For years, there has also been a lack of memorabilia for cinephiles. Unlike music fans who can easily buy ephemera at concerts, fans of TV shows and films were often only left with sourcing bootleg T-shirts online (Mac Donnel, 2024).

What is more, the brand also bears the traces of a generational marker, addressed mostly to a young, urban, progressive, and fashion-conscious demographic. A prime example of this status is the company's involvement in the trend "#euphoriamakeup" — which has been dubbed "the biggest trend beauty has seen since contouring" (Rao, 2023). A hashtag originating from the A24-backed TV show *Euphoria* which found significant favor among the Gen Z demographic. To this day, it has garnered over 2.5 billion views on TikTok and "averages over 100,000 online searches monthly". A24 has capitalized on this trend by collaborating with the Euphoria-inspired brand of cosmetics Half Magic (Gabriele, 2023).[21]

Yet, what are the defining ideological and aesthetic traits that constitute this generational phenomenon? A closer examination of A24's apparel, collectibles, and magazines reveals a diverse array of references — tie-dye T-shirts, zines, hoodies — emanating from various subcultures emblematic of past generations. These include — among others — psychedelic, punk, hip-hop, and skateboarding subcultures. What results is an impression of a postmodern collage, blending elements from fringe cultures that were themselves already considered postmodern in their own right. Yet, the blending of these codes with those of a more recent internet culture as well as those of high-end fashion[22] signals a desire to move beyond these postmodern references, ushering in a kind of post-postmodern culture.

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20. A "Cannes'96" tee-shirt sold on A24's online store, 2023, https://shop.a24films.com/products/cannes-96-tee .The price of said tee-shirt ($100) also denotes high financial capital. While the online shop does offer high-end luxury items like a *Priscillia*-inspired necklace created in collaboration with high-profile jewelry brand J. Hannah ($1,280-$1,480), it must be noted however that it also sells caps, beanies ($35) or socks ($12) at a price deemed more affordable for a young, middle-class U.S. audience.
21. A brand created by makeup artist Donni Davy who worked on the A24-produced TV show *Euphoria*.
22. Indeed, A24 resorts to limited-edition "drops" and unexpected collaborations with high-profile brands to artificially generate a hype and sense of exclusivity around their products. A strategy reminiscent of high-end street-ware brands like Supreme.

SIMMS – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

57

At the heart of this particular strand of "post-postmodernism," I argue, lies a distinct metamodern oscillation. Moving between "innumerable poles," it oscillates between plurality and unity, the authentic and the inauthentic, the popular and the elitist. Indeed, the overarching discourse is not simply one of apathetic exploitation of fringe cultures for commercial gain or a nihilistic blending of high and low culture. Instead, what transpires is — concomitantly — an earnest appreciation for these subcultural codes, referenced through memorabilia that evoke a sense of authentic nostalgic yearning — for epochs that, ironically, many have not experienced. What is more, the traditional distinction between high and low culture is both abolished and re-affirmed,[23] as these pop culture elements are ultimately exploited to signal an appreciation for a more "elevated" cultural taste.

This distinct metamodern discourse, I argue, is even more obvious in A24's unusual selection of collectibles.

Between Irony and Sincerity

A *Hereditary*-inspired "Evil grandmas wall calendar" at the price of "$6.66", a "*Midsommar* Incense Temple",[24] or a "*Lighthouse* Grooming Set",[25] seem at first to be purely ironic statements. One could see in these absurd collages a self-aware parody of film memorabilia mixing art with the hyper-mundane. All the more so, as these objects make light of some of the most unambiguously sinister aspects of the horror films they reference. And yet, whereas a truly deconstructed, ironic trinket would find no practical use, these products all serve a clear practical purpose. Additionally, the connection that they bear with the film they are referencing — though humorous in nature — is also somewhat clever and sophisticated. Lastly, these objects are carefully designed to be aesthetically pleasing and their limited editions make them highly sought-after collectibles for many fans.

Similarly, A24's eccentric "widescreen beach towel"[26] and "aspect ratio blankets", seem at first to be ironic collages of high and low culture. Mixing the elevated technical film discourse with the triviality of a beach towel could in theory serve the purpose of an anti-elitist discourse

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23. As opposed to the cultural logic of postmodernism which is, according to Fredric Jameson, characterized by "the effacement [...] of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture" (Jameson, 2).
24. A Midsommar-inspired ceramic incense holder, 2023, https://shop.a24films.com/products/midsommar-incense-temple.
25. A Lighthouse-inspired grooming set, 2023, https://shop.a24films.com/products/the-lighthouse-joya-grooming-set.
26. A Blue Widescreen Beach Towel, 2023, https://shop.a24films.com/products/blue-widescreen-beach-towel.

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

58

deconstructing our preconceptions about legitimate and illegitimate culture. And yet, such products are precisely aimed at consumers who would like to signal that they possess cultural capital while not being too self-serious about it. They are earnest markers of cultural elitism disguised as cool ironic detachment.

In the same vein, the "Beau Embroidered Pajama Set", a replica of the pajama worn by the protagonist in *Beau is Afraid* (Ari Aster, 2022), could traditionally pass as a costume to wear at a Halloween party. Yet, here it is sold in the "apparel" section of the online store, thus blurring the line between ironic and authentic use. It becomes unclear whether this piece of garment is to be used in the context of pastiche performance of the film, or a sincere appropriation of the film's universe in everyday life.

All of these products perfectly capture the metamodern concept of "ironesty", as defined by Greg Dember in his simultaneously ironic and sincere website, whose sole purpose is to assert the origin of the term.[27]

A comparable fluctuation between irony and sincerity is evident in the studio's distinctive marketing campaigns. To promote *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), for instance, A24 launched a pop-up store called "A Ghost Store". This unique store encouraged visitors to try on fitted sheets as a kind of mock cosplay of the film. Much like the quirky merchandising available online, the store appeared to be the result of an ironic play on the word "story". Yet, judging by the elaborate production that went behind this event, as well as the participant's reactions,[28] it seems that the store offered an experience that oscillated between the light and the profound. A curtain separating the store in two invited the visitors to "check out the other side", both in the literal sense, but also figuratively calling for a meditation on the afterlife, thus prolonging the film's experience in a playful manner while transposing it from the virtual to the physical (which is also a central theme in Lowery's film).[29]

Pragmatic Idealism

Lastly, I contend that A24's metamodern sensibility transpires in its unique blend of "pragmatic idealism". As previously established, metamodernism involves an oscillation between the sincere and the ironic, but also between the pragmatic and the idealistic. This distinctively

27. See: https://icoinedthewordironesty.com/
28. A "Beau is Afraid" inspired Pajama Set, 2023, https://shop.a24films.com/products/beau-pajamas.
29. Sam Reed, Tweet about "A Ghost Store", Twitter (now X), July 2, 2017, https://x.com/spamreed/status/881582858879610886.

SIMMS – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

59

metamodern fluctuation is evident in A24's approach to cinema. In a rare interview for *Les Cahiers du Cinema,* the press-shy founders David Fenkel and Daniel Katz make this point particularly apparent. Using *Good Time* (Joshua and Ben Safdie, 2017) as an example, the A24 founders explain that part of their involvement in the film entailed the creation of a "positioning statement" to promote it. For that purpose, they counterintuitively chose to focus the promotion on the directors, instead of superstar Robert Pattinson, who plays the lead in the film. Similarly, on other projects, they sometimes deliberately opt for a "less commercial" casting. However, as David Fenkel makes clear, these seemingly anti-commercial "counterintuitive" choices are not the result of a purely idealistic stance favoring artistic over commercial considerations. Rather, they are precisely taken to make the film even "more commercial […] because the result will be more original" (Elliott, 2019: 14; my translation).[30] The traditionally auteurist rhetoric — which could be considered idealistic insofar as it prioritizes the director's artistic vision over commercial concerns — seamlessly blends here with a much more pragmatic — almost cynical — calculation. Such a discourse takes aback the journalist from *Les Cahiers du Cinema,* who notes: "Their rhetoric, highly focused on marketing and 'positioning,' contrasts with the perception one might hold of independent cinema, yet it reflects a certain reality" (Elliott, 2019: 14; my translation).

The reason why A24 exploits a rhetoric of pragmatic idealism that appears so unbecoming of an independent studio, is perhaps both the cause and consequence of its "mini-major" status. Indeed, this status implies an oscillation between independent and major ethos, between auteurist and studio philosophy. Though these two poles might not be canonically metamodern in nature, I argue that they do resonate with a broader metamodern structure of feeling, insofar as they showcase a desire to transcend two major trends of the past by negotiating between the two.[31] What is more, I argue that it is precisely A24's capacity to artfully navigate between these two poles that enabled it to dominate the post-horror cycle.

Indeed, at first glance, A24's "mini-major" status might have appeared incompatible with the post-horror cycle. In his book, David Church defines post-horror partly as: "an emerging cycle of independently produced (and potentially profitable) horror films" which share a "sense of handmade artistry, low-budget ingenuity" (Church, 2021: 1), thereby making the independent mode of production a key component to understand its ethos. Yet, as previously discussed, A24's dominant status within the

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30. Original quote in French: "*Parfois c'est contre-intuitif, par exemple quand on refuse un casting plus commercial. On préfèrerait ne pas faire un film plutôt que de le faire de la mauvaise façon. Et nos décisions rendront le film plus commercial*" (Elliott, 2019: 14).

31. It should be noted however that A24 is not the first studio to oscillate between these two poles. Miramax, New Line Cinema, Orion Pictures, or Focus Features for instance have also navigated in a similar way between auteurist and studio philosophy.

SIMMS – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

60

cycle can be attributed precisely to its ability to oscillate between the major and independent studio paradigms. This oscillation is evident in how A24 promotes niche auteurist content using mainstream studio codes, while simultaneously screening stream-bound content in physical venues,[32] or how it brands itself as a club for cinephiles akin to Miramax while expanding into a multimedia conglomerate using marketing strategies reminiscent of Disney.

A Collective Affect

This oscillation between opposite poles, I argue, can be interpreted as both impetus and result of a broader metamodern structure of feeling that is constitutive of A24's identity. As such, I contend, that this metamodernist approach to filmmaking participates in generating a characteristic "collective affect" that emanates specifically from A24 films. The term "collective affect" here is understood in keeping with U.S. scholar Lawrence Grossberg's definition of the notion, used to describe the "'socially constructed domain of cultural effects' that makes the text matter in a specific historical situation and place, and makes it come alive giving it a resonant tone" as opposed to "something inherent to the text itself (supposed meaning)" (Duffet, 2013: 136). This "collective experience of emotion" perhaps best explains why so many fans or journalists of the popular press have identified a persistent, yet ineffable "aura" or "vibe" specific to A24 films (Pineda Pacheco & Saab, 2023).

In his book, David Church also resorts to affect theory, this time to characterize the "more generalized, ineffable block of sensation, such as free-floating anxieties without an apparent cause or solution" that "the aesthetic form and narrative strategies of post-horror films produce" (Church, 2021:7-8). Yet, is there a correlation between these two types of affects? Does A24's unique metamodern sensibility — most evident in its branding and marketing strategies — reflect in the content of its post-horror films? If so, is it inherent to post-horror as a whole, or should A24 horror films be considered a cycle within the cycle of post-horror?

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32. Further accentuating this oscillation between independent and major studio ethos, A24 has recently acquired the Cherry Lane Theater in Manhattan. This move resonates with the classic Hollywood studios' strategy of vertical integration within the market and mirrors the recent developments of major platforms like Netflix and Amazon, which have also begun investing in physical locations. However, A24 maintains its elevated, auteur-driven and New York-centric discourse, asserting that their new theater will serve to promote plays, live entertainment, and foster innovative interactions between their writers and directors (Paulson, 2023).

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

61

A Cycle within the Cycle?

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As evidence of A24's surge in popularity and its intrinsic ties to the post-horror cycle, the term "A24 horror movies" seems to have made its way into public discourse. It can be found in products of fan labor such as social media posts, memes, tribute posters, or even online music playlists. On the music streaming platform Spotify, for instance, several users have constituted public playlists around this idea of "A24 horror", from the generic "A24 Horror" by user "Cam???", to the oddly specific "Huckleberry Finn but make it an a24 [sic] horror movie" by user "not.justa.simpletess".[33]

Such a phenomenon confirms the conflation in the public's mind of "A24 films" into a coherent entity, which seemingly includes all of the films that A24 collaborated on, regardless of whether they were involved as producers or mere distributors. However, it remains unclear if in the case of the term "A24 horror films", A24 is used as a metonymy to include the whole of the post-horror cycle, or if it could describe a type of horror specific to A24 films alone. As we shall see, several journalists of the popular press as well as academics have explored this second possibility.

In August 2022, *Vulture* journalist Nate Jones, who claims to have "maybe seen more A24 films than the people who work at A24", took on the impressive feat of ranking the 113 films that A24 had released from best to worst. In this article, Jones included another ranking, entitled "10 Signs You're Watching an A24 Film". Most of the tell-tale signs that he identified, like "White Teens Are Rapping in a Car", or the complementary "While Driving Over a Bridge in Florida" don't apply to A24's horror catalog, and reveal the self-depreciating, overly specific nature of this mock-ranking. Regardless, he does identify a stylistic device — the use of "Unconventional Aspect Ratios —" which does apply predominantly to A24 horror films, including *A Ghost Story*, *It Comes at Night*, and *The Lighthouse*. Regarding recurring themes, he notes the prevalence of woods and "creepy birds" as well as the basic plot-line "True Happiness Is Found Through Satan", which surprisingly do seem overrepresented in A24 horror films. This basic plot line, he contends, applies to *The Witch*, *The Blackcoat's Daughter*, *Midsommar*, *The Lighthouse*, *Hereditary*, and *Saint Maud*.

Nate Jones is not alone in picking up on these themes. Illustrator Nick Charge posted on Instagram a fan-made tribute poster to the horror films of Ari Aster and Robert Eggers, reposted on Reddit under the

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33.   "Spotify playlist referencing A24 horror movies", 2023, Screenshots, https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2NB7aOTKQlSx1m9qPXGhXI; https://open.spotify.com/playlist/50CMn0ZuHD8cOhKGvWZDbC.

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

62

name "a tribute to A24 horror" (see illustration), which highlights the recurring animal motif in every film (a goat for *The Witch*, a bear for *Midsommar,* and a bird for *Hereditary* and *The Lighthouse*). Similarly, user Lukeymcgarry turned A24's formulaic plot lines based on the occult into a meme by posting a mock-graph entitled "How to Make an A24 Film" on Instagram (see illustration). In it, one reads that the only thing differentiating an A24 horror film from a non-horror film is that it: "end(s) with pagan/satanic ritual"!**34**

In a more academic context, Eddie Falvey, in his article on "'Art-horror' and 'hardcore art-horror'" also remarks that many of A24's horror films are "either within or adjacent to the supernatural sub-genre", despite "a few outliers such as *Green Room* [Jeremy Saulnier, 2015], *Climax* [Gaspar Noé, 2018] and *High Life* [Claire Denis, 2018], which arguably earn their art-horror stripes on different terms, as psychological horrors perhaps". Rather than categorizing "A24 horror" as a supernatural cycle within the post-horror cycle however, Falvey isolates *A Ghost Story* and *The Lighthouse* as displaying a "substantial variation " among post-horror films, stating: "while *The Lighthouse* exhibits a markedly different style to a franchise slasher for instance, it also feels different to some 'post-horror' films with a less ostentatiously dissonant style such as, say, Jordan Peele's *Get Out" (*Falvey, 2021: 71).

Looking precisely at the early post-horror films, it is striking to see that nature and the occult are overrepresented in A24 horror films, in a way that is not shared by other non-A24 post-horror films like *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014), and *The Invitation* (Karyn Kusama, 2015). However, I found that this observation ceases to be pertinent after 2016, as nature and the occult become themes that run through most of the cycle. Hence, Church has dedicated a whole chapter to the importance of natural landscapes in the cycle, which includes several non-A24 films, namely *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse* (Lukas Feigelfeld, 2017), *A Quiet Place* (John Krasinski, 2018) and *Gretel & Hansel* (Oz Perkins, 2020) (Church, 2021: 142-180).

Such an observation leaves us with the possible conclusion that maybe A24 set a precedent. Rather than create a cycle within the cycle, A24 films could have infused the cycle with its own in-house style and motifs. An interpretation that seems closer to Brannan's take on the matter, as he states: "I argue that there are a set of shared traits which these elevated horror films display, and these traits comprise the house style of A24's horror product" (Brannan, 2021: 8).

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34.   Nick Charge, "Modern Horror", 2022, fan-made poster, http://tiny.cc/a9fszz; Lukey McGarry, "How to Make an A24 Film", 2022, Instagram publication, https://www.instagram.com/lukeymcgarry/p/DBhXeTlzBiE/?img_index=1.

SIMMS – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

63

In this final section of this article, I would like to defend the idea that among those "set of shared traits", may lie traces a distinct metamodern structure of feeling.

A Metamodern Strand of Supernatural

Upon initial consideration, A24's distinct metamodern sensibility — most evident in its "ironest"[35] merchandising — would seem to stand in direct opposition with its post-horror repertoire. Indeed, by definition, what characterizes these post-horror films is precisely their serious aspect and general lack of humor.[36] And yet, I argue some of these films' approaches to the supernatural resonate with a metamodernist structure of feeling, particularly in the way they oscillate between the naturalistic and the stylized, sincerity and irony, naivety and knowingness.

This metamodern strand of supernatural, I argue, is most apparent in David Lowery's *A Ghost Story*. The film's narrative structure, which follows a ghost tethered to a single location over an extended period, can be considered postmodern insofar as it dismantles traditional storytelling conventions. However, the film also explores themes of love, loss, and existential longing in a heartfelt manner, which is more aligned with a modernist sensibility. Central to this metamodern structure of feeling is the oscillation between the naturalistic and stylized. On the one hand, there is a conspicuous lack of special effects to represent the ghost. He is not seen as flying or translucent and does not produce any sounds. This evokes a sense of earnestness and simplicity. On the other hand, the highly stylized representation of a ghost draped in a fitted sheet is inherently absurd and even verges on the comical, thus subverting recent horror conventions.

Mutatis mutandis, I argue that a somewhat similar oscillation can be observed in Robert Egger's approach to the supernatural — though I concede that Egger's markedly darker and heavier strand of horror stands out precisely because of its seriousness and lack of irony. Much like Lowery however, Eggers re-explores the most archaic representations of the supernatural: Satan as a goat, evil women as witches in the woods, or mermaids by the sea… in a manner that oscillates between the naturalistic and the stylized. On the one hand, his films display a "fetishistic" attention to

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35. We refer here once more to the term of "ironesty", which encapsulates "the braiding together of irony and sincerity (honesty) in a unified aesthetic expression." The term was coined by Greg Dember, a prominent critic of metamodernism, in his simultaneously ironic and sincere website https://icoinedthewordironesty.com/.

36. The gravitas of A24's post-horror catalog is particularly apparent when contrasted with Jordan Peele's humor-infused strand of horror. Yet, it should be noted that humor is not entirely absent from A24 horror films. Ari Aster's filmography, in particular, incorporates many elements of dark humor.

SIMMS – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

64

detail in the costume and set design, as well as in the dialects of the characters, which make for a particularly immersive and believable world.[37] On the other hand, the representation of the supernatural is heavily symbolic and accompanied by carefully crafted cinematography that is all but documentary-like. In so doing, these films adopt a stance that oscillates "between naïveté and knowingness" into a kind of "informed naivety"[38] (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 6).

In this light, we could interpret the repetitive depiction of flatulence emanating from the character of Thomas Wake — portrayed by Willem Dafoe — in *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019) as a distinctly metamodern motif.

Initially, it might be perceived as an ironic deviation from horror conventions, relieving tension through crude humor. However, it also serves as another hyper-naturalist element, enhancing the film's believability and thus its horror. In this regard, *The Lighthouse*'s incorporation of flatulence finds a surprising parallel with another contemporary supernatural metamodern — though not horror-related — A24 film: *Swiss Army Man* (The Daniels, 2016). Despite being marketed as a surrealist comedy, "Swiss Army Man" also contains disturbingly macabre elements typically associated with the horror genre, as it depicts the unlikely friendship between a marooned man and a corpse whose flatulence can propel him over water. Moreover, in both films, the significance behind these instances of flatulence oscillates between the ironic and the sincere. However, while in *Swiss Army Man*, flatulence renders the horrific supernatural world unbelievable and comedic, in *The Lighthouse*, it contributes to making the narrative seem more believable and thus more horrifying.

The Non-Jump Scare

Drawing inspiration from an article by Linda C. Ceriello entitled "The Big Bad and the Big 'Aha!': Metamodern Monsters as Transformational Figures of Instability" which undertakes a classification of the different types of monster narratives through the lens of metamodernism, I would like to suggest an alternative classification for another recurring trope in horror films: jump scares. The non-ironic, classical jump scare would take

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37. Eggers, who describes his approach to design in *The Witch* as "fetishistic", flew in a thatcher from Virginia and a carpenter from Massachusetts to faithfully recreate elements of the 1630s New England setting (Crucchiola, 2016).
38. A24's archaic representations of the supernatural can be considered "naïve" insofar as they seemingly lack awareness of more recent and elaborate conventions. Yet, they are also "informed" since they display a highly realistic and sophisticated portrayal of the historical and cultural context within which these myths appear.

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

65

place when a sudden change in the image — often accompanied by a loud jarring sound — reveals an actual threat or monster. The ironic, anti-jump scare would use the same device to reveal a non-threat. The metamodern non-jump scare, on the other hand, would oscillate between the ironic and the non-ironic. It would occur when the protagonist unknowingly comes into contact with the monster in a conspicuously silent and drawn-out sequence.[39]

Such a stylistic device can be observed in Alex Garland's *Men* (2021) when the threat suddenly appears in the background and remains lurking behind the unknowing protagonist over a two-minute-long sequence without any added music. The fact that we identify a threat that the protagonist doesn't notice naturally generates dramatic irony. The lack of jarring sounds or sudden visual shifts further highlights this dissonance between the dramatic tension we experience, and the lack of tension the protagonist feels. And yet, this irony[40] and serene cinematography do not lead to our emotional detachment. Instead, we oscillate between feelings of detachment[41] and authentic discomfort. A similar — though perhaps less dramatic — "non-jump scare" can be found in *A Ghost Story (David Lowery, 2017),* which shows the "monster" standing in the background while the unaware protagonist eats in silence over a drawn-out four-minute sequence.[42]

Nudity and Nakedness

The example of the "non-jump scare" sequence taken from Alex Garland's *Men* (2021) in which the monstrous threat takes the form of an unclothed intruder, also points to another recurring motif in A24 horror films, that can be studied through the prism of metamodernism: nudity and nakedness. I rely here on the distinction made by John Berger in his

39. However, as with all taxonomic propositions, this typology — which seeks to highlight dominant trends — has its limitations. It should be noted that traditional jump scares and anti-jump scares appear across a variety of contexts whether in modern or postmodern horror films. Similarly, non-jump scares are also prevalent in J-horror films such as *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998), which are not commonly labeled as post-horror.
40. It should be noted that the effects of dramatic irony are complex and very much context dependent. In a comedic context, dramatic irony may lead to the spectator distancing himself from the characters' foolish actions, whereas in a tragic or horrific context — as is the case here — it typically leads to a heightened empathy. Yet in all cases, it could be argued that knowing something that the character does not know necessarily generates a cognitive (or epistemic) distance between the spectator and the character.
41. A feeling of "ironic detachment" which is heightened here not only by the peaceful cinematography, but also by the incongruous and ambivalent nature of the perceived threat or monster. In *Men*, this is embodied by an unknown, silent and fully visible naked man lurking in the garden. He is an intruder, yet seems oblivious of the fact, showing no clear signs of hostility. In the case of *A Ghost Story*, the "monster" takes the form of a silent, still, and fully visible draped figure devoid of ill intentions.
42. Alex Garland, *Men*, 2022, Film still, https://ibb.co/ysSzbNW; David Lowery, *A Ghost Story*, 2017, Film still. https://ibb.co/w6yW7kV.

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

66

essay *Ways of Seeing*: "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself […]. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise" (Berger, 1972: 54).

Representations of nudity are ubiquitous in the horror genre. From the early frills of erotic bodies revealed in Hammer films and early grindhouse to the graphic images of bodies being tortured in neo-grindhouse of "torture porn" films, the unclothed body has always been used for its titillating qualities as an object of spectacle. A canonic example of this can be found in the iconic "Room 237" scene in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). In it, the protagonist, Jack Torrance, comes upon a vision of an attractive nude woman posing for him, before suddenly transforming into a monstrous decaying body covered in special FX makeup. The alternative here is clear: the body is either a spectacle of beauty or of horror. But each time a spectacle.[43]

In A24 horror films, the unclothed body is also a recurring motif, but we can notice an evolution in the way it is represented. In *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) and *Ex Machina*[44] (Alex Garland, 2014), we can identify something that could qualify as a postmodernist stance. The two women, who are objectified by the male gaze throughout the film, end up peeling their skin, thus revealing nudity for what it is: a mask. However, in a typical postmodern, ironic twist, we discover that there is no human subject to be found behind this mask either: one is an alien while the other is a robot.[45]

In *The Witch*, *The Lighthouse*, *Hereditary*, *Midsommar*, and *Men*, we start to see representations of the body as truly naked: neither ideal nor monstrous. What is more, it is often the "monster" that is naked, thus leading us to question its "monstrosity". In *The Witch* and *Hereditary*, low-key lighting artificially enhances the horrific quality of these visions, though no horrific music is added. In *Midsommar* and *Men*, nakedness is shown in broad daylight and at length, using full frontal shots. We are not surprised but invited to sit with the feeling of uneasiness that stems from these uncanny visions.

Keeping in mind that A24's audience is mostly young, urban, and hyperconnected (a social demographic that is overrepresented in A24's non-horror catalog), it seems somewhat fitting that these horror narratives would feature as monsters their audience's antithesis: old naked

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43. Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining*, 1980, Film stills, https://ibb.co/zH1LCdk; https://ibb.co/b73qBSG.
44. Which I would argue possesses elements of a horror film, though it is more commonly categorized as science-fiction.
45. Jonathan Glazer, *Under the Skin*, 2013, Film still, https://ibb.co/Sd8RBRX; Alex Garland, *Ex Machina*, 2014, Film still, http://tiny.cc/hgfszz.

Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

67

people in the woods. What seems metamodern about this representation of nakedness, however, is that it is not artificially presented as monstrous as in *The Shining*'s "Room 237" scene. In showing us the naked body as is, without any added artifice, these films seem to veer towards authenticity, transparency, and non-judgment. Nevertheless, somehow, they also manage to make the familiar seem unfamiliar, obscene, and/or threatening. We oscillate between fascination and repulsion, between the natural and the unnatural, the innocent and the perverse: a metamodern oscillation that triggers the "ineffable block of sensation" that Church identified as constitutive of post-horror (Church, 2021: 7-8).[46]

Conclusion

In Greek mythology, rogue bandit Procrustes was known to stretch out and cut off his victims' limbs to fit the size of his iron bed. A lot of exercises in taxonomy can feel similarly contrived and arbitrary. In the case of this study, however, questioning why A24 was hailed as the driving force behind post-horror has proven to be a rather fruitful exercise.

Delving into the rich — albeit brief — history of the studio, this study was able to appreciate its key role within the cycle both as a distributor and a producer. Benefitting from a virtuous dynamic, A24's dominant reputation in the horror realm was owed in great part to its triumphs outside of the genre, which in turn capitalized on its successes within it.

Crucial to these successes, this paper argues, is A24's metamodern sensibility. This dominant cultural trend — which A24 embraced — enabled the studio to position itself as a generational touchstone at the forefront of cultural relevance. Though this structure of feeling is most apparent in the company's "ironest" branding strategies, this paper contends that it also permeates its "mini-major" status, as it oscillates between the pragmatic studio and an idealistic auteur ethos.

Given A24's — and post-horror's — distinct auteurist quality, it proved challenging to make sweeping generalizations about the style and content of the films under study. Moreover, the genre's characteristic seriousness initially appeared incompatible with the ironic components of metamodernism. Despite these hurdles, certain motifs within A24 post-horror films were identified — particularly in their treatment of the supernatural, use of jump scares, and portrayal of nudity — that echoed

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46.   Ari Aster, *Midsommar*, 2019, Film still, https://ibb.co/GJNMgqw; Ari Aster, *Hereditary*, 2018, Film still, https://ibb.co/B6bXZq7; Robert Eggers, *The Witch*, 2016, Film still, https://ibb.co/j5tbKVH.

the metamodern structure of feeling. Yet, rather than holding metamodernism as a central characteristic of post-horror, this study argues that it manifests primarily in the collective affect of A24's brand identity, which in turn finds resonances — as well as dissonances — with the cycle's own characteristic affects.

While A24 stands as the clear hegemonic studio behind post-horror, restricting the cycle to the alternative of "in-house cycle" and "auteur cycle" may appear somewhat limiting. Faithful to the metamodern image of the pendulum swinging endlessly between innumerable poles, one might wonder if the defining feature of this cycle lies precisely in its constant negotiation between these two paradigms.

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Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

69

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Simms – A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?

70

Of Mothers and Witches: Performative Spaces of Femininity in Post-Horror Works.
Antichrist, The Witch, Hagazussa, Sharp Objects

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Abstract: The article will center on three films commonly included in – or considered to have somewhat anticipated and inspired – the recent post-horror cycle: Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2008), Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) and Lukas Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa* (2017). Jean-Marc Vallée's series *Sharp Objects* (2018), a TV series that has less explicitly been associated with the cycle or the horror genre as a whole, will be brought forth in the last section. The commentary on gender binding these female-led works together appears to articulate feminine representations in spatial terms: the first part of this essay will therefore strive to delineate these spaces – literal, psychic and narrative – that are imposed on the female figures of the films and of which the masculine agent is the self-appointed architect. As they address the historical containment of their female characters into the figure of the witch – transposed, in *Antichrist*'s case, in a contemporary setting –, these three works moreover depict an excessive adherence to this specific space of representation that reads, in light of feminist theories such as Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance or Luce Irigaray's views on hysteria, as a paradoxical act of resistance. In the final section, it will become apparent that *Sharp Objects*, in its reappropriation of spatial dynamics and folkloric elements outlined in *Antichrist*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa*, brings the witch back home. The series' portrayal of a poisonous feminine bloodline points out the oppressive patriarchal structures imposed on – and then perpetuated by – women and questions its ongoing consequences.

Keywords: Femininity, Gender, Genre, Space, Performance, Post-Horror, Witchcraft, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Representations, Folklore

Résumé : Cet article se focalise sur trois films communément inclus dans – ou considérés comme ayant quelque peu anticipé et inspiré – le récent cycle de "*post-horror*" : il s'agit d'*Antichrist* (2008) de Lars von Trier, *The Witch* (2015) de Robert Eggers, et *Hagazussa* (2017) de Lukas Feigelfeld. La série *Sharp Objects* (2018) de Jean-Marc Vallée, malgré son association moins explicite au cycle ou au genre horrifique dans son ensemble, sera abordée dans la dernière section. Le commentaire sur le genre qui parcourt et lie ces œuvres repose sur des représentations féminines dont la mise en scène se fait en termes spatiaux : la première partie de cet essai consiste donc à délimiter les espaces – littéraux, psychiques et narratifs – imposés aux figures féminines des films et dont l'agent masculin est l'architecte autoproclamé. Ces trois œuvres, à travers les ramifications historiques – transposées, dans le cas d'*Antichrist*, dans un contexte contemporain – d'un confinement du féminin à la figure de la sorcière, dépeignent en outre une adhésion excessive à cet espace spécifique de représentation ; adhésion excessive qui apparaît, à la lumière des théories d'auteures féministes telles que Judith Butler et Luce Irigaray, comme un acte paradoxal de résistance. *Sharp Objects*, enfin, en se réappropriant les dynamiques spatiales et les éléments folkloriques soulignés dans les films, recompose en filigrane la figure de la sorcière. En dressant le portrait d'une lignée féminine empoisonnée, la série met en évidence les structures patriarcales oppressives non seulement imposées aux femmes mais perpétuées par elles, questionnant ainsi leurs conséquences actuelles.

Mots-clés : féminité, genre, espace, performance, *post-horror*, sorcellerie, maternité, patriarcat, représentations, folklore

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade or so, the horror landscape has been marked by a string of films that have since been gathered inside the porous and shifting boundaries of a new "cycle" somewhat controversially labelled "elevated horror" or, perhaps more consensually, "post-horror". Although its characterization is still ongoing, the attention garnered among viewers, critics and academics by the works of directors such as Jennifer Kent, Robert Eggers, Jordan Peele or Ari Aster allowed for the constitution of a core nucleus of films. The provisional corpus established by David Church in *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation* encapsulates forty-four films released between 2008 and 2020, among which Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) and its European counterpart, Lukas Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa* (2017). The third film that will constitute the corpus of this study, Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), is later quoted by Church as part of the "longer and broader tradition of art-horror cinema" (Church, 2021: 3). A tradition, the author argues, picked up and shifted into a more minimalist register by the post-horror cycle. Although the film's release

predates what is perceived as the emergence of this cycle by a few years, rewatching *Antichrist* in light of these recent films indeed reveals the intimate kinship it harbors with post-horror.

Antichrist opens with the infamous, slow-motion fall to death of infant Nick during his parents' enthusiastic primal scene, and goes on to narrate the journey of Willem Dafoe's therapist character "He" as he takes his grief-stricken and guilt-ridden wife, Charlotte Gainsbourg's "She", to their isolated cabin in the woods. While attempting to cure her, he becomes convinced of his wife's – and of female nature's – inherent evilness, as the contents of her stunted doctoral research on witchcraft and female persecutions seem to permeate their shared reality. *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* are period pieces: respectively taking place in seventeenth-Century New-England and fifteenth-Century Austrian Alps, they depict the ambiguous self-fulfilling prophecies of Thomasin and Albrun, two young women scapegoated as witches by their family or peers.

From the outset, all three films appear to be exhibiting common themes, settings and character arcs (folkloric beliefs and esoterism, remote natural environments, small communities…) – all recurring elements of the folk-horror subgenre that have been resurfacing in recent years and overlap, in many places, with the post-horror cycle.[1] But as a seminal art-horror influence, *Antichrist* also diegetically "contains" both *The Witch* and *Hagazussa*'s narratives, an imbrication that conversely informs Von Trier's arguably opaque discourse on gender. By encapsulating the historicity of Thomasin and Albrun's trajectories inside the dissertation, the mind and, soon enough, the reality of *Antichrist*'s "She", the film inscribes the character in a broader feminine lineage and cultural spectrum. This anachronously transfers the critical perspective on patriarchy's historic oppression of women assumed by *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* to the contemporary setting of *Antichrist*.

As for the fourth installment examined in this essay, it departs from the films in format and genre: one of Jean-Marc Vallée's last directorial projects before his untimely death, *Sharp Objects* (2018) is a ten-part series

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1. The folk-horror cycle is retroactively ascribed to three seminal British films released in the late 1960s and early 1970s: *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971), and *The Wickerman* (Robin Hardy, 1973). The subgenre's distinctive elements include an isolated setting, the depiction of skewed belief systems and morality, and a resulting action in the form of a happening or summoning. Although this template proved most prolific during the aforementioned period, with films unfolding in rural communities prone to violence – Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) or John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) are seminal examples – or depicting event – such as Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) or Collin Eggleston's *Long Weekend* (1978) –, the cycle has been argued to reach all the way back to Benjamin Christensen's silent *Häxan* (1922) and to have undergone a strong resurgence in the last decade or so. *Antichrist* falls within this return of folk-horror, that further expanded and became intertwined with the post-horror cycle in the 2010s : *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* are instances, followed by more recent entries such as Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2020) or Alex Garland's *Men* (2022).

centered on the investigation of a gruesome, small-town Missouri crime. A teenager has turned up dead in the woods surrounding Wind Gap, and another girl has gone missing since. Camille is a journalist and, knowing she grew up in the town where the murder took place, her editor sends her "home" to write about the event. As she reconnects with her icy mother Adora and versatile step-sister Amma in the family's Southern estate, her oniric journey down memory lane will soon overlap with the official police investigation. Released in 2018, the series is an adaptation of the eponymous 2006 novel, thus nicely bookending the films' corpus.

Thematically, there is a clear concern with femininity and a commentary on gender binding these works together. Despite the tenuous explicit kinship of *Sharp Objects*' main narrative with the folk-horror subgenre and the horror genre as a whole, there is also a definite sense that the series is no stranger to the post-horror cycle. Detailed analysis indeed reveals an array of aesthetic, symbolic and narrative motifs that, although already present in the 2006 novel, are exacerbated by Vallée's mise-en-scene and are akin to the folk-and-post-horror films of the corpus. Such motifs are articulated around the feminine figures and inform the series' discourse on gender, which bears similarities with that of the three films under study. I will therefore attempt to identify and unfold these elements as they echo throughout the corpus, along with the way these are instrumentalized to outline a specific topography of the feminine. This analysis will center mostly on *Antichrist* and *Sharp Objects*, as they relocate the historic female persecutions depicted in *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* in contemporary contexts, thereby actualizing their sociocultural and cinematic legacies.

Writing about the views of French philologist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grozs states that "the Virgin Mary's uniquely sinless position, as many have noted, is opposed to the other major figure in the Bible – Eve. Two sides of the same coin." (Grozs, 1989: 83), before concluding: "we are today facing a crisis of representation that inherits its form from religious texts" (Grozs, 1989: 90). There are only so many prescribed representations of femininity, so many spaces which women are allowed to occupy. The first part of this essay will be dedicated to the delineation of these feminine spaces – especially the literal, psychic and narrative spaces imposed onto *Antichrist*'s She and *The Witch*'s Thomasin –, spaces of which the masculine agent is the self-appointed architect.

But how are the feminine trajectories of the films articulated around these patriarchal, binary representations striving to mold and contain them? As Francesca Matteoni writes, "inside early modern patriarchal society women gained a recognized identity thanks to the idea of motherhood" (Matteoni, 2009: 60). The immaculate Mary and the sinful Eve

are both embodiments of motherhood, a role intersecting with femininity to the point of complete overlap. The second part of this analysis will aim at charting the expression, in the films, of these feminine figures' slippage toward a third term: the witch. The porosity of the spaces represented, together with the depiction of feminine fluids (water, blood, milk), convey a "seeping through" dynamic that is strongly feminine-encoded. According to Judith Butler's conception of gender as performative, "to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', […] to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (Butler, 1988: 522). The depiction in the corpus of the female characters' complex relationship to witchcraft, in light of these feminist theories, poses their excessive adherence to this specific space of representation – the figure of the witch – as a paradoxical act of resistance. From the Virgin mother, through the pivotal Eve and to the witch "seen as the anti-mother" (Matteoni, 2009: 60), this performative "becoming" takes the form of a historic materialization, a subversive testament of "the way in which oppression structures the ontological categories through which gender is conceived" (Butler, 1988: 529).

The exploration of the performances of femininity in *Antichrist*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* eventually brings us to *Sharp Objects*. Although the films as well as the series were all directed by men, *Sharp Objects*' original 2006 novel was written by Gillian Flynn, a woman; it is therefore interesting to compare this female discourse on gender, and Jean-Marc Vallée's audiovisual expression of it, to that of the rest of the corpus. As will become apparent, the folk-horror template of the films, although pushed under the surface of the narrative, still echoes throughout *Sharp Objects*. Its reappropriation of the feminine spaces and fluids brings the witch back home, thereby articulating these figures inside a poisonous feminine bloodline. This portrayal outlines and interrogates the ongoing consequences of the oppressive patriarchal structures imposed on – and then perpetuated by – women, thus echoing Luce Irigaray's project of "challenging and deconstructing the cultural representations of femininity so that it may be capable of representation and recognition in its own self-defined terms" (Grozs, 1989: 101).

Containing the feminine:
Antichrist, The Witch, Hagazussa

Man as architect: building the feminine space

One of *Antichrist*'s main concerns is exposed when Willem Dafoe's "He" undertakes the construction of his wife's "pyramid of fears": in this crude triangular structure, He will attempt to lay out and hierarchize the objects of her anguish in order to rationalize them. The drawing will recur sporadically throughout, and closer analysis reveals the plural and important role it occupies. Although the story is already divided into a prologue, chapters and an epilogue,[2] the pyramid acts as a clear catalyst and provides a second narrative structure to the film.[3]

The shape He chooses to give this dubious therapeutic instrument strongly evokes Freytag's pyramid, a schematic rendition of the five-act dramatic structure.[4] Moreover, the narrative seems to shift according to his modifications of the diagram. He first guides his wife throughout its designing: "let's make a list of the things you're afraid of. At the top, you put the situation you fear the most" [21:00]; and soon after, She suffers a very violent fit, hurting herself, then aggressively having sex with him. He whips out the pyramid again, stating: "if you can't tell me what you're afraid of, maybe it would be easier for you to tell me *where* you're afraid?" (my emphasis). Right there and then, She is tied to the pyramid, forcibly projected into its spaces. Visually and symbolically, it is instrumentalized in order to expose the spatial quality of the gender dynamics at play. When she responds that she is most afraid of the woods surrounding their cottage, nicknamed "Eden", he writes the word at the bottom of the pyramid. "Where" she's afraid is where He will put her, as this new addition prompts their departure to the cabin, ends the "exposition", and launches the "rising action" part of the plot.

The second occurrence of the happens midway through *Antichrist* [51:00]: She states that "Nature is Satan's church" and He feverishly crosses the word "Nature" previously written beside (not quite inside) the pyramid's top, adds "Satan" above it, and immediately proceeds to cross it too. These infructuous attempts at mapping out the content of She's psyche

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2. "Grief", "Pain" (Chaos Reigns), "Despair" (Gynocide) and "The Three Beggars".
3. He's pyramid of fears. *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-27.
4. From German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag's study, *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863). Its five stages, consisting in exposition, rising action (sparked by the inciting incident), climax, falling action, and resolution, are set in a pyramidal shape.

seem to elicit confused reactions in her: she successively declares herself "cured", relapses into depression, and exhibits aggressive sexual behaviour. When finally, He decidedly writes the word "ME" *inside* the top space of the pyramid, his gesture immediately shifts the narrative towards the film's "climax". This last part ends with her execution at his (literal) hands.

Following Auerbach's *Mimesis*,[5] Dorothy Geller distinguishes a masculine-encoded "foreground" narrative, that "can be associated with simple, schematic and mainstream tales such as those in mainstream cinema" (Geller, 2010), from a feminine "background" narrative in *Antichrist*:

> On one level it is an isolated domestic drama. On another level it repeatedly conjures a background of disavowed passion and violence that invoke the coming into being of gender via the history of witches, gynocide, and the question of "nature" in a form that prefigures modern notions (Geller, 2010).

Both narratives run parallel with, Geller states, the feminine one striving to come to the fore while being kept under masculine control. *Antichrist*'s (Freytag's) pyramid of fears therefore appears as the diegetic materialization of She's background narrative, doubling the foregrounded one of the domestic drama. But the pyramid not only provides a visual template to this secondary narrative, it also participates to the topography of the gender dynamics at play, and in particular, the containment of the feminine. The spatiality of the device is double-sided: it is the space He builds for her, to contain her, and He places her inside of it – the narrowness of this space made all the more apparent by the quotation marks he adds around the capitalized "ME" (see figure 1). But it also represents her own interiority, which He tries to decipher, manipulate, and control.

This duplicitous apprehension of the feminine space is made explicit through its domestic, diegetic equivalent: the cabin's attic. Indeed, his visit of the room which – as a recurrent and explicit metaphor of the mind – contains her research upon the persecutions of women seems to influence the architecture of the pyramid. Him inscribing her in the top part of the diagram also reads as a schematized rendition of the "madwoman in the

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5. In the first chapter of his *Mimesis* (1946), Auerbach opposes in literature a "foreground" narrative template, best exemplified by the "starkly illuminated Homeric text" (Geller, 2010), to a "background" narrative characterized by ambiguity and symbolism, and of which the prime illustration is the Genesis. Geller extends Auerbach's theories by outlining the implicit gendering of these two levels of narration: "If Auerbach describes both foreground and background types of text as emerging from patriarchal orders, he emphasizes the presence of the dominant maleness in the straightforward linear and implicitly mainstream narrative progression of the heroic Homeric text, linking visible orderliness with control, domination and the adventures and explorations of men. In contrast, the background text is shaded by angst and personal complexity, layers of mood and sense of a past" (Geller, 2010).

attic" trope.[6] This marginal space of the cabin's attic and the top of the pyramid of fears mirror each other as both a metaphor of interiority and the feminine character's space of confinement.

Another look at the last occurrence of the drawing shows that besides playing a decisive role in the narrative structure of the film and exposing the way He both manipulates her interior space and shapes a space to contain her into, it further serves as a substrate to expose another mechanism of phallocracy: the "masculine mirror".

In *Sexual Subversions*, Elizabeth Grosz writes that "we live in a resolutely homosexual culture […] [that] leaves no space for woman as such. Women can be represented only by means of a violence that contains them […] within masculine sameness" (Grosz, 1989: 107). Elaborating on the topic, the author then mentions the work of Luce Irigaray, who reinterpreted the Lacanian mirror phase as the feminine formation of identity in a phallocentric environment:

> The mirror reflects only an image placed in front of it: the (implicitly) masculine being. The specular relation is thus composed of a man and his self-reflecting other, an image of himself that he takes to be his other, woman (Grosz, 1989: 130).

Man, wherever he looks, only ever contemplates echoes of himself.

Antichrist's He, as he writes "ME" at the top of the pyramid, simultaneously mutters "Herself": the confusing combination of what is written and what is spoken betrays the self-reflecting nature of the masculine relationship to his phallocentric environment. What is more, a retrospective look at the film from the perspective this particular shot offers reveals that this "masculine mirror" has been repeatedly held at He by Von Trier's editing. Quite early on indeed, the couple's dialogue at the hospital [9:52] displays a noticeably stilted shot/reverse-shot dynamic: caught in one of his patronizing monologues, Dafoe's character is made to look like he is facing himself. The operation recurs when the couple arrives to Eden [37:57]. She goes ahead of him, and as He is shot scanning the woods, presumably looking for her, He again only finds himself: the reverse-shot, a deliberately subjective-looking hand-held span, "meets" him.[7]

The double movement of spatial containment inside phallocentric representations these analyses reveal is one of Luce Irigaray's concerns in her text "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other": "Captive when a

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6. Inspired by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and echoed throughout Victorian literature.
7. The masculine mirror held by Von Trier's editing. *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-25.

man holds me in his gaze […]. Immobilized in the reflection he expects of me. Reduced to the face he fashions for me in which to look at himself" (Irigaray, 1981: 66). *Antichrist*'s He puts She in the top space of the pyramid and contains her there. The self-reflectiveness of his supposedly therapeutic method is betrayed by the "ME" he writes for the "Herself" he says, and further exemplified by his multiple mirrored shots. These elements make the masculine character's role as architect of the feminine space clear. What is more, the performative role of the pyramid in the arc of Gainsbourg's character suggests that this space of representation is directly tied to the male character's desire to control the narrative. On that subject, Elizabeth Grozs writes that "the masculine is able to *speak of and for* woman because it has emptied itself of any relation to the male body, thus creating a space of reflection, of specul(aris)ation in which it claims to look at itself and at femininity from the outside" (Grozs, 1989: 128) (my emphasis). The command and manipulation of the narrative, therefore appearing as a pivotal aspect of *Antichrist*'s gender dynamics, invites further inquiry.

Man as narrator: rewriting the story

At face value, the tale told by Von Trier is that of a man selflessly trying to cure his grieving wife after the death of their infant son. In the painful process, he uncovers the extent of her involvement in the child's accident and correlative madness or evilness – a decisive twist in the narrative that I will elaborate upon below. But what we are given here is the male narrator's perspective on these events,[8] which could be suggesting the crux of the matter lies elsewhere: as Dorothy Geller suggests, "*Antichrist* can be understood as a narrated episode not unlike Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in terms of Willem Dafoe's 'He' character reconstructing the events that led up to the annihilation of his wife" (Geller, 2010). The trial She undergoes, blaming herself first for neglecting to prevent the child's fall then for having caused it, might then be a decoy: He's version of the events designed to justify murdering her. This process of containment and control of the feminine narrative by a masculine instance has been extensively surveyed by Kaja Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, where she states that in Classical Hollywood films, "female characters are incorporated within an exaggeratedly diegetic locus, and male characters assigned a seemingly extradiegetic position" (Silverman, 1988: 54). She also mentions the "talking-cure films" of the period which, despite giving space to the female voice,

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8. Dorothy Geller elaborates on that: notably, on the fact that he is seen alone multiple times and for entire scenes, which is not her case (Geller, 2010).

PATRONNAT – Of Mothers and Witches: Performative Spaces of Femininity in Post-Horror Works

79

"deprivilege the female psyche by denying any possibility of arriving at self-knowledge except through the intervening agency of a doctor or analyst" (Silverman, 1988: 65). *Antichrist* could very well, in fact, categorize as a "talking-cure film", whereby She is led by her husband and therapist to a skewed form of self-knowledge, manipulated to adhere to a narrative he has constructed for her.

Indeed, the most incriminating piece of evidence we are presented with can be interpreted as a rewriting of the fateful opening sequence. The sequence is partly repeated [1:28:00] through fragments of the couple's embrace and of Nick's accident showing that She opened her eyes to witness, impassive, her child's fall. Although it reads like a belated admission of guilt on her part, it arguably presents confusing traits as to the accountability of the narrative: two of the three shots alternating with the flashback include Willem Dafoe's character in the frame and, therefore, do not decisively impute these reminiscences to She. Whereas the first shot of the infant could be interpreted as her subjective perspective on the scene, the second shot breaks this tie by filming Nick's fall from the outside of the flat. The flashback ends and, in the film's most infamous scene, She excises her genitals. In response to her shriek, we are then presented with a shot of a deer so monochromatic that it almost looks like it is part of the preceding black-and-white flashback.[9]

Up to this point in the sequence, Dafoe's character had appeared nearly unconscious with pain or exhaustion. Here, he comes to and seemingly picks up the flashback's narrative where She left it off: encapsulated in two close-ups of his face, Nick's fall resumes from the same exterior point of view and in an enlarged shot that now includes a deer in the background, inside the flat. This shot of the fall, now attributed to him, relocates the whole episode in his mind. As for the deer, a liminal element previously associated with her by the editing, it is as though it traveled from the diegetic present to the flashback: its irruption signals Her intervention into the reconstruction of the event, an attempt to regain control of this narrative imposed on her – a point I will come back to.[10]

These elements of the episode's cinematography thus undermine its reliability as proof of her guilt in the fall and could be read as his interpretation of the incident. This rewriting of Nick's literal fall heavily shifts the blame on the feminine agent, thereby echoing another one: the patriarchal rewriting of the biblical Fall, of the original sin, which transpires in *The Witch*.

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9. The rewriting of the fall (1). *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-36.
10. The rewriting of the fall (2). *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-26.

In his review of the film, Mark Kermode notes the family's obsession with sin,[11] as underlined by a puritan quiz on the subject taking place between William and Caleb [14:38]. To his father's questions, Caleb replies: "I was conceived in sin and born in iniquity [...]. Adam's sin imputed to me and a corrupt nature dwelling within me. [...] My corrupt nature is empty of grace, bent unto sin, only unto sin and that continually." As Lauren Zwissler points out in her article, these lines are from Puritan John Cotton's 1646 *Milk for Babes, Drawn from the Breasts of Both Testaments* (Zwissler, 2018: 8). Indeed, the breast appears to be the equivocal site of Christianity's concept of sin, and is portrayed accordingly in *The Witch*. Eggers uses the motif to associate Thomasin and Katherine, the adult females of the narrative, to the feminine figures evoked in the introduction – the Virgin Mary, the pivotal Eve, and the witch. In Thomasin's case, the mirroring of Caleb's interactions both with her at the stream [22:40] and with the witch in the woods [40:30] most tellingly links this motif of the breast with Christian sin. The scene at the stream is described, in the script, as follows:

> The long dead tendrils of a WILLOW TREE hang around THOMASIN. She wades in a small stream scrubbing her father's shirt and breeches against some rocks, quietly humming a psalm. CALEB is nearby, filling buckets with water, WATCHING HIS SISTER. THOMASIN'S apron and petticoat are tucked into her belt, EXPOSING HER BARE LEGS in the water. CALEB WATCHES HER LEGS... AND HER SMALL CHEST RISING UP AND DOWN AT THE TOP OF HER BODICE.[12] (Eggers, 2013: 32)

As for the encounter between Caleb and the witch, it starts with the boy following a faint melody in the distance that echoes Thomasin's psalm,[13] and the confrontation that ensues makes explicit mention of the witch's breasts:

> Her face is greasy, but stunning. Her filthy bodice is cut quite low. There are a few small moles on her ample breast. CALEB sees this all. He stays still. The rain falls. THE WOMAN beckons him. CALEB walks toward her, he is drawn to her. He can't help it. She strokes CALEB'S head and embraces him. (Eggers, 2013: 56)

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11. "Just as the family are obsessed with the concept of sin (poor Caleb recounts his putrefaction by rote and anguishes about his lustfully hell-bound heart), so Eggers not so slyly suggests that such anxieties perversely invite horror into the home, where shadowy faces flicker in the firelight" (Kermode, 2016).
12. This is not the first mention of Thomasin's prepubescent brother lustfully (and shamefully) staring at his sister's breasts: "CALEB looks down and notices THE SIDE OF HIS SISTER'S BREAST in her somewhat open shirt, and her faint armpit hair" (Eggers, 2013: 11).
13. "IN THE DISTANCE IS A SWEET MELODY. A WOMAN HUMMING. [...] CALEB continues to walk toward the humming" (Eggers, 2013: 54-55).

The script's emphasis on female breasts is conveyed in the film by the framing, which assumes Caleb's gaze – and to confirm the analogy with sin, the apple, the most emblematic symbol of the fall, is narratively woven into the two aforementioned scenes:
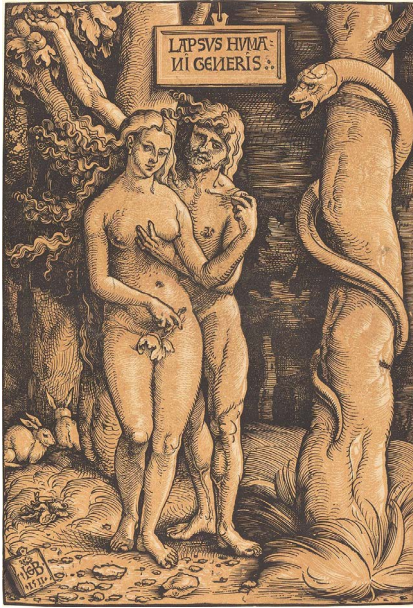
> CALEB goes to THOMASIN and she takes him in her arms. […] THOMASIN strokes CALEB'S hair as he nestles up to her. THOMASIN (CONT'D): I have seen no apple since we went from England. I would thou hadst found em. I so wish for one. THOMASIN MIMES BITING CALEB'S SHOULDER AND MAKES A GROWLING/GNAWING SOUND. […] THOMASIN starts humming her psalm again, almost rocking CALEB. (Eggers, 2013: 33-34)

Not only is the witch's embrace foreshadowed here, but Thomasin also playfully languishes for an apple – an apple she will ironically get when agonizing Caleb, presumably bewitched during his encounter in the woods, regurgitates one [55:21].

The motifs of the female breasts and of the apple, articulated both narratively and visually with the idea of sin throughout the film, hint toward a patriarchal rewriting of the original Fall.[14] This new narrative seems to have gained traction in the sixteenth century, and imputes Adam's sin entirely to Eve's seductive manipulation. As Wioleta Polinska writes in her article "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology":

> When the *Malleus Maleficarum* blames Eve for seducing Adam to sin, there is no ambiguity; the text refers to carnal seduction. […] This connection between Eve's sexuality and Adam's sin is made explicit visually in the work of Hans Baldung Grien. In a woodcut, *The Fall* (1511) […] Adam sins actively, as his stretched-out arm grasping the apple suggests, but clearly under the deceptive influence of Eve's body. The association between Eve's breast and the forbidden apple, between her sexuality and Adam's sin, is unmistakable. The same association is made in the work of other artists, such as Hering (*Adam and Eve*, 1525), Frans Floris (*Adam and Eve*, sixteenth century), and Henry Fuseli (*Sin Pursued by death*). (Polinska, 2000: 50)

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14. The rewriting of the Fall (3): the breast and the apple. *The Witch*, Parts and Labor, 2015, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-32.

These elements all coalesce in the idea of the man as architect and narrator. He is the architect of *Antichrist*'s pyramid of fears and attic space, both of which conflate as constructs of She's interior and exterior space, jointly designing her psyche and her site of confinement. Less tangible spaces are narrative, and a certain masculine manipulation of these is made apparent with *Antichrist* as well as *The Witch*'s patriarchal rewritings of the films' respective "falls": Von Trier's She, guided by lust, allowed the fall (of her infant son); Eggers' Thomasin is associated through breasts and apple to the mischievous Eve – portrayed during the late-modern period as luring Adam into sinning – and later accused by her parents to have "bewitched" Caleb and caused his death.

But how is the feminine resistance to this patriarchal claim for narrative control portrayed? Going back to *Antichrist*'s double narrative structure, a struggle seems to emerge following the "rewritten fall" sequence, with the final segment of the film showcasing She's resistance and attempt to regain control of her narrative. About Willem Dafoe's character, Dorothy Geller writes:

15. The rewriting of the Fall (4): sixteenth-Century representations, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-38. Left to right: *Adam and Eve* (Hans Baldung Grien, 1511. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Baldung_Grien,_Adam_and_Eve,_1511,_NGA_4125.jpg), *Adam and Eve in Paradise* (Loy Hering, circa 1550. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/adam-and-eve-in-paradise-loy-hering/GgG3setnOK50uQ), *Die Sünde, vom Tod verfolgt* (Henry Fuseli, 1794-1796. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Johann_Heinrich_F%C3%BCssli_031.jpg).

> As the film's hidden narrator, he perceives himself as having an absolutely integral position within his wife's emotional life. He has the capacity to see his wife's imaginings and to construct them. Still, even in those constructions, parts of what is not him seem to get through. (Geller, 2010)

And indeed, a succession of shots indicates his failure to contain the feminine narrative: first, the deer in the background as Nick is falling suggests her invasion of his mind, her intervention in the rewriting process unfolding. When He gazes across the room, as if looking for the culprit who disrupted his mental storytelling, the camera pans up to stop on Charlotte Gainsbourg's character [1:30:40]. She lets out a scream, a harrowing "no" that unequivocally expresses her resistance, and picks up the "masculine mirror" so far attributed to Dafoe's character: the editing then "mirrors" several shots of her face.[16]

Immediately after this, hail starts to pound onto the cabin's roof, the three beggars invade it, and the masculine character reacts to his apparent loss of narrative control by proceeding to strangle his wife to death. The constant struggle to control this "background" female narrative, Dorothy Geller states, "foreshadows a certain kind of vantage point on film […]. A hand on the throat, which places women inside the story as objects […] but not as storytellers" (Geller, 2010). Willem Dafoe's character's very literal "hand on the throat" is a way to shut down the feminine voice and claim back his status as storyteller, and Lukas Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa* makes an eloquent use of the motif as well. The main protagonist, Albrun, lives in a quasi-total mutism until she is befriended by a woman from the village; just as she starts warming up to this new companionship, the woman lures her into a situation involving her own husband that escalates into rape. The man's hand, in the last shot of the sequence, is placed around Albrun's throat – she will not, from that point on, utter another word.[17]

Our analysis of *Antichrist*'s pyramid of fears thus presents it as the double-sided, metaphorical site of interiority and confinement of the feminine as well as its "background" narrative structure, and the instrument of the man's attempt to control all three. From this point on, the cinematography's ambiguous editing and framing choices cast doubt on the ownership of the narrative and on its reliability: *Antichrist* exposes a patriarchal rewriting of the original sin that strives to blame it all on Eve's sexuality, just as *The Witch* articulates symbols around its female characters

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16. The "masculine mirror" picked up by She in her attempt to regain control of the narrative. *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-35.
17. The "hand on the throat". *Hagazussa*, Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB), 2017 / *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-28.

pointing in the same direction. Although the attempts of both *Antichrist*'s She and *Hagazussa*'s Albrun to control their own narratives are met by a "hand on the throat", a retrospective and comparative examination of the corpus reveals the modalities orchestrating the female characters' resistance against these enforced traditional spaces of femininity. By the climax of *Antichrist*, the diegetic world's boundaries between representation and reality, inside and outside, and between the characters' respective interiorities have become very porous – and just as She "leaked" into her husband's reconstructed narrative of the fall, the characters of *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* all transgress their allocated spaces. The feminine cannot be successfully contained, and all three films express this excess through spatial dynamics conveying the characters' journey through, or resistance against, the representations of femininity enforced upon them.

Becoming the witch: contamination and performative materialization

Contaminations: blood, milk, water

As Anne Carson points out in "Putting her in her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire", texts dating back to Ancient Greece transcribe the common association of femininity with water. The female physique is considered opposite to the masculine "condition of dry stability", remaining "cold and wet all its life" (Carson, 1990: 137). This analogy is not solely based on some dubious scientific ascertainment of physiological moisture levels, but also on water's spatial properties as "that which is not bounded by any boundary of its own but can readily be bounded" (Carson, 1990: 153). "If we consider the ancient conception of gender in the light of this distinction", the author goes on to write in a section titled "Women leak", "we see that woman is to be differentiated from man […] not only as wet from dry but as content from form, as the unbounded from the bounded, as polluted from pure, and that these qualities are necessarily related to one another" (Carson, 1990: 153). Since woman's "boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable" (Carson, 1990: 154), "she must be *bounded*" (Carson, 1990: 156) (the author's emphasis). But the masculine efforts to contain the feminine are met with excess and contamination. Accidental though it might be, Lars Von Trier's introduction of *The Kingdom* (1994) therefore rings as a good metaphor of this feminine leaking: "for it is as if the cold and the damp have returned. Tiny signs of fatigue are appearing in the solid, modern edifice."

Expanding on ancient Greek thought, and as Kwasu D. Tembo argues in his article "The Left-Hand Path: On the Dialectics of Witchery in *The Witch* and *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse*" (Tembo, 2019), a clear dichotomy of the Apollonian versus the Dionysiac is at play in Eggers and Feigelfeld's films. The religious order impersonated by Thomasin's father as well as the objective, scientific authority of *Antichrist*'s He both incarnate the Apollonian principle, which is defined by "structure, marked boundaries" (Thomsen, 2009: 2). The Dionysiac, on the other hand, is described as the "drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess" (Tembo, 2019). There is a clear spatial component to the Dionysian force as a way to exceed and escape the constrictive representational spaces imposed upon femininity. This struggle to transgress representations is expressed in *The Witch* through Katherine's (Thomasin's mother) successive connections to paradoxical iconographies.

This is a matter that I have already discussed elsewhere (Patronnat, 2023) and which, just as the association between Thomasin and a sinful Eve,[18] gravitates around the pivotal feminine attribute of the breasts. "Inside early modern patriarchal society", Francesca Matteoni writes, a woman's identity revolved around motherhood, seen as the feminine "capacity to be the channel of life". "From such a perspective", the author explains, "the witch, who was seen as the anti-mother, distorted and enforced the powers and dangers ascribed to women" (Matteoni, 2009: 60). It thus comes as no surprise that, as a metonymical symbol of motherhood, ambivalent representations of breastfeeding convey the transgressive feminine slippage from the virgin to the witch. One of the most persistent beliefs attached to the figure, Francesca Matteoni argues, is the "corrupted lactation":

> At the famous trial at St. Osyth in Essex during 1582, we find the first account of a sucking familiar, that shows a direct contact between the witch and the spirit. The eight- year- old Thomas Rabbet testified that his mother, Ursula Kemp, had four familiars, […] which, "in the night-time will come to his mother and suck blood of her upon her arms and other places of her body. (Matteoni, 2009: 155)

And indeed, the composition of an early shot of Katherine [5:15] replicates the Madone Litta and will reoccur later [1:13:45], reversed, as a nightmarish tableau of the character seemingly breastfeeding blood to a giant raven.[19] The two shots thereby shift the character's iconographical identity around the axis of her motherhood, from the mother-virgin with

18. Addressed above in "Man as narrator: rewriting the story".
19. The nightmare sequence is, moreover, cross-cut with a fleeting (and very dark) apparition of the witch feeding on the family nanny goat's milk in the barn. The witch's mad cackling is prolonged by Katherine's own unhinged laugh in the last shot of the sequence, further confirming the association between the two figures through editing.

her vital nurturing and into the mother-witch with her corrupted lactation. As for Thomasin, the very last image of the film places her in a resolutely ambivalent space: the freshly consecrated witch, blood-soaked and levitating, strongly evokes Christ crucified or the assumption of the virgin Mary – this latter biblical episode consisting, incidentally, of a spatial inversion of the fall.[20]

The common association of femininity with wetness and liquids is thus expressed in these shifting, fluids-related identifications: the porously bounded feminine leaks out of its consecrated space of representation, enacting a contamination at play between different categories of femininity. We find a similar pattern in Lukas Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa*, where the blood as a vehicle of contamination is primarily shown through the visual motif of the stain. The first shot of the film assumes a god's eye view on Martha, Albrun's mother, a dark spot on the immaculately snowed landscape. Later on, this composition is repeated with the menstrual blood on pubescent Albrun's white sheet. These associations signal the character's transition into womanhood and the advent of her mother's poisonous heritage:[21] this is the "curse of Eve" transposed in individual and filial terms. The motif of the stain will recur multiple times throughout the film, from bloody vomit or a fleshy animal's skull lying on the snow, to the red rose painted on deceased Martha's own skull – a gruesome relic entrusted to Albrun by the village priest.[22]

This red-on-white stain extends a milk-blood compound that is made explicit in *Hagazussa*'s own mirrored scenes [21:10 – 39:30]. The first one depicts Martha's fever-fuelled (the character is severely ill with the plague) assault of her teenage daughter, during which she appears to be "tasting" her menstrual blood. This disturbing episode is explicitly echoed in the second scene: adult Albrun is shown milking her goats, and as Kwasu D. Tembo states, "treats the secretions of the goat […] in exactly the same way as her mother treated her blood. It is enjoyed primarily for its olfactory qualities, both blood and milk being brought to the mouth, not fully ingested but still sensually taken in" (Tembo, 2019). The confusion or conflation of the two liquids, as the vector of these categories' contamination and therefore, the key symbol of the mother-witch dichotomy, visually marks the feminine excess out of the spaces the masculine, apollonian principle tries to contain it in.

20. The shifting associations of the feminine figures of the film: from archetypal virgin-mothers and other religious icons, to the blood-lactating anti-mother, the witch. *The Witch*, Parts and Labor, 2015, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-40.
21. This heritage fits the same pattern as those exposed by *Antichrist*'s Pyramid of fears: Albrun takes over the space that Martha, labelled as a witch by the villagers, was confined to, along with her possibly ill "interior" space – the film hinting at inherited mental illness.
22. The motif of the stain as a visual for contamination. *Hagazussa*, DFFB, 2017, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-29.

Arching back to *Antichrist*, one may find the same notions of excess and of a transcendence of the spaces arrogated to the feminine, in this case relying on the tension and permeability between inside and outside. Both trajectories – from the outside in, and from the inside out – are enacted in the film. First, the masculine character, encouraging his wife to heal faster from her grief, states that "what the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve" [32:03]: does it mean that interiority can manifest externally, in objective reality? Say no more. From this point on, the more he tries to contain her, the more she leaks from the inside out into their shared world and his own interiority, the respective boundaries of these spaces crumbling as the movie progresses. His play on the polysemy of the word "nature" – "I'm Nature. I'm outside but I'm also within" [1:03:30] – further solidifies the confusion, and when he contradictorily asserts, far too late, that "obsessions never materialize. That's a scientific fact" [01:08:25], the statement already sounds like desperate bargaining.

Antichrist further stages this growing spatial porosity through a visual and symbolic grammar of openings, invisible barriers, and mixed elements. No blood nor milk here, but another aforementioned fluid ensures the expression of these transgressions: water. As has been observed by Anne Carson in her survey of ancient Greek texts and underlined at the beginning of this section, the fluid is associated with femininity as a shapeless, unbounded material needing to be contained. *Antichrist*'s cinematography emphasizes this element from the outset: the extreme slow motion of the opening suspends the shower's droplets or the snow midair, the grieving parents are shot through a windshield speckled with raindrops, and the camera zooms-in on the gravitating particles of a vase's murky water in the hospital. The transparent surfaces combined with representations of this element illustrate the fading of its containing boundaries. The repetitive image of the fog or mist also concurs to this watery, feminine element leaking out of its space of containment: it first appears in the opening, then shrouds She's imagined journey to Eden, and eventually permeates the characters' shared reality in the final segment.[23]

This persistent fog – also to be found in *The Witch*, as Saige Walton observes –[24] was believed to be an attribute of the devil, who "materialises, in particular, through water and air and through their mixing in, for example, mist or hail" (Thomsen, 2009: 4). The motif of fog is therefore

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23. The feminine "leaking" through the representation of invisible barriers and mixed watery elements. *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-30.
24. "Aerial images are especially obvious during the film's most uneasy moments when smoke, fog, clouds and moving dust particles lend visible form to an invisible, mobile dread. Similarly, Eggers' depiction of the local witch depends as much on the imagery of clouded, deathly air as it does on the forest. Recalling the "maleficent body" of the witch that dominated medieval scholasticism, the witch is portrayed here as not only dangerous but inherently vaporous" (Walton, 2018: 14-15).

both a symbol of the devil's influence and of the feminine resistance to, and exceeding of, its confinement. It stands with blood and milk as the vectors by which the feminine figures of the corpus become the witches.

The figures of the mother and the witch exist back-to-back like two sides of the same coin, polar opposites so close to each other they coalesce. *Antichrist*'s water, marking the porosity of the female boundaries, thus stands with milk and blood as a pivotal element in the mother's shift into the "anti-mother", the witch. As a visual symbol of her supernatural influence, it expresses her "leaking out" of her consecrated space of femininity and motherhood. But because *Antichrist* displaces this folkloric narrative in a contemporary context, its materialization takes the form of history coming alive: She's internalized history leaks into their shared, present reality.

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Performative materialization:
the images made real

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When Willem Dafoe's character, eager to map out his wife's psyche, ventures into her makeshift office in the cabin's attic, he is in for a tour of the persecutions endured by women through the ages. He seems to take particular interest in engravings depicting the witch hunts, and as Thomsen notes,[25] the film's progression suggests that these images have been internalized by Gainsbourg's character as testaments to a certain feminine history, and are now exceeding the boundaries of this containment by manifesting into the diegetic reality. The occurrence of these historically accurate documents, J.M. Tyree highlights in "Horror – On von Trier", recalls Benjamin Christensen's 1922 masterpiece, *Häxan*. Considered one of the first "documentaries", this cinematic inquiry of the evolution of witchcraft-related beliefs through the ages will later be called a cult classic. On the one hand, *Antichrist*'s use of the same historic material betrays a double reference to *Häxan*: it encapsulates the large scope of feminine persecutions that is embraced in the documentary and draws, in the specific scope of film history, a direct kinship between the two films – a filmic lineage that will be addressed at the end of this essay. On the other hand, both films display similar techniques to transcribe the realization of the past into the present, a becoming-real that is particularly relevant to *Antichrist*'s discourse on gender. During his attic excursion [1:00:00], Dafoe's character observes two engravings borrowed from *Häxan*: one depicting the witch-burnings, and one of a naked woman with her hands

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25.   "There are the pictures from the thesis, which reproduce some of the well-known illustrations of witchcraft and witch burnings, but soon […] the same kind of images start to materialise directly on screen, in the film itself" (Thomsen, 2009: 4).

and feet bound together. The picture is drenched in rain leaking from the attic's roof. From the past of film history, *Häxan*'s voice-over provides context for this image [34:59]:

> A woman accused of witchcraft is thrown into the water to find out whether she is guilty or not. In *History of Customs*, Edward Fuchs shows us how the accused is tied up. Two executioners use oars to move the accused into deeper water where she can't touch the bottom. If she floats, she will be pulled up and burned. If she sinks, the judges thank God for her innocence. (Christensen, 1922)

The drawing of the soon-to-be-drowned witch, eerily and appropriately animated by the pouring rain, is thereby resurrected and bleeds into *Antichrist*'s reality.[26] The operations depicted in the engravings, moreover, confirm the redirection of the film's stakes and foreshadow the course of its narrative: women are presumed guilty, and punishment is inevitable. In a seminal article titled "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", Judith Butler states that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities" (Butler, 1988: 521) (her emphasis) and that, consequently, gender identity is an "act" performed according to a "set of meanings already socially established" (Butler, 1988: 526). Gender identity, she states, stems from a "historical situation" rather than a "natural fact" (Butler, 1988: 520). And indeed, a specific set of historical beliefs and events – one that has played a critical role in the cultural construction of the feminine and is depicted directly in *Häxan*, *Hagazussa* and *The Witch*–[27] is conjured into *Antichrist*'s present narrative to convey She's "becoming" said witch: it is not her "nature" seeping through, it is her history. The performativity of historical gender constructs is thus incarnated visually with the animation of the still materials borrowed from *Häxan*.

But this performativity also operates on the level of discourse: in *The Witch*, Mercy and Thomasin both claim to be "the witch of the woods,"[28] and their prophecies have been entirely fulfilled by the end of the film.[29] In *Antichrist*, images, writing and speech have magical per-

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26. The burning witch and the drowning witch: historical engravings, commented in Häxan, reappropriated and animated in *Antichrist*. Häxan, Svensk Filmindustri (SF), 1922 / *Antichrist*, Zentropa Entertainments, 2009, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-39.
27. All of them titled, quite tellingly, "the witch" in three different languages.
28. "MERCY (O.S.): I be The Witch of the Wood. THOMASIN: Mercy, come out. MERCY (O.S.): I be not Mercy. I be The Witch of the Wood. I have come to steal ye! […]" (Eggers, 2013: 34); "THOMASIN: Aye. It was a witch Mercy, you speak aright. […] It was I! […] Twas I what stole him. I'm the witch of the wood. […] I am that very witch. When I sleep my spirit slips away from my body and dances naked with The Devil. That's how I signed his book. […] He bade me bring him an unbaptized babe, and I stole Sam, and I gave him to my master. And I'll make any man or thing else vanish I like. […] Aye. And I'll vanish thee too if thou displeaseth me." (Eggers, 2013: 36)
29. Mercy and Jonas do vanish after it has been suggested that they were conspiring with Black Philip, and Thomasin does eventually sign The Devil's book before joining the covenant of naked witches.

formative properties too. "I have it in writing in my books!", She argues about the alleged evilness of female nature [1:04:46], and when He writes her down inside the pyramid's top space while simultaneously naming her, it elicits immediate action: She attacks him. Right after maiming him, [1:26:38] She finally recites the first verses of a Robert Herrick poem called "Upon Some Women": "False in legs, false in thighs; false in breast, teeth, hair and eyes." Although the duplicitous woman described in this extra-diegetic reference aligns with a patriarchal view of deceiving femininity,[30] further inquiry of its author's work nuances his apparently misogynistic discourse as parodic and critical, thus bringing forth the subversiveness of these gender performances:

> Close examination of his texts reveals that he recognized the ambiguities of gender and the inconsistencies of his era's beliefs pertaining to women, disrupted and interrogated them, and often engaged in outright parodic critique of accepted seventeenth-century gender mores. […] While convention operates on the surface of Herrick's poems on women, a great deal of parodic revisionism is simultaneously taking place. (Landrum, 2007: 181)

This "fake" performative statement, again pointing to existing extra-diegetic material and its context, further invites a "suspicious reading"[31] of the events unfolding onscreen. The reference gives away Von Trier's self-awareness regarding *Antichrist*'s misleading stance on gender and informs, in its pattern, the subversive operation underlying the films' feminine trajectories.

As has been noted by J.M. Tyree in "Horror – on Von Trier", *Antichrist* is "essentially reversing the polarity of Christensen's classic by offering a fiction in which mental illness melds with supernatural irruptions" (no pagination). Indeed, whereas *Häxan* trades its folkloric lens on witchcraft for a scientific one, *Antichrist* unequivocally retraces these steps. This two-way trajectory between witchcraft and what has been – and still is – called hysteria outlines and reasserts a form of equivalence or analogy between them. From this perspective, it seems legitimate to place the supernatural trajectories of She, Thomasin and Albrun under the light of Luce Irigaray's theory of hysteria as "the woman's rebellion against and rejection of the requirements of femininity" (Grozs, 1989: 134). In *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, Elizabeth Grozs writes that "because it represents

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30. "This phantasmagoric topography has haunted representations of femininity across the ages, […] persisting as an intermittent strand of patriarchal mythology and misogyny. It is an image of female beauty as artifact or mask, as an exterior, alluring and seductive surface that conceals an interior space containing deception and danger" (Mulvey, 1992: 58).
31. "The images of witches in the attic are also indications from the point of view of the film about the 'suspicious reading' that we should do of the therapist's discourse about the madness and wickedness of the researcher" (Kruger, 2018).

one of the few possible positions that women occupy in rebelling against the confines of patriarchal definitions, hysteria figures as a central 'figure' in Irigaray's subversion of phallocentrism" (Grozs, 1989: 136). Thus, what is depicted here as reversed, fairy-tale-like self-fulfilling prophecies could indeed embody one of the few feminine paths of resistance against patriarchy: self-equation, in excess, to the hegemonic images of femininity they are expected or suspected to adhere to – the hysterical woman or the witch.

In the case of *Antichrist*'s She, a slippage occurs in the way she is forcefully portrayed (or designed) by her architect husband, going from the mischievous Eve to the neglectful, and even murderous, anti-mother. As for Thomasin's family, their stifling bigotry and consuming paranoia makes it so very little supernatural incentive is needed for them to spiral into self-destruction, leaving her with few choices but to become what she has been scapegoated as all along. Albrun, having inherited – along with terrible childhood traumas and a plausible set of psychological disorders – her mother's reputation as a witch, is persecuted by the villagers into self-fulfilling this prophecy. "Only through its own techniques can patriarchy be challenged and displaced" (Grozs, 1989: 133): far from depicting feminine acquiescence to these norms, this excessive conformism points them out, making their contriving structures all the more apparent. What has been imposed from the outside in gets exposed from the inside out as the feminine figures of *Antichrist*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* assume forms that overflow and subvert their patriarchal molds.

Bringing it back home with Sharp Objects

Containing the feminine: the domestic scene

The exploration of these patterns takes us to *Sharp Objects*, where they lurk just under the surface of a contemporary narrative that mostly steers clear from the folk-horror template of the films. Although shrouded in ambiguity, the witchcraft theme unfolds out in the open in the period pieces of *The Witch* and *Hagazussa*, and it resurfaces as subtext in the contemporary context of *Antichrist*, this displacement further informing the actuality and complexity of the gender dynamics it exposes. The comparative analysis of the films provides a lens through which these folklorically-charged representations and spatial dynamics of femininity transpire in *Sharp Objects*' even more subdued treatment of witchcraft.

First, its feminine narrative – here centering around Adora and her two daughters, pubescent Amma and thirty-something Camille – is displaced into the domestic sphere, a lavish Southern estate encapsulating its own miniature replica, a dollhouse cherished by Amma. How does taking the conflict "home" inform the terms of the feminine representations? On both aesthetic and narrative levels, this site of the home occupies a structural and enlightening role in the topography of the feminine while picking up and expanding on the notion of a feminine, familial, and filmic lineage. In an article titled "Home Wee Home – It's Where the Horror Is: Miniature Models, Crime Scenes, and Toxic Femininity in *Hereditary* and *Sharp Objects*", Brian Gibson delivers a brilliant comparative analysis of the dioramas of the series and of Ari Aster's 2018 debut, wherein "miniature domestic objects – scale replicas of rooms and houses – are not just recreations and re-imaginings of scenes of trauma and imprisonment but microcosmic mirrors of toxic and power-intoxicated femininity" (Gibson, 2022). The comparison with *Hereditary* proves very apt in regards to the obvious degree of demiurgic manipulation of the (doll-like) characters involved with the device of the dollhouse. In both works, it stands as the visual metaphor of an over-powering lineage; but whereas Aster uses this apparatus to comment on the horror of family, *Sharp Objects* uses it to comment on the horror of femininity – although articulated within a familial setting.

As Michaela Hermann writes in her semantic study of Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, "Amma's dollhouse is fashioned to look exactly like Adora's Victorian, a house-within-a-house. A type of Gothic doubling, it represents both the duality of Amma as well as the veneer of artificiality that attends Adora's Southern Belle performance" (Hermann, 2020: 8). In "Housing Gender", Mark Wigley points out "architecture's complicity in the exercise of patriarchal authority": about the house's prescribed design, he quotes an antique treatise stating that "women are to be confined deep within a sequence of spaces at the greatest distance from the outside world" (Wigley, 1992: 332). This "dollhouse-within-a-house" therefore illustrates, on the one hand, the feminine domestic confinement as well as Amma and Adora's duality. Its artificiality, on the other hand, informs the performative role of this "domestic scene". Altogether, these elements set the topography of the spaces devolved to the feminine characters of Adora and Amma, spaces they each exceed and subvert in their own way.[32]

Laura J. Miller, in the article upon which Brian Gibson based his comparative study of *Sharp Objects* and *Hereditary*, comments on the spatial dynamics and sociocultural patterns highlighted by the crime-scene

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32. Annie's dioramas and Amma's dollhouse. Hereditary, Palmstar Media, 2018 / *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-34.

dioramas of forensic pioneer Frances Glessner Lee. The crime-scenes, objectified and frozen in time, split open the boundaries of the home and expose the dark undertones of the domestic. "Through her dioramas", Miller writes, "Glessner Lee created her own liminal space, located between the seemingly rigid, proprietary spheres of public and private, inside and outside, and masculine and feminine" (Miller, 2005: 198). The device of the miniature replica, poised between these polarities, makes the liminality of the home apparent; and it brings into play the same spatial patterns exposed in *Antichrist*, *Hagazussa* and *The Witch* – namely, the porous boundaries allowing contaminations and the characters' "becoming the witch". This liminal domestic space, in *Sharp Objects*, is where toxic performances of femininity sprout: removed from the exterior setting to be found in the films, Adora and Amma challenge the inherent boundaries of gender identities by once again demonstrating excessive and subversive self-equation to the prescribed norms of femininity. In Both cases, these toxic performances of femininity escalate in very specific forms of violence. For Adora, it is domestic abuse in the form of Munchhausen Syndrome By Proxy: "an instance of psychological disorder in which the caregiver, in most cases the mother, induces symptoms of illness in the child under her care" (Farhani, 2021: 4). How does this contribute to build Adora's own liminal posture, poised as she is – not unlike the other feminine figures of the corpus – between the mother and the witch?

The character's ambivalence is intrinsically linked to the space of the home here as it resides in her role as caretaker. In "Inscribing Pain: Female Perversion and the Maternal Imago in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*", Sohella Farhani notes that "the root of [the] glorification of women's role as the sole care-givers goes back to the Victorian ideology of 'angel in the house'" (Farhani, 2021: 3). Excessively adhering to what was once considered the sole function devolved to women, Adora's "caretaking" is an overbearing, poisonous one. Echoing a maneuver that I have outlined in another domestic abuse narrative,[33] the ambiguity of the term itself is exacerbated in the dialogues: mentions of it range from Amma's confession "You know what my favourite part of getting wasted is? Mama takes care of me after" (Ep.7), through her paradoxical statement "I'm not so bad right now, she's got you to care for" (Ep.8) and to Camille's last wish "if anything happens to me you tell him Mama took care of me" (Ep.8). The inherent ambiguity of the condition, a "form of child abuse which is often neglected because it mainly occurs under the guise of intensive maternal care" (Farhani, 2021: 4), is admirably encapsulated in the double-sided

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33. In a previous study, I argue that *The Shining*'s intergenerational domestic abuse narrative is notably brought forth through Jack Torrance's ambivalence as the "caretaker": from the narrative handling of his role as caretaker of the hotel to his and Grady's ominous "Red room" exchange, during which promotion of domestic violence and debate over who the "caretaker" is overlap, this figure plays a pivotal part in the evolution of the character and the expression of said domestic abuse narrative (Patronnat, 2023: 5).

meaning of "taking care". The ardent nurturing displayed on the public scene is flipped into the nefarious "care" provided inside, in the confines of the home. Aesthetically with the dollhouse, narratively with MSBP, the ambivalence of *Sharp Objects*' domestic scene is set.

The chosen expression of Adora's perversion seems equally deliberate: she is shown grinding and mixing various powders or liquids into colorful potions she feeds her daughters, inevitably evoking the folkloric healer or the witch. In his critical theory, Jacques Derrida mentions a handful of words endowed with a dual signification: they are "undecidable, poised over binary categories", thereupon challenging these binary categories. One of them is "Pharmakon": from the "Pharmakós" which, in ancient Greece, referred to the ritualistic sacrifice of a human scapegoat, the Pharmakon became a philosophical concept signifying the cure, the poison and the scapegoat. This liminal concept of the Pharmakon serves as a pivot between two modes of motherhood. Adora, an over-caring "ultra-mother" with MBPS, is poised between the nurturing mother, the "angel in the house", and the devouring anti-mother – the witch. The original meaning of the term, this "sacrificial victim", moreover hints at the dual perspective on witches – supernatural malefactors or persecuted scapegoats of patriarchal communities? – onto which the broader argument of the films hinges.[34]

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"All of them witches": toxic femininity, poisonous lineage

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Again quoting a treatise on the design of the house made to accommodate the woman's male-prescribed domestic role, Mark Wigley points out how, according to the times' prescribed patriarchal norms, "the woman, as she remains locked up at home, should watch over things by staying at her post, by diligent care and watchfulness" (Wigley, 1992: 332) – and when *Sharp Objects*' Allan compares Camille to her maternal grandmother, Joya, who would "stand guard on the house like a witch" (Ep.6), it oddly echoes this injunction. What is expected of the consecrated, domesticated "angel in the house" is readily flipped into a tell-tale characteristic of its polar opposite, and in a way similar to Katherine's switch from the archetypal Virgin mother to the witch,[35] Adora occupies this ambivalent space where extremes coalesce. Just like the instrumentalization of milk and blood characterizes the "undecidable" mother-witch in *The Witch* and *Hagazussa*, the treatment of these two fluids in *Sharp Objects*' contemporary narrative conjures and shapes the toxic feminine "bloodline" at play.

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34. Adora preparing the "Pharmakon", a poison posing as a cure. *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-41.
35. In *The Witch*, addressed above in "Contaminations: blood, milk, water", Fig. 9.

Feminist authors explored the specific spaces involved in the mother-daughter relationship which *Sharp Objects*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* address. For Julia Kristeva, "maternity satisfies a desire originally directed towards the mother's mother […]. The baby comes to represent the mother herself, and she, her own mother, in a vertiginous identification that brings the mother into a corporeal contact with her mother's maternity" (Grozs, 1989: 80). This "vertiginous identification" is exemplified in Albrun's naming of her daughter after her mother in *Hagazussa*. In *Sharp Objects*, it is echoed by Adora's warning to Camille – "when you are here, you are my daughter. Everything you do reflects on me" (Ep.1) – and evoked by the imbricated spaces of Amma's Russian-dollhouse. The series' last episode also makes explicit reference to the myth of Demeter and Persephone:[36] "I'm Persephone. Queen of the Underworld", Amma tells Camille as they are all sitting at the dinner table. As has been noted by Hermann, the series' reference to the myth evokes Luce Irigaray's conception of the mother-daughter relationship (Hermann, 2021: 20): it is a contriving one, that crystalizes women inside two roles outside of which they have no space to occupy. The narratives of the female characters of the corpus are, indeed, restricted to these two roles. This is most striking in the case of *Hagazussa*'s introduction of Albrun as a child, as a daughter, followed by her transition into womanhood *and* a motherly role all at once – she is forced, not long after her first periods, to become her ill mother's caretaker. A significant temporal ellipse occurs after Martha's death, and the Albrun we return to has now herself become a mother: the film only allows her to exist inside these two spaces of femininity, outside of which her narrative is erased.

In her essay "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other", Irigaray invokes the image of maternal milk to articulate this stifling relationship: "with your milk, mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen. […] You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me" (Irigaray, 1981: 60). This metaphor is strikingly staged in the evocatively titled "Milk" finale of *Sharp Objects*, wherein it is heavily implied that Camille is poisoned by the only thing she consumes at the dinner table – a glass of milk, presumably spiked by Adora. This is further illustrated by references to infant Camille's refusal to feed on her mother's milk: recalling Joya's spiteful attitude, Allan says that she would only smile when Camille "refused to nurse from Adora" (Ep.6). In *Hagazussa*, Albrun's own toxicity is similarly suggested when she is shown [50:40] struggling to breastfeed her infant daughter Martha.

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36.   Daughter of Zeus and Demeter, Persephone is the all-pervading goddess of spring and nature. She becomes queen of the underworld following her abduction by Hades, who will also take her as his wife. Demeter obtained from Hades that Persephone would be allowed to resurface and be reunited with her during spring and summer each year.

Witches have commonly been characterized by a general predatoriness and by a specific savagery towards children. Eggers' witch is depicted taking the family's infant, Samuel, to her hatch and turning its body into an unguent [7:00]. Caleb's feverish final diatribe [57:15] revolves around this voraciousness for children's blood: "A toad. A cat. A crow. A raven. A great black dog. A wolf. […] She desires of my blood. She sends 'em upon me. They feed upon her teats, her nether parts. She sends 'em upon me". Moreover, the witch is insistently mistaken for another predatorial figure, the wolf,[37] over the course of the film. Infanticide is involved in *Hagazussa* as well, and furthermore complimented with cannibalism. But it is, unexpectedly, *Sharp Objects* that offers the most extensive expression of this folkloric attribute of the witch. Both Adora and Amma are staged as predatorial figures whose victims of choice aren't just children but, as is repeatedly stressed throughout the series, "little girls" – here again, the pattern is gender-coded. In the novel, Adora is said to have "that voraciousness about children. She swoops in on them." (Flynn, 2006: 84) and in the series, one of Camille's memories depicts Adora biting an infant's cheek (Ep.7). From this perspective, the familial hog-slaughtering industry seems hardly accidental – as the detective reenacts the teeth-pulling inflicted to the victims on a dead pig's head, a visual parallelism is established between the two. Amma is also shown in postures reminding those of a bird of prey[38]: she and her gang of roller-skating ghouls roam the streets of Wind Gap at night, and these shots conjure a very specific representation of the predatory witch. Francesca Matteoni describes it in these terms:

> Though the folkloric motif of the vampire-witch survived almost everywhere, trials in Protestant areas were almost free of these kinds of witches, while they still figured in the trials of Catholic countries, where the witch figure was shaped by the ancient symbolism of the Strix. This was a nocturnal predatory bird that allegedly sucked infants' blood. In medieval times it became the most diffused witch-stereotype, indicating an old woman that killed children during the night. (Matteoni, 2009: 57)

As another symbol of this poisonous feminine lineage, blood here consistently appears on the girls' bodies, and more precisely, around their mouths. Wind Gap's serial killer, Amma, pulls the teeth out of her victims' mouths, leaving them red-lipped.[39]

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37. "MERCY: I could go to the brook before you let the witch take Sam. CALEB: It was a wolf stole Sam. MERCY: A witch. I've seen her in her riding cloak about The Wood! CALEB: Father showed me the tracks. MERCY: It was a witch!!" (Eggers, 2013: 35).
38. The victims as prey and Amma as the predatorial Strix. *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-31.
39. The bloody mouths of the murdered girls. *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-33.

But these are not the only dead girls of the narrative. Camille is haunted by visions, sometimes captured through reflections, of her red-mouthed former hospital roommate Alice. We will learn that the girl committed suicide by "drinking poison", and the poison Adora favours the most, which probably killed Marian, is a bright red syrup. Here again, the blood is used to tie femininity to the figure of the witch, and this bond is even further echoed and consolidated in bloodless scenes: Camille is shown struggling to wipe lipstick off of her deceased younger sister Marian's lips during her funeral (Ep.1), an action later inverted when she helps Alice put on red lipstick. "My Mama always says lipstick makes you look like a lady so, here you go", she says as she does (Ep.3). This "red-mouth" motif, on a metaphorical level, marks *Sharp Objects*' "dead girls" as collateral victims of the constrictive spaces of femininity that forged Adora and Amma, with monstrous results. But it also aligns them with the blood-sucking witch, thus forcefully inscribing them into this toxic feminine "bloodline". As a symbol of this traditional-femininity-gone-wrong trajectory, the red lip that makes you a lady turns into the bloody mouth of the witch.[40]

The motif of teeth achieves to articulate this idea of lineage by reversing the feminine trajectories portrayed in the films: from inside-out, to outside-in again. As another symbol of the predatoriness attributed to the folkloric witch, this element is used to expose spatial operations that strive to lock feminine resistance back into the domestic sphere. When *Sharp Objects*' final twist reveals that Amma collects the pulled-out teeth of her victims and arranges them so they pave Adora's dollhouse bedroom, this mirrors the actual ivory tiling her mother is so protective of. In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart explores – often in spatial terms – the symbolic operations involved in our relationship to certain objects. The souvenir, she states, "domesticates on the level of its operation: external experience is internalized; the beast is taken home" (Stewart, 1992: 134). The parallel between the girls' teeth and the ivory – a result of poaching itself representative of a long, violent tradition of cultural domination and exploitation –, along with their encapsulation in the dollhouse, expressly aligns with this image of domestication. The murdered girls are said to have attracted Adora's nurturing attentions, but rejected it. They are referred to as "biters", and their refusal to fall prey to Adora's poisonous nurturing, their resistance against her pathological mold of consecrated femininity, is met by Amma's own diverted need for control. The exotic souvenir, specifically, "represents distance appropriated […]. It is thus placed within an intimate distance; space is transformed into interiority, into 'personal' space" (Stewart, 1992: 147). The collection, finally, "appears as a mode of control

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40. The feminine figures' bloody mouth or red lips. *Sharp Objects*, Crazyrose, 2018, .URL: https://posthorror7.wordpress.com/2024/10/28/pics/#jp-carousel-37.

and containment" (Stewart, 1992: 159). The pattern behind Amma's collection of exotic souvenirs thus becomes apparent: in an attempt to make that "distance" hers, to appropriate that space, she brings it back into the domestic sphere. "This Southern Gothic's revealing of a sister's fury via an upstairs bedroom", Brian Gibson writes about *Sharp Objects*' conclusion, "echoes the Gothic novel *Jane Eyre*'s revealing of a madwoman in the attic" (Gibson, 2022): just as *Antichrist*'s She was locked into the attic space of her controlling husband's pyramid of fears, Amma tames and contains feminine resistance into the attic space of her dollhouse.

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**Gender and genre:
a conclusion**

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Milk, blood, and teeth – these occurrences align the feminine figures of *Sharp Objects* with the predatoriness attributed to the folkloric witch, all the while articulating it in this paradigmatic feminine "bloodline". Generations of women violently contained into the same alienating representations, and their subversive resistance to these spaces, are encapsulated in the domestic sphere and contemporary timeline of the series.

Through their explicit treatment of the theme of witchcraft and of its affiliated folklore – although to varying extents –, these feminine portraits lay out complex gender dynamics that persisted through time: from *Hagazussa*'s fifteenth-Century Austria and *The Witch*'s seventeenth-Century New England, to the duplicitous modern setting of *Antichrist*, virtually spanning women's history all the way back to the Middle Ages. Von Trier's film has been chosen as a point of departure to establish the gender dialectics at stake within its central couple, dialectics that determine each character's trajectory and echo throughout the corpus as a whole. The pyramid of fears and the masculine mirror convey the idea of spatial containment in male-designed spaces of representation, and this control of the feminine extends to the narrative space of the film. What is more, this space is subjected to manipulations: *Antichrist* hints at a patriarchal rewriting of the biblical fall that is echoed in *The Witch*. The feminine resistance against this figurative and narrative containment is expressed in all three films through fluidity: literal liquids – water, milk, blood – and shifting identifications. Altogether, these motifs inform an ever-unfolding topography of the feminine rooted in folklore, thereby making its contemporary treatment as subtext in *Sharp Objects* visible.

Interestingly, in *Thinking the Difference: for a Peaceful Revolution*, Irigaray establishes a link between Persephone and Eve: "the poisoned

gift that Persephone accepted from Hades is apparently enough to make her his captive at least a third of the year, the cold season. Similarly, yet differently, eating an apple is all it later took to be excluded from earthly paradise"[41] (Irigaray, 1994: 107). This comparison not only underscores the spatial nexus of gender dialectics – these performative spaces of femininity women are held captive of, excluded from, or exceed – but also closes the loop of our corpus. *Antichrist*'s She and *Sharp Objects*' Amma, who have been respectively associated with these two figures, are hereby bound together under the aegis of this cursed femininity: She, Katherine, Thomasin, Martha, Albrun, Adora and Amma – all of them witches. And although the architects of these spaces are directly in control of (*Antichrist*'s He), involved in (*The Witch*'s patriarch, William and, arguably, the devil, Black Philip), or lurking around (*Hagazussa*'s villagers) the films' feminine narratives, they are virtually absent from *Sharp Objects*. We go from women entirely dispossessed of their own stories to a female narrator. There is a clear trajectory here, which is culminating in the series' "gonzo feminism"[42] – as Hermann puts it, "with indictment come possibility: in Flynn's gonzofeminism, it is up to women to undo their own constraints" (Hermann, 2020: 24). *Sharp Objects* is overall charged with the seminal – and still relevant – feminist discourses of the 1970s, and Camille's literal and professional self-writing[43] specifically echoes Hélène Cixous' chosen means of feminine liberation:

> By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display […]. It is by writing, from and toward woman, […] that women will confirm women in a place other than which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, a place other than silence. (Cixous, 1976: 880-881)

As we mentioned in the introduction, *Sharp Objects* is the only work adapted from female-produced material in a corpus exclusively directed by males; and while the films all bear elaborate, constructive, and progressive commentaries on gender dynamics, Flynn's perspective on the matter takes one more step towards a decisive feminine shift in the narrative. Jean-Marc Vallée's adaptation, as it emerged in the context of post-horror's peek productivity, both betrays the already burgeoning influence of the cycle – given the series' many intertextual links with *Antichrist*, *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* – and feeds into its outgrowing ramifications. Through this canvas of aesthetic and thematic echoes, *Sharp Objects* falls within another

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41. In the myth, Hades tricks Persephone into eating pomegranate seeds from the Underworld, thereby making her his captive.
42. Labelled as such in reference to Camille's posture as a journalist, an ultra-subjective writing style that includes the narrator of the story.
43. The words she has been carving on her skin as a way of dealing with her personal history are transferred in her journalistic writing on the case.

kind of lineage: a cinematic lineage of female-centric horror that goes all the way back to *Häxan* and appears to be increasingly picked up and perpetuated by women themselves. Although the core concern of this article, the figure of the witch, was not the focus of these works, the post-horror cycle includes inputs from arising female filmmakers the likes of Jennifer Kent, Julia Ducournau, Natalie Erika James, Prano Bailey Bond or Chloe Okuno. As such, it has provided a channel for the feminine voice and will hopefully continue to do so, thus contributing to shape a space "other than silence" for women in cinema.

Filmography

Aster, Ari, *Hereditary*, 2018.
Christensen, Benjamin, *Häxan*, 1922.
Eggers, Robert, *The Witch*, 2015.
Feigelfeld, Lukas, *Hagazussa*, 2017.
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Lee Haven Jones, *The Feast* (2021): A Tale of Retaliation

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Abstract: Lee Haven Jones's 2021 film *The Feast* would be yet another witch's tale were it not for its contemplative aesthetics and its underlying appeals to an idealized, pristine state of nature reclaiming its due. The intrusion of a witch in an elegant family during a formal dinner actuates the retaliation of a land desecrated and exploited by modernity and industrialism. The witch's – and, through her, the land's – revenge is enacted through punctual paroxysms of body horror, all the more striking since the overall atmosphere of the film is one of silence and morbid contemplation of the toxic interpersonal dynamics between the protagonists. Punished by the witch for their respective sins, while she, in the meantime, seems to fill, in a horribly distorted way, their individual gaps and failures, the members of the family are killed one by one, in what is shown not as gratuitous aggression but as the justified vengeance of a discarded past, a past symbolized by the land on which the family's house is built as well as by the witch herself. The fact that the entire film, a Sianel 4 Cymru production, is in Welsh, a language by essence striving for survival in a globalized world, must also not be overlooked as a meta-discourse on cultural resilience. This article examines the dynamics of duality inherent to *The Feast*, from the intertwining of past and present to the aesthetic and narrative contrast between contemplative moments and peaks of extreme violence. I will also consider the manner in which the film eventually complexifies these dynamics of duality and eludes simplistic characterization, allowing the viewer and the critic to interpret the ultimate destruction of the family as fair retaliation.

Keywords: Wales, Post-Horror, Witch, Environmentalism, Body Horror, Family

Résumé : Le film *The Feast*, écrit et réalisé par Lee Haven Jones et sorti en 2021, pourrait être considéré comme un simple conte de sorcière parmi tant d'autres si ce n'était son atmosphère contemplative et ses références plus ou moins explicites à une nature idéalisée et intacte mais vengeresse. L'intrusion d'une sorcière chez une famille élégante alors que cette dernière tient un dîner mondain amorce la vengeance d'une terre profanée et exploitée par le monde moderne et l'industrialisation. La vengeance de la sorcière (et, à travers elle, de la terre) est traduite dans le film par de ponctuels

paroxysmes de violence physique subis par les membres de la famille, paroxysmes d'autant plus saisissants que l'atmosphère générale du film relève d'une esthétique du silence et de la contemplation morbide des relations extrêmement toxiques entre ces protagonistes. Punis par la sorcière pour leurs péchés respectifs, quand bien même cette dernière semble combler (certes, d'une manière horriblement détournée) leurs failles et manquements individuels, les membres de la famille sont tués un par un, dans ce qui est dépeint non pas comme un enchaînement d'attaques injustifiées, mais comme la vengeance légitime d'un passé renié. Ce passé, ici, est symbolisé par la terre sur laquelle la maison familiale fut construite autant que par la sorcière elle-même. Le fait que le film, produit par Sianel 4 Cymru, soit dans son entièreté en gallois, une langue menacée d'extinction à l'époque de la mondialisation, peut ainsi être compris, à un autre niveau, comme un appel à la résistance culturelle. Cet article se propose d'analyser les dynamiques de dualité qui sous-tendent *The Feast*, depuis le jeu d'alternance et de confusion entre passé et présent jusqu'aux contrastes esthétiques et narratifs entre plages contemplatives et paroxysmes d'extrême violence. Je m'attacherai aussi à étudier la manière dont le film s'appuie en réalité sur la complexification de ces dualismes et évite ainsi la caractérisation simpliste des personnages, ce qui ouvre vers une possible interprétation de la destruction finale de la famille comme vengeance légitime.

Mots clés : Pays de Galles, *post-horror*, sorcière, environnementalisme, *body-horror*, famille

Introduction

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Released on March 17, 2021, *The Feast* originates in director Lee Haven Jones's "desire to say something, and passion for horror" (Bradbury, 2022). Set in contemporary countryside Wales, the plot revolves around the encounter between a young woman, Cadi, and a wealthy, upper-class family. As the family gets ready for a dinner given at their modern, sophisticated country house, Cadi, hired as help for the night, arrives. Her subsequent intrusion into the intimacy of each member of the family (and of one of the guests as well), as she shares with them moments of happiness, apparent friendship or sexual intercourse, reveals Cadi as a witch figure, a goddess-like embodiment of nature who punishes the family for their relentless exploitation of the land on which they built their house. Cadi is also occasionally portrayed as the embodiment of the family's ancestor punishing them for their toxicity, reciprocal abuse and disrespect of their heritage.

The narrative of *The Feast* follows dynamics of duality articulated along the oppositions between nature/industry, modest rurality/upper-class sophistication, and ageless past/fleeting modernity. These oppositions are translated, on the aesthetic level, through a temporality divided

between periods of contemplation during which the toxicity between the members of the family is exposed, and culminations of violence and horror. *The Feast* thus seems to belong to the "elevated horror" or "post-horror" subgenre, which is to say, "horror films that merge art-cinema style with decentered genre tropes, privileging lingering dread and visual restraint over audiovisual shocks and monstrous disgust" (Church, 2022: 1). Horror is used in *The Feast* as a sensorial means to highlight the ambiguity of its protagonists, neither of whom, Cadi included, fit the "villain/hero" dichotomy. This ambiguity, paradoxically revealed by the dynamics of duality infusing the film, is at the core of *The Feast* and allows for a new take on the ecological and social questions which seem to constitute the message of the film. This message itself does not elude the dual dynamics which underlies *The Feast*, as it is both universal and tied to the director's and actors' native Wales, a geographical and cultural attachment revealed, from the very first minutes of the film, by the Welsh language of the dialogues and chapter titles. In an interview given to *The Upcoming* on August 21, 2022, Lee Haven Jones stated his desire to "create a horror film" as well as "to get a Welsh-language contemporary story out there into the world" (Bradbury, 2022). Horror, as a narrative device and an aesthetic stance, as the depiction of "slicing up, tearing holes into, crushing, rotting, and their mental corollary – mental torture,"[1] actuates in *The Feast* the extreme tensions underlying the dual dynamics of the plot while bringing the regional specificities of the film to the foreground.

This essay aims at examining how the confrontation between, on one hand, the dynamics of duality inherent to the narrative and aesthetics of the film, and the moral ambiguity of the protagonists on the other hand, confirms *The Feast* as a portrayal of the tensions between regional and national cultures in the specific setting of countryside Wales. The analysis of the dynamics of duality in the film will lead to the second part of this essay and its focus on two examples of the film's more ambiguous components. The essay concludes with the examination of two ways in which the film seemingly offers a resolution – albeit violent to an extreme - to these tensions.

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1. « D'abord tenter de définir la représentation de l'horreur à travers quelques images emblématiques : soit ce qui tranche, ce qui troue, ce qui écrase, ce qui pourrit, et leur corollaire mental – ce qui torture l'esprit. » (Desserre, 2015) [my translation].

Aesthetic duality and narrative dichotomies

Nature, the house, and the family

The Feast is articulated around multiple occurrences of duality and oppositions, all of which inscribe the film in specific aesthetics as well as allow for the plot to unfold. This duality is brought to light as soon as the opening scene of the film: a man running from something or someone stumbles in a field and collapses to the ground. The very next scene shows an industrial drill boring into the soil in an eruption of metallic noise, smoke and oil spurting from the drill hole. The black, viscous liquid symbolically reappears in the following scene, in the form of a beauty mask which Glenda, the mother of the family, has applied on her face as she gets ready for the formal dinner she and her husband are hosting.

In these few minutes during which the settings shift from the field and the oil-drilling hole to the family's modern designer house, the contrast dynamics between authentic nature and sophisticated domesticity are obvious. The family's craving for social recognition, their relentless desire to detach themselves from Glenda's modest origins, is symbolized by the almost absurd refinement of the bathroom in which Glenda is getting ready: this bathroom, situated at the center of the house, is an empty room with no windows except for a skylight, with walls painted in black, and an artificial waterfall. A mockery of nature in its sophisticated yet artificial minimalism, the bathroom denotes the family's need to exploit, dominate and even outshine the natural environment on which they built their house. The irony underlying this proud display of tamed nature, in a house surrounded by fields, woods and natural lakes, serves as the first hint at the family's conflictual relationship to their environment: nature to them is both a convenience and the proof of social and financial accomplishment. Moreover, this scene installs a possible interpretation of *The Feast* as a film articulated along the punishment, by the witch, of the cardinal sins committed by the family. As Glenda declares to her friend Mair, the minimalist, dark bathroom with its artificial waterfall is her favorite place in the house, the only one where she can truly rest. The pride she shows at having mastered a natural element for her own convenience, and her pleasure at being praised for it by her visitors, is indubitable.

Glenda's control of nature for her own pleasure and social validation is also symbolized, in the same scene, by the viscous, black charcoal mask that she applies on her face (all while listening to Vivaldi's "Cum

Dederit"[2]), seconds after the opening scene in the drilled field. The color and texture of both the mask on Glenda's face and the oil spurting from the field signal a parallel as well as an irreconcilable dichotomy between the natural world from which the oil originates as it is exploited by industry, and the –explicit or symbolic– exploitation of nature claimed by the mother as part of her social status. The same presumptuous exploitation of nature is later depicted in a scene in which Gweirydd, Glenda's older son, is training on an exercise bike in the front yard of the house. This scene, verging on absurdity as the camera backs up to a long shot of the son intensively pedaling on his overpriced bike, yet fully immobile before the rolling hills surrounding the house, is another hint at *The Feast*'s denunciation of the family's vapidness and misdirected pride. By condensing in these first minutes several clear depictions of the family's problematic relationship with the land they live on and profit from, the film seems to offer a justification for the extreme violence which Cadi will subsequently inflict on them as a punishment.

Punishment and culminations

The aesthetics of *The Feast* therefore alternate between the contemplative quality of art films and scenes depicting extreme physical violence. For the most part, the film

> evince[s] minimalism over maximalism, largely eschewing jump scares, frenetic editing, and energetic and/or handheld cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot-framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movements, and stately narrative pacing. (Church, 2022: 11)

These contemplative scenes are counterbalanced by peaks of physical violence verging on body horror which serve as aesthetic and narrative evidence of the witch's wrath and subsequent punishment. The witch's defense of her land and revenge for the family's betrayal of their own heritage are achieved through her extreme bodily punishment of the various cardinal sins the members of the family have committed. Perhaps the most obvious examples of Cadi's retaliation occur when the father's and elder son's lust for Cadi's body is punished exactly where they have sinned: Gwyn, the father, is seized with debilitating headaches as soon as his face, posture and words betray his desire for the young woman. Gweirydd, the family's elder son, bleeds to death, unable to stop his sexual intercourse with Cadi even as the glass shards she had inserted into her vagina tear

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2.   I will study the role of music in *The Feast* in the third part of this article.

his flesh to pieces, in an obvious reference to the trope of the *vagina dentata*.[3] Yet the most gruesome death in the film is that of the younger son Guto, punished for his drug abuse: he snorts powdered poisonous mushrooms that Cadi had selected for him as a recreational drug, which leads to the infection of a cut on his foot. The camera repeatedly lingers on this wound, each close-up more visually shocking than the last as the infection spreads and evolves into actual rotting of the flesh, oozing on Guto's bedsheets, in a perfect illustration of horror residing "in the details".[4] These moments of explicitly gory visuals culminate in Cadi licking the maggots from the son's rotting leg, in direct contrast with the film's overall minimalist aesthetics.

These culminations of body horror were foreshadowed by several explicit depictions of waste and physical violence, beginning with the skinning of two rabbits presumably hunted by Gwyn, and Cadi's subsequent vomiting in the dish they were left in to marinate.[5] Cadi's vomiting is later paralleled with that of Euros, an investor in the industrial exploitation of the family's land, as he slowly extirpates a clutter of wet hair from his mouth after eating the canapés brought to him by Cadi. As scenes appealing to the viewer's physical repulsion, these two segments recall Éric Falardeau's analysis of explicit depictions of bodily functions in pornographic and gory scenes:

> […] the filmed body must remain an anchor point, a sensory point of reference for the viewer. Simply put, the filmed body links the viewer to the image on screen. The relationship between viewer and viewed is necessary, even essential, otherwise the image does not signify anything.[6] (Falardeau, 2019: 109)

The extradiegetic reception of such physically intense moments inflicted by the witch seems to postulate the viewer's temporary identification with either Cadi or her victims, a thesis developed by Xavier Aldana Reyes (Aldana Reyes, 2016). Moreover, by maintaining sparsity in the depiction of extreme violence, *The Feast* maximizes the impact of its few gory or repulsive segments: "when viscerally shocking moments do occasionally occur in post-horror films, they are more likely used to signal

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3. See "The virgin's other: vagina dentata" in chapter 1 of Harrington, 2018, for an account of the trope of the vagina dentata as an expression of "rapacious, unbounded desire in a manner that is coded as threatening and transgressive" as well as "an expression of the agency of the castrator (the *femme castratrice*)."

4. « *L'horreur, c'est le détail. Détail d'un récit, d'une torture, d'une injustice.* » (Desserre, 2015) [my translation].

5. Cadi's vomiting in the dish is shown both as the bodily actualisation of her revulsion and despair at seeing the dead rabbits, and as the beginning of her revenge on the family. It can also be understood as an indirect way of poisoning the dish.

6. « *…le corps filmé doit demeurer point d'ancrage, référent sensuel, pour le spectateur. Plus simplement, le corps filmé lie le spectateur à l'image. La relation regardant/regardé, chair/corps est nécessaire, voire essentielle, sinon l'image ne signifie rien.* » (Falardeau, 2019; 109) [my translation].

major traumatic events, and therefore used to greater thematic effect than as disposably 'cheap' scares'" (Church, 2022: 18). These sporadic culminations of body horror signal, on an intradiegetic level, the witch's true intentions. The violence inflicted on the family's bodies can thus be read not just as revenge but as a way for the witch to confront them to their true human nature, to the fragility and vulnerability of their flesh. Striking each member of the family where he or she has sinned, the witch brings each down to his or her most base –or most genuine– level of existence, to a place where pride, greed or lust become meaningless.

The image of Cadi licking the maggots from Guto's rotten flesh is therefore more than just another gory scene. Symbolizing the witch's infinite love for nature, down to the most repulsive insect, this scene also appeals to the viewer's deepest and possibly most primitive affect: disgust. Xavier Aldana Reyes differentiates abjection, a theoretical concept often used in analyzing horror,[7] from disgust as a phenomenon induced by external factors: "if abjection explores the boundaries of corporeality, disgust explores those of the clean, pure and proper, which are often articulated by the desire to deny or reject the primal, that is, our animality" (Aldana Reyes, 2016: 54). Repulsion, as the core affect in this scene, seems to hint at the viewer's fear of reverting back to a primitive state of existence, beyond the control and comfort of logic and reason. More prosaically, this scene appears to refer to the archaic fear of rotting flesh, an image which conveys the threat of contamination and disease and signals the disintegration of the individual. Therefore, while abjection functions on a symbolic level, disgust is what is at stakes here: namely, appealing to the viewer's senses in order to convey, in the most immediate –and, arguably, effective– manner, the intensity of the witch's love for nature as well as the extent of the violence she inflicts as retaliation. Not yet a corpse, Guto, in this scene, is nevertheless worse than a dead body: the horror suggested by his progressively rotting flesh signals the film's depiction of death as a process which could possibly impact the viewer. As a corpse in the making, the dying flesh of Guto is truly, undeniably, horrifying:

> […] decay is repulsive because of the myths attached to it, not necessarily as an objective, putrid, septic fact. […] decay means the deterioration of the body, the decomposition of the flesh – the locus of life; therefore, it means the dissolution of the individual being, the indisputable loss of his or her uniqueness.[8]

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7. A concept mostly based on Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical approach in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur - Essai sur l'abjection* (1980).

8. « […] *la pourriture est repoussante moins comme réalité objective, nauséabonde et septique, qu'en raison des fantasmes qu'elle déchaîne. […] la pourriture, c'est le délabrement du corps, la déliquescence des chairs, support de la vie; c'est donc la dissolution de l'être, la perte irrécusable de l'individualité.* » (Thomas, 2000; 480) [my translation].

By explicitly depicting the archaic fear of personal dissolution rather than suggesting it, *The Feast* offers a vision of horror anchored in the senses rather than in reason and concept. It appeals to the most instinctual aspect of the viewer's reception, the one which feels rather than conceptualizes.

These scenes of almost unbearable violence also allow for an interpretation of *The Feast* as a tale of retaliation built on undeniable references to the cardinal sins of pride, greed and lust. As such, the narrative could be understood as pertaining to a Christian belief system. Yet the witch in *The Feast* can also be read as a figure embodying an archaic, undefined form of paganism, one which considers every life, human or otherwise, to be sacred, as Cadi's horror at the vision of the dead rabbits suggests. More specifically, every life appears sacred to Cadi as long as it does not overly exploit or endanger to the environment it inhabits. As such, the witch's bloody rampage on the family is perfectly justified when understood as a righteous punishment for them violating the land and its history. This interpretation anchors the narrative in an ancient form of spirituality in which the human is equal with the animal. This temporal duality between spiritual timelessness and fleeting modernity complements the aesthetic and narrative dichotomies in the film and highlights the confrontation between two conflicting representations of the world.

A lament for ancient times

The temporal duality in *The Feast* is perhaps best symbolized by the family's house. A contemporary designer house, it was built on the ruins of the farm of Glenda's mother. The land around the house includes the natural oil deposit depicted in the first scene, as well as deposits of precious metals and minerals, as Glenda informs her friend Mair later on in the film. The conflict between nature and modernity is explicitly shown in the opening scene as the oil drill pierces the ground until it literally bleeds oil, a centuries-old substance which had been until then hidden away by the land. The collision between the world of modern industry and that of ageless land announces, from the beginning of the film, the need for a resolution, for a bridge between these seemingly irreconcilable spheres.

The dual temporality also functions as an aesthetic artefact, allowing for the constant opposition between the contemplative depiction of the family's mundane interactions and the sporadic peaks of physical violence. As such, *The Feast* is articulated along the suggestion of a constant back and forth between the past embodied by the witch and her symbiosis with the land, and the failure of modernity as it is denounced through the

characterization of the members of the family. The witch embodies a permanence, an immutability, against which the aspirations and pretensions of an always fleeting, constantly changing modernity seem contemptible. The family's pride in the modern-looking designer house, the presumptuous absurdity of its bathroom, the hypocrisy of the house's wide windows opening on a landscape which the family has no respect for, translate the modern world's inability to really think in terms of environmental durability and humility before the land it has claimed.

This contrasted temporality also highlights the ambiguity of Glenda's position in the family. As the rightful heir of the land, her betrayal of the land and of her own past is particularly blamable, since she has made the decision to destroy her mother's farm and build the family's country house on its ruins as a sign of her financial and social success. Glenda is especially impacted by Cadi's intrusion whenever the latter is portrayed as the spirit of Glenda's mother, as Cadi is shown using her mother's objects, wearing her favorite dress and ultimately watching her own reflection morph into that of said mother. All these instances of Glenda reverting to a time before her own house and family even existed may be understood as her desire to return to a state of peace and innocence and escape her own family's toxicity, but, since the film shows this reversion as initiated by Cadi,[9] it rather hints at Glenda's mother reclaiming her land and progressively coming back into her daughter's life. Dysfunctional, modern domesticity is confronted to a resurgence of former times, to a past represented both by Glenda's mother and the witch as the two entities possessing Cadi's body. While neither Cadi nor Glenda is portrayed as the villain of the plot, their inclusion in this dual temporality seems to point at modernity (or, rather, at its excessive pride and greed) as the obvious antagonist of the storyline.

Beyond duality

Beyond the witch

The "witch" or deity embodied by Cadi is indeed a multi-faceted character, at times an ancient deity symbolizing offended Nature, at times the ghost of Glenda's mother, and, at times, an actual witch punishing her

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9. At the beginning of the film, as Cadi is asked by the mother to set the table, she purposedly uses Glenda's mother mismatched glasses, then soils the elegant tablecloth with her hands (her body at times oozes soil) and replaces it with her mother's outdated and used tablecloth. Cadi also tries on Glenda's mother's earrings, a scene which ends in her joyfully laughing in front of the mirror in the mother's room.

offenders through deceit, potions and curses. This spirit or deity, inhabiting the body of a deceased young woman,[10] is therefore a fluctuating figure open to interpretation. The young witch could be understood as the embodiment of female sexuality, especially since she is occasionally represented in the film in various confrontations with the (supposedly) motherly figure that is Glenda, in an overly simplified Freudian motif of femaleness along the "whore/mother" dichotomy. Yet Cadi's sexualization does not aim at titillating the viewer, not even in those scenes when she mates with the ground in the forest or has sex with Gweirydd, the elder son of the family: at no point in these scenes is Cadi's body eroticized by the camera. Her feminine clothes are nothing but a necessary uniform for the day's work, and the witch never seems to inhabit Cadi's body in a way that could be understood as either following or challenging gendered expectations. Cadi's body is a means to an end for the witch, and the only times she inhabits it in a sexualized and gendered manner is when she uses it to punish Gweirydd and his father Gwyn for their lust and greed. What is more, what could be at first understood as a sexual act when the witch mates with the ground and the tree roots is depicted as her communion with nature, the physical actualization of her love for the land, rather than as a sensationalist appeal to the viewer's senses. There is no overt sensuality in these scenes which are shown with a cold and matter-of-fact eye which only reinforces Cadi's alienation from the family. Rather, Cadi's "sex scenes" seem to aim at triggering atavistic awe at the vision of a timeless entity in the full possession and acceptance of her power and inherent connection to nature.

Consequently, even though the film is centered around a female figure, the association of femininity and nature in *The Feast* seems to open a reflection on ecological matters rather than strictly follow the usual horror films' depiction of "women laying special claims to forested areas that become wellsprings of patriarchal anxiety about 'monstrous' generativity" (Church, 2022: 143). Femininity, here, is the vessel of ecological preoccupations rather than the main focus of the film. It is used as a recognizable, familiar component of the narrative, which opens to a deeper understanding of the film's ecological values. Nevertheless, Cadi's femaleness, as a witch-like figure, does recall the ancient association of woman with nature, as was beautifully described by Jules Michelet:

> The better to reckon up the seasons, she watches the sky; but her heart belongs to earth none the less.…she looks down toward the

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10. The actual Cadi drowned in a lake as she was driving to the family's house, which is hinted at by her wet hair as she first introduces herself to the family as the night's hired help. Later on in the film, Mair, one of the guests, tells the family that her husband was sent to help retrieve a car from a nearby lake, a car which turns out to be Cadi's. Her corpse is possessed by the witch, by Nature as a deity and by the spirit of Glenda's mother. All these entities can be understood both as separate spirits and as a single yet constantly shifting being.

> enamoured flowers, and forms with them a personal acquaintance. […] On her first appearance the Witch has neither father nor mother, nor son, nor husband, nor family. She is a marvel, an aerolith, alighted no one knows whence. Who, in Heaven's name, would dare to draw near her? Her place of abode? It is in spots impracticable, in a forest of brambles, on a wild moor where thorn and thistle intertwining forbid approach. The night she passes under an old cromlech. (Michelet, 2010: "Introduction")

The few portrayals of Cadi as a strictly female figure seem to serve the ideological discussion at the core of *The Feast* only insofar as these portrayals highlight the family's toxicity and its punishment by the witch.

The character of Cadi seemingly eludes the question of gendered representation by subverting the traditional expectations attached to the witch figure as the embodiment of destructive femininity. However, the complexity of Cadi's character is evident when considering her punishment of the father Gwyn's and the son Gweirydd's toxic masculinity, who both approach her as a mere sexual object. The fact that Gweirydd's sexual relation with Cadi causes his death is, indeed, an explicit reference to the traditional figure of the witch as the embodiment of "hostile" and lethal femininity. Nevertheless, since Cadi also happens to embody the spirit of Glenda's mother, her retaliating to Gwyn and Gweirydd's aggressions can also hint, on a symbolical level, at parental discipline instead of sexualized punishment. The character of Cadi therefore appears to fluctuate between various archetypes or traditional figures, and her complexity as a character can be understood as an implicit tribute to the richness and depths of our understanding of femininity and nature alike. Conversely, the mother Glenda is portrayed as a woman trapped in a familial and social setting, which calls for a feminist interpretation of her character. She seems confined to her role as a wife and mother, a role not criticized as such by the film but, rather, condemned when understood as a monolithic definition of femininity. Glenda's apparent simplicity as a character at the beginning of the film is thus questioned as the complexity of her relation to Cadi unfolds. Cadi, the image of a mythical existence not bound by modernity and its various dynamics of oppression, does not bear the burden of the ideological and social chains afflicting Glenda. Consequently, she is straightaway portrayed as a complex character, whereas Glenda's seemingly simplistic characterization at the beginning of the film seems to reflect the weight of social and ideological conventions inflicted on her as a wife and a mother.

Cadi could also be expected to fit the "motherly" cliché usually associated with depictions of nature, all the more since the witch is also the spirit of Glenda's mother - thus a doubly maternal figure. Yet the depiction

of the nature-maternity association is subverted in *The Feast*, as nature is also portrayed as violent and destructive. Cadi eradicates the family, and the woods into which she drags and burns their corpses at the end of the film fit the expectations of horror-film forests, with their moonless nights, menacing trees and overwhelming fogs. The depiction of these woods recalls the Gothic trope of the tunnel, of advancing further and further away into danger, madness and depravity. However, this subversion of the "motherly Nature" trope is further reversed, as most of the film is set among the peaceful, rolling hills and fields of countryside Wales. Covered in a richness of grass, flowers and green trees, the soft curves of the landscape do recall the archaic understanding of nature as a motherly, nourishing, sheltering entity: wilderness itself seems tamed, welcoming, as if it were inviting people to partake in its many benefits. The aesthetic manner in which nature is represented in *The Feast* thus bears as much significance as nature's narrative position in the film as either an ally or an antagonist. Both nature and women are depicted as indirect victims of unbridled capitalism and/or toxic masculinity in *The Feast*, yet both can be equally violent and destructive when necessary, hence their complex and ambiguous portrayals in *The Feast*.

This complexity culminates in the character of Cadi, whose composite character cannot be narrowed down to a specific entity. As a female figure personifying nature, violence, and archaic powers, she is a witch; as the receptacle of the spirit of Glenda's mother's, she is the embodiment of spiteful, malicious motherhood; as the vengeful entity of wounded nature, she hints at ancient, pre-Christian deities. However, the archaism embodied by Cadi as a witch figure is never explicitly associated with a specific religion or pagan system of beliefs, as no forms of worship are depicted in the film. Consequently, *The Feast* cannot be understood as a film explicitly rooted in Celtic mythology, notwithstanding its Welsh settings and language. This uncertainty, or, rather, the lack of necessity for a specific spiritual system here, only emphasizes the witch's power as a character. Cadi is evocative of a world beyond traditional mythical and spiritual systems, a world which does not need to be explicitly tied to any contemporary or archaic system of belief. What the witch is in *The Feast* is the embodiment of times before the necessity for systematic definitions: archaic, unrestricted, untamed nature not yet circumscribed to human concepts.

Objects and their significance

The complexity and ambiguity of Cadi's character also permeates the aesthetic and narrative function of objects in *The Feast*. The film offers highly realistic portraits of the persons composing the family through

material details ascribed to each of them: Gweirydd has his bike and his skin-tight training apparel, Guto has his drugs and electric guitar, Glenda has her bathroom, her kitchen, and her art. Each of these material elements or belongings unveils the family members' individual intradiegetic stories and contribute to their strong characterization while eluding presenting them as simplistic archetypes. Guto is not the caricatural rebellious guitar player, rather, he is a teenager whose use of his guitar and drugs is the consequence of his emotional isolation and rejection by his family. In the same way, Gweirydd's consumption of raw meat at the beginning of the film does not simply portray him as a carnivorous predator. Rather, at first glance, it complements his characterization as a sports competitor with a necessarily strict diet. Yet this initially marginal focus on his diet later on opens to further interpretation as a sign of Gweirydd's disturbed state of mind when he seemingly relishes his family's –and their guests'– repulsion at having to watch him ingest raw meat during the actual dinner.

This complexity is also prevalent in the way the objects inherited by Glenda after her mother passed away are insisted upon in the film. Most of these objects (her mother's old tablecloth and mismatched glasses, for example) are of no commercial value whatsoever, but their sparsity and simplicity convey a highly credible portrayal of her mother as someone who is still secretly attached to her past and to her origins regardless of her claims to modernity and wealth. What is more, far from the expected fetishization of such objects either as triggers of demoniacal possession or as explicit symbols of unresolved grief or anger, objects in *The Feast* are not filmed as ominous or as overtly bearing emotional significance. Their relevance in the narrative does not go beyond what they straightforwardly tell the viewer about their owner, their use, their origin. They are nothing but objects and are depicted with a blunt meaningfulness which only emphasizes their ability to subtly suggest the reciprocal grief, resentment and anger corrupting familial bonds. As such, they elude the horror film trope of the object as a vessel of demoniacal intrusion or possession. They are mere objects, but their real significance as symbols of the interpersonal dynamics between Cadi and the family, and between the family members themselves, cannot be overlooked. Much as the raw meat eaten by Gweirydd in front of his family and their guests does not in itself make him, as a person, repulsive, but is engulfed in a subtle network of meaning, these objects stand for themselves in the narrative. As trinkets passed by a mother to her daughter, they do not need interpretation beyond the authenticity they convey through their inexpensiveness, countryside simplicity, and obvious mismatch with the elegance and sophistication of the family's house. Neither is the apparent preciousness of Glenda's mother's earrings and dress - shown for example through the privileged place allotted to them in her bedroom - criticized as a symbol of greed or capitalism: in their sparsity, these objects rather hint at a countryside, working-class

cherishment of belongings made dearer by their comparatively substantial financial value. Their outdated quality and mismatching styles only seem to reinforce their interpretation as loved objects, desired and cherished by their original rural and underprivileged owner, while every stylish yet impersonal item of clothing, furniture or art owned by her successful daughter Glenda seems to be nothing more than an emotionally empty social statement.

By eluding the trope of the demoniacal possession of objects and using the same objects as conveyors of familial toxicity and regret, *The Feast* thus allows for the same ambiguity and complexity found in the characterization of its protagonists. This ambiguity, far from impeding the overall discussion of environmental and cultural issues, appears to perfectly complement the initial, more obvious dynamics of duality inherent to the structure and aesthetics of *The Feast* and opens to a resolution enacted through the characters' final dissolution in chaos and violence.

Resolution

Toxicity unleashed

Just as the witch cannot be considered as the sole antagonist in *The Feast*, Glenda is not characterized as an absolutely negative figure, even though she partakes in the toxicity pervading the interpersonal relationships in the family. Rather, she is the catalyst of the family members' reciprocal toxicity. Each of the people composing the family is tainted by one or several cardinal sins, and by continuously acting on these sins, they relentlessly inflict and endure resentment, anger, anxiety, to and from each other. Even Glenda, as complex a character as she is, can thus be linked to a specific cardinal sin.

The members of the family are guilty of three main sins: pride, greed, and lust. Glenda's pride is sustained by Gwyn's greed, as her material and social success are directly caused by his political and financial accomplishments. This sin of greed is what triggers the witch's retaliation against the family's desire to exploit and destroy her land. Incidentally, the intrusion of the witch into the family is facilitated by their having hired Cadi to help during the dinner given to a potential investor in the exploitation of the mineral deposit on their land (as it happens, Euros, the investor, is later on forced by the witch to gorge on food –part of which is Guto's leg–, his greed thus translated as abject gluttony). Gwyn's greed triggers

the downfall of the family, yet his lust towards Cadi, subtly hinted at and confirmed by the mother's anxiety and fear of aging,[11] is what initiates the witch's actual attacks on the members of the family: shortly after Gwyn lets his desire for Cadi transpire, he is seized with debilitating headaches, an excruciating pain which will eventually lead to his death. Lust, however, is not the father's prerogative, as his son Gweirydd's openly sexual behavior proves: he engages in masturbation, exposes his body to his brother Guto, and has sex with Cadi. Yet the sexual relationship between Cadi and Gweirydd eludes the traditional abuser/victim duality, as Cadi willingly engages in two sexual acts with the young man, the second of which eventually kills the young man. The sexual relationship between the two young people is even more disturbing when recalling that the witch is repeatedly portrayed as Glenda's mother and therefore as Gweirydd's grandmother. The character of the witch, far from a simplistic embodiment of rightful revenge, is here portrayed as deranged, perverse, blamable for her many wrongdoings. Admittedly, the whole family functions along lines built by sin, toxicity, and veiled abuse. Gwyn's and Gweirydd's lust induce Glenda's anxiety; Gweirydd's lust triggers his parents' anger and resentment;[12] Guto's drug addiction feeds his parents' anxiety and anger, even though this addiction was indeed caused by his parents' blind focus on success. Yet the final destruction of the family is not initiated by its members turning on each other; rather, Cadi embodies the horribly personified punishments for each of the family members' individual sin.

Cadi, therefore, is neither inside nor outside the family. A mostly silent figure on the face of whom the camera sometimes lingers as her immobility contrasts with the restlessness of the other members of the family, Cadi's perspective is portrayed through her sporadic bursts of emotion as she reconnects with symbols of her former existence as Glenda's mother. Her ambiguity as a character transpires through both her position as an outsider and her portrayal as the only legitimate occupant of the land. As the witch and as the goddess, she is tied to the family's land, and as the embodiment of their grandmother's spirit she is part of the family. Neither is she portrayed as a mere figure of vengeance: by repeatedly taking on motherly, caring characteristics, Cadi seems to fill the fault lines between the members of the family. She does not bring them together or initiate reconciliation; rather, she at first acts as a silent confidante to Guto, a daughterly companion to Glenda, and a sexual validator to Gwyn and Gweirydd. She, at first, seems to be able to give each of the family members what he or she needs the most, what he or she cannot obtain from the other members of the family.

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11.   She is once shown sitting in front of her mirror, tightening the skin on her face then releasing it with a sigh of sadness and resignation.
12.   Gweirydd was accused of raping comatose patients during his doctor's internship, which ended his medical career.

One scene is particularly striking: as Cadi and Glenda are preparing dinner, the former starts singing a Welsh song. Glenda, pleasantly surprised, joins in the singing and then informs Cadi that her own mother used to sing this song, and that she has never heard it since the latter passed away. This scene, when taken outside of the rest of the film, is the perfect image of a healthy, close relationship between a mother and a daughter figure. Nevertheless, not only is this relationship an illusion, one which reveals Glenda's desperate craving for familial love, but it retrospectively enhances the horror of the merciless destruction subsequently brought on by Cadi to the family. What is more, the reversal of the roles of mother and daughter in this scene is tinted with a sense of sadness and regret, as Cadi, shown here as the spirit of Glenda's mother, appears to delight in this short moment of familial bonding with her daughter Glenda. This scene perfectly reveals the film's ability to elude the traditional dichotomy between hero and villain. *The Feast* shifts this traditional duality to a confrontation between fleeting moments of familial happiness and utmost pain and despair as Glenda later witnesses the successive deaths of the members of her family. Incidentally, the witch does not kill her: Glenda eventually slices her own throat, after changing her clothes for what used to be her mother's favorite dress. Confusion of identities is used here not so much as a narrative means appealing to the fear of losing any sense of reality and certainty than as a reflection on the bottomless, absurd toxicity undermining the family.

Since the clear denunciation of a villain or monster to be eliminated in order to reinstate normalcy eludes both the family members and the viewer, the only resolution to the family's latent self-destruction seems to reside in a culmination of violence and death. The solution to the family's ordeal does not take the form of the destruction of the monster embodied by Cadi: rather, in *The Feast*, the witch acts as the catalyst of the toxicity that had been festering their relationship for years. The resulting carnage enacts resolution through destruction and chaos, which is translated, on the aesthetic level, by a specific use of music in the final scenes of the film.

Beyond the visual:
the sounds of *The Feast*

The end of the film seems to conflate the duality underlying the storyline and its sensorial representation. Images of the family's bodies burning in the pyre lit by Cadi are accompanied by the two main sound pieces of the film, Vivaldi's "Cum Dederit" and Meinir Lloyd Griffiths "Watshia di dy hun" (1969) alternatively overlapping each other. This auditive confrontation between "Cum Dederit", a masterpiece of European "elevated"

art, and "Watshia di dy hun", a song anchored in a language and a culture whose apparent simplicity and rurality nevertheless shows resilience against globalization and capitalism, act as the auditive embodiments of the conflict at the core of the plot.

While the Welsh song seems to indicate that the witch is truly Glenda's mother's spirit, the iconic violence of Cadi burning the family's corpses in the depths of the forest hints at the presence of the supernatural, through the figure of the witch, in this narrative. The violence displayed by Cadi in this scene is more justified than denounced by her being portrayed as a witch, while the omnipresence of the Welsh song throughout the film recalls her position in the family as Glenda's mother. This ambiguity is even more reinforced in this scene through the disharmony between the two simultaneous songs. This cacophony is made even less agreeable by the changes in the volume at which the two songs are played, as the sensorial translation of the impossibility of reconciling "high", metropolitan culture with the preservation of regional history and attachment to a specific land. In this specific sequence at the end of the film, the lyrics of "Watshia di dy hun"[13] become ominous as they ironically echo the first occurrence of the song in a scene which then seemed to humanize Cady and suggest a connection between herself and Glenda as they sang together in the kitchen. In this scene at the end of the film, however, the Welsh song seems to confirm that Cadi, as the spirit of Glenda's mother, can reclaim her land, even though the price to pay is the destruction of Glenda and her family. Neither can the Christian spirituality implied by Vivaldi's "Cum Dederit"[14] offer a resolution to this conflict between two irremediably separate worlds: "Cum Dederit" here seems a desperate call for salvation to a God who does not belong on the witch's land. The Christian God is vanquished by the witch's paganism, by the purifying flames erupting higher and higher from the pile of bodies in retaliation for Christianity's and modernity's betrayal of the land, until the menace of the destruction brought on by industrialism and greed is erased. Music thus bears as much meaning in *The Feast* as dialogues and images do. It is not used as a mere aesthetic artefact meant to create a specific atmosphere; rather, it is a sign in itself, an appeal to the viewer's ability to understand the film's depiction of conflicting cultural spheres. What is more, the two musical pieces intertwining at the end of the film can be understood not as the promotion of the fusion of modernity and timelessness, or industry and nature, but as the musical depiction of the chaotic confrontation between two irreconcilable spheres.

13. "Better be careful/Walking down the street with your curly hair/You wake up with a smile on your lips/A queen of crows with her eyes full of life/Oh, my dear, Better be careful".
14. "The Lord will give to his beloved in their sleep/Children are the Lord's gift/His grace is the fruit of the womb." [my translation]

The language spoken by Cadi –albeit sparsely– and the other protagonists throughout the film also bears significance: Welsh is the oldest language still spoken in Great-Britain (see Abalain, 1998: 74) and descends from the Brythonic language which dates back to times before the Roman conquest of the British Isles (Abalain, 1998; 67). Welsh as the exclusive language of *The Feast* implies cultural resistance and suggests visions of ancient, almost mystical times. Hervé Abalain also mentions that ancient Wales was a refuge for pre-Christian religious practices: "it is known, through the Elder's testimonies, that the isle of Môn (Anglesey) was a sanctuary of druidism. The roman invaders feared druidism, thus the druids were massacred in 61"[15] (Abalain, 1998; 74). The Welsh language links *The Feast* to a cultural, spiritual, historical, linguistic and geographical identity, and in itself denounces the hegemony of modern industry and capitalist greed as the utmost marker of social success. On a narrative standpoint, it also seems to unify the whole film under a specific cultural and geographical context, however torn between conflicting ideologies this context is. On an aesthetic level, the specific sonorities of the Welsh language highlight the dichotomy between its voluntary estrangement from its non-Welsh viewers and its inclusion in a cohesive, unified regional history and culture. As such, the Welsh language in *The Feast* anchors the film in the post-horror movement's interest in "alternative" cultures which detaches horror from the hegemony of white, hetero-normative, English-speaking characters and settings.

Conclusion

The film ends on an ultimate form of duality, as Cadi, covered in the family's blood, walks in "her" meadow after having burned the corpses of the family, and turns towards the camera, facing the viewer. Her smile of relief and deliverance suddenly turns into an expression of excruciating pain and sadness, a pang of extreme affliction on which the film concludes. In this fleeting yet extremely intense glimpse of Cadi's pain, the film confirms Cadi's character as the embodiment of the sufferings of a land and culture fighting for survival amidst constant attacks from a world that it does not identify with. In this final revelation of Cadi's immense sadness, the link between horror films and art films is obvious, as the final scene does not seem to "conclude" the narrative, thus following the art films' interest in open endings. Rather, it opens a reflection on the resilience of nature against the various violations inflicted on it by the modern, industrialized, capitalist world. After the screams, sobs and peaks of

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15.   *"On sait, par les Anciens, que l'île de Môn (Anglesey) était le sanctuaire du druidisme : les envahisseurs romains, qui le redoutent, massacrent les druides en 61"*. (Abalain, 1998; 74) [my translation]

physical violence inflicted on the family, *The Feast* thus closes on a very subtle, toned-down rendering of extreme emotions: "much as death as a metaphysical transition/state cannot be cinematically represented with any degree of surety, the survivor's grief often evades linguistic representation" (Church, 2022: 71). Suggestion is what matters here: after culminating in horror and violence, the slow, soft moan of despair shown through Cadi's grimace of pain carries the true horror of *The Feast*, that of a land relentlessly abused and exploited by industry and modernity.

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Embracing the Horrific Other: Problematizing Identification, Cultural Relativism and Empathy in Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019)

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Abstract: In Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019), Dani (Florence Pugh) is the locus of the viewers' identification. The film encourages viewers to empathize with her as she undergoes a traumatic experience and must then deal with a failing relationship. Yet the viewers' identification with the protagonist is challenged when the character eventually joins an archaic community intent on murdering foreigners, and even finds solace in participating in the ritual sacrifice of her ex-boyfriend. This article argues that by reworking the generic trope of horror opposing normality to a monstrous other, *Midsommar* aims at questioning the process of cinematic identification as well as the very possibility of embracing the worldview of others. In so doing, the film proves symptomatic of post-horror cinema's tendency to challenge traditional understandings of cinematic identification.

Keywords: Ari Aster, Post-Horror, Elevated Horror, Identification, Otherness, Empathy, *Midsommar*

Résumé : Dans *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019), Dani (Florence Pugh) est le réceptacle privilégié de l'identification spectatorielle. Le film encourage les spectateurs à développer un lien empathique avec le personnage tandis que celui-ci subit des traumatismes et doit faire face au délitement de sa relation amoureuse. Néanmoins, ce lien identificatoire est remis en cause lorsque le personnage rejoint une communauté archaïque déterminée à massacrer tout étranger, et finit par trouver du réconfort en participant au sacrifice rituel de son ancien compagnon. Cet article suggère qu'en retravaillant le trope horrifique d'un conflit entre normalité et altérité monstrueuse, *Midsommar* interroge le processus d'identification cinématographique ainsi que la possibilité même de pouvoir partager le point de vue d'autrui. Ce faisant, le film témoigne d'une tendance

partagée par de nombreux films dits « *post-horror* », qui tendent à interroger le concept d'identification cinématographique.

Mots-clés : Ari Aster, *post-horror*, *elevated horror*, identification, altérité, empathie, *Midsommar*

Introduction

With his critically acclaimed first feature film *Hereditary* (2018), Ari Aster established himself as a leading figure of the post-horror cycle, notably due to the film's exploration of such themes as trauma, mental illness and atavism, but also because of Aster's willingness to play with the codes of the genre – notably by killing off the suspected monster child in the first half of the film – and to produce a "film literate" form of horror.[1] *Hereditary* circumvents viewers' expectations yet if anything, the film's metageneric self-awareness only enhances its raw emotional impact. Similarly, Aster's second feature film *Midsommar* (2019) also subverts some of the most firmly established aesthetic and narrative tropes of horror in a way that does not preclude the viewers' emotional investment – the film has been widely received as one of the most poignant horror films of the last decade.[2] This article aims at exploring how, by reworking traditional horror tropes, *Midsommar* problematizes the process of cinematic identification, not to produce a form of Brechtian distancing effect[3] nor to adopt a *Scream*-like postmodern self-aware experience of ironic distancing, but to complexify the viewers's emotional and cognitive investment in the film characters and, through this, question one's relation to otherness.

Not unlike Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), it is by rejecting the conventional association of horror with darkness that *Midsommar* most obviously – and perhaps most superficially – subverts the codes of horror, as the film explores the horrific potentialities of a story set in an Edenic, bright and flowery Swedish meadow. Like Kubrick's film, *Midsommar* never relies on shadows, dark corners or night-time scenes to allow for a

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1. Matt Zoller Seitz, "Hereditary", June 08, 2018, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hereditary-2018
2. See, for instance, the opening line of Tomris Laffly's review published in Rogert-Ebert.com: "One thing is certain: writer/director Ari Aster comprehends stifling dread in the most profound sense" (2019). "Midsommar", July 01, 2019. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/midsommar-2019. However, some (mostly New York – based) critics expressed dissatisfaction at a film seen as too intent on offering an art cinema reworking of the horror genre, losing its capacity to affect the viewers in the process. Manohla Dargis notably wrote in *The New York Times* that "Ari Aster's hyper-aware movie builds a scary mousetrap […] but it has more virtuosity than vision" (2022).
3. Brecht's theory of the distancing effect posits the necessity to suppress the audience's identification with characters. To Brecht, "any identification is dangerous" since, as Aumont *et. al.* summarize, "it suspends judgement and the critical mind" (2004: 182, my translation). This article will suggest that *Midsommar* questions identification without developing a form of Brechtian distancing, challenging the viewers' emotional involvement instead of seeking to suppress it.

horror of the unseen, its constant depth of field and total clarity precluding the possibility of any off-screen threat about to assault the protagonists and surprise the viewers.

Beyond this obvious distortion of horror conventions, the film also circumvents various generic expectations by mixing the narrative and aesthetic tropes of several genres and subgenres. *Midsommar* has often been categorized as belonging to the sub-genre of folk horror, due to its obvious narrative similarities with Robin Hardy's 1973 *The Wicker Man* (Di Rosso, 2019). Indeed, the plot focuses on a group of American students visiting Sweden to attend the traditional Midsummer celebrations of a secluded community maintaining a highly traditional way of life, The Hargas, only to discover that their visit was part of the celebrations, as the group was lured in so the Hargas could use them in ritualistic human sacrifices. However, the film complexifies its generic association, notably as it also relies on the generic tropes of the melodrama, a genre which at first glance seems ill suited to be hybridized with that of folk horror – in fact, Ari Aster claims he envisioned the film as first and foremost a breakup movie (Rao, 2019).

The film centers on Dani (Florence Pugh), a woman who, after going through a traumatic event – her sister killed herself and their parents – ends up accompanying her boyfriend Christian (Jack Reynor) to Sweden. Christian, obviously disinterested in Dani, had decided to leave her behind when attending the Harga Midsummer celebrations with his friends – but he ends up reluctantly inviting her along once she finds out about the trip. The idea of this journey had initially been suggested by one of Christian's friends, Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren), a member of the Harga community studying in the United States. Once it becomes clear that Pelle had in fact planned to lure the group into the Hargas' so they would be killed in ritualistic sacrifices, it also becomes apparent that Dani, far from counting among the victims, will in fact integrate the Harga community (she is chosen as their May Queen during the celebrations) and even find solace in one of their ritualistic murders, which enables her to heal from her toxic relationship with Christian. The film, characterized by Aster as a "wish fulfilment fantasy" (Koresky, 2019), ends with Dani's troubling cathartic release as she watches her former boyfriend, whom she selected as one of the ritual's victims, being burnt alive.

As such, *Midsommar* may also be seen as reworking the horror trope of the Final Girl, more commonly associated with the sub-genre of the slasher, since Dani, in keeping with this trope, manages to survive while all her friends get killed one by one. The variations on this archetype are manifold, and all point at the film's ambition to challenge the viewers'

capacity and willingness to identify with Dani as she joins the Harga community, which is what this article will focus on.

Altering the trope of the final girl: Problematizing Identification

In her groundbreaking study, Carol Clover contends slashers encourage all viewers to identify with the Final Girl. By using the word "identify", Clover, in keeping with the psychoanalysis-inspired tradition of identification theory that she draws on (notably the works of Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey), rather vaguely refers to a form of empathetic and cognitive bond with the protagonist – let us temporarily accept such a definition, although it will be discussed and criticized later in this article.[4] Positing that slashers address an essentially male audience, Clover wonders why slashers invariably depict a female heroine, thus requiring their male viewers to accept a form of cross-gender identification. The author claims that male viewers might prefer identifying with a female character in the case of a slasher as such a process of identification enables them to revel in experiencing the "abject terror" (2015: 51) of the female protagonists, which they would be unwilling to experience should these protagonists be male.[5] Noting that most of these Final Girls are boyish characters, Clover goes on to argue that Final Girls are in fact "transformed males" (2015: 52) permitting male viewers to experience repressed male affects such as homoerotic fantasies: "the femaleness of the Final Girl [is] only apparent, the artifact of heterosexual deflection. It may be through the female body that the body of the audience is sensationalized, but the sensation is an entirely male affair" (*Ibid*.). The ultimate empowerment of Final Girls in slasher films (as Final Girls usually end up defeating the monsters) would thus have nothing to do with a feminist subtext of female empowerment, and everything to do with male catharsis following the male enjoyment of unavowable male affects expressed through the male viewers' identification with a "transformed male".

Clover's theory may be criticized, if only because women do not make up a small minority of all horror fans, as is often assumed (Boissonneau, 2021). However, it does point at the issue of cross-gender identification in a body of films overwhelmingly made by male directors and rightly

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4. Such a definition only encompasses what Christian Metz (1983) refers to as "secondary identification", i.e. identification with a character, as opposed to the "primary identification" of the viewer with the movie camera. Clover's study implicitly only focuses on secondary identification. This article will also leave aside the issue of primary identification to focus on *Midsommar*'s problematizing of character identification.
5. "gender displacement can provide a kind of identificatory buffer, an emotional remove that permits the majority audience to explore taboo subjects in the relative safety of vicariousness" (Clover, 2015: 51).

or wrongly targeting an essentially male viewership. In this respect, *Midsommar* clearly distorts the generic expectations of the Final Girl: not only does Dani share none of the boyish characteristics of typical Final Girls, but her experience is also depicted as an unambiguously feminine one. Drawing on the melodrama, a genre historically coded as feminine – studio-era melodramas were often called "women's weepies" – in which a viewership perceived as essentially female is incited to identify with a female protagonist, *Midsommar* incites the audience to identify with Dani as she goes through an experience characteristic of melodrama – ending a failing heterosexual relationship.[6] Due to that, *Midsommar*, like other horror films also categorized as belonging to the cycle of post-horror (Jennifer Kent's 2014 *The Babadook*, David Robert Mitchell's 2014 *It Follows* or Robert Eggers' 2015 *The Witch*) departs from the male-oriented identification strategies that have been overwhelmingly dominant in horror cinema since the 1970s – including, according to Clover, in films focusing on strong female protagonists – and renews with an earlier tradition of female-oriented gothic and horror films which, from *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941) to *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963), were cinematic adaptations of so-called "Female Gothic" literature. In doing so, following Clover's thesis, one could contend that *Midsommar* – along with other post-horror films – problematizes the issue of identification by requiring its male viewers to accept a form of cross-gender identification that has become atypical of horror films.[7]

While such an assertion is inherently debatable as it posits a male-centered strategy of identification in horror films that may be questioned, it does point at the centrality of the issue of identification in *Midsommar*. I suggest that it is essentially through Dani's eventual embrace of the Harga worldview that Aster's film questions identification, since not only does the character's shifting allegiance challenge the identification of all viewers (male, female or non-binary) with Dani, but it also enables the film to raise fundamental moral, ideological and cognitive questions as to the limits of one's capacity to adopt another's viewpoint.

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6. What I mean by "inciting" viewers to identify with a film character will be discussed in the course of this article.

7. As Clover contends, the possibility for women to identify with male characters has been largely acknowledged, while the opposite has not, "presumably on the assumption that men's interests are well served by the traditional patterns of cinematic representation" (2015: 43). Therefore, a film belonging to a traditionally male genre requiring its male viewers to identify with a female protagonist could be said to problematize filmic identification in a way that a horror film requiring its female viewers to identify with male protagonists would not.

Normality *vs* monstrous others

In keeping with the trope of the Final Girl, Dani's survival is depicted as a rebirth,[8] yet in Dani's case this rebirth is triggered not by her defeating any monster, but by becoming a part of the film's murderous community. As she joins the Hargas and kills her former boyfriend, Dani appears to heal from her trauma and begin a new life. In order to ponder upon the issues raised by this inclusion-as-rebirth, let us first examine to what extent the Hargas stand for horror's archetypal monstrous others.

As Robin Wood famously analyzed, American horror films typically depict a deadly conflict between protagonists embodying normality and a monster embodying otherness. The other is therefore represented as a monster threatening normality, one who can only be dealt with "in one of two ways: either by rejecting it and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself" (2018: 77). Wood's theory suggests horror films rely on a conflict between diametrically opposed embodiments of normality and of monstrous otherness, which does not mean that the monster is necessarily feared and shunned as many "progressive" horror films are characterized by their propensity to encourage the viewers to identify with the monstrous others (2018: 83). However, in the recent *Horror Film and Otherness*, Adam Lowenstein argues that Wood opposes normality and monstrous otherness in an excessively rigid and dichotomic way. Many, if not most, horror films rather stage "variations on self and other that cannot be fixed but are always shifting, always metamorphosing" (2022: 06). To Lowenstein, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1967), a film that blurs the boundary between the self (the humans) and the monstrous others (the zombies) and "insists on a constantly transforming otherness rather than on a neatly delineated 'self versus other', 'normality versus monstrous' structure" (2022: 11), is highly representative of how most horror films associate normality and otherness. Blurring the boundary between normality and otherness, rather than simply dramatizing their conflict, is what constitutes the veritable basic formula of horror films according to Lowenstein.

At first glance, Wood's thesis seems particularly well suited to describe *Midsommar*, whose narrative structure is typical of folk horror, a subgenre focusing on the violent confrontation between protagonists embodying normality and a community embodying a form of "primitive" otherness – be they the cannibal Amazonian natives of Ruggero Deodato's

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8. While Clover does not mention rebirth as a narrative characteristic of the Final Girl, she does identify Ellen Ripley, who undergoes a literal rebirth in the *Alien* franchise, as a quintessential Final Girl (2015: 40).

Cannibal Holocaust (1980),[9] or the Pagan Scottish islanders of *The Wicker Man*.[10] In addition, *Midsommar* does suggest that both groups have diametrically opposed and antagonistic worldviews, as I suggest below. On the other hand, Aster's film also seems to fit Lowenstein's theory of horror films questioning and blurring the boundary between normality and monstrous otherness, not only because Dani eventually crosses the gap between both groups by joining the Hargas, but also because, as we shall see, one may not unequivocally consider this community as monstrous. However, both Wood and Lowenstein posit that horror films enable viewers to identify with the monstrous other, at least to some degree. I suggest that it is by challenging this fundamental trope of horror that *Midsommar* most radically subverts the generic expectations of horror, and initiates a reflection on the very possibility of identifying with others.

The ambiguous monstrosity of the Hargas

While the concept of monster is central to most theories of horror cinema, it is unclear whether the antagonists of folk horror films may indeed be deemed monsters. Of course, the term monster does not solely apply to supernatural creatures, but humans were historically qualified as monsters when they possessed physical deformities, which the antagonists of folk horror often do not, the Hargas being a case in point. Nonetheless, as Jean-François Chassay argues, the word "monster" is now widely understood as an exclusively moral quality: one deems "monstrous" a human being with moral – and ideological – beliefs that one utterly rejects as alien, distinct from one's own and unacceptable (2021: 11-14). It is with

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9. Needless to say, the term "primitive" is a highly problematic one, conveying various Eurocentric biases. As soon as 1954, Claude Lévi-Strauss warned that "the idea of a primitive society is a delusion". As Lévi-Strauss points out, the main criteria used to deem a society "primitive" are usually their existence outside of industrial civilizations, and their lack of a written language. Obviously, such criteria do not apply to all the communities of folk horror. The community of *Midsommar,* for instance, seems to evolve outside of industrial civilizations, yet it does have a written language. As the "folk" of "folk horror" implies, another criterion to define the communities of this subgenre is their belief in archaic folklore – another problematic concept one may be hard pressed to define. In this article, I use the term "primitive" keeping in mind that *Midsommar* questions its Eurocentric biases, given the film's focus on one's difficulty to understand a worldview deemed as other.

10. Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* is not always included as part of the folk horror corpus. For instance, it is absent from Adam Scovell's 2017 study of the subgenre. Nonetheless, the film does meet two of the criteria listed by Scovell to define folk horror: "a work that uses folklore, either aesthetically or thematically, to imbue itself with a sense of the arcana for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes / a work that presents a clash between such arcana within close proximity to some form of modernity, often with social parameters" (7). My assumption is that Deodato's film is not usually included as part of the Folk Horror corpus due to its plot opposing American embodiments of modernity to a foreign tribal culture deemed "primitive", whereas folk horror films such as *The Wicker Man* typically display a clash between a folkloric community and embodiments of modernity from the same country (typically Great Britain). Since *Midsommar* also stages a clash between American "moderns" and non-American "primitives", I propose to adopt a larger view of folk horror that would include every horror film staging such a cultural confrontation between "modern" individuals and "primitive" communities.

this moral definition of the word that the communities of folk horror may be said to also embody a form of monstrous otherness.

However, even before Dani's eventual inclusion within the Harga community, *Midsommar* carefully prevents the viewers from easily categorizing the Hargas as monsters, whose worldview ought to be fully rejected as an unacceptable departure from the Western norm. Which is not to say that the film reverses the trope – turning the other into a utopian alternative to a monstrous Western norm – as the viewers cannot easily disregard the murderous practices of the Hargas and consider human sacrifice as a morally acceptable practice.

While the community initially appears as a loving, eco-friendly and tightly knit group of whom the American characters are in awe, any viewer used to the codes of folk horror expects this idyllic façade to hide a monstrous quality about to resurface, yet when the first sign of the Hargas' darker nature emerges – the characters witness the violent ritual suicide of two elders jumping off a cliff – the American characters, while shocked, refuse to cast off the Hargas as monsters. Instead, they display an openness to cultural diversity in keeping with the liberal views to be expected from a group of contemporary young American social science students, and especially from a group composed of several anthropology students desirous to study and understand other worldviews. Christian even (awkwardly) tries to comfort a shocked Dani by openly advocating the necessity to be open to cultural differences: "that's cultural, you know? We stick our elders in nursing homes. I'm sure they find that disturbing". Upon discovering the ritual murders, viewers are therefore prevented from unambiguously considering the Hargas as monsters, as the film has stressed that their ritual sacrifices serve a religious and cultural purpose which, from their perspective, is in no way immoral. And yet, how can one manifest cultural openness towards a murderous community?

Although this question enables *Midsommar* to mock the cultural archetype of the young, open-minded American liberal – Christian's call for cultural openness is particularly ironic given the character's fate –, the film does not problematize one's desire to understand otherness so as to advocate a reactionary worldview whereby only the Western viewpoint should be valued and respected. In fact, such a perspective is implicitly criticized as the Hargas are driven to murder because of similarly xenophobic beliefs.[11]

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11. The Harga ritual serves a dual purpose: using the foreigners as mating partners to ensure the community's genetic renewal, then symbolically purifying the community by killing off these aliens. Interestingly, the aforementioned whiteness characteristic of the Hargas, combined with their habit of murdering all foreigners, has been interpreted as a criticism of white supremacy (Albin and Ward, 2020). Such a reading is notably legitimized by the various scenes during which *Midsommar,* echoing Jordan Peele's 2017 *Get Out,* stresses the

It is in such a context of morally ambiguous characterization of the Hargas that Dani's rebirth as one of them initiates a reflection upon the philosophical and ethical issues related to one's capacity to understand otherness and experience the point of view of an other.

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Modern Americans and the Hargas: Two antagonistic viewpoints

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While problematizing any moral assessment of the Hargas, *Midsommar* also depicts the community as radically distant from the Westerners from an ideological and cognitive standpoint, thus further complexifying the viewers' identification with Dani once she joins them.

Through a strategy of aesthetic dissonance, the opening scene foreshadows the conflictual opposition between two diametrically opposed, antagonistic worldviews that the rest of the film will stage. The first shots evoke a harmonious relationship between humankind and nature through the melodious association of Swedish traditional singing with still shots of the wilderness, a harmony nonetheless eliciting a certain sense of dread, as the mournful singing emphasizes the threat of the inhospitable natural setting. This harmony is brutally interrupted by the ringing of a phone and a synchronous cut to a long shot of an American suburb, followed by several shots closing in on a particular house. The jarring quality of this brutal change of tone, setting, and editing rhythm, establishes the conflictual opposition between a modern American (or Western) perspective and a more traditional, archaic viewpoint.

Once the American characters arrive at the Hargas', the gap separating the viewpoints of the two groups is constantly emphasized. The Americans bear many attributes of modernity that jar in the traditional community. Christian's friend Mark (Will Poulter), whose presence brings comic relief through the first half of the film, smokes an electronic cigarette in the middle of a timeless ceremony and is afraid of catching Lyme disease while walking in the woods. His incapacity to fit in with the community gives rise to some tragicomic episodes, such as when he urinates on a tree which happens to be sacred for the Hargas, thus antagonizing them.

Josh (William Jackson Harper), and in a lesser degree Christian himself, are defined by their academic, rationalistic perspectives, due to

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contrast between the whiteness of the Hargas and the blackness of Josh, the only African American protagonist, in order to emphasize the threat looming upon the latter, isolated within a potentially hostile racially homogeneous group.

which they often appear cold, calculating and self-centered. Both characters are anthropology students planning on writing their Ph.D. theses on the Hargas, yet their desire to analyze and document the society (up until the Hargas' murderous intentions are revealed) does not enable them to breach the cultural divide separating them from the community: competing against one another in search of academic glory, they end up disrespecting the Harga culture, in spite of their willingness to appear culturally respectful. Josh notably sneaks into the Harga temple to take pictures of their scriptures even though he had been explicitly forbidden to do so. This rather bleak depiction of a heartless, self-centered and rationalistic American perspective contrasts with the Hargas' arguably even more upsetting mistrust of rationality. Indeed, the community willingly produces mentally ill individuals through inbreeding in order for them to act as oracles in charge of writing the scriptures. As an elder explains to Josh, the oracle is "unclouded by normal cognition". The sacred rules followed by the Hargas are therefore dictated by an oracle willingly selected for their incapacity to use rationality to lead and organize the community.

But it is certainly in their animist worldview that the Hargas are the most culturally and intellectually distant from the American characters and from the viewers – an immense majority of whom, one may safely assume, share the worldview of the American characters on that point. The Hargas share a radical animist belief whereby everyone is connected to a larger whole and nothing fundamentally separates humans, animals, plants, and non-organic matter – a worldview inherently incompatible with the belief in individual consciousness that is so essential to modern (Western) sensibilities. Communion, acting as one being, seems to be a central Harga value, as indicated by their homogeneous clothes as well as by their many rituals, such as dancing and singing, filmed with long shots stressing the perfect coordination of the participants. As the film unfolds, the viewers come to understand that the Hargas believe in a form of inter-subjectivity, each member acting as though they are feeling and thinking what every other member is simultaneously feeling and thinking. Several disturbing scenes show all the Hargas screaming and writhing while only one of them is in actual physical pain, or seemingly experiencing sexual pleasure while only one of them is actually having intercourse. Such belief in inter-subjectivity is accompanied by a belief in reincarnation so strong that several Hargas happily commit suicide through the course of the film, convinced that they shall continue to exist as part of the super-organism that is the community.

In addition, various elements suggest the group believes in the inter-connectedness not just of humans, but of all things. The film esthetically alludes to this belief through its evocative use of lighting, as the bright Swedish Midsummer sunlight that the Hargas worship constantly radiates

over everything – reverberating upon the members' white garments and blurring the boundary separating human from non-human elements.

Beyond the gruesome murders (essentially left off screen and only evoked through a few shots of the bodies of the victims), *Midsommar* mostly relies on the depiction of the inter-subjective and anti-rationalist qualities of the Harga worldview to produce its most disturbing effects. This worldview becomes a source of dread, and sometimes disgust and disbelief – such as when Christian finds a pubic hair was intentionally put in his glass in a seduction ritual. The American tourists – and the viewers alongside them – progressively discover the extent to which the Hargas' beliefs depart from the modern Western norm, thus making these characters fundamentally unpredictable and upsetting.

All this being said, one may assume that Dani's eventual embrace of the Harga worldview ought to appear as fully incomprehensible for the audience. Yet several elements enable the viewers to understand the psychological motivations of the character. Throughout the film and especially at the beginning – before the characters travel to Sweden – the modern world appears singularly cold and scary, so that even the radically alien Harga belief in inter-subjectivity may feel like an attractive alternative to that world. The scenes taking place in the United States are pervaded by a deep-seated feeling of loneliness, that the film stresses through the use of symmetry and geometrical framings. In the United States, the characters never seem to truly coexist within the frame, even when they share the same space, as various devices stress the fundamental distance separating these disconnected individualities. For instance, when the grieving Dani confronts her boyfriend, whose intention to go to Sweden she has just found out, Only Christian's reflection in the mirror is seen alongside Dani, so that the two characters seem distant and disconnected from one another even though they occupy the same room. Once they are finally reunited in the same frame later on in the scene, their disconnection is emphasized by their opposed postures (one is standing while the other is sitting before the positions are reversed).

Modern humanity thus appears trapped in a nefarious individualistic lifestyle which prevents any intersubjective relationship, a fact highlighted by the scene unveiling the suicide of Dani's sister, who killed herself and her parents by poisoning the air with their cars' exhaust gas: following a close-up on the cars' exhaust pipes strapped to two hoses, the camera slowly follows the path taken by the hoses, across two doors and up one flight of stairs; the first hose is taped on the parents' bedroom door, the other directly taped on the sister's mouth, whose dead body is revealed alongside a laptop displaying Dani's unanswered emails. Not only does this murder/suicide suggest the distress of modern life, as it was

committed with the symbols of modernity that are cars and their poison-ous emissions, it may also be interpreted as a desperate plea for intercon-nection, the hoses linking the young woman to her parents through the perverted and lethal intermediary of exhaust fumes. No matter how cul-turally strange and morally unacceptable the Hargas may seem, then, this initial representation of modernity as a nightmare of individualism and isolation ensures that all the viewers empathizing with Dani will under-stand her relief in joining a community, which, in addition to offering her the chance to take revenge on her failing boyfriend, praises communion, inter-subjectivity and a radical form of familial bond.

Dani as a challenging locus of identification

These precisions now enable us to come back to the topic that is the focus of this article: the film's challenge to the process of identification. Let us first examine the assumption that the character of Dani is the primary locus of identification throughout *Midsommar*. Dani is the main focalizer of the film: the character is present in most (though not all) scenes and her perspective guides the viewers through most of the film. According to the psychoanalysis-inspired school of identification theory, this alone would suffice to affirm that Dani is the privileged locus of identification, as most theoreticians since Christian Metz have argued that film viewers identify with the characters whose point of view they share. Yet, as Murray Smith points out in *Engaging Characters*, "most models of 'identification' [over-state] the importance of point of view to 'identification', and at the same time occlude the wide variety of other functions that point of view may perform" (1995: 83-84). Indeed, films often perceptually align the viewers to characters they tend not to identify with, and, on the other hand, view-ers may identify with characters whose point of view they barely share throughout the movie.

Such confusion between point of view and identification is one of the reasons that led Smith to propose a new theoretical model that would dis-tinguish three distinct processes former theories often indistinctly mixed up together under the concept of "identification":[12] recognition (recogniz-ing a character as character), alignment (which not only comprises per-ceptual alignment – sharing a character's perceptions – but also emo-tional and cognitive alignment – having access to a character's knowledge, thoughts and feelings) and allegiance (sympathizing with a character).

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12. Smith is so critical of the confusion raised by former identification theories that he proposes to suppress the term "identification" altogether to replace it with the less connoted "engagement". While I agree with Smith, this article still refers to the process as "identification" for the sake of clarity, notably as I refer to other identification theories which keep using that term.

Aligning with a character, Smith argues, may strongly help viewers sympathize with a character (and therefore develop the cognitive and affective link usually described as 'identification'), but alignment and allegiance remain two distinct processes.

Relying on this theory, one may safely conclude *Midsommar* does make Dani the key locus of identification throughout the film. Indeed, viewers are predominantly aligned with Dani not only on a perceptual level, but also on a cognitive and emotional level, as Dani's thoughts and feelings are more readily accessible to the audience than those of any other character. Florence Pugh's performance, combined with various narrative and stylistic devices, enables viewers to easily identify Dani's emotions and thoughts. Viewers are notably given access to Dani's subjective worldview through repeated use of what Edward Branigan terms "projection shots", i.e. shots in which "we understand what the character sees, thinks or experiences through 'metaphors'" (1984: 82) – for instance in two scenes in which the viewers see Dani's body merging with vegetation, thus reflecting the character's own distorted perception due to the hallucinogenic drugs she has then consumed. Several mental images also give viewers access to Dani's dreams.

The viewers' alignment with Dani is therefore maximal, which facilitates the process of identification permitted by the various narrative and stylistic strategies encouraging viewers to give their allegiance to the character. Chief of all, the initial traumatic sequence – her sister's murder-suicide – followed by the various scenes showing Christian's unsatisfactory emotional support, enable the film to encourage viewers to develop a strong emotional and cognitive bond with Dani that will define their engagement with the character throughout the rest of the film.

Such a bond strongly determines the viewers' reactions to Dani joining the Hargas in the second half of the film.[13] As noted above, her joining the Hargas is depicted as both an emotional and an intellectual rebirth. Given the viewers' established identification with Dani, this raises the following question: does *Midsommar* expect viewers to also experience an emotional and intellectual "rebirth", i.e. to experience the Harga worldview alongside Dani?

13. By referring to the viewer's emotional and cognitive bond with the character, one may object that this article posits a homogeneous reaction from all viewers, whereas actual emotional and cognitive responses to a film are manifold. While reception theory has indubitably proven film scholars should refrain from assuming all viewers react to a film as one, it is not the purpose of this article to study the variety of actual reactions to *Midsommar*. Instead, its focus on the film's challenge to identification requires me to shed light on the stylistic and narrative strategies it develops to favor a certain type of reaction from its viewers. The identification to Dani I refer to should therefore be understood as the identification posited by the film from an "ideal viewer", to adapt Umberto Eco's concept of the "model reader". In other words, the viewer this article discusses is the viewer as posited by the film text, rather than any empirical viewer.

While I will eventually suggest that the film does not, and that instead it reflexively points at the limits of identification, one may notice that *Midsommar* maintains the viewers' alignment with the character as she goes through her transformation. Her perceptions, as well as her emotions and thoughts – and in particular the emotional and intellectual benefits she draws from joining the Hargas – remain accessible to the viewers.

Emotionally, joining the Hargas is depicted as an opportunity for Dani to externalize her pain. Following her trauma, Dani expresses her sorrow through uncontrollable sobs that break into inhuman-sounding repressed belches, as if Dani were doing her best not to throw up all her pain. Such suggestions that Dani's grief is all the more painful as it is internalized are repeated several times throughout the course of the film. While in Sweden, the character has a nightmare in which she wakes up and witnesses her friends abandoning her, before eructing a thick black smoke in a scene interspersed with rapid shots of all the dead bodies haunting her. This scene is echoed in the last one, in which she witnesses the burning of the sacrificial pyre containing the bodies of all her American friends. A long shot first associates the crying character with the burning building pouring out thick black smoke in the background. The scene then ends with a long dissolve through which the pyre is superimposed with both the figures of the Hargas and Dani's face, which eventually breaks into an elated smile: Dani's pain, previously depicted as an internalized poison struggling to get out, has been cured through a process of objectivation and externalization, the material burning of the pyre and the communion of Dani with the Hargas being directly linked to her emotional and psychological liberation.

Midsommar thus suggests Dani's emotional healing is directly related to her intellectual transformation, her adopting a viewpoint no longer determined by a form of individualism leading to isolation, loneliness, and emotional repression. In other words, it is the Hargas' very belief in intersubjectivity and reincarnation that allows Dani to experience catharsis once she finds herself integrated within the community and authorized to release her pent-up sorrow through a ritualistic sacrifice.

Various other elements enable the viewers to surmise how Dani's intellectual transformation leads her to experience the world differently. As previously discussed, the character is drugged twice, and each time the viewers are shown her hallucinations: grass leaves sprouting from her hand, her feet becoming roots growing from the ground, and flowers moving and expanding. These subjective shots imply Dani's worldview is gradually aligning with the Hargas', as not only does she see nature as alive, but the borders between individual subjectivity and objective reality collapse. In the end, Dani's embrace of the Harga worldview is objectified

by the dress she has on once she is chosen as the May Queen, as the floral costume she wears literally erases the boundary between her body and the natural world surrounding her. As Sandra Huber describes it, "Dani transforms throughout the course of *Midsommar* and quite literally expands or grows in excess of herself, [until] she incrementally becomes covered in a lush overgrowth" (Huber, 2019).

In addition, Dani is also depicted as progressively adopting the Harga belief in inter-subjective consciousness. During the ritual suicide of two elders, Dani – like all the American characters – is shown as still intellectually distant from the Hargas, whose belief in inter-subjectivity becomes apparent for the first time. After failing to kill himself by jumping off a cliff, one of the two elders moans until he is put out of his misery. As of one voice, all the Hargas start screaming in pain along with the victim, before instantly falling silent when the man dies. Against this backdrop of perfect uniformity, the reactions of the Westerners witnessing this ritual, including Dani, chimes deeply. Each of them screams at a different time and acts out of tune, so that their belief in individuality and the Hargas' belief in inter-subjectivity are visually and orally contrasted. On the other hand, towards the end of the film, as Dani cries after seeing Christian cheat on her, she becomes integrated within the Harga inter-subjective mindset, as young Harga women surround the protagonist and start matching their own sobs with hers, until the group seems to exist as one super-being made out of undistinguishable individualities. Tellingly, this embrace of inter-subjectivity is a crucial step towards Dani externalizing her sorrow, as her sobs grow louder and turn into screams that foreshadow her final catharsis a few minutes later.

Keeping Murray Smith's distinction in mind, it is therefore apparent that the film maintains the viewers aligned with Dani all the way through her transformation. Not only do we keep perceiving what the character perceives, we also keep on understanding the intellectual and emotional processes she goes through. And yet, the allegiance of the viewers is strongly challenged throughout the whole process, since, as we have seen, identifying with Dani throughout the process would require one to embrace a worldview that is fundamentally other for an overwhelming majority of viewers, one that growingly appears as morally and intellectually opposed to the moral and intellectual beliefs that form the bedrock of the Western worldview(s). It is therefore by progressively widening the gap between the viewers' alignment and their allegiance that *Midsommar* challenges their identification with Dani and, in so doing, questions the process of identification itself.

Can the viewers go through the looking glass?

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According to the traditional model of cinematic identification (as well as to the more recent cognitive approach),[14] the fact that the film enables the viewers to identify with Dani should mean that one should experience the character's intellectual and emotional transformation with her. Fully identified with Dani, viewers should end up feeling and thinking the way the Hargas feel and think, the character acting as a gateway enabling the viewers to progressively identify with such a challenging worldview.

However, we have seen that such a straightforward embrace of the Harga viewpoint is challenging, to say the least – and *Midsommar* problematizes this challenging identification by including various distancing elements underlining the moral, cultural and ideological obstacles separating the overwhelming majority of viewers from the Hargas. Indeed, though Dani remains the main locus of identification, the second half of the film contains several scenes during which the viewers are aligned with other American characters who come to represent a more stable, recognizable Western worldview. Given the terrible ordeal these characters are subjected to, viewers are likely to sympathize with them, thus splitting their allegiance between two antagonistic points of view. For instance, while Dani is being celebrated as the new May Queen, the sufferings of Christian are shown through cross cutting – drugged then led to participate in a disturbing sexual ritual, he is then paralyzed and stuffed into a bear skin, awaiting to be burnt alive. When seen from the perspective of the American characters other than Dani, the Harga ritual killings are thus depicted as the monstrous acts of a group cementing its unity by sadistically torturing and murdering foreigners.

Cross cutting, multiple points of view and various other film techniques thus keep the viewers torn in-between a dynamic of identification with Dani and therefore with the Hargas on the one hand, and a rejection of the Hargas as monstrous others on the other hand. Such distancing effects underline the problematic nature of the process of identification viewers are engaged in, and enable *Midsommar* to reflexively question the very possibility of identifying with a viewpoint as radically other as the Hargas'.

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14. First developed by Torben Grodal, the cognitive approach rejects the psychoanalytic roots of the traditional models of identification, yet defends the same initial hypothesis, i.e. that cinematic identification enables viewers to feel and think what the characters they are identifying with feel and think. As Laurent Jullier summarizes, viewers identifying with a character "simulate [a character's] thoughts, perceptions and reasoning" (2014: 164, my translation).

One may wonder whether in doing so, *Midsommar* sheds light on cinema's inherent incapacity to propagate a worldview founded on beliefs other than individual consciousness or on a clearly delineated border between the self and the outside world. Does the film underline the viewers' difficulty in identifying with the Hargas in order to suggest cinema is fundamentally incapable of conveying such a non-Western viewpoint? This hypothesis harks back to debates concerning the ontological ideological biases of cinema as explored by the first theoreticians of the cinematographic apparatus, most famously by Jean-Louis Baudry in his 1970 article translated in English as "Ideological Effects of the Basic Apparatus". According to Baudry, cinema inherited from pictorial conventions known as the *perspectiva artificialis,* conventions which vehicle the ideological biases of Renaissance humanism. The camera, Baudry argues, produces "a recentering or at least a displacement of the center (which settles itself in the eye) [and] assures the setting up of the 'subject' as the active center and origin of meaning" (1970: 40). Therefore, he argues, cinema necessarily reinforces the belief in a unified "transcendental subject" (1970: 43). As a materialist thinker, Baudry is obviously critical of the "subjectivist and anthropocentric" biases of the cinematographic apparatus (Guido, 2006: 10). Since their worldview is based on non-anthropocentric values and intersubjective spiritualism, the Hargas share a belief system that cinema would be ontologically incapable of conveying properly, according to Baudry's theory.

Yet throughout the film, a wide array of techniques are used in order to enable viewers to experience the diegetic world according to the mindset of the Hargas. I already mentioned the special effects animating the flowers, or the way the lighting blurs the boundaries between individuals and between the self and the outside world. Both these effects do seem to enable viewers to cinematically experience an inter-subjective, spiritualist worldview. If the film simultaneously distances viewers from such a perspective, it is therefore not in order to point at some ideological pre-determination of the cinematic apparatus, since the film does develop means to convey a non-Western viewpoint.[15] Instead, I suggest that such distancing effects enable *Midsommar* to reflect upon the limits of empathy – an affect playing a crucial role in cinematic identification according to most theories.

15.   By enabling viewers to experience the Harga point of view, *Midsommar* then seems to confirm the validity of the criticisms addressed to the theories of the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus, often said to essentialize an ideologically neutral medium, the ideological effects of which merely reflect the sensibilities of the filmmakers themselves. For a critical outlook of the theory of the cinematic apparatus, see Guido, 2006.

The limits of empathy

Upon the film's release, various reviewers were critical of the film's treatment of anthropology. Richard Brody notably wrote in the *New Yorker* that Aster "uses the anthropological framework—likely unintentionally—as the basis for a smug and narrow-minded pathologizing of social science" (2019), a point of view shared by Rebecca Onion in the *Slate* article "*Midsommar*'s Real Villains Aren't Murderous Pagans. They're Grad Students." While the film may indeed appear like a gratuitous satire of anthropology, given the aforementioned irony of having anthropology students advocate cultural openness towards a community that eventually uses them as sacrificial victims, such criticism proves more meaningful than it may seem, when viewed as part of a broader reflection on empathy and on the human capacity to view the world as seen from the perspective of others.

Indeed, the question of whether anthropologists may manage to adopt the affective and cognitive worldview of the peoples they study is of crucial importance to the field. In an essay entitled "'From the Native's point of view': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding", Clifford Geertz points out that anthropology has long been believed to rely on the researcher's empathetic identification with her objects of study. A good anthropologist, one used to believe, is someone who, through an exceptional capacity for empathy, can put herself in the shoes of the peoples that she studies and experience existence the way they do, no matter how much her own worldview might differ from theirs. Humankind, Geertz argues, is essentially incapable of such a feat. Anthropologists, therefore, should rather strive to comprehend how an other experiences the world through rational, distanced analysis: studying a culture may enable one to infer how a member of said culture views the world, but one may never hope to actually experience such a worldview oneself.[16]

The students of *Midsommar* have adopted the kind of distanced, rational approach to anthropology advocated by Geertz. As we have seen, this approach proves problematic due to the characters' excessive coldness – their very lack of empathy. Neither Josh (willing to break into a forbidden sacred site to take pictures) nor Christian (apparently respectful of the Hargas yet cold and calculating in his own relationships) manifest any empathy, in that they seem too self-centered to put themselves in the

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16. "To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distance concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin. The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants […] The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to." (Geertz, 1983: 58).

shoes of others and feel the emotional damage their actions cause to others. The characters therefore caricature the cold rationality of the methodology defended by Geertz, yet this caricatural dimension is but a counterpoint to the film's more central questioning of the very empathetic approach Geertz opposes.

This approach is not evoked through one of the anthropologists. Instead, it is implicitly questioned through the film's identification processes, as the viewers are led to ponder upon the limits of this ability once Dani has turned into a Harga and they can no longer unproblematically identify with her.

Indeed, empathy has long been considered as the ability thanks to which film viewers can experience a character's emotions and thoughts. Yet as Murray Smith points out, the centrality of empathy in traditional models of identification – as well as in the more recent cognitive models – can be criticized. Smith does so by drawing upon the concepts of "central imagining" and "acentral imagining" theorized by philosopher Richard Wollheim. Central imagining refers to the process whereby one imagines experiencing something oneself.[17] With "acentral imagining", on the other hand, there is no such production of internal images: "I do not place myself "in" the scenario, so much as entertain an idea, but not from the perspective […] of any character within the scenario" (Smith, 1995: 77).

Smith argues that by positing identification occurs when viewers use empathy to "experience vicariously the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist" (1995: 77), most models of identification have assumed the process of identification to be a matter of central imagining. To Smith, however, it is through acentral imagining that we engage with characters most of the time: we rarely imagine ourselves to "be" the characters, nor do we feel what they feel or think what they think. In other words, the role of empathy in the film viewer's experience is more limited than is often assumed. Instead, Smith claims, viewers more frequently develop a link of "sympathy" with the characters, a more distanced form of emotional and intellectual engagement whereby viewers evaluate characters and react to them, instead of reacting as though they were them.

Smith's model of identification helps shed light on the way *Midsommar* challenges the assumption that viewers may share the worldview of the characters they identify with. Once Dani has become a Harga, the limits of the viewers' empathetic link with the character become

17. "Central imagining is often expressed in the form 'I imagine…' […] If we say 'I imagine jumping from the top of the building', we imply that we represent this event to ourselves, as it were, from the inside […] Central imagining […] may also involve simulations of the internal states and values of the person or character functioning as the vehicle of the central imagining" (Smith, 1995: 76).

apparent, as experiencing the radically other worldview Dani is now experiencing becomes an emotional and cognitive impossibility. One may comprehend this worldview and therefore evaluate it (using one's own ethical, affective and intellectual mindset to do so), but comprehending it is not the same thing as experiencing it, which the film frequently underlines by multiplying elements stressing the extent to which the viewers' emotional and intellectual reactions necessarily chime with the diegetic reactions of the Hargas and of Dani.[18]

One may notably think of the film's depiction of gore and blood. The physiological reactions these unmistakably provoke in the viewers (be it disgust, laughter, or even – in the case, let us hope, of a very small minority of viewers – sadistic enjoyment) prevent them from emotionally experiencing the Harga worldview. Bodily fluids such as blood are shown to be an inherent part of Harga culture – menstrual blood is even used as part of a love potion. On the other hand, most viewers' reactions originate from a cultural background in which the sight of blood and other bodily fluids has long been considered taboo. Indeed, most modern cultures consider bodily fluids to be an abject source of disgust and horror. Abjection, as Julia Kristeva analyzed, arises from all that threatens the dissolution of the border separating the self from the outside world (1980) – a feeling which, as *Midsommar* shows, may only exist in a mindset believing in the hermetic unity of the human body – why would the Hargas, with their intersubjective and animist mindsets, find blood and bodily fluids repellent? The film makes this cultural divide very clear when the Harga priestess asserts that the suicides of the elders are a joyful event as the dead take part in "a cycle of death and rebirth", an assertion that, from a non-Harga perspective, appears singularly quaint given the profusion of blood and smashed body parts the suicides led to. Any viewer experiencing abjection at the sight of smashed body parts may comprehend the Harga worldview as described by the priestess, but not experience it.

Another example is to be found in the Hargas' sexual traditions. When a drugged Christian is forced to have sex with a young woman, the loss of virginity of the latter is celebrated in another instance of inter-subjective communion: the sexual act is performed by the couple in front of a group of naked women, whose chanting turns into a synchronized moan of sexual pleasure, suggesting Christian is (at least symbolically) procreating with the whole group rather than with a specific individual. By breaking the taboos of public exhibitions of nudity and sexuality, it is once again safe to argue that the scene distances most viewers from the Harga

18. Here too, I do not wish to imply that the viewers' emotional and intellectual reactions are homogeneous. I simply claim that these reactions, varied as they may be, necessarily jar with those of the Hargas, so long as the viewers share such moral and intellectual characteristics as an ethical rejection of human sacrifice or a belief in individual consciousness, which, it is safe to say, is the case for an overwhelming majority of them.

worldview: one cannot but feel the disgust and unease that our modern sensibilities associate with this sexual taboo.

In addition, as Ari Aster himself pointed out,[19] the aesthetics of the Harga rituals could be said to border on kitsch – at least from a "modern" point of view – due to the use of excessively colorful and richly adorned costumes, culminating in both Dani's gigantic flowery overgrowth and the grotesque dressing up of the sacrificed American tourists, some of whom are filled with flowers, fruit and straw, while Christian is wrapped in a bear skin. Viewers may thus be led to react to such sights with the distancing laughter arising from the contrast between the ideological seriousness of the Hargas (wholeheartedly engaged in their sacred rituals) and our "modern" perception of their rituals as kitsch.

Empathy, *Midsommar* thus points out, is a limited ability: viewers may never fully experience the worldview of others as no one may fully rid oneself of one's own subjective prism. By fully encouraging viewers to identify with Dani before having the character embrace a radically other worldview, the film forces viewers to reflect upon the nature of the emotional and cognitive link that they had previously developed with the character: those of us convinced that empathy was enabling them to feel and think what Dani was feeling and thinking must accept that no matter how much sympathy they still feel for her once she becomes a Harga, her experiences have become fundamentally alien. From a metafilmic perspective, *Midsommar* therefore shows that empathetic identification may, at the very least, be a phenomenon much weaker than traditionally assumed in most models of identification. In addition to feeling sympathy for a character, viewers must necessarily assume this character's worldview is morally, ideologically, and phenomenologically similar to their own in order for an empathetic link to be created.[20]

Conclusion

By challenging the fundamental generic assumption that horror films ought to enable viewers to identify with the monstrous other, *Midsommar* questions two commonly held beliefs, i.e. that both empathy and cinema enable one to experience someone else's worldview.

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19. "We [pursued] something that could very easily fall into kitsch. I don't know if we did fall into kitsch, that's not my call to make, but that was the fun of this" (O'Falt, 2019).
20. Such a reflection points at the ethical issue of a model of identification relying mostly on empathy: if a model posits that viewers identify with a character using an ability which, it turns out, only enables them to establish a bond with characters viewed as similar to themselves, then film and other art forms can no longer be thought of as means to open up to other worldviews. A model relying on sympathy, however, does not face the same problem.

Midsommar exemplifies the tendency of the films belonging to the post-horror cycle to subvert some of horror's generic conventions so as to develop aesthetic and thematic concerns leaning towards the realm of "art cinema" (Church, 2021: 8). Due to its favoring such devices as non-linear narratives, non-naturalistic acting or open endings (Bordwell, 1979), art cinema is often considered as a more "intellectual" approach to film than mainstream commercial cinema. Horror, on the other hand, is frequently understood as a genre favoring raw emotional investment, if not purely physiological responses, as Linda Williams underlined in her influential study of "body horror" (Williams, 1991). It is therefore unsurprising that a cycle of films blending elements of horror and art cinema would be particularly well suited to explore cinematic identification, which is both a cognitive and an emotional process. In fact, it is my assumption that many, if not most, post-horror films, distort the traditional model of cinematic identification, although further work would be needed to support this hypothesis.

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A Ghost Story (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

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Abstract: The representation of the spectral on screen raises questions about the porosity of the boundary between the visible and the invisible, absence and presence, the living and the dead, the real and the imaginary. This article focuses on *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), identified as representative of post-horror cinema and which stands out from Hollywood conventions with a refusal of the spectacular and graphic horror and a focus on temporality, contemplation, memory, and the impossible mourning of a loss. We will analyze some of the foremost features of the film, the way in which the ghost is represented, his relationships to space, to the human environment and to time. We will then examine the film's links with modernist literature and slow cinema and we will finally discuss its relation with the Gothic mode.

Keywords: Ghost, Post-Horror, Haunting, Memory, Time, Modernism, Gothic

Résumé : La représentation du spectral au cinéma pose la question de la porosité de la frontière entre le visible et l'invisible, l'absence et la présence, le vivant et le mort, le réel et l'imaginaire. Cet article se focalise sur *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), film représentatif du courant « *post-horror* » à l'écran et qui se démarque de la convention hollywoodienne par un refus du spectaculaire et de l'horreur graphique et un travail sur la temporalité, la contemplation, la mémoire et l'impossible deuil. Nous analyserons les caractéristiques principales du film, la manière dont le fantôme est représenté, ses relations à l'espace, à l'environnement humain et au temps. Nous examinerons ensuite les liens du film avec la littérature moderniste et le « *slow cinema* » et pour finir sa relation avec le mode gothique.

Mots-clés : fantôme, *post-horror*, hantise, mémoire, temps, modernisme, gothique

Menegaldo – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

145

Introduction

The figure of the ghost, present since the early days of cinematography, prominently manifests in Hollywood cinema of the 1940s/50s (*The Uninvited*, Lewis Allen, 1944, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, Joseph Mankiewicz, 1947, *The Portrait of Jennie*, William Dieterle, 1948, etc.), as well as in horror films of the 1970s-80s (*Fog*, John Carpenter, 1980, *The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick, 1980). It also takes on parodic forms as seen in Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988) or Ivan Reitman's *Ghost Busters* (1984). The ghost film blurs genre boundaries, blending horror film codes with Gothic thriller, melodrama, and even satirical or burlesque comedy.

Some theoreticians go as far as identifying cinema itself as a narrative of revenants, perceiving a structure of "haunting" constantly at work, whether or not specific films explicitly deal with specters, ectoplasms, or ghosts. This is notably articulated by Jacques Derrida, who in Ken Mc Mullen's film *Ghostdance* makes observations about the spectral nature of cinema. Echoing Roland Barthes' analyses on photography in *Camera Lucida*, he states:

> To be haunted by a ghost is to have the memory of what one has never lived in the present, to have the memory of what, fundamentally, has never had the form of presence. Cinema is a 'phantomachia'. Let the ghosts return. Cinema plus psychoanalysis gives us a science of the ghost. Modern technology, despite its scientific appearance, actually multiplies the power of ghosts. The future belongs to ghosts (Mc Mullen, 1996: 129. My translation).[1]

Derrida also distinguishes between the "spectre" and the "revenant":

> In the series of roughly equivalent words that precisely designate haunting, 'spectre', unlike 'revenant', says something of the spectral. The spectre is first and foremost visible. But it's a visible invisibility, the visibility of a body that is not present in flesh and bone. It resists the intuition to which it gives itself, it is not tangible. 'Ghost' retains the same reference to 'phainesthai', to appearing for the sight, to the brilliance of day, to phenomenality. And what happens with spectrality, with ghostliness – not necessarily with revenance – is that what is almost visible becomes visible only to the extent that it is not seen in flesh and bone (Mc Mullen, 1996: 129. My translation).

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1.   Propos repris par Derrida dans son entretien avec Bernard Stiegler in *Échographies de la télévision*, chapitre « spectrographie », p. 129.

This distinction between the "spectral" and the "revenant" is pertinent to the various ways in which cinema brings ghosts into being. Indeed, some ghost films do not present ghosts in an evanescent form supposed to "translate" their spectral dimension (often through photographic superimposition), but rather as characters displaying a body "in flesh and bone", thus equating their presence in the film with that of (still) living characters, effectively blurring the distinction between worlds in the perception that is given.

The representation of the spectral, whether explicit or suggested, raises questions about the porosity of the boundary between the visible and the invisible, absence and presence, the living and the dead, the real and the imaginary. The ghost is a source of disturbance, whether perceptual, intellectual, or hermeneutic. It is an imprint, a trace of a reality often disturbing and associated with intimate or historical trauma. It also concerns temporal dimensions, the grip of the past on the present, inducing various narrative, enunciative, and figurative strategies. The ghost is a source of uncertainty. It is an intruder, a revealer, or a catalyst. It interrogates the relationship between what is on screen and what remains off-screen, appearance and disappearance, and it raises the question of the body that displays its spectral identity (through transparency, superimposition, shadow projection, heavy makeup, or more conventional attributes such as the white sheet, clanking chains, or more original signs like the scent of mimosa in *The Uninvited* (Lewis Allen, 1944).

This spectral body is sometimes represented in a way that makes it indistinguishable from a "normal" human body. This is the case in *The Sixth Sense* (Night Shyamalan, 1999) which subverts the spectator's contract,[2] and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2001), which revisits Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* with a new narrative twist. These two films, along with others such as *The Devil's Backbone* or *Crimson Peak*, (Guillermo Del Toro, 2001, 2015), mark a renewal of the ghost figure at the turn of the 21st century. Among the most recent films, *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2015) offers an innovative treatment (despite various borrowings, particularly from John Carpenter), at the intersection of different figures. *The Awakening* (Nick Murphy, 2011) inventively exploits haunted house tropes and works with "jumpscare" effects on the viewer.

Some of these films featuring ghosts belong to a recent trend that has been labelled "slow horror", "elevated horror" or "post-horror". According to David Church who examines these different concepts and provides an

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2. In classic cinema, the viewer expects to identify ghosts because they are differentiated in their appearance from living human characters. In *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*, the true status of the ghosts is only revealed toward the end of the film though minor signs are provided as the narrative develops. The viewer is thus manipulated.

MENEGALDO – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

147

in-depth analysis of various films such as *It Follows*, these films constitute a cycle associated with the long tradition of art-horror[3] cinema and with modernist literature and art. This cycle may be defined by specific narrative and formal features that go against the conventions of horror cinema:

> Stylistically, post-horror films evince minimalism over maximalism, largely eschewing jump scares, frenetic editing, and energetic and/or handheld cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movements, and stately narrative pacing (Church, 2021: 11).

In this article we will focus on *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017) which has been identified as representative of post-horror. We will analyze some of the foremost features of the film, the way in which the ghost is represented, his relationships to space, to the human environment and to time. We will then examine the film's links with modernist literature and slow cinema and we will finally discuss its relation with the Gothic mode and why it may not be a "horror film".

A Ghost Story, an ambitious, original and inventive film, uses conventional props like the white bedsheet that ostentatiously signals spectral status, but it stands out from Hollywood conventions with a refusal of the spectacular and the horrific and a focus on temporality, contemplation, memory, and the impossible mourning of a loss. The male protagonist (Casey Affleck) is an unnamed musician only referred to as the letter C in the credits. Right after his accidental death, he returns as a ghost to the house where he lived with his partner M. (Rooney Mara) and becomes a silent witness to her life, her difficult mourning, and her eventual departure. The ghost remains in the house, a passive and mute observer of the lives of successive tenants, and ends up travelling through time, both past and future, while staying in the same space, in a constantly evolving setting, before returning to the initial situation, having experienced the destruction of the house and the moment of its first building.

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3. This concept was first coined by Noël Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990). Carroll defines art-horror as an emotion felt when we read a text or watch a film in which a monster (Dracula, a zombie, etc.) triggers emotions like fear, threat or even disgust because the reader/spectator identifies with the protagonists. Thus we are "art-horrified" by an object like Dracula or any other monster. This concept was revisited by Joan Hawkins' *Cutting Edge. Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde* (2000). Hawkins refers more specifically to films (and other art works) that blend the codes of horror with the stylistic and narrative strategies of "art films" such as *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1935) or *Eyes Without a Face* (Georges Franju, 1960).

Menegaldo – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

148

Featuring the ghost and playing with conventions

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While this film also deals with themes of solitude, trauma, and the relationship between the living and the dead, it distinguishes itself from previous films in various ways. Whereas *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* relied on a dual state of ignorance — both the audience and the characters being unaware of their ghostly status — the character C is fully aware of his spectral identity, as is the audience. Additionally, the ghost is visually identified from the outset — in stark contrast to the other films where the spectral figure is indistinguishable from the living — in the most stereotypical way possible, depicted as a body draped in a sheet with two eye holes, reminiscent of children's stories and comics.

However, this representation harkens back to a 17th-Century tradition where corpses were buried in shrouds. Thanks to the meticulous work of the costume designer, this portrayal avoids comedy or ridicule and the character imposes its presence, often motionless, in almost every shot, even evoking a form of emotion and a process of identification despite the lack of a face, another stark difference from the films mentioned above where facial expressiveness is highlighted (Nicole Kidman, Bruce Willis, and child actors in *The Others*). Hence another specificity, the constant association of the viewer with the ghost's point of view, even though many shots are not subjective. The ghost, hyper-visible to the audience, remains invisible to the other characters in the diegesis, except in one sequence where the two small Spanish-speaking children seem to sense his presence without actually seeing him.

Another distinctive feature is the choice of a square format, which is relatively rare in modern cinema. This suggests a form of nostalgia (claimed) for the classic cinema of the 1950s and also creates an impression of claustrophobia, the idea that the ghost is a prisoner of the house as he is of the box-like frame. The vintage aspect is reinforced by the rounded edges of the frame and the slightly desaturated pastel photography. This aspect ratio (1.33.1) accentuates the centripetal nature of the image, as also seen in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) highlighting the foreground and background and certain details that escape the wide format. The sense of confinement is reinforced by numerous frame-within-the frame shots that circumscribe the figure of the ghost, often filmed behind the crossbars of a window, restricting his space. While the camera often films the ghost whole and center frame, numerous metonymic shots fragment the ghost's body, relegated sometimes to the edge of the frame, such as at the moment when M.'s hand stretches towards C. almost touching the bottom of his sheet while the upper part of his body remains off screen.

Menegaldo — *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

149

Despite the deliberately conventional physical appearance,[4] the film rejects most tropes of classic ghost films and all spectacular effects, except at certain moments that seem to function as parodic nods to the horror genre's tradition, particularly in the scene where the ghost, taking advantage of its invisibility, terrifies the children of the Latino woman who rented the house after his partner's departure. Here, we find the most classic effects of poltergeist films: door knob slightly moving, door hinges creaking, objects seeming to move by themselves, plates and glasses breaking, etc. The difference with classic poltergeist films is that we do see the ghost holding a glass of milk as if it were suspended in the air, then throwing it on the floor. An earlier scene already conveyed the ghost's emotions, the moment it expresses a form of jealousy (as M. appears to be courted by another man) by knocking books off a shelf, allowing a glimpse of Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*, another of *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Gabriel Garcia Marquez) and, most notably, Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House and Other Stories*. These literary references will be analyzed later. Aside from these two sequences, the ghost only manifests himself to human beings once through an initially unidentified gesture in a scene shown twice from different angles with a parallax effect. The first occurrence takes place at the beginning of the film before the ghost's emergence, when C, who died in a car accident, is still alive. A loud noise heard at night awakens the couple, who cannot identify its source. The scene is repeated towards the end of the film, but this time we see the ghost, after observing the couple in bed, abruptly sitting on the piano keys, causing the intense noise that signaled its presence in the first occurrence. *A Ghost Story* portrays a being aware of his own painful spectral presence in a world that is no longer his own. Instead of following a character unaware of his status, we are identified with the viewpoint, if not the consciousness, of this supernatural being.

C. is mute, can't communicate with M. or any other human being and we do not have access to his inner thoughts or desires. In the Greek tradition, the souls of the dead have no memory or desire. Here, only physical reactions to certain events and postures outline a psychological portrait of the ghost whose emotions we feel — solitude, nostalgia for the past, a sense of loss, jealousy, anger, and even a form of metaphysical anxiety. The ghost, deprived of memory, is a simple witness, a passive spectator of events unfolding before its eyes. It has no notion of the passage of time and cannot distinguish between different forms of experienced time.

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4.   In fact, it took costume designer Annell Brodeur a great deal of work to create the sheet, and we're a long way from a simple stage prop. Underneath the sheet a hoop skirt and tulle petticoats provide more ampleness to the costume, enabling aesthetic shots of the ghost (comment in DVD bonus).

MENEGALDO – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

150

Spectral temporality

The film indeed plays with the temporal dimension on several levels, with the ghost oscillating between different temporal layers — present, past, and future — with moments of intense stasis, moments of acceleration, and dizzying ellipses.[5]

One of the characteristic traits is the temporal stretching through the choice of fixed shots and particularly long, static takes, early on in the film. Just after the accident scene, the camera shifts from a close shot of C.'s bloodied head thrust on the steering wheel to an overhead shot of a white sheet covering the corpse. The low angle reverse close shot of M's face, seen from the dead man's perspective conveys the emotion of the character, without melodramatic effect. A hand lifts the sheet, revealing Affleck's face in close up. We cut to a carefully composed long take under a cold greenish light. First the camera frames M. and a nurse standing close to the body lying on a slab. After the nurse's departure, the camera remains static with M. watching over the body and finally covering it before leaving. The static shot endures for almost a minute before C. suddenly rises, as if answering our expectations. During the whole scene, diegetic sounds fill that space, footsteps, pops and buzzes, but mostly a low drone which intensifies when the ghost revives.

The most daring and provocative sequence occurs when M., the pie in real time. Through a series of subjective shots of the ghost, first off-screen then within the frame, we see how a woman (Linda, the landlord) enters through the front door, leaves a pie wrapped in aluminum foil, and a note. A subjective zoom denotes C.'s desire to decipher the written message, which motivates his actions. M. then enters the room, moves toward the ghost's location, reads the message (the ghost is behind her), and grabs the pie, placing it on a table. She washes dishes, then starts to cut and eat the pie, framed by a motionless camera. Then, she abruptly shifts her position and the camera cuts to her, sitting on the floor, almost prostrated at the base of a kitchen cabinet as she slowly goes on eating the pie, observed by the ghost, now very visible in the background. This perfectly static long take lasts nearly four minutes, aiming to express both M's pain and resilience. Very suddenly, M. gets up and runs to the bathroom to vomit, crossing through C.'s space. The ghost, having entered her visual field, remains out of focus and we have no subjective shot from his point of view. We, viewers, on the other side of the screen are identified with the ghost, witnessing a disturbing scene, seemingly outside of human experience.

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5.   See on that aspect Victor Iturregui-Motiloa (2020). Article in Spanish.

MENEGALDO – A Ghost Story (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

151

During the evening party organized by new tenants after the departure of the Latino family, this temporal stretching is also conveyed — though differently — in the long nihilistic monologue of a character called the "prognosticator" (played by Will Oldham, an indie musician) trying to convince his friends that all human action is insignificant, that we are all doomed to disappear, and so is any work of art and even the earth and the universe. This monologue, lasting over six minutes and edited with few cuts, starts with a form of dialogue but shifts very quickly to a single discourse filmed in two one minute takes crosscutting at times on the listening ghost. At the end of the scene, electricity crackles and the speaker lifts his eye towards the overhead lamp shining more brightly, signaling the ghost's presence. As the sound of the pop music subsides, we cut abruptly to the same lamp now deprived of bulb. The house is now empty, the floor full of litter, torn wall paper, plaster debris, and silence prevails. We only hear the wind whirling and a scratching noise as the camera exploring the place discloses the ghost fumbling for the hidden scribbled note left by M.

This emphasis on time in the prognosticator's speech ("time is a big one") prepares for C.'s subsequent temporal escapades. The passage of time is here conveyed through changes in the setting (the house empties or fills, walls crack, paint peels), but sometimes through seasonal changes or day/night alternation. It is also marked by dissolves, camera movements, particularly lateral tracking shots, and sharp cuts.

Temporal order is also disrupted by three partial flashbacks, related or not to the main storyline. Lowery does not provide explicit markers indicating a chronological alteration (camera movement on the face indicating a dive into interiority, superimposition, dissolve). The first flashback takes place just after the ghost's fit of jealousy and alternates between two temporalities: the present moment and the couple's past around the motif of the song "I Get Overwhelmed" composed by the deceased musician just before the accident. The scene starts after a fade to black, revealing first M. then C. still alive discussing about whether or not to leave the house. C. refuses to speak about it and instead asks M. to listen to his new song. While we hear the first measures, the camera closes up on M.'s face listening intently through earphones. After a quick reverse shot on C. we shift abruptly to a medium shot of M. lying on the floor filmed from above, listening to the same song. We are back to the present before shifting again to the past and a close up on M.'s wistful and melancholy look only to revert in the following shot to the present. This time the camera follows M.'s movement as she stretches her arm to the left until her fingers almost touch the bottom of the ghost's sheet whose body remains off screen and who may be unaware of this gesture. The two timelines are distinguished by contrasts in filming and chromatic choices: cold blue light for the present, warmer tones for the happy past, close shots for the past,

MENEGALDO – A Ghost Story (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

152

medium shots filmed at ground level for the present. The scene ends with a long take in close up of M.'s face still listening followed by two quick shots (overhead and ground level) of her lying on the floor, this time separated from the ghost who is totally out of frame, just before his partner's departure. This moving scene associated with M.'s memory conveys affects that are close to nostalgia, melancholy and sadness.

The second flashback occurs just after the ghost's "suicide" attempt by jumping into the void from a high-rise building which has replaced the house, torn down by excavators. Instead of "dying" (plunging into the beyond or another level of existence), C. finds himself in the 18th century, at the time of pioneers and westward expansion. The ghost arrives in a virgin territory where a family of five immigrants (father, mother and three kids) in period clothing, settles down, the first inhabitants of the house of which they will lay the first stone. A little girl writes a message on a scrap of paper that she buries under a stone. This scene reminds the viewer of an earlier scene where M. told C. of her habit to hide secret messages in the walls of the houses she left when compelled to move.

However here tragedy soon follows when the family is brutally and unexpectedly slaughtered by Native Americans, identified only by their wild war cries off-screen and never represented. We only see the aftermath of the attack by means of a long diving shot on the victims with the ghost featuring in the frame, then two shots each intercut by a close shot of the ghost witnessing the scene: a closer shot of the father's pierced by two arrows and a shot of the younger girl's inert bloodied body. Strikingly, the camera cuts abruptly to the same body but the head has become a skull. Lowery condenses the fate of the little girl whose corpse decomposes in three brief shots until it merges with the lush grass, suggesting also the swift passage of time. Lowery ostentatiously avoids special effects, particularly morphing.

The third flashback occurs just after this episode. Without transition and by means of a straight cut, we jump forward in time as the ghost returns to a moment of his recent past, the couple's first discovery of the house. The ghost is framed in medium shot, motionless in an empty room. As the camera closes up on him, a noise is heard off screen. A reverse shot shows the couple (C and M.) visiting the house with Linda the real estate agent who brought the cake in a previous sequence. Seen from the ghost's point of view, the couple is sometimes clearly visible, sometimes out of focus, only filmed in silhouette in the dim light. The song composed by C. is heard again. A montage of a series of short scenes follows, summarizing the couple's life in their daily activities, including fragments of earlier scenes until the scene where the ghost produces the noise (the piano ringing) that triggers fear in M. is repeated.

MENEGALDO – A Ghost Story (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

153

The film also makes extensive use of ellipses, creating a sense of temporal acceleration. Shortly after his return to the house, we see C. observing M. in a sequence shot (digitally edited). M. repeats the same gesture of opening the front door three times, each time wearing different clothes, while the ghost watches motionless always in the same position in space. This repetition signifies different moments in M.'s life while C. remains fixed in space and time. This is a good example of Gilles Deleuze's "crystal image",[6] associating several temporal layers in the same long take. An ellipsis also occurs after M's departure, another after the Latino mother and her children leave, and another when the house is demolished and replaced by a modern building.

Temporal jumps are also conveyed by sharp cuts: between a shot of the ghost turning just before an off-screen noise behind him and the reverse shot of what caught his attention, an ellipsis occurs summarizing hours or weeks. The editing becomes tighter, the shots shorter, and the sound fragmented into overlapping temporal flows.

Before she left the house, M. hid a secret message inserted in a chink of the wall partition that she covered with paint. C. tries several times to retrieve this piece of paper, but is always thwarted by an external circumstance, particularly when a bulldozer demolishes the house. Only at the end of his temporal journey, returning to his recent past, does he manage to retrieve the secret message, and upon reading it, he disappears, leaving only the tangible trace of the sheet, resembling a flower corolla. The content of this message remains unknown to the spectator but seems to appease the ghost, finally at peace like Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) in *The Sixth Sense*, leading to his vanishing bodily presence ("death").

Special effects nonetheless

Despite the minimalist staging and the desire to avoid special effects, Lowery uses a range of visual effects, from artisanal tricks inspired by theatre and magic shows—like the ghost's final disappearance where the "body" dissolves—to more sophisticated and imperceptible effects developed by Weta Digital. Visible effects include the galaxy images at the beginning (with digitally added stars), the added smoke during the accident, the luminous effects and color changes when the ghost is offered a passage to the beyond, filmed from behind facing a door opening in the wall, a secondary screen traversed by light (actually a miniature). More imperceptibly, many shots of the ghost are filmed at 33 frames per second,

6.   See Gilles Deleuze, *L'Image-temps*, Cinéma 2, Éditions de Minuit, 1985, p. 92-128.

creating a fluid and gliding effect. A motion control platform is sometimes used by cinematographer Andrew Droz Palermo. The ghost is generally filmed separately, with images then digitally assembled. The "suicide" scene of C. is shot on a green screen, and when the ghost falls from the top of a newly built skyscraper, the building's inclination, filmed in an oblique overhead shot, is treated digitally. The apparent simplicity of the film is partly an illusion, and the director exploits contemporary technology to create effects that verge upon the fantastic.

A Ghost Story and "elevated horror" or "post-horror" cinema

To what extent may we then consider *A Ghost Story* as representative of the "elevated horror" or "post-horror" trend?

The most obvious device is the decentering of the conventional monster figure who is no longer an object of fear but rather a pitiful subject with who the viewer may empathize, but also the constant association with the ghost's point of view which goes against the codes of the classic ghost film where the narrative rather adopts the perspective[7] of the human protagonists as in *The Uninvited*. The lack of spectacular action and the foregrounding of minor day-to-day events and small details is another dominant feature. We won't insist on the formal features already analyzed which all associate the film with the post-horror trend. However, we would like to focus on two important features of the film: first the link with high culture, second the affiliation to slow cinema.

The film's epigraph testifies to the overt influence of modernist literature. Just after the opening shot of the happy couple embracing on a sofa, the film quotes the incipit of Virginia Woolf's short story "A Haunted House": "Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting" (1943). The story evokes the way in which the female narrator evokes the presence of a ghostly couple seeking some kind of treasure in the old house she inhabits with her partner. The narrator seems to hear the ghosts whispering and she also searches the house for signs of the ghosts, such as open doors and drawn curtains. Woolf's ghosts, contrary to a well-established tradition, are not threatening but harmless and benevolent. They whisper trying not to awake the living couple. In the same way, Lowery's ghost is unthreatening and harmless (most of the time). Like in Woolf's story the two lovers were first separated by death, but contrary to the film, in the text they were reunited in death.

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7.   *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* adopt the perspective of ghostly characters who are not aware of their ontological status. Neither is the viewer until the end.

Menegaldo – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

155

Later in the film, one of the books that falls to the ground when C. shakes up the bookshelf is a collection of Woolf's stories. The book opens on the page of "A Haunted House" which M. starts reading. Several close shots focus on the printed text. Some sentences of the story seem to echo the ghost's plight. Words mention the wind which we can also hear howling on the soundtrack. A passage refers to the separation of the ghostly couple ("death was between us"), another to "leaving the house", adumbrating M.'s move, leaving C. alone. The reference to seeking a treasure is also echoed in the film with the ghost's frantic search for the written message left in the wall. At the end of Woolf's story the narrator becomes aware that the lost treasure that the ghosts seek is the love they once experienced and that is reflected in the living couple. We might consider that the message the ghost finally found in the film evokes that "treasure of love", enabling him to vanish or reach another level of consciousness.

Another important influence on the film is slow cinema, as also highlighted by David Church and confirmed by David Lowery himself who refers to the influence of Terrence Malick's first films and quotes among other sources Tsai Ming-liang, Bela Tarr, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and also Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975).[8] The main formal features of slow cinema emerging[9] in contemporary world cinema are highlighted by Matthew Flanagan: "The employment of (often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday" (2008). As we saw, time and specifically empty time and the sense of duration is an essential feature of *A Ghost Story*. Long takes are frequent and the film downplays eventfulness to foreground small incidents and daily routine activities, repetitiveness inducing a form of ennui. Stress is laid on observation and contemplation rather than action. The film provides numerous shots of the lonely ghost simply watching either natural processes (the change of seasons) or human activities, a witness of drama, even murder (the killing of the pioneers) without reacting. The film is mostly devoid of dialogue and silence prevails in several scenes, favoring a form of immersion in the fictional universe and identification with the protagonist. The musical score emphasizes this mood with long soundscapes[10] (DVD bonus) which convey in particular the overwhelming nature of mourning and a sense of nostalgia for what is lost.

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8. See Lowery's commentary of the film in DVD bonus.
9. Obviously there are some precursors of this trend such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Theo Angelopoulos, Antonio de Oliveira and many others.
10. Composer Daniel Hart explains how he slowed down his song: "I took the separate elements of the song, like the strings or the guitar or my own vocals, and I ran them through *PaulStretch* to make these long soundscapes out of the different elements of the song, then used that as one of the recurring themes throughout the score". DVD bonus.

Menegaldo – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

156

Finally we may discuss the idea that *A Ghost Story* is a "horror film" by considering in particular its links with the Gothic mode,[11] but also its specific approach of the ghost motif. The film clearly uses Gothic conventions and tropes such as the haunted house and its gradual degradation (the ruin motif), or disquieting uncanny sounds. It also emphasizes a form of interaction between the living and the dead. The constant presence of the ghost (a central Gothic figure) testifies to his unwillingness to go away, the encroaching of the (recent) past into the present. The rare poltergeist effects partake of the Gothic paraphernalia, albeit with a parodic and ironic touch. The motif of the double is another link with the Gothic, with the ghost returning to watch his living self at the end of the narrative, and the female ghost next door waiting for someone she can't remember. The sense of isolation and imprisonment, typical of the Gothic, is underlined by the numerous frames within the frame, such as shots of the ghost watching behind window panes, etc.

However the film departs from the Gothic tradition in various ways. The house is a simple ground floor house, not a grandiose vertical architecture triggering a sense of the sublime. There is no stately staircase, no underground cellar or other subterranean dark place. Contrary to the Gothic tradition, the ghost does not come from the beyond. He actually refuses the beyond (signified at the beginning of the film by the door motif and an intense light) to go back to his house (an extreme high angle long shot of the solitary ghost shows him crossing through the fields back home, a poignant vision). Contrary to the tradition, this ghost is not seeking revenge, neither is he a monster that triggers terror or horror. Even when C. manifests his telekinetic powers, increases the intensity of lamp lights, or produces disturbing sounds, he may be a source of fear for the human beings (the Latino family), but not for the spectator who knows the origin of the deed and enjoys the parodic and meta-filmic wink while he/she may feel sorry for the victims. When her books are strangely thrown off the shelves, M. hardly reacts, she is only intrigued and attracted to the Woolf volume she starts reading, as if she had an intuition of a presence. Gothic narratives are mostly about transgression, hubris, paranoia, sexual tension and we have nothing of the sort here, neither have we an "uncanny return of something which has been expelled or thrown off (ab-ject)" (Kavka, 2002: 211). The film also distinguishes itself from the Gothic theatrical tradition by its overall lack of dramatization and spectacular effects. The only true horror scene is the shot on the dead bodies of the pioneer family and the decaying corpse of the little girl.

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11.   On the relation between horror cinema and Gothic cinema see also Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema* (2020).

MENEGALDO – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

157

However the ghost imposes his presence to the viewer in almost every shot which means there is no Todorovian[12] hesitation, no perceptive or intellectual uncertainty. The supernatural here is blatant. There is no need to explain it away with a rationalist discourse. Finally if we feel some "negative emotions" such as sadness, melancholia, a sense of loss, these emotions are never excessive. The only obsession that triggers the ghost's activity is the search for the hidden note left by M., his perusal of the written text leading to his collapse and liberation.

Conclusion

David Lowery's film may indeed, to some extent, be defined as "elevated horror" or "post-horror" if we consider the term "horror" as generic. The film shares with this corpus of works a number of features, both narrative and formal that we tried to delineate. However it seems to baffle the spectator's expectations. There is no tension between seeing or not seeing, no monstrosity, no feared object, no deep psychological trouble, no elusive sense of menace. *A Ghost Story* blurs the boundaries between Gothic, horror, fantasy and melodrama, with at times comic or comedic touches. It offers in a way an ostensibly conventional spectral fiction, but one that leads to reflections on time and memory and provides metaphysical escapes, a reflection on the human condition and fate and a cosmic[13] feel. Misha Kavka, theorizing on Gothic film, offers a good approach of what *A Ghost Story* has to offer: "A medium through which things are allowed to pass, from the past into the present, from death into life, from the beyond to here and back again" (Kavka, 2002: 228).

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12. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to A Literary Genre*, New York, Cornell UP, 1975. Originally published in French under the title *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1970.

13. In his analysis of the film, David Church refers to Lovecraft's cosmic horror fiction, because of the "transformation of the monster into an existential wanderer across time" (2021: 226).

Menegaldo – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

158

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Menegaldo – *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?

159

The Girl with all the Gifts, Colm McCarthy (2016), as Post-Horror – Post-Apocalyptic, Post-Modern and Post-Romero, Zombie Fiilm

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Abstract: David Church's definition of post-horror as a sub-genre which is characterized by "formal minimalism" (Church, 2021: 13) and which downplays action scenes as well as explicit horror and gore, seems to exclude *de facto* the most corporeal and grotesque sub-genre in horror production, namely zombie fiction. However, as *The Girl with all the Gifts* (Colm McCarthy, 2016) shows, post-horror's concern for "family dramas about grief, mourning and monstrous reproduction" (Church, 2021: 13), probably contributes to bridging the gap between the two sub-genres. In addition to this, the alleged explicitness and conventional narrative of zombie fiction, such as they can be noticed in McCarthy's film, might be questioned if ever these stylistic traits are analyzed as manifestations of the grotesque. My contention is that Bakhtin's ideation of grotesque realism and of the carnivalesque, allows the viewer to perceive the ambivalence of the sub-genre's conventions and figures. *The Girl with all the Gifts'* grotesque and carnivalesque aesthetics and discourse, that can also be related to the eco-critical approach of genre film, thereby inscribes zombie fiction and the zombie figure within the realm Church explores, that of modern, self-aware, subversive and ambivalent horror.

Keywords: Zombie; Carnivalesque; Grotesque; Mikhaïl Bakhtin; Post-Horror; Ecocriticism

Résumé : Dans sa réflexion sur le sous-genre qu'il nomme « *post-horror* », David Church propose une définition de ce phénomène récent dans laquelle il met en avant le minimalisme formel (Church, 2021 : 13) tout en écartant ce qui s'apparente à la violence et au *gore*. De toute évidence, la figure du zombie ne peut qu'être exclue, ne

peut que se placer à la marge de ce cadre générique. Pourtant, *The Girl with all the Gifts* (Colm McCarthy, 2016), en mettant en scène ce que Church appelle la reproduction familiale et monstrueuse du deuil (Church, 2021 : 13), contribue à nourrir une forme de porosité des frontières entre ce cycle décrit par Church, que la critique nomme parfois « *elevated horror* » et la tradition du *gore* / grotesque incarnée par la fiction zombie dont le film de McCarthy est une formulation. Ma proposition consistera à montrer que le concept de carnavalesque développé par Bakhtine permet de mettre en valeur l'ambivalence du film zombie et dans le même mouvement, de situer *The Girl with all the Gifts* ainsi que la fiction zombie en général, dans un espace esthétique où se développe un discours éco-critique et subversif, méta-filmique et ambivalent, qui n'est pas si éloigné de celui du « *post-horror* ».

Mots-clés : Zombie, carnavalesque, grotesque, Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *post-horror*, écocritique

Introduction

My purpose in this article is to posit that Colm McCarthy's *The Girl with all the Gifts*, a post-apocalyptic zombie film, namely the most corporeal and grotesque sub-genre in horror production, could qualify for a place in the "post-horror" or "elevated horror" cycle, whose stylistic, narrative and thematic traits have more in common with art films than with mainstream horror. In other words, I will strive to reconcile two domains of horror whose aesthetics seem to represent two opposing poles of the genre. To this end, I will draw on Mikhaïl Bakhtin's reflection on and ideation of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Indeed, the two notions are particularly suitable conceptual instruments for studying the evolution and dynamics of the genre, and for emphasizing the ambivalence of themes and figures belonging to horror.

Although he is tackling a new sub-genre that could be expected to be restrictive, given the various labels that have been associated with it ("elevated", "smart", "indie", "prestige" or "post-horror"), David Church's definition is anything but narrow and limited. By choosing the term "post-horror", Church suggests that this current cycle of horror films does not actually break with generic precedents but has built "a stylistic approach that attempts to both contain and move beyond" past horror tradition (Church, 2021: 37-8). His focus is first on the influence of art film and art horror modernist stylistic features upon "post-horror" aesthetics. The current cycle stands out from more conventional production via what he calls "formal minimalism" (Church, 2021: 11) which culminates in open endings "as (an) extension of narrative ambiguity" (Church, 2021: 19): the implicitness of post-horror dread conveys a sense of fantastic hesitation which can be opposed to the manifestations of monstrosity or gore

characteristic of mainstream horror films. "Formal minimalism" implies that films generally eschew "jump scares, frenetic editing, and energetic and/or handheld cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movements, and stately narrative pacing" (Church, 2021: 11), and most often downplay gore moments by way of a distanced visual style. Church completes this description which is essentially based on formal traits by insisting on the cycle's concern for "negative affects", mainly "family dramas about grief, mourning and monstrous reproduction" as well as for the sociopolitical context (Church, 2021: 13). If the ideological elements connect post-horror to generic tradition, their crucial difference lies in the cinematography which characterizes the current cycle, making it reminiscent of *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) or *Don't Look Now* (1973) to name a few examples bearing the same characteristics, or of the narrative strategies found in Jacques Tourneur's famous RKO fantastic films.

Church goes on to devise a table whose aim is to organize the corpus of post-horror's films into two categories: on the one hand, the primary texts, displaying the minimalist qualities "for most of their duration", and on the other hand, the secondary list in which films share the same stylistic traits as the core texts while at the same time or eventually, showing "action-oriented pacing […] or uncharacteristically violent scenes" (Church, 2021: 15). His approach is more nuanced than this dichotomy may suggest at first glance: he describes "these subdivisions […] as potentially fluid", thus allowing the table to remain scalable and open to films that do not comply with every single major prescription Church has formulated.

My stance is that *The Girl with all the Gifts* combines conventional generic traits such as a series of violent and gore scenes or a post-apocalyptic narrative inspired by the tradition of the sub-genre, with more contemplative and restrained filming, as well as a sub-text enhancing "familial traumas" and "the negative affects" that Church considers as essential to post-horror. In that respect, not only can Colm McCarthy's film be included in Church's secondary list of peripheral texts, but it could also be termed post-Romerian precisely because, in its own particular way, it moves beyond past horror tradition. My contention is finally to suggest that gore and grotesque horror, particularly the zombie sub-genre as it has been developing since the beginning of the 21st century, might be considered as a new stage in the history of horror film, a new wave that, for all its explicitness, is as subversive, as self-reflexive and as innovative as the current post-horror film wave.

The Girl with all the Gifts as post-apocalyptic and eco-critical zombie virus film

The Girl with all the Gifts undoubtedly belongs to the post-apocalyptic-zombie-virus sub-genre. Although the "z" word is never used, the creatures have many of the characteristics of the zombie(s) developed by George Romero or his followers, and the narrative reproduces most of the sub-genre's conventions. William Kyle Bishop provides a very useful definition of the zombie fiction that can be expanded so as to describe McCarthy's film: "the apocalyptic invasion of our world by hordes of cannibalistic contagious, and animated corpses" (Bishop, 2010: 19).

The film starts in a military compound surrounded by hordes of "hungries" after the outbreak of a fungal infection[1] that has wiped out the greater part of the human population. The first part takes place in this military and research compound where a group of children are kept in containment and raised because they possess a variant of the disease: as they were still in the womb during the outbreak and did not succumb, they are considered as a special breed of the "hungries" and used for experiment by Dr Caldwell's team of surgeons and researchers who want to find a cure for the disease. Several elements in this description are obviously related to the genre. The uncontrolled disease, the returning corpses, the collusion between the military and a crew of scientists, all these elements are conventional components of the sub-genre. The military compound can even be seen as the extension or the reinterpretation of the Gothic haunted house or castle in which unholy practices – medical and scientific experiments – are led by some mad and inhuman scientist, which would relate the film not only to the Gothic tradition but also to Romero's reformulations of the trope. I equally agree with Bishop's remark that the zombie subgenre, "must also be viewed as part of the Gothic tradition", not only because it adapts Gothic spaces but also because zombies manifest "the predominant anxieties of their times […] anxieties usually repressed or ignored" (Bishop, 2010: 25). This analysis obviously takes into account Romero's tradition of societal satire that has become a convention of the sub-genre, exposing the responsibility of humans and human society in their own destruction. McCarthy's film does explore this trend in the first part of the film as a well as in the second. However, the natural cause given for the end of the world also echoes the current eco-anxiety and relates *The Girl with all the Gifts* to the wave of eco-critic and eco-gothic cinema.

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1. The fungal infection is the *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis*, a genus growing on insects, especially on ants, and called the zombie-ant disease. It results in the alteration of the host's behavioral pattern and eventually in its death.

The fungal infection that has been destroying mankind, differs from the chemical, man-made compounds that have started the plague in most of the previous zombie fictions. The *cordyceps* is a living organism spreading an infection often called "the zombie-ant fungus" and originating from the ecosystem. As such it can be interpreted as a metaphor of "the fear of an impending environmental catastrophe" (Smith & Hughes, 2013: 6) that would be initiated by a vengeful ecosystem. As the action is moving from the military compound to a natural environment before exploring London, which is invaded by plant and dominated by a huge tree literally bearing the poisoned fruit of the zombie virus, the film is shifting from the concept of Gothic-like haunted castle to that of "nature as haunted house" (*Ibid.*, 2013: 9). If Romerian zombie fiction probably involved an eco-critic sub-text, Mc Carthy's film explicitly creates zombies which may appear as a "monstrous version of nature" (*Ibid.*, 2013: 11).

London: Fiction and reality

The second part of the film starts after the compound has been over-run by the hungries. If the first part echoes the structure of the siege film as it had been developed by Romero in his first zombie trilogy, the second part takes up the motif of the escaping group of survivors in search of a safe place. Mélanie, the main protagonist and the gifted girl of the film title; Ms Justineau, her and the other children hungries' school mistress; Dr. Caldwell, Sergeant Parks and another soldier, Kieran Gallagher, all set off towards London where they find shelter in an abandoned hospital. This part of the film, which takes place in London, reveals two singular aspects of McCarthy's take on zombie fiction: the first concerns the way the town is shown and the uncanniness of the views of London; the second is related to the status of Mélanie in the group of survivors.

The town is filmed via a series of long-distance shots and vertical views on the deserted streets and buildings. Such a presentation of London or of any town after the zombie apocalypse, is a motif of the sub-genre: one of the most spectacular and innovating occurrences of the motif can be seen in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) at the beginning of the film.[2] As Colm McCarthy explains, some of the views of the town where the survivors take shelter, were shot in Pripyat (Wiseman, 2016),

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2. The protagonist is seen awakening in an empty hospital where the first clues of disorder can be perceived. He then walks in the streets of London: the town is deserted by humans and the signs of the apocalypse become obvious. Similar scenes of chaos having overcome a city are equally shown in the opening sequence of *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Alexander Witt, 2004), or *Land of the Dead* (George Romero, 2005) and *Welcome to Zombieland* (Ruben Fleisher, 2009), to name but a few in the sub-genre.

which is an abandoned city in northern Ukraine. Pripyat is located three kilometers from Chernobyl and was evacuated after the explosion of the Nuclear Power Plant in 1986. The director's choice is manifestly significant. The shots taken in Pripyat enable the director to emphasize one of the themes of zombie fiction, namely the self-destructiveness of human activity, whether one thinks of the unchecked ambitions of science or of the ceaseless wars waged by human beings. Seeing the ruins of the town, one might also refer to the drone views of Aleppo wiped out by Russian bombings, views that circulated the Internet and photos that appeared in the media in 2016. The choice of Ukraine as the place where the sequence is shot, in the context of annexation of Crimea in March 2014, as well as in that of the invasion of the country by the Federation of Russia in 2022, takes on a meaning that probably exceeds McCarthy's intentions when the views were made, and yet, it is as if they were the expression of a prospective past, in which past, present and future collide, giving these images an uncanny permanence. As a consequence, we might see the views of London as echoes of past and future disasters that fell – will fall – upon humanity and at the same time as illustrations of the current state of human relations and activity: the collision of the Chernobyl returning images with the present views of Aleppo, the uncanniness of the co-existence between past destruction and chaos yet to come in Ukraine – and to a certain extent with all the haunting views showing towns like Baghdad or New York disfigured by bombings or covered in ashes, illustrates in a tragic way, the state of human civilization. Although no interview of Colm McCarthy confirms this analysis, it seems to me that his film, his own version of the zombie fiction, by providing the viewer with haunting images of death and destruction, perpetuates the Romerian satirical stance while at the same time reactivating the design by delving into contemporary issues and recent conflicts.

Mélanie as "resisting" zombie

The second remark concerning the second part of the film, is related to Mélanie's status. As the group of survivors are discovering the streets of London, they become aware that the place is surrounded by hungries: therefore, they need to rely on Mélanie for food and in order to help them avoid the creatures. Zombie fiction conventionally describes a society whose structures have broken down, and usually investigates the issue of human extinction. The post-apocalyptic sub-genre relates the efforts of a surviving group of humans to overcome the chaos which coincides with the end of civilization as we know it and the invasion of the world by zombies who finally replace the humans. *The Girl with all the Gifts* fits this pattern of replacement and reversals in a very radical way.

Indeed, while the first scenes show the zombie children in a state of utter subjugation, treated like prisoners and eventually guinea pigs, on the contrary, the second part of the film inverts the hierarchy as the last survivors depend upon Mélanie's readiness to help them find a way out of London. This reversal of roles and of the characters' status, can be related to the carnival sense of the world in which, as Bakhtin explains, the official world and the laws of society are parodied, debunked, and subverted so that another conception of the world and of mankind might prevail (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1984: 5). The institutions as embodied by Caldwell, Justineau and Parks – respectively science, education, and the military – are either questioned or at least redirected to serve the development of the new breed of zombie children. In that respect, there is an explicit reversal of hierarchies and status between, on the one hand, the first sequence of the film in which the zombie children are seen attending a class, tied to their wheelchair and their heads strapped back, and on the other hand, the last sequence, which shows a school session involving Ms Justineau as schoolmistress, locked inside a mobile laboratory, and a group of hybrid children, freely attending the class outside the vehicle. The denouement not only confirms the overthrow of institutions but also gives a positive view of what should be understood as their replacement by another structure and the extinction of humankind as it has been so far. To a certain extent, Colm McCarthy's zombies, and particularly zombie children, are the offspring of those that David Roche called "the resisting bodies" (Roche, 2011: 8).

In his account of the two stages in the history and ideology of zombie fiction, David Roche shows that the figure as constructed by Romero, asserts itself as a resisting body that represents struggle against oppression and repression. In the context of a sub-genre that can be understood as describing the uprising of the destitute and the return of the repressed of Western culture and history, *Night of the Living Dead* presents, Roche suggests, "a negative view of the restoration of order" (Roche, 2011: 8). If the film's sequels, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985) do not introduce the same pattern, since the group of human survivors do not restore order or even manage to reach a stable situation, their escape illustrates the incapacity of human society to resist the invasion of the zombie. The focus has shifted from a critical comment on the fundamental violence of the state apparatus (Roche, 2011: 9), to the helpless and self-destructive attempts on the part of the institution's agents to restore order, their efforts turning out to precisely illustrate their helplessness and violence, and eventually the arbitrary nature of the power they stand for. Similarly, the resolutions of both *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009), Romero's last zombie films, acknowledge the failure of the humans to withstand the ordeal their civilization is confronted to: the survivors in *Diary of the Dead* have no other choice but to lock themselves

up in a vault; those who survive the feud in *Survival of the Dead*, leave the island to return to the mainland which has been invaded by the zombies. The case of *Land of the Dead* (2005) is at the same time different and more complex. After helping the human resistance and the zombie rebellion to bring down the plutocratic regime led by Kaufman, Riley and his companions set off for Canada where they hope to find a better situation. The specificity of *Land of the Dead* is that the film enhances the humanization of the zombies who are seen rebelling against the government, using tools as weapons and displaying their ability to direct their anger against the very symbol of injustice, oppression, and violence: in other words, they are zombies with a class consciousness.

The Girl with all the Gifts as post-Romero zombie fiction

The Girl with all the Gifts represents zombies that continue the reflection introduced by Romero about the future of humanity, and the capacity of human beings to curb their self-destructive tendencies. The transition between Romero's zombie fiction and Mc Carthy's film may be embodied by Big Daddy in *Land of the Dead*. This character stands for resistance to oppression: he takes up arms against a tyrant and brings down the world that Kaufman has built. In many ways, Mélanie takes after Big Daddy as I will try to show.

Colm McCarthy's version of the zombie figure is complex. They are called hungries, they prey on human beings whom they devour and tear to pieces; they were contaminated by a fungus that has spread across the country and the world; they can be extremely fast-running or particularly slow and apathetic; the zombie children are very gracefully called "abortions" by the soldiers: as a matter of fact, they cannot be labeled definitively. The circumstances of the children's birth are particularly striking: they were contaminated when they were still in the womb and although their mother did not survive, they managed to "eat their way out of the womb", as Dr Caldwell explains. This most shocking description corresponds to Caldwell's vision of the zombie children that she considers exclusively as matter, as flesh for her experiments. They are indeed feral and ruthless creatures, not very different from previous zombies except for their capacity to devise clever traps for their prey, namely for human beings. And yet, the final sequence shows them as prepared for improvement through education and learning, which can be accepted as yet another step towards civilization. Both the adult and the child zombies are evolutions, or alternative figures of the Romerian zombie: the adults because of their duality – either fast or slow – and the children because

of their intelligence and skillfulness. But of course, Mélanie embodies the most remarkable metamorphosis of the zombie figure. I will emphasize one particular trait in the character that is related to the subject of filiation. Indeed, like the other zombie children, Mélanie probably "ate her way out of her mother's womb". And yet, her relation to monstrosity / humanity differs from that of the other children.

Filiation and family trauma

The particular relationship between Mélanie and Miss Justineau is probably one of more than mutual interest: right from the beginning of the film, during the first class sessions, Mélanie is shown drinking in each and every word Justineau is saying and, conversely, the schoolmistress is seen taking pleasure and pride in the girl's clever contribution to the class. What seems at first to be mutual admiration rapidly turns into affection and attraction. Their bond, based on reciprocal care, develops throughout the film and shapes into what can be interpreted as a mother / daughter relationship. Their affectionate relationship is perceptible not only through their exchanges and way of gazing at each other, it is equally conveyed in a delicate and allegorical way by the story Mélanie has written and reads aloud to the whole class and Ms. Justineau. It tells the story of a beautiful woman who is attacked by an "abortion" but who is rescued by a little girl who eventually stays with her. The meaning of the allegory is clear: it is meant to express the girl's attachment to Justineau and to produce a picture of herself as transcending her status as a zombie. By picturing herself as a little girl and not as a hungry, Mélanie takes the first step towards her humanization. Moreover, she produces a tale whose proleptic dimension will soon appear, as she will indeed save Justineau from the hungries during the attack of the compound, and from the zombie children (the so-called abortions) in London. This simple story is of great significance: it should be understood as foundational, not only in the relation between Mélanie and Justineau but also as a text out of which an alternative to the current world and mankind is to be invented. Mélanie's tale sounds like a foundational myth that I interpret as the first step towards an alternative culture and civilization.

The film draws emphasis on a mother / daughter relationship between the two characters which develops in a context that must be described. Mélanie's story is one of loss and grief, one of violence and oppression: whatever her instincts and hunger might imply, she is also characterized as a child and an orphan and so are the other zombie children. This means that the subject of the family and of filiation is at the core of the

film. This subject is addressed in a particularly subtle and daring way. First, the filial love between the two characters is of an unusual type since they do not belong to the same family. In a way, the characters have chosen each other. The film thus presents a family nucleus composed of two strangers, a family cell that will expand in the denouement, to include other strangers, namely the zombie children living in London. McCarthy thus deconstructs the traditional conception of the family and delivers a reflection upon family trauma. To a certain extent, the solution to the loss and grief, the violence and oppression that Mélanie had to suffer from, is not to be found in the shelter of the traditional home but in the company of a chosen tribe. Suggesting that the bond between Mélanie and Justineau could originate in the tale written and told by the girl, might be stretching the meaning slightly too far – and yet, one is tempted to think that the renewed family nucleus and eventually the renewed society that emerges in the end, could be founded on a myth enhancing care. Anyhow, the introduction of a family and, in a way, a psychological plot in the context of zombie fiction implies a genuine reformulation of the sub-genre, particularly considering that the plot involves two characters who belong to two different species, a zombie hybrid and a human.

McCarthy's film transcends the dichotomy between human and non-human, completes the humanization of the zombie figure that had been initiated by Romero and consecrates the emergence of an alternative being who is both a human and a zombie. While Romero's zombie fiction questioned the capacity for surviving human beings to recreate a cohesive mankind, *The Girl with all the Gifts* shows a new generation zombie paving the way for an alternative human / zombie hybrid species.

The carnivalesque reversal of hierarchies

The overthrow of society and reversal of hierarchies I have evoked concerning *The Girl with all the Gifts* seems to be the staple of most Romerian or post-Romerian zombie films. However, it seems that McCarthy's film goes a step further by taking the humanization and the resisting capacity of the zombies to the next level in terms of ideology as well. One particular trope may substantiate this statement: it is one of the primary acts of carnival, namely the *crowning / decrowning* ritual which, as Bakhtin explains, "determined a special *decrowning* type of structure for artistic images and whole works" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 1984: 126). What seems to me of particular interest in this structure, is that it has survived in literature and the visual arts as form, as imagery, "imparting symbolic depth and ambivalence to the corresponding plots and plot situations" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,

1984: 125). The *crowning / decrowning* ritual, involving the celebration and crowning of the carnival fool / king, followed by his *decrowning*, debasing and even beating and (symbolical) dismembering, has not been transposed as such in the arts but has been returning in many an occurrence of parody or eccentric discourse, whenever a work has relied on "paired images" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 1984: 126) to subvert the "official life, monolithically serious and gloomy" and celebrate "the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 1984: 129). Several sequences and images taken from *The Girl with all the Gifts* follow this specifically carnivalesque structure: this is the case of the sequence situated in London as the survivors have become aware that zombie children are around, ready to prey on them.

This sequence can be divided in two phases and takes place in what probably used to be a shopping centre. Gallagher ventures out of their refuge to look for food supplies. His attention is drawn to a trail of food cans leading to a supermarket whose metal shutters are half-opened. The soldier crawls under the shutters, leaving his gun outside. Once inside, he discovers enough food to provide for the whole group: he enjoys the discovery and tastes some of the things he had probably not eaten for long. Then, the viewer understands that the character has fallen into a trap: he has been lured inside the shop by a pack of hungry / zombie children who attack and kill, disembowel, and dismember him. What is striking in this scene, is that it can be understood as an intertextual reference to the zombie apocalypse fiction trope originating in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) and showing the survivors who, having sought refuge in a mall, indulge in unrestricted consumption of what they can find there. The same motif occurs in *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *Welcome to Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009), or in *The Dead Don't Die* (Jim Jarmusch, 2019). It is often interpreted to emphasize the survivors' dependence upon consumption and an attempt "to recreate the old order of consumer society" (Roche, 2011: 10). Of course, in McCarthy's film, the emphasis is laid more explicitly on the irony coming from the fact that the trap has been devised by a pack of animal-like and paradoxically childlike creatures. Consequently, the metatextual dimension of the situation, appealing to the genre fan as well as to the perceptive academic, is combined with a *crowning / decrowning* structure fraught with irony and cruelty. The carnivalesque nature of the scene, its potential playfulness, is reinforced by the fact that, because it involves children, it could be related to a game of hide-and-seek which of course would end up with the death of one of the participants.

The second phase of the sequence starts when Gallagher's companions, looking for the soldier, discover his corpse. In turn, they are

surrounded by the pack of feral hungries that Mélanie chooses to confront. The scene takes place in front of the supermarket where Gallagher is lying dead. The place is designed like a square on which the children's and Mélanie's bands face each other in two semi-circles. This sequence shows the struggle between Mélanie and the leader of the zombie children pack, the two being surrounded and observed as if by an audience. In a way, the open space before the supermarket resembles both a theatrical stage and the carnival square on which the carnivalesque acts are performed: the sequence belongs both to drama and carnival.

The outcome of the confrontation is no less important than the performance of the two fighters or the meaning of this fight. Mélanie eventually defeats and kills the other zombie child so that what could be seen as a ritualized school fight between two rival bands (considering the age of the contenders) once again turns out to be a barbaric and lethal feud. The director shoots the sequence as if it was a performance and a game. First because the two groups of onlookers are shown in turn as if there were two mirroring performance spaces merging at times when the two fighters deliver their blows. The two opponents walk in circles; they grunt and roar as if they were animals. It might be useful to note that it is the first time Mélanie has been heard roaring, not speaking, from which we may infer either that she is one of them or that she is using the other zombie child's language, thus mimicking him. To a certain extent, Mélanie is playing a role, so as to defeat her opponent and frighten the pack of zombie children away. But there is another position at stake in this situation: she is also performing a role for the benefit of her companions, to impress them and claim the leading role in their group. This interpretation is confirmed by the ensuing events of the film: Mélanie will also contest the authority of Dr Caldwell and Sergeant Parks before making the most tragic decision of the film, namely eradicating the remaining human beings by setting fire to the tree and liberating the spores that will contaminate the survivors. This sequence is therefore both a ritualized struggle between potential leaders of a tribe or pack, and a performance intended by Mélanie to assert her control and power over her own group.

In an article tackling the sub-genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, Renner remarks that apocalyptic narratives such as *The Walking Dead* allow "ordinary folks" (ordinary and non-heroic characters) to "assert an agency that one lacks in the real world" (Renner, 2012: 206). If this remark can be considered relevant as far as many – most of – zombie narratives, the situation is slightly different in *The Girl with all the Gifts*: indeed, the film does not focalize on an ordinary human being whose courage is emphasized but instead on a female zombie. Mélanie is thus the main and very singular agent of a double reversal: not only does she reverse the world hierarchy, but she also reverses the generic hierarchy

that is found in zombie fiction, between human and inhuman. The *crowning / decrowning* structure is undeniably at work here: the reversal of hierarchies is made explicit, and the renewal of power and authority appears as a positive evolution despite the death that is associated with it. As a characteristically carnivalesque act, a performance in which death and renewal merge, the fight enhances the ambivalence of the situation and of the whole plot involving Mélanie. This sequence introduces carnivalesque imagery whose effect is to reconfigure zombie fiction based on dialogism, hence the constant hesitation between mourning and rejoicing, the insistence on "the very process of replaceability", "the image of constructive death" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 1984: 125).

The tree of death and renewal

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One crucial sequence of the film, in fact what could be considered as its climax, both in terms of the narrative and of imagery, epitomizes this paradox. As they are exploring the streets of London, the group of escapees / survivors discover a huge tree, a formidable and marvelous-looking plant on which a multitude of pods have grown. Dr Caldwell explains that these pods contain the same type of spores that contaminated and killed the greater part of humanity, and adds that, would these pods open and liberate their spores, the remaining humans could be completely eradicated. The monstrous tree and lethal spores reactivate the figure of the vengeful natural world as menace to mankind that McCarthy (re)introduces in the sub-genre whose ecocritical dimension is thus (re)emphasized. If ecocriticism seeks "a synthesis of environmental and social concerns" and if its subject is "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" (Garrard, 2012: 4-5), then *The Girl with all the Gifts* takes a clear stand on the necessity to shift "from a human-centred to a nature-centred system of values" (Garrard, 2012: 24). That shift is conveyed by Mélanie's short-lived dilemma as she finally decides to set fire to the tree and therefore cause the spores to diffuse and suppress mankind.

However, this terrifying scene is filmed in such a way that Mélanie's gesture cannot be interpreted as a murderous act: the beauty of the fire and of the burning spores is enhanced rather than the dreadful consequences of the act. The spores are shown diffusing and filling the night sky with sparkles of light like fireworks. It might sound like an overstatement to describe the scene as festive, and yet, it is obviously reminiscent of the fireworks that illuminate the sky in the festive denouement of *Land of the dead*. In Romero's film, fireworks are used by the human survivors to catch the zombies' attention and hypnotize them until they realize that the creatures have stopped being deceived. This theme is one of the signs

of the evolution in the zombies, a sign of their growing awareness and intelligence. At the end of the film, Riley has his crew discharge fireworks: they dispose of tools or weapons that have become useless and at the same time, they celebrate the victory of the zombies over Kaufman, the tyrant, which enables the survivors of the apocalypse, both zombies and humans, to contemplate a new dawn: hence the festive dimension of the fireworks.

The intertext comprises a reformulation which is precisely the expression of McCarthy's vision of zombie fiction. Mélanie's gesture might not convey the idea of a celebration, but if it is undeniably destructive, if it is obviously "a world-altering catastrophe" (Renner, 2012: 204), Mélanie's gesture does not correspond to what Renner calls "a meaningless apocalypse" (*Ibid*.: 205), nor can it be characterized as redemptive, at least not in the religious sense of the word. In fact, it should be understood as an act of renewal of the world: her purpose is made clear in the last sequence where the zombie children are shown attending a class and thus appear as the future of the world. The director therefore puts to the fore what, in Romero's film, was inchoate: zombie fiction relates the destruction / self-destruction of human society and the emergence of an alternative (human / living-dead) being to populate the earth. What is particularly striking is that this denouement is not seen as negative: on the contrary, once again, the last sequence is particularly joyful and full of promise. McCarthy reverses the paradox that David Roche perceives when commenting the ending of *Night of the Living Dead*: if Romero's film presented "a negative view of the restoration of order", *The Girl with All the Gifts* presents a positive view of the extension of disorder. McCarthy's film even seems to forbid any possible return to the world before its *decrowning* and carnivalization.

Mélanie's gesture and the denouement of *The Girl with All the Gifts*, link the film as well as zombie fiction in general, to the spirit of carnival, "the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time". The images of the burning tree and spores convey "the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 1984: 124) which is the very core of the carnival sense of the world. Zombie fiction and the zombie figure could be interpreted as the reemergence and the manifestations of carnivalesque figures, themes and imagery which are basically ambivalent in that "they unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death […], blessing and curse" (*Ibid*.: 126). To a certain extent, McCarthy's film pushes the logic of (Romerian) zombie fiction to its limit, to its necessary and tragic end, and in addition to this, he creates a zombie which / who enables the popular horror figure and genre to be renewed. The film completes the humanization of the monster: Mélanie comes after Bud and Big Daddy, as the embodiment of the missing link between the hordes of hungries and the next generation of human

zombie species. Her acts and gestures, her fundamental ambivalence, make her a post-modern and post-Romerian character who sheds a light on the nature of the zombie figure and at the same time conveys a contemporary message concerning identity. Mélanie is a "resisting body" not only because she chooses to reverse hierarchies and to bring down the world that was oppressing her, but also because, as a character and horror figure, she stands for resistance to monological truth: she embodies creative ambivalence.

The trope of the mask: Identity and ambivalence

Shortly after escaping the military compound, the group of survivors must deal with the presence of Mélanie whom all of them, except Ms. Justineau, consider as a threat to their safety. The girl is made to wear a mask that was designed to make the hungries harmless since it covers their mouths. The obvious practical purpose of the device does not suppress the carnivalesque meaning of the mask in general, all the more so as its being transparent complexifies its impact on the film's imagery.

The girl wears the mask whenever she is with the other survivors but every time she leaves them, she can take it off: this is what she does when being entrusted with the exploration of the neighborhood in search for supplies. This exploration is the opportunity for her to discover the world outside the military compound: she is shown enjoying this discovery with a childlike delight and a sense of wonder, as if she was being reborn into the world. Of course, she needs to satisfy her hunger, which she does by chasing and eating a stray cat. The fact that she has forsaken to prey on human beings probably serves to mitigate what remains a cruel act and the sequence mostly emphasizes the positive, non-feral aspects of the character. After eating the cat, she puts the mask back on, and this is when the transparency of the mask becomes significant: Mélanie's mouth can still be seen, stained with the animal's blood. The whole ambivalence of the character is comprised in this paradoxical and grotesque image. Indeed, if the mask was meant to protect Mélanie's environment from her hunger, it has obviously failed to do so; if it was designed to neutralize her, she has managed to make it ineffective; if it was meant to annihilate her character, nullify her identity, it turns out that it only succeeded in reinforcing her complexity and ambivalence. To a certain extent, she has reappropriated the mask to be able at the same time to indulge in her instinctive needs and to comply, falsely and playfully, with the other survivors' demands. The element of manipulation and play, the carnivalesque aspect of the sequence, cannot be denied: it expresses "the joy of change and

reincarnation […], metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 1984: 40). Mélanie uses the mask to play a role and at the same time free herself from the demands and the oppression of the world of the humans. The liberating dimension of carnival is conveyed by Mélanie's reappropriation of a device meant to contain her, which she changes into a carnivalesque mask. The sequence represents the degradation of authority and the liberation of the character from oppression, the two aspects being completed by a process of regeneration that is conveyed by Mélanie's delight in discovering the world, and which is characteristic of grotesque imagery as well as of grotesque ideology.

The images showing Mélanie's blood-stained mouth behind the transparent mask condense the playful and grotesque dimension of the zombie figure in general, and the irreducibility of Mélanie's character in particular. McCarthy introduces the grotesque dimension of the character in this sequence by using the comic element, the irony that emerges from the diversion by Mélanie of the device / mask. But the grotesque is of course equally related to what Bakhtin calls the "material bodily principle" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 1984: 18) which is conveyed by the gory dimension of the sequence. Its fully assumed and self-reflexive gore element enables the director to insist on the duality of the character: she is both a hungry, a new generation zombie, a playful child, a developing human being, and a self-conscious horror figure. Gore is not emphasized for the sake of gore itself but to convey the complexity of the character and enhance the essential ambivalence of the zombie figure. The explicitness becomes an asset of gore whose aesthetics thus complies with the requirements of post-horror fiction. The singular gore / grotesque aesthetics of the film inscribes Mélanie's humanization in the continuity of the traditional zombie while at the same time renewing its conventions.

Grotesque imagery: Ideology and aesthetics

Like other figures of the horror genre, zombies have contributed to developing a critical vision on society's flaws and on contemporary crisis, whether in the 1960s or the years 2000. And yet, I would suggest that the zombie figure, more than any other, carries a transhistorical vision of man's condition in addition to the spirit of present time because of its grotesque dimension.

Bakhtin's study defines two moments in the history of grotesque imagery: first, the archaic phase of the grotesque, which developed in the Antiquity and in which the imagery of archaic grotesque was related to

"cyclical time […] natural and biological life". This conception of time and of change, of the succession of seasons and of time and death, was broadened to include social and historical change: grotesque imagery, because of its vision of time as metamorphosis and because of its ambivalence, became the means of conveying "an awareness of history and historic change which appeared during the Renaissance" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 1984: 24). Despite this distinction, there seems to be a common point between the two phases, and this distinction is also one of the main characteristics of the grotesque: it is the expression of "the crisis of change" (*Ibid*.: 50). McCarthy's zombie conveys precisely the awareness of history that Bakhtin describes as one decisive characteristic of the carnivalesque. *The Girl with all the Gifts* depicts the world during a crucial transformation, and a group of characters as they are confronted to major choices. Zombie fiction in general and McCarthy's film in particular, build their narrative upon the tension that structures grotesque imagery and thus present "a phenomenon in transformation" (*Ibid*.: 27).

The second aspect of the grotesque that emerges in zombie fiction, particularly in Romero's films and even more explicitly in *The Girl with all the Gifts*, is the perspective and even the representation of another world: "the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life". In other words, the grotesque dimension of the zombie figure is what makes it subversive: not only does it oppose and debunk "the apparent (false) unity of the indisputable and stable" (*Ibid*.: 48) but the ambivalent laughter which structures the grotesque imagery, regenerates the world whose values have been reversed and brought down.

The aesthetics of the grotesque is shaped by the dynamics of difference: Bakhtin defines it as "the merry negation of uniformity and similarity", adding that the grotesque "rejects conformity to oneself" (*Ibid*.: 39). The sequence of the mask is an obvious illustration of this dynamic, this tension between identity and difference, between the conventional figure of the zombie and its reformulation in the character of Mélanie, between the zombie as deadly creature and as humanizing / humanized being. The constant reformulation of identity, Mélanie's, the zombies', and a constant reformulation of the genre.

Another evidence of Mélanie's complexity comes from the title of the film, *The Girl with all the Gifts*, which refers to the Greek myth of Pandora. In this tradition, Pandora is said to have opened a jar, "Pandora's box", releasing all the evils of humanity. The myth can be understood as explaining the origin of evil on earth and is to be related to the biblical character of Eve, and to the lineage of female figures who, in Western tradition, have been associated with evil and accused of having caused death and chaos in the world. To a certain extent, Mélanie plays the part of Pandora, that is,

if we consider that she is the one who causes the complete annihilation of the remaining humans. But at the same time, she cannot be seen as the one who is at the origin of the fungal infection, which makes a first difference with the myth. The second difference lies in the way her gesture is shown by the director and perceived by the viewer: as I have stated, the denouement of the film shows a world that has been destroyed and regenerated thanks to Mélanie's decision – in other words, it is a positive denouement pointing the way to the renewal of mankind. Therefore, the ideology of the myth has been reversed: the female character is not responsible for the evil on earth but, on the contrary, for ushering a new dawn.

The myth of Pandora is also referred to during one of Ms. Justineau's classes, which shows how important it is to the understanding of Mélanie as a character and as a zombie figure. First, it contributes to building the complicity between the schoolmistress and her pupil, and it is relating them in terms of their gender: they share the opprobrium to which such female myths as Pandora, Eve and Circe (the enchantress / witch and loving / jealous female character best-known for her part in the Odyssey, is also mentioned by Ms. Justineau in one of her classes) condemn women; however, they also succeed in reversing the meaning of these myths, thus deconstructing the figure of the evil-doing female that has dominated Western culture and representation for thousands of years. Secondly, the reference to Pandora and the deconstruction of the myth, enables McCarthy to create one of the first zombie figures who embodies such a crucial contemporary issue as the cause of women and such a progressive value as the deconstruction of female representation and identity.

With the character of Mélanie, the filmmaker also tackles the issue of ethnicity. Karen J. Renner's analysis of *The Girl with all the Gifts* underlines the racial and sexual dimensions of the novel, in which "Mélanie's zombie apetites repeadly function as a metaphor for sexual desire" (Renner, 2021: 172). The novel also introduces a racial subtext concentrating on Justineau as racial other and objectified center of the white characters' desire (*Ibid*.: 179). Colm McCarthy's adaptation of the novel includes reshaping not only the relationships between Mélanie and Justineau, but also their appearance. Mélanie is turned into a black character whereas middle-aged black Justineau is transformed into a young white woman. Renner argues that the reversal of races leads to a shift in the interpretations of the film, "revealing the important role that race plays in the novel" (*Ibid*.: 180). My view is that this reversal shows how important race is in the history of zombie fiction as a whole: in many ways, Mélanie takes her place in the lineage of Black characters that appear in zombie fiction as witnesses of the changing time or as genuine symbols of issues related to the black community and its history: one may think of the succession of

black characters represented in Romero's films who personified different aspects of the black problem in the context and in the history of the USA, a series of figures that are characterized by their growing self-awareness and assertiveness.

However, I think that Mélanie's ethnicity is more complex than it seems. In M. R. Carey's novel, in the very first paragraph, the author explains the meaning of her name, the etymology of "Mélanie": it means "the black girl". He goes on to indicate that Mélanie's skin "is actually very fair" and that her name was given to her arbitrarily (Carey, 2014: 1). McCarthy's choice to cast a black skinned actress for the role of Mélanie is significant: by giving the role of the oppressed, then the resisting and finally the revolting body to a black actress, the director takes a stand on issues of resistance related to the black community. Mélanie takes on the role of the defender of the cause of women and of the blacks. The film thus broadens and complexifies the symbolical meaning of the zombie figure. And yet, an ambiguity remains as to the way Mélanie's ethnicity should be addressed: indeed, she is "the black girl" while at the same time, in the novel, her skin is fair; she is played by a black-skinned actress, but the character identifies with cultural types that are not directly related to the black cause. In fact, she is linked to and, to a certain extent, springs from multiple fictional references: the black characters from Romero's zombie fiction, the mythical types I have mentioned and of course Mélanie's self-representation in the little girl who saves the beautiful woman from the "abortion" in the tale she has written. For all her relations with current issues and the contemporary world, Mélanie is equally a fictional character and as such a vessel for multiple and ambivalent meanings.

The figure is made all the more complex as, I insist, Mélanie is a zombie: she is not a human being or at least not a conventional human being as culture and history have sought to define it. Therefore, I would say that Mélanie represents resistance to any attempt at defining, at *essentializing* human beings. She is human and not exactly one – she is a daughter and not completely one – she is a figure of queer desire in the novel and at the same time, the film seems to minimize this aspect of the character; she is a young woman but not only, she is Romerian and even more so, she is modern and she is ancient – and the list could be extended: the cumulative dimension of this series of words or of labels, partakes of the grotesque imagery associated with the film, with the character and more generally with zombies. The character of Mélanie illustrates in an explicit way, what characterizes zombies in general inasmuch as they embody "the crisis of change" and "the phenomenon in transformation", or, to use Bakhtin's phrases, the crisis of the subject, and the truth in transformation – and vice versa.

Conclusion

The specificity of *The Girl with all the Gifts* lies in its capacity to inscribe the film in the post-horror cycle's agenda since it carries similar thematic, reflexive and epistemic traits, while at the same time providing a formulation of the most corporeal, the less art-film-compatible, the most grotesque of all the horror figures. Although formal minimalism or narrative ambiguity and the aesthetics of the grotesque sound irreconcilable, McCarthy manages to bridge the gap between these two conceptions of cinematography and to depict man's self-destructive tendencies and tackle contemporary concerns such as man's relation with a planet that is on the brink of disaster as well as issues related to gender and ethnicity.

However, I would like to suggest that the film goes further than – or does something different from – bringing together two visions of the horror film. *The Girl with all the Gifts* both perpetuates the Romerian gore and satirical stance, but it also reformulates and renews our contemporary perception of the grotesque. The grotesque dimension of McCarthy's film does not only produce a critical and satirical vision of the world, as it is the case in Romero's films and in many horror films.

According to Bakhtin, grotesque realism, which characterizes the tradition of the carnivalesque, both destroys *and* recreates, annihilates *and* renews the object or the subject it addresses. *The Girl with all the Gifts* fosters a pessimistic vision of our society and our world, but it also renews the way the genre handles the fate and the perspectives of our world. The visual and ideological ambivalence created by grotesque imagery and the carnivalesque, which are particularly obvious in post-2000 zombie fiction and in the zombie figure, precisely because the sub-genre lays the stress on comic reversals, comic corporeality and the capacity of ambivalent laughter to produce an alternative discourse on the world, contributes to a renewal of the sub-genre's perspective on history as well as on the contemporary world. By relying on ambivalence and the creation of a modern epistemic hesitation, *The Girl with all the gifts* is a particularly obvious example of zombie fiction's capacity to produce what Bakhtin calls a "creative ambivalence". If I could venture on a generalization, I would suggest that post-2000 zombie fiction represents a new cycle of horror, straddling the line between traditional mainstream horror and the post-horror cycle, and characterized by this renewal of the horror grotesque.

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You'd better look twice!: Annexation and De/Colonisation of the Gaze in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017)

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Abstract: In his first two fictions (*Get Out* [2017] and *Us* [2019]) Jordan Peele invites the viewer to question the way in which the new paths of horror reinvest, through the treatment of images and bodies, the articulation and opposition between seen and unseen, seeing and knowing in a narrative economy that thwarts the expectations of the genre. *Get Out* renews the figures and forms of horrific discourse by revealing the internalized horror of our contemporary societies. By proposing to take hold of the representations that surround us by decentring our gaze and replace the horrific aberration with a horror indexed on the real world, *Get Out* manages to revitalize the horrific genre and revisit the history (notably Hollywood) of our representations. This essay will show how *Get Out* displays a whole range of images, in particular stereotypes and clichés—both photographic and stylistic—in order to question our gaze, which is biased by a habitus that is now only governed by unconscious mental operations. In the film, the exposure of the ideology underlying the standard expression of racism in the United States is based not only on a study of the representations of otherness, but also on the colonisation of the gaze resulting from the interdependence between the visible, the seen, vision and the lens through which we view the world.

Keywords: Horror; Representation; Stereotype; Cliché; Colonisation of the Black Body; Colonisation of the Gaze

Résumé : Dans ses deux premières fictions, *Get Out* (2017) et *Us* (2019), Jordan Peele invite le spectateur à interroger la façon dont les nouvelles voies de l'horreur réinvestissent, à travers le traitement des images et des corps, l'articulation et l'opposition entre le vu et le non-vu, le voir et le savoir dans une économie narrative qui déjoue les attentes propres au genre. *Get Out* renouvelle les figures et les formes du discours horrifique en dévoilant l'horreur intériorisée de nos sociétés contemporaines. En proposant de nous

ressaisir des représentations qui nous entourent par le décentrement du regard et de remplacer l'aberration horrifique par une horreur indexée sur le monde réel et ancrée dans un temps mémoriel, *Get Out* parvient non seulement à revitaliser le genre horrifique mais aussi à revisiter l'histoire (notamment hollywoodienne) de nos représentations. Cet essai montrera comment *Get Out* met en scène toute une série d'images, notamment des stéréotypes et clichés (photographiques et stylistiques) afin d'interroger notre regard biaisé par un habitus qui n'est plus régi que par des opérations mentales inconscientes. Dans le film, la mise en lumière de l'idéologie qui sous-tend l'expression ordinaire du racisme états-unien repose non seulement sur l'examen des représentations de l'altérité véhiculées par cette société, mais aussi sur la colonisation du regard qui résulte de l'interdépendance entre le visible, le vu, la vision et l'objectif à travers lequel nous considérons le monde.

Mots-clés : horreur, représentation, stéréotype, cliché, colonisation du corps des Noirs, colonisation du regard

Introduction

In the chapter entitled ""Woke Horror": Social Consciousness in Black Horror", Robin R. Means Coleman and Mark Harris point out that Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is said to have originated the term "Woke Horror", used to describe works related to the struggle of Black minorities against institutional racism in the United States (Means Coleman, Harris, 2023: 127). The search for a different terminology to define Jordan Peele's first film testifies to the generic renewal inspired by the director's aesthetic and political proposals. This term, which refers to a sub-category of "art" or "elevated horror",[1] is nonetheless proving to be divisive if we are to believe the proponents of an escapist conception of horror that is supposedly incompatible with a politically oriented discourse (Means Coleman, Harris, 2023: 128). While this escapist apprehension of the genre does not seem relevant to us, these new categories tend to reinject into critical discourse an axiological judgement of little interest for analysis. The debate surrounding them is reminiscent of the Aristotelian opposition between the mind's eye and the eye of the flesh, between elite culture and mass culture, and reiterates the divide between 'hermeneutic fantastic' and 'graphic fantastic' (Mellier, 1999: 95) that has long plagued the study of the genre. To maintain such a hierarchy would also amount to forgetting that this transgressive genre, based on the literalisation of the metaphorical, always questions our relationship with otherness, whether it is entertained or concerned by it. It is the latter that Jordan Peele chooses to explore, making

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1. As David Church notes in the chapter entitled "Defining a New Wave of Art-Horror Cinema", the terms "slow horror", "smart horror", "indie horror", "prestige horror" are also used by critics to try to define this generic revival (Church, 2021: 2).

the representation of the monstrous the graphic expression of the night-mare of the Black American community.[2]

Hence, whatever the terminology used to describe these new forms of horror, the films that fall into this category all bear witness to a dynamic operation of genericity (Macé, 2001)[3] whose constant metamorphoses seem to reflect the plurality of the figures it portrays. It may be risky to propose a new terminology here, all the more so as it would involve encompassing works distinguished by their singularity. I would argue that the originality of Jordan Peele's films rests on the way they shed social light on post-racial America through the prism of metadiscourse. Unlike the *Scream* franchise and its offshoots, the reflexive (Yacavone, 2021)[4] gesture serves less a playful enterprise than the expression of a societal reflection that questions our view of others and the world.

While the director of *Get Out* does not resort to the graphic horror favoured by many of his contemporaries, he does place at the centre of his film the status of the visible and its corollary, the image, both in its linguistic aspect (figures of speech and other mental representations) and in its iconic reality (filmic, photographic, televisual). Drawing on an outrageous discourse peppered with stereotypes about the Black American community, Peele questions the status of the minority subject in the contemporary imagination. In the film, the African American, long caught in the grip of an iconographic history oscillating between erasure and caricature, remains a prisoner of this aesthetic of disappearance that eclipses the subject in the off-screen or behind the coarseness of the line. While *Nope* reveals the obscenity of the off-stage,[5] *Get Out* chooses to question the discursive mechanisms at play in this representation by revealing the new modalities of racism in the age of "post-Blackness" (Baker, Simmons, 2015).

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2. According to Tananarive Due, "Black history is Black horror. A genre that enables viewers to reframe true-life trauma on the screen as imaginary monsters and demons is tailor-made for the Black American experience." (Due, 2019: 8)

3. "It's less a question of genres, however, than of genericity, understood in an active, transformational sense. The presence of genres in the production and reception of contemporary writing is taken into account in a specific way, no doubt dictated by the times: genres as dividing lines, axes of organization and hierarchization of literary space, are replaced by the dynamics of genres, the various forms of interaction between generic categories, canonical or not, in short, a question of 'constant recategorization'."

4. " In sum, reflexivity, as ultimately a relation between film and spectator, occupies a figurative location between the cinematic work and the extra-work realities to which it refers. Operating at the intersection of moving-image convention and innovation, meaning and style, empirical fact and narrative fiction, it is a significant part of the cognitive function and value of many films, as well as a major channel for affective and artistic expression." With regard to the opposition between reflexivity and metafiction, I also refer to David Roche, *Meta in Film and Television Series* (2022).

5. *Nope*'s story and characters follow in the footsteps of the forgotten dark horseman in Eadweard Muybridge's chronophotographs. For further information on this subject, see Ben Kenigsberg's article (2022).

Although the film takes place in Upstate New York, a bastion of supposedly "colourblind" (Means Coleman, Harris, 2023: 79-140) White neoliberals who hide, behind a glaze of stifling paternalism, sectarian ideals of ousting the Black minority by replacing it, it would be a mistake to isolate the scope of the film's political reflection. Despite the apparent renewal of discourse promoted by increasingly modern and high-performance media, *Get Out* exposes the strategies by which White American society renews and updates a system of servitude made literal by the colonisation of the Black body. This is why this work aims at studying the visual devices used by Peele to make representation a catalyst to reveal the fictionalisation of reality, whose latent, forbidden image he brings to light in the same way as a photographic or stylistic cliché is exposed to light. As I shall demonstrate, this exposure of the ideology underlying the standard expression of racism in the United States is based not only on a study of the representations of otherness conveyed by this society, but also on the colonisation of the gaze resulting from the interdependence between the visible, the seen and the lens—both physical and ideological— through which we perceive reality.

The fantasised Black Body and the rhetoric of monstrosity

Ever since his first film, *Get Out*, Jordan Peele has been questioning the status of the mental and cultural representations that populate everyday life in the United States. In this respect, he seems more interested in expressing an inner horror than its graphic representation *per se*. The director thus revisits the conventions of the genre by making the irruption of the monstrous less something to be seen than something to be thought about. Instead of making a brutal breakthrough in the narrative fabric, Peele gradually leads us towards abjection by giving the disruptive event less the features of a horrific figure than by contextualising its arrival through ordinary discourse whose banality conceals its violence.

To do so, the fiction highlights the stereotypes—these fixed formulations resulting from their repeated circulation within a community— to which Black people remain the victims today. While *Get Out* does not repeat what Means Coleman and Harris describe as the stereotypes of the Black man in cinema (such as the Black man with magical powers, or the sacrificial Black man) (Means Coleman, Harris, 2023: 44-89), the viewer is treated to an anthology of racist preconceptions from the film's White community.[6] Besides, the fiction accompanies this rhetoric

6. Lisa, one of the guests, says to Rose: "So, is it true? The lovemaking. Is it better?". The conclusive nature of the phrase ("So, is it true?") underlines the deductive nature of

with "neo-stereotypes" (Macé, 2007) such as when a couple invited by the Armitages say that "Black is in fashion these days". *Get Out* thus moves away from the familiarity of horrific figures and places them at the service of other, equally hackneyed representations. As Tananarive Due points out, "*Get Out* redresses decades of erasure, abuse, *clichés*,[7] and damaging *tropes* that have stained horror cinema, Hollywood and American history." (Due, 2019: 8)[8]

By making Chris's Black body a space of fantasmatic projection under the Armitages' gaze, he becomes the object of a whole rhetoric of commonplace and stereotype, which, by singling him out as an individual from another community, monstrifies him. Indeed, while the monstrosity constructed by the words he is the subject of does not trigger fear but lust, these words stage a visible otherness in keeping with the etymology of the word (monster comes from the Latin '*monstrare*' meaning to show). This rhetoric shapes an imagery that turns Chris's body into a space of the unknown, outside what the film's White community imagines to be the norm, in line with the idea that "the monster breaks down categories" (Mellier, 1999: 428).

While Rose initially claims that Chris's belonging to the African American minority is a non-issue for her parents, his exposure to the White community they frequent turns him into a circus freak whose radical otherness is scrutinised and investigated.[9] As the guests keep asking about Chris's sporting and sexual prowess (reminiscent of the market place hucksters extolling the physical qualities of slaves), Rose's brother Jeremy claims that by training Chris could become a real "beast".

Thus, the speeches Chris is subjected to do not, strictly speaking, use the hyperbolic rhetoric that is symptomatic of the representation of monstrous aberration in fantasy and horror cinema. The superlatives and exclamations —not to say aphasia— that ensue any horrific confrontation give way to incessant questioning peppered with higher degree comparatives ("So, is it true? The lovemaking. Is it *better*?"). These aphorisms suggest not only that whiteness remains the yardstick by which other ethnic categories are defined and considered, but also that the construction of

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her request. Here, the character seeks confirmation of the paradigmatic construct (Black men are more sexually efficient) that prevails in the White community.

7. It should be noted, however, that unlike the rhetorical figure of the cliché, the stereotype is a worn-out image that manifests the unthinking repetition of a society and, in this respect, has an ideological impact. The discourse of the White community in *Get Out* is of course imbued with this resonance. However, the use of the term cliché has the advantage of highlighting the way images (both rhetorical and iconic) function in the film. On the difference between stereotypes and clichés see Herschberg-Pierrot, 1979: 89.

8. Italics added.

9. This is one of the many paradoxes raised by the film: the guests treat Chris as a "foreign body", by definition unfamiliar, while at the same time imposing on him a constrained, pre-established reading grid.

Chris's monstrosity is made subtle through an imperceptible gap between the White norm and what it excludes. In the bosom of racial America, where institutional racism no longer exists (Thorp, 2020: 208), the affirmation of White domination is expressed through the use of dampened stylistic figures. Far from confronting us with the unthinkable, the insidious monstrosity created by the discourse plays on the sociolectal functioning of the cliché: a space of false recognition is created which, while disturbing the interlocutor, who is made uncomfortable by the use of such hackneyed representations, cannot let him envisage the unspeakable and inconceivable reality that will result.

This is why it is worth noting that the enunciative strategy used here is not what French critics call a trope, which can be understood as "that which changes meaning", i.e. "both *direction* and *signification*" (Bacry, 1992: 9).[10] The trope, understood as a figure of divergence, opens up a gap in communication, when the formulas invoked here are so outdated that they point more towards the workings of catachresis.[11] To say, for example, that with a little practice Chris could become a "beast" is indeed a metaphor, but no stylistic effect is intended here (Bacry, 1992: 26-27) and no one perceives this statement as the place where the rhetorical figure is expressed. Chris's body is thus captured in a rhetoric that oscillates paradoxically between the spectacular and the trivial. Whereas graphic monstrosity is achieved through the literalisation of a horrific metaphor to create an original representation, here it is the trivialisation of figures of speech that gives rise to the monster through the repetition of fantasised fictions which objectify the Black body.

If the seen is sifted through a system made familiar by its numerous occurrences (the tropes of the genre/the racist caricature), while the ontology of the monster presupposes visual excess, Chris's monstrification is constructed through speech and does not produce the expected narrative scandal. On the contrary, it goes unnoticed within a community which, by dint of iterations, has performativised language to the point of substituting the representation it gives of reality for reality itself.[12] The use these White neoliberals make of language is reminiscent of what Frédéric Joly, following Jean-Michel Rey, tells us about the language of "swindlers" whose aim is "[t]o engender—through the desire they have for it and which they strive to communicate, or through a desire that they are only trying to bring about within the community —these 'imaginary formations', whose whole purpose is to give substance to those things whose consistency they nonetheless assert"(Joly, 2019: 59). Indeed, although, as many

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10. All translations from the French by the author.
11. This term is used here in the sense of a metaphor whose use is so common that it is no longer felt as such. https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/catachr%C3%A8se. Accessed July 24, 2023.
12. While this is clearly a U.S. problem, I thought it appropriate to mention here Frédéric Joly's work on the denaturing of language by Nazi discourse during the Second World War.

critics have pointed out, *Get Out* denounces the egalitarian deception of today's post-racial America, its message is no less part of a socio-cultural history that has never ceased to oppose categorial fictions to the singularity and diversity of the subjects represented.

The Coagula project: a slave undertaking to annex the Black body

It is in this light that the new representations of the Black body in horror fiction take on their full meaning. By staging the transplant of a 'White' brain onto a Black subject, *Get Out* creates the monster not through a graphic hyperbole with unprecedented contours, but by revealing intermittently the barely perceptible gap between the model (the White individual who now hides behind every Black person) and its copy (the Black body whose envelope it has usurped). Through this annexation of bodily territory, the White community in the film takes to its logical conclusion the "predatory appropriation of the body" (Colin, Quiroz, 2023: 27) once suffered by the slave. Indeed, the Armitages' graft turns the African American corporeality back into terra nullius, "an entirely 'available' space, offered to the 'will of the West and exposed to the deployment of its political and technological apparatus of capture'" (Colin, Quiroz, 2023: 27).[13]

And yet, despite the technological prowess behind this unprecedented monstrosity, beneath the apparent modernity of these new representations, it is in fact a whole age-old iconographic tradition that the guinea pigs in the Coagula project[14] echo. This new appropriation of the Black body is the result of the same process of erasure that consisted, during minstrel shows (Mouëllic, 2002) in Blackening the faces of White actors with shoe polish to represent the 'Black man'[15] in the style of Jim Crow.[16] The idea is to turn the Black man into an effigy, in other words a representation in no particular form whose excess—typical of crude imitation—far from obscuring the real model (whether the White man behind the mask or the outrageously designated Black man), guarantees

13. While this book (whose work on decoloniality is not unrelated to the mechanisms of US post-raciality) focuses on the Western colonization of Latin American territories, the population control strategies implemented by the White colonial powers seem comparable in this aspect.
14. The Order of the Coagula is made up of influential and wealthy White members who aim to sell and transfer the consciousness of a White individual to the brain of a carefully selected African American.
15. The aim is not to portray an individual in his or her singularity, but to give an image in line with an archetypal or even stereotypical representation of his or her community.
16. If, through the character of Chris, it is above all the identity of the Black man that is questioned here, we must not forget that the representation we are given of Georgina is also part of a racist tradition, inherited from the role of the mammy, the slave woman who looked after the plantation owners' children.

and restores the interval, the gap, with the referent. The masquerade of Black identity is then a vulgar signage intended to reflect the paradigmatic construction of the ethnic minority prevalent in a given community at a given time. *Get Out* thus joins a history of the performing arts and cinema in which, from minstrel shows to horror films and *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), the exhibition of the Black body is no more than a pantomime, a simulacrum in the service of White ideology.

However, in the film, the transformation of individuals into decerebrate carriers of White consciousness is far more detrimental to the integrity of the individual. Whereas the spectacularisation of the body achieved by the makeup of the minstrel maintained the distance between the subject and their image, the occupation of these new slaves' bodies is virtually undetectable. The ventriloquism that takes over the body here epitomises the systemic strategy of a White society that has for centuries assumed the right to speak for and in place of the Black community. It also reiterates the idea that whiteness places the subject on the side of disembodiment and control, in keeping with Richard Dyer's now famous phrase: "Whiteness is in but not of the body" (Dyer, 1997: 14).[17] The peril represented here by the annexation of the Black body, now a receptacle for White identity, is rooted in the segregationist history of the United States, as Elaine K. Ginsberg, echoing Cheryl Harris, reminds us: "In a society structured on racial subordination, White privilege became an expectation and [...] Whiteness became the quintessential property for personhood" (Ginsberg, 1996: 7).

The film's tour de force consists in inscribing this abrogation of the subject promoted by a racist tradition in new forms of representation that revisit age-old processes of erasure. The disappearance of the subject's origin, the revocation of identity, is indeed reminiscent of the "passing" strategy widespread at the time of slavery. According to Ginsberg's definition, passing involves taking on a new identity in order to escape the subjugation of one's origins (racial, sexual, etc.) and gain access to the privileges of another (Ginsberg, 1996: 3). Passing is therefore a work of fiction in which race can be performed if the codes that define it in the eyes of society are observed. This reinvention of the self, which by definition calls into question the visibility of race (Ginsberg, 1996: 9) and in this sense constitutes a threat to it, is linked here to another racist fantasy, that of the exploitation of the body of the other.[18] In *Get Out*, it is the senescent White community

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17. This seems all the more true in the film as no one seems to be concerned about the degeneration of the ageing brain that controls these juvenile bodies.
18. Richard Dyer notes, in reference to *Night of the Living Dead* which particularly inspired Peele's cinema, that the desire to control the racialized body is at the heart of whiteness: "'The fear of one's own body, of how one controls it and relates to it' [...] and the fear of not being able to control other bodies, those bodies whose exploitation is so fundamental to capitalist economy are both at the heart of whiteness." (Dyer, 1993: 160).

that appropriates the advantages of a fantasised Black body endowed with superior physical qualities.

As a matter of fact, the stratagem at the heart of both passing and the Coagula project rests on the mastery and silencing of corporeal signs as the support and expression of the subject's origin. The grafting of the White brain onto the Black body in *Get Out* stages the dislocation of the individual through the conflict produced by the co-existence of the "White essence" and the "Black incarnation". The monstrosity thus created arises, not from appearance, but from the battle between exteriority and interiority behind the scenes, at the origin of this unprecedented "human monstrosity" (Mellier, 1999: 430).[19] Without resorting to the slightest special effect, Jordan Peele invents new figures of monstrosity in which a colonial entity, the White man, spreads, as if by viral contamination,[20] within a body curetted by hypnosis (Thorp: 2020, 206).[21] The entity thus created by this combinatorial game is a living oxymoron, the unexpected result of the "*coincidentia oppositorum*" that underpins this unprecedented figure of contradiction (Mellier, 2000: 39).

In *Get Out*, however, the inner horror is characterised by the concealment of its symptoms. The visibility of monstrosity only comes to the surface when the subject literally syncopes[22] in a barely perceptible expression of the appearance/essence divide so dear to the genre.

This is why Chris (like the viewer) is initially fooled by the appearances of Georgina, Walter and Andre. As the film progresses, however, he is surprised to discover that their way of expressing themselves and evolving in society[23] does not integrate the codes of "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1972: 181) which define the Black American community, unlike the individual who has recourse to passing. The homograft practised here does not subject the transplanted organ to the internal logic of the body, but secedes from it in order to domesticate it more effectively.[24] In contrast to passing, the White extraction is not performed but internalised, and the aim is not so much to deny the appearance of the Black man (whose physical qualities

19. I borrow this terminology from Denis Mellier and give it an opposite meaning in order to highlight the originality of Peele's elaboration of monstrosity. Mellier, for his part, uses it to demonstrate how, whatever the ontology of the monster (human or supernatural), it is part of a rhetoric of excess and common reading strategies.
20. In this respect, whiteness can be associated with both senescence and disease.
21. "Through hypnosis, she forces Black consciousness out of (or much deeper into) the Black body in order to make room for White consciousness to enter the same body".
22. The two instances of this syncope of the real occur when Chris blinds Andre and then Walter with the flash of his phone, suddenly revealing the caged Black identity.
23. This is particularly striking in the case of Andre who, despite being the same age as Chris and from neighbouring districts, doesn't know any of the codes they used to share, such as the way they express themselves and greet each other.
24. In this sense, it is not surprising that once their brains have been grafted onto Georgina and Walter's bodies, the Armitage grandparents occupy the space reserved for domesticity (the kitchen, the park) as if this change were to involve a downgrading.

are coveted) as to deny his integrity as a subject. In the film, the enslavement of the African American community is part of both a history of American representations and an ahistorical process that rejects the postulate of post-raciality and shows the permanence behind the veneer of decoloniality.

Indeed, the iconography in *Get Out* revisits the tradition of the counterfeit face of the Jazz Singer and the topos of the representation of Black people on screen, where the body, the vector of an identity that it both conveys and designates, disappears. The Black man, captured by the image thus fashioned, still conceals a White man who claims to act, express himself and think in his place. The Black bodies, reduced to their surface, become mere trappings, a term whose polysemy combines the notions of illusion, false adornment and entrapment. The physical envelope is indeed the paradoxical mark of a body that is on display and yet absent. It gives rise to the deletion and division of an individual who has become a projection screen for what the viewer wishes to see: a Black wo/man for some, a White wo/man for others. Yet these two sides of the same coin cannot convey the complexity of the being thus created.

The ectoplasmic body, now a mere surface, is no longer the plastic expression of an interiority with which it would maintain an indexical relationship. These new images of the double are a reminder that fantasy text is mirror writing, a self-representation that "embraces the historical evolution of the media" (Mellier, 1999: 444). Indeed doesn't this body detached from its source, this image without referent, stripped of all anchorage in a genetic reality, evoke in this respect a terrifying version of the computer-generated image?[25]

As Philippe Dubois points out, "[from] the moment that it is this genetic principle of the organic link with the real, that had become the foundation of the medium's supposed identity, its specific 'nature', it is clear that the digital technology directly attacks this link between the image and its 'real referent'" (Dubois, 2021: 233). The comparison with the digital medium is of interest in that it brings to light the paradigmatic shift introduced by representation in the film. The challenge posed by the digital to the genesis of the image as trace and imprint (what has been called its "ontology" (Dubois, 2021: 233)) is here mirrored by the deletion of the victims' origin in *Get Out*.

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25. The point here is obviously not to pass an axiological judgement on digital technology, but to shed light on the competitive relationship that all images (both digital and analogue, as we shall see later) have with reality in a film that never ceases to question the representations surrounding us. The essay by Philippe Dubois cited in the following note takes a critical look at the study of the analogue 'epiphany' in the light of the digital revolution.

Erasing the referent: from the Black body to the digital image

The analogy between the digital medium and the erasure of the Black identity throws light on one of the film's central questions: the contemporary way in which the issue of race is examined through the prism of the evolution of audiovisual media. Through the figure of the photographer protagonist, *Get Out* questions both what we see (the seen as part of the visible), the medium through which we see the image (which filters our vision of reality) and the ideological prism that conditions our gaze, of which the image bears the trace (the viewpoint we are seen through). The violence of the flash produced by Chris's telephone can be seen as a modernised version of the Platonic myth of the cave. By dazzling Andre and then Walter, he tears them away from an illusory condition and frees himself from a false image by accessing the reality it conceals.[26]

In this sense, the depiction of these 'low-key' monsters allows us to embrace in a single glance an entire iconographic history ranging from the allegory of the cave to the computer-generated image. But at each end of the spectrum, the lesson is the same: you have to be wary of *trompe l'œil representations* that *require you to look twice*.

From the outset, the film invites us to be suspicious of the apparent frontality of the image, whose feint consists in presenting itself openly, head-on, when it should be perceived less as a direct access to reality than a façade. Let's take an example. When Chris arrives at the Armitages' house, a long shot of the front of their home shows us Rose's parents greeting them on the stoop. This image in itself is not very different from the photographs that clutter the walls once inside, except that the latter focus more closely on the uniformly White family posing for the camera. When Chris arrives, however, the still frame widens as the camera dollies back to turn into an over-the-shoulder shot of Walter, who is observing them from a distance. Walter, whom we saw a few shots earlier busy gardening, thus disappears from the frame only to reappear as an observer. At the edge of the frame, halfway between the seen and the unseen, the man's body seems to inscribe him in the traditional representation of the Black subject always on the fringes of the action, either witness to it or part of the scenery, but very rarely the protagonist. As Walter's position in the shot attests,

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26. "At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision […]" Plato, *The Allegory of the Cave,* https://open.library.okstate.edu/introphilosophy/chapter/on-the-allegory-of-the-cave-plato/. Accessed August 11th, 2024.

the Black characters remain in a satellite position: while the grandparents take pride of place at the centre of the Black and White photographs on the walls, Georgina and Walter, who, according to the couple, are part of the family, are not in any of the pictures. Yet the discovery of this sideways perspective on the image creates tension and, by dilating space in the same way that Hitchcockian suspense dilated time, invites us to reconsider the initial banality of the scene.

Despite the warm welcome Chris receives, he unwittingly gets caught between two converging gazes that turn out to belong to White people: that of the Armitages, at first slightly overhanging, and that of Walter, watching him surreptitiously. However, as the characters' exchanges become less audible (in keeping with the realistic convention that sound level is indexed to our distance from its source), the few notes of music that accompany the scene from the start add to the tension felt by the viewer, especially as they rise to a crescendo in the foreground. This closing shot of the scene leads the viewer to believe that the threat will come from the periphery and that it will be brought to life by an individual belonging to the same ethnic community as Chris. However, despite appearances, this individual on the edge of the frame is the same as the one who, a few minutes later, appears in the photograph showing Dean's father, Roman Armitage, ready to take the start of the qualifying round at the Berlin Olympic Games. The White man, his legs bent over the start line, occupies the centre of the image, the frame so tight that it is impossible to place the action in space or time. It is Dean's commentary that re-establishes the context of the image and dramatises it through the narrative, a narrative that the viewer will later learn is not only partial but also specious, since it consists, under the guise of confession, in deceiving the listener. Contrary to Dean's assertion ("He almost got over it"), Roman never overcame his defeat, which lay at the very root of his undertaking to annex the Black body. The photograph, taken in the flow of family photos lined up on the wall, would in itself be anecdotal if we did not decipher it in the light of what it keeps out of frame, namely Jesse Owens, who beat Roman that day and qualified for the Games he won. In this respect, the exclusion of the Black athlete from the shot is all the more surprising given that Roman's under-performance only makes sense in the light of Owens' presence and his entry into History.

From the outset, therefore, the image in the film maintains a competitive relationship with reality, which it carves up, shapes and parcels out in keeping with the ideology that underpins it. Thus decontextualised, it verges on insignificance and can be manipulated by any commentary claiming to elucidate it. Dean's discourse reconstitutes its *origin* and gives it orientation by anchoring it in a reality that the photographer has chosen to conceal. However, the inclusion of the photograph at this point

in the sequence also invites us to question it, in addition to its relation to the referential context, in its relationship to the reverse shot produced by the filmic device. The photograph of the White sportsman can be read as a counter-shot to Walter's body introduced in the previous sequence. The proximity between Dean's father and the Black gardener he has become is reinforced by the mirror effect produced by the editing, which places the White man facing the camera opposite the Black man filmed from behind.

The resulting shot/counter-shot effect highlights the similarities between these two muscular men in their prime, essentially defined at this stage of the story by their physical activity, despite their differences in age and condition. However, the shot/reverse shot does not place them on an equal footing: while Roman appears in full frame, Walter is framed from behind at shoulder height, with most of his body kept out of frame. This unequal treatment reminds us that in a History written by Whites for Whites, while excluding other ethnic groups from access to representation, the archive (the photograph) can only maintain a counterfeit relationship with reality and truth that is insufficiently questioned.

However, the hermeneutic operation of the image is restored by the device put in place by the film here: the mirroring, by placing Roman and Walter face to face, makes each the double of the other. This face-to-face confrontation between the image of the White man and the "escamotage" (Robert-Houdin, 2011: 42-44) of the Black body foreshadows the transfer effected by the grafting of the image (Roman) into the body (Walter) leading to the dissolution of the body in the image. In this respect, *Get Out* is part of a long horrific tradition in which, from *The Oval Portrait* to *Dorian Gray*,[27] the vampire figure is embodied at the expense of a subject whom it turns into a mere image. Now, the grafting of the White brain into the Black body takes us from the shores of fantasy into the political sphere. In the same way as the racist remarks Chris is subjected to at the garden party, the image maintains a con/fusion between fiction and reality to the point of pretending to replace it. And yet, its mise en abyme in *Get Out* implies, for the discerning eye, a permanent distrust of what is seen, which must now be deciphered. The revelation of racist abjection is thus brought about by the image, even if it remains reserved for those seeking to revive a hermeneutic approach to representation.

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27.   For an analysis of the vampiric relationship between the painted portrait and Madeleine Usher in Jean Epstein's film, see Isabelle Labrouillère's article "The Fall of the House of Usher" (2020: 119-142).

Chris as photographer: from the annexation of the gaze to its emancipation

The film is not content to simply stage the failure of our vision of the world; it also shows that "there can be no domination without the dispossession of the gaze" (Lebrun, Armanda, 2021: 121). The spectator's reappropriation of the seen is then achieved through its protagonist in what will prove to be a shared initiation. While much has been made of the fact that the main character, Chris, is a photographer, less thought seems to have been given to the nature of his photographic productions, which we see against the backdrop of the opening credits.

The first one shows a man dressed entirely in Black carrying white inflatable balloons of various sizes at arm's length. The second one shows the rounded belly of a pregnant Black woman in the left foreground, while a Black man with his back to the camera walks away to the right off-screen area. The third one shows a white dog standing on its hind legs, pulling on a leash held by a man whose face remains out of frame. These three photographs are of particular interest to us because they open the sequence and are displayed in a row, the montage inviting us to read them in syntagmatic continuity.[28] Unlike the images that follow them (a lamppost standing out against a tangle of electric wires, a bird in flight filmed from a low angle), these photographs are taken in a fixed shot, on a tight scale, and all depict individuals.[29] Chris's photographic work follows in the tradition of street photographers who succeed in capturing the strange, the comic or simply the beautiful through composition (Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment) in the ordinariness of everyday life. The Black-and-White prints contribute to the aestheticisation of bodies and scenery, and the works on display would be rather conventional if they did not all depict Black individuals.[30]

At first glance, these images might seem to suggest that the Black subject has finally re-entered the world of representation (if we take Muybridge's photograph of the horseman as the point of origin), and that to do so it will have been necessary to wait for non-White minorities to seize the means of reproducing reality. And yet, on closer inspection, none of these people are treated as the subject of a work in which they occupy the centre and foreground. Whether they are relegated to the background as a simple silhouette with undefined features (the man with the balloons),

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28. Each new photo includes, in the way it is framed, a fragment of the previous or following one.
29. I'll return later to the photo of the White girl hidden behind a black mask, which, like the previous two, is revealed by a wide shot of one of the walls of the flat.
30. The hand that stands out in the third photograph suggests that it belongs to an African American.

kept at the edge of the frame (the pregnant woman), seen from behind (the man walking away), or literally decapitated (the pregnant woman, the man with the dog), the photograph is not organised around their bodies. The traditionally centripetal principle of portraiture shatters, dispersing the human figure to the edges of the image, to the limits of the unrepresentable.[31] Like Chris's father, whose absence Chris reminds us of through a metaphorical *image* ("My dad wasn't really *in the picture*"),[32] the silhouetted bodies (the man with the balloons) or those atomised by the framing are already disembodied. Behind the aestheticisation of reality lies an imperfect grasp of subjects marked by incompleteness, while the repetition of headless bodies seems the proleptic sign of the horror to come. The individuals literally decerebrated by the operation of transplanting the White brain into the Black body will become subjects devoid of identity, a disappearance that the dis/figured subjects photographed here seems to herald.

Ironically, these photographs seem to bear witness to the dispossession of the Black gaze at precisely the moment when it seemed to be emancipating itself. It would indeed be erroneous to think that mastery of the camera is necessarily synonymous with a grip on reality[33] and the restoration of an authorial vision. Surprisingly, in his urban photographs, the protagonist recaptures the modes of representation that populate United States iconography and pepper racist discourse. Chris's photographs can thus be considered paradoxical in that it is through the exposure of Black people that their disappearance takes place, which in this sense makes them tragically part of the lineage of minstrel shows and other racist representations. Chris's eye is a "confiscated" gaze,[34] the invisible vector of the enslavement that his works bear witness to. The segregationist ideology that has always permeated representations of the Black subject thus infects the mental and artistic constructs of Black people themselves. Chris's colonised gaze is evidence of the enduring nature of a racist system whose representations invade social space to the point that they become the yardstick by which a given society thinks of itself. The image here is reminiscent of the language usurped by the Nazi discourse, which permeates every social sphere to such an extent that "the most noxious words of the new phraseology are often taken up without any thought whatsoever, with disconcerting ease, by people who not only abhor and despise the regime, but also have everything to fear from it" (Joly, 2019: 45). A similar

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31. It is in this sense that I think it is possible to read the full-frame image of the White girl hidden behind a black mask that hangs on one of the walls of the flat. It can be seen as a metaphor for the feint of representing Black subjects only as promoters and supports of the dominant White ideology.
32. Italics added.
33. In this way, I do not share Kyle Brett's analysis that when Chris points the lens of his camera at Georgina and Walter, he exerts on them a violence similar to that of the White gaze on the Black body.
34. I am here adapting the title of Frédéric Joly's book.

mechanism seems to be at play in the internalisation of White ideology by African Americans. As Ryan Poll points out after W.E.B. Du Bois: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Poll, 2018: 88). Indeed, it seems more relevant to see in these photographs the double-consciousness effect referred to by Du Bois, which finds its counterpart in the colonisation of Black bodies by the Armitages, than to consider them as a critical commentary on the invisibilisation and decentring of Black people. Besides, this interpretation allows us to take the measure of the initiatory journey undertaken by Chris in *Get Out*.

At this point in the film, Chris is not very different from the child he was, hypnotised by a TV screen distracting him from the violence of reality. At the time, however, the child, although rendered inactive by the seduction of the image, was well aware of the ontological difference between television fiction and reality. Glued to the screen, he refused to take action (in this case, call for help) for fear that it would bring about the misfortune he feared,[35] as if he understood the performative power (Austin, 1975) of a language capable of shaping and informing the world according to its objective. As an adult photographer, Chris continues to withdraw from the world, not only because photography, as Susan Sontag pointed out, "is essentially an act of non-intervention" (Sontag, 2005: 8), but also because he has internalised the objective, the dominant ideology, unconsciously reproducing it in his own work. So it is by reviving the performative operation of the camera, eclipsed by his artistic practice, that Chris untangles himself from the unconscious alienation of his gaze through an unprecedented photographic gesture. This gesture, as mentioned above, consists of inverting the dazzling power of the flash to restore Andre and Walter's sight. In this particular case, however, he is mainly an auxiliary in this sudden awareness, his own revelation coming through the discovery of a series of photographs showing Rose with numerous Black partners.

When Chris uncovers this collection of private photos showing Rose in the company of various African American male and female partners, it is the passage from the unique (her relationship with Chris)[36] to the multiple that takes place through the inclusion of each shot into a series. This insertion into a continuity invalidates the meaning conveyed by each shot. While at first the photos of Rose show her alone and appear to be taken by a third party, the shots gradually become first group photos and then selfies, recognisable by the insertion of the mobile phone in the shot and/or the position of the subjects photographed. While the first photos that open the series seem to confer a sacred character on specific moments in

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35. Missy: "You didn't call anyone?" […] Chris: "I thought if I did it would make it *real*". Italics added.
36. Rose had led Chris to believe that he was her first African American partner.

Rose's past life, the other images only derive their value from the series in which each one is included. From now on, the photos are all taken from the same angle and distance, and repeat the same poses, their value residing essentially in "the singular adventure of the person who has shot them" (Bourdieu in Gunthert, 2015). If the statement whereby "the selfie is the first image in history that carries no secret, no hidden image and, in so doing, no perspective"[37] seems open to criticism, it appears that the viral proliferation of these ready-to-use images on social networks is dragging these new self-portrait practices down to the derisory and the insignificant. Here, however, unlike digital images that are scrolled across the screen, the fact these photographs were printed on paper means that one has to stop and consider them. While the contextual and aesthetic content of each photo remains poor in itself, the enlargement and resolution enable the spectator to identify without a doubt the faces of Andre, Walter and Georgina among Rose's previous conquests. What's more, the printing of the developed shot gives the image a new value that invalidates its anecdotal nature: the manipulation of the paper format —unlike scrolling, which implies that each new image eclipses the previous one— allows the creation of a photographic ribbon suddenly rendered talkative or "garrulous", as Roland Barthes put it (Barthes, 2020: 57). All at once, the insignificance of the photo, thus contextualised and duplicated, reconnects with a hermeneutic function. Once inserted into a chronology that inscribes it in time, the once silent space/time of the photograph turns into a narrative.

The film then shifts into the logic of investigation, the digital image becoming in context the trace of a "ça-a-été" (Barthes, 1980: 120-121) restoring the truth about the existence of Andre, Walter and Georgina. The photographic image thus restores the characters' past, re-establishing an anchorage in reality that has been damaged by the fictionalisation of the present. In retrospect, the reconstitution of the overall picture denounces the not only partial but also arbitrary capture of the visible that had been carried out up to that point.

Indeed, the history that is being written in counterpoint to the post-racial deception here takes the form of thanatography, in line with an iconographic tradition in which the White figure (in this case Rose) always occupies the axial point opposite Black bodies that the accumulation of photographs renders satellite-like and supernumerary. While each shot, taken separately, maintains the illusion of a rhizomic relationship in which the two figures, side by side, occupy the space of the frame on an equal footing, their succession reveals the commodification of the Black

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37. Annie Lebrun and Juri Armanda's book is a scathing indictment of "the ridiculous practice of the selfie" (Lebrun, Armanda: 2021, 96). The point here is not to pass value judgement on what Gunthert describes as "participatory autophotography", but to show how the proliferation of this type of image contributes to its insignificance.

subject, who has become disposable. The photographic ribbon thus formed makes the story of each couple part of the US history of Black/White relations while freezing each pair in the eternity of a fixed representation. The modes of reproducing reality may have changed, but their denomination has never been so well-founded: the aim is to re/produce in identical fashion an endogamous positioning that exposes the false proximity between the subjects photographed and perpetuates the subservience of one to the other.

So, as in Roman's photograph, it is essential to restore the integrity of the image when so many representations maintain a competitive or even duplicitous relationship with reality. It is in fact possible to reconnect with reality, on the one hand, by questioning the image in its context, and on the other, by discerning in it, beyond the banality of the instantaneous, an image of time. By reconstructing the photographic jigsaw, Chris succeeds in giving new meaning to the visible by reconnecting with a memory in the light of which we must now decipher the increasingly diffuse signs of White domination. In a world of pretence manufactured by White America, the truth revealed by the image highlights, in a single gesture, the fusion and dislocation of reality (these photographs attest to the existence of past relationships) and fiction (orchestrated by Rose). But in order to flush out the chimera, we need to reconnect with the memorability of the photograph (Sontag, 2005: 13)[38] and halt the flow of images, whether by means of a flash that edifies by stupefying or through photos that careful examination snatches from the digital scroll.

Conclusion

It would seem, then, that while *Get Out* shares many of the concerns of Afro-pessimism,[39] Jordan Peele's film is less about promoting a separatist conception of society than it is about inviting the Black American minority to develop modes of resistance, while at the same time encouraging every citizen to question the ways in which ideas are circulated in a society at a given time. The director thus invites us to reconsider our fiduciary relationship with all forms of representation. By exposing the iconic and linguistic devices that govern usage within the same community, the director denounces the disembodiment of subjects by language and image, responsible for the ideological reshaping of individuals. A paradigm shift is therefore needed to understand this "profound structure, rooted in institutions, social practices and collective patterns of thought", which "violently

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38. "Photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow."
39. On this question, see the above-mentioned article by Ryan Poll.

appropriates reality, produces its own reality and, in so doing, imposes its own conditions of visibility and intelligibility" (Colin, Quiroz,2023: 38). Faced with the proliferation of mental, linguistic and media images whose indexing to reality is less than guaranteed, it is now up to us all to flush out the invisible behind the visible (Kuhn, 1994: 71), the objective behind the vision, with an eye that is ever vigilant and worried.

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Jordan Peele et le canon poësque : revisiter l'horreur

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Abstract: This article aims at pointing out how Jordan Peele's films (*Get Out*, *Us*, and *Nope*) echo the Poe literature, and how American *New Horror* resonates quite particularly with it, more than traditional horror cinema ever did – at pointing out, also, how Peele's *New Horror* stands out by the Gothic legacy it operates in and revisits.

Keywords: Jordan Peele, Edgar A. Poe, Cinema, Gothic Literature, Racism, United States

Résumé : Dans cet article, il sera question des liens que Jordan Peele tisse entre ses films (*Get Out*, *Us* et *Nope*) et la littérature d'Edgar Allan Poe, ainsi que de la résonance que la Nouvelle Horreur états-unienne trouve en celle-ci, encore plus que le cinéma d'horreur traditionnel ; également, de la manière dont Peele négocie et revisite son héritage gothique.

Mots-clés : Jordan Peele, Edgar A. Poe, cinéma, littérature gothique, racisme, États-Unis

Introduction

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Edgar Allan Poe est une figure majeure de l'intertextualité états-unienne ; ses ambiances et schémas narratifs sont constamment empruntés, copiés, volés (« *purloined* », pour reprendre le titre d'une de ses nouvelles les plus célèbres, « The Purloined Letter »[1]). Le cinéma d'horreur états-unien du milieu des années 2010, dont fait partie le réalisateur afro-américain Jordan Peele, s'ancre alors presque inévitablement dans un héritage poësque. La particularité de l'horreur de Jordan Peele est qu'elle

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1. En français : « La Lettre volée ».

utilise ses influences gothiques d'une manière bien précise : d'une part elle réconcilie le canon poësque avec des problématiques sociales contemporaines, par exemple les liens entre personnages blancs et communautés discriminées ou marginalisées, ou la place des femmes dans la société ou en fiction – deux thématiques sur lesquelles Poe a souvent pu être considéré ambivalent ; d'autre part, cette horreur contemporaine permet au public états-unien de questionner son identité d'une façon tout à fait similaire à celle du maître du gothique, mais dans de nouvelles directions que cet article s'attachera à décrire et comprendre.

L'objectif de cette analyse va être d'identifier et de décrypter les motifs poësques présents dans les trois longs-métrages de Jordan Peele (*Get Out*, *Us* et *Nope*) pour comprendre comment ces schémas s'infiltrent dans la Nouvelle Horreur états-unienne. Prenant également en considération qu'Edgar Poe est, indiscutablement, « une figure omniprésente à tous les étages de l'édifice culturel occidental, et notamment celui de la culture populaire » (Dupont, Menegaldo, 2020 : 15), en particulier aux États-Unis et que, d'une certaine façon, les références à ses œuvres et à ses mécaniques narratives en sont devenues incontournables, il va s'agir de montrer comment celles-ci prennent forme dans la Nouvelle Horreur états-unienne, la distinguant du cinéma d'horreur traditionnel – pour qu'elle en devienne un mouvement à part entière.

Jordan Peele a rencontré un très grand succès avec son premier film, *Get Out* (2017), qui met en scène Chris, un jeune homme noir rencontrant pour la première fois ses beaux-parents blancs dans leur demeure de Nouvelle-Angleterre – réunion de famille qui va prendre une tournure cauchemardesque. Le film a été nommé trois fois aux Oscars, remportant celui du meilleur scénario. En 2018, le deuxième film du réalisateur, *Us*, campe une famille états-unienne dont les membres se font poursuivre par leurs doubles maléfiques. Le dernier film de Peele, *Nope*, date de 2022. L'histoire met en parallèle deux intrigues : d'un côté celle d'un frère et d'une sœur soupçonnant une présence extraterrestre au-dessus de leur ranch californien ; et, d'un autre, celle d'un singe tuant de façon sanguinaire toute l'équipe de tournage d'une série télévisuelle familiale. Chacun de ces trois films dresse un portrait dérangeant de l'identité états-unienne, faisant resurgir les fantômes d'Edgar Poe, plus de cent cinquante ans après sa mort. Prenant en compte ce que le double de la protagoniste, dans *Us*, déclare quand elle présente sa ténébreuse famille : « *We are Americans* », voyons comment l'américanité est représentée par Jordan Peele, dans la lignée d'Edgar Allan Poe.

« *We are Americans* »

Pendant un séjour de vacances dans leur résidence secondaire, les Wilson (*Us*) remarquent sur leur trottoir quatre personnes se tenant les mains, complètement statiques, et qui fixent leur résidence dans l'obscurité. Après que les Wilson menacent d'appeler les autorités, les étrangers commencent soudainement à se déplacer et s'introduisent chez eux en les poursuivant, finissant par les tenir captifs dans leur propre maison. Assis, terrifiés, face à leurs agresseurs, les Wilson ne peuvent que constater – « *It's us* », observe le petit Jason. En effet, c'est bien eux. Chaque membre de la famille a devant lui un double qui le persécute. Adelaide, la mère, reconnaît Red, son ombre, qu'elle avait rencontrée enfant lorsqu'elle s'était égarée dans une fête foraine de Santa Cruz (comme on peut le voir dans la scène d'ouverture du film). Red explique aux Wilson la situation : ayant grandi toute sa vie comme l'ombre d'Adelaide, elle veut désormais prendre sa revanche. Si l'on fait abstraction des mouvements de son corps, qui la rendent complètement désarticulée et flexible, Red se différencie d'Adelaide par un élément distinctif : elle ne parle qu'en chuchotements, avec une voix cassée, comme si elle était en constante rémission d'une strangulation. De façon tout à fait similaire chez Edgar Allan Poe, William Wilson (dans la nouvelle éponyme) est poursuivi et hanté par un double obscur, reconnaissable à son « profond, maudit *chuchotement*[2] » (Poe, 1989 : 441). Le fait que Peele ait choisi de nommer cette famille les Wilson rend le parallèle avec la célèbre nouvelle de Poe encore plus évident. La façon dont l'histoire se développe est aussi très similaire : dans « William Wilson », le narrateur « se rend de lieu en lieu, à plusieurs reprises, pour laisser son passé (et son double) derrière lui et retrouver son intériorité[3] » (Reuber, 2012 : 99) ; dans *Us*, Adelaide Wilson quitte sa maison de vacances pour un bateau, puis va de la résidence d'un couple d'amis à la plage de Santa Cruz, puis au palais des glaces de la fête foraine de son enfance, dans le souterrain duquel se trouvent les « *Tethered*[4] » (ainsi que ces doubles obscurs se font connaître). Exactement comme dans la nouvelle gothique, la protagoniste de *Us* tente d'échapper à son ombre avant de se décider à la confronter dans un final inattendu. Adelaide correspond au traditionnel protagoniste poësque : « obsédé[5] » (McCoppin, 2012). Elle aussi est obsédée par son antagoniste jumelle, qu'elle fuit mais finit par suivre sous terre, une obsession qui l'ancre dans un désir de se retrouver et entrer dans une forme de résilience, tels ces narrateurs poësques qui « empruntent un chemin autodestructeur, mus par des obsessions inventées qui s'avèrent n'être que des

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2. « *ever-remembered, damnable* whisper » (Poe, 2012 : 86).
3. « *relocates several times in order to leave his past (and double) behind and find his true self* ».
4. Littéralement, les « attachés » ; les « captifs ».
5. « *obsessed* ».

moyens détournés de faire face à leur propre inconscient[6] » (McCoppin, 2012 : 106). Mais l'obsession d'Adelaide d'en savoir plus se révèle à la fin du film totalement feinte, comme on le réalise grâce au rebondissement final inattendu. L'idée de double, induite par l'intertextualité de « William Wilson », est par ailleurs particulièrement soulignée pendant tout le film, notamment parce que l'antichambre du monde des *Tethered* est un palais des glaces (l'accent est ici mis sur le reflet et la reproduction), mais aussi parce qu'Adelaide ne cesse d'être confrontée dans de nombreuses scènes à sa propre image, que ce soit dans du verre brisé ou des surfaces réfléchissantes de toutes sortes. Mais, contrairement à Poe, qui faisait se confronter un personnage solitaire à son ombre, Peele oppose les États-Unis tout entiers à leur ombre. En effet, au fur et à mesure de l'intrigue, les Wilson comprennent que, non seulement eux puis leurs amis sont poursuivis par leurs ombres meurtrières, mais que c'est le cas de chaque habitant du pays. La partie oubliée, abandonnée des États-Unis se soulève pour renverser celle qui vit dans la lumière. Peele comprend ici les États-Unis comme un corps pourvu d'une conscience, qui doit questionner ses traumas nationaux. Poe quant à lui enfermait plutôt ses lecteurs dans le corps et l'esprit d'une seule personne (d'un seul homme), alors que l'objectif de Peele est d'évoquer des groupes entiers : la communauté noire (dans ses trois films) ou même le pays dans son entier. L'Amérique, construite sur un projet d'individualité est ici transformée en multitude – l'horreur, chez Peele, n'est alors plus dans un individu, mais dans les États-Unis, qui semblent être dotés de leur propre inconscient, construit collectivement. Quand Red déclare « *We are Americans* », elle ancre dès le début l'intrigue dans une idée de nation et de collectivité qui, par ailleurs, a été amorcée avant même que le film ne commence. Le tire, *Us*, écrit en lettres capitales sur des affiches étasuniennes, joue déjà sur une ambiguïté : qui est le « *us* » (« nous ») ou les « *U.S.* » (« *United States* », États-Unis) dont le film va parler – en tant que public états-unien, qui allons-*nous* voir dans le film *Us* ?

L'américanité, Poe et l'horreur de Peele vont également trouver un point de convergence dans la symbolique de la maison. L'intrigue des films de Jordan Peele est fortement structurée autour des frontières de la maison, ainsi qu'à la manière dont les personnages évoluent à l'intérieur de celle-ci. Le film *Get Out* tire son nom de cette idée-là. Alors que la tension ne cesse d'augmenter, à la fois les personnages noirs diégétiques et toute l'audience états-unienne veulent crier au jeune Chris : « *Get out! Get out!* » (« Va-t'en ! ») ; mais il est coincé dans cette maison et le jardin qui l'encercle ; l'horreur se crée sur cet enfermement. Comme dit précédemment, dans *Us*, la maison est un lieu de refuge – les protagonistes vont de l'une à l'autre pour échapper à leurs agresseurs. Pourtant, ces abris ne semblent pas suffisants : les assaillants parviennent à déjouer la sécurité que la

6. *« follow a self-destructive path propelled by these invented obsessions, which are really misdirected attempts at facing their own unconscious ».*

maison aurait dû prodiguer à la famille Wilson. Dans le cas de *Nope*, il y a pour le frère et la sœur Haywood une opposition claire entre l'extérieur de la maison, leur lieu d'enquête où l'extraterrestre est censé se dissimuler, et son intérieur, où ils sentent leur protection garantie – la maison s'avérera en réalité perméable aux ingérences météorologiques de l'extraterrestre (se plaçant au-dessus du ranch Haywood, celui-ci déclenche une pluie torrentielle qui s'infiltre dans la bâtisse et s'abat sur Emerald et Angel, l'acolyte des Haywood dans leur enquête). Pour Poe également, la maison est un lieu de danger dans de nombreux récits : dans « La Chute de la maison Usher », bien sûr, où la maison est un corps en décomposition qui devient presque un personnage à part entière ; dans « Double Assassinat dans la rue Morgue », où un crime énigmatique s'est déroulé dans une maison fermée à double-tour et qui est finalement résolu entre les murs d'un petit appartement ; dans « Le Chat noir », un bâtiment réduit en cendres puis, plus tard, une cave, sont des éléments clés de l'intrigue ; et enfin, l'idée générale de l'étrange manoir sombre et inquiétant, que l'on trouve dans « Le Portrait ovale », « Le Masque de la Mort rouge », « Le Cœur révélateur », « Hop-Frog »… La Nouvelle Horreur états-unienne, dans le travail de Jordan Peele, emploie le motif de la maison ainsi qu'on le trouve dans la littérature de Poe. Mais encore une fois, ce n'est plus un individu qui doit l'appréhender, mais un groupe de personnes (la communauté noire dans *Get Out* ; la famille nucléaire dans *Us* ; et un frère et une sœur dans *Nope*). On peut d'ailleurs rappeler dans ce sens que la famille est une cellule sociale récurrente de la Nouvelle Horreur – entité presque entièrement absente (en tant que protagoniste) des récits de Poe qui sont plutôt centrés, comme dit précédemment, sur un personnage masculin solitaire (face à son intériorité), confronté à des événements étranges. Peele lie la maison menaçante, l'un des tropes majeurs du gothique états-unien, au contexte familial, qui se retrouve, lui, fréquemment dans la fiction d'horreur traditionnelle. En effet, horreur et cellule familiale se sont rencontrées au cinéma bien avant les films de Jordan Peele ou la Nouvelle Horreur :

> Lier famille et horreur n'a bien entendu rien de nouveau : les hantises familiales étaient en vogue dans le cinéma d'auteur des années 1970 – *L'Exorciste*, *Rosemary's Baby* ou *Shining* par exemple. […] Mais ce nouveau mouvement de films [la Nouvelle Horreur] semble, encore plus que par le passé, se construire sur cette profondeur émotionnelle propre aux drames familiaux middle-class – comme c'est le cas dans *Manchester by the Sea*, […] *Le Monde de Charlie* ou *American Beauty* – pour se conclure sur la même sublimité gothique[7] (Bridges, 2018).

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7. *« The relationship between family and horror is nothing new, of course: family haunting films were in vogue in the arthouse horror of the 1970s* – The Exorcist, Rosemary's Baby, *and* The Shining *for example. […] But this new set of films seems, more so than in the past, to develop with the emotional depth of middle-class family dramas* – for instance, Manchester by the Sea, […] The Perks of Being a Wallflower, or American Beauty *– and conclude with high gothic sublimity »*.

Comme évoqué en introduction, la Nouvelle Horreur se distingue par le fait qu'elle combine les mécaniques traditionnelles de l'horreur avec des schémas d'intrigues d'autres genres cinématographiques, généralement perçus comme plus hermétiques (par exemple des « *middle-class family dramas* », ainsi que les identifie Bridges, mais aussi des comédies ou des thrillers, comme c'est le cas chez Jordan Peele). Les représentations contemporaines de maisons dans le cinéma d'horreur abordent des problématiques bien différentes de celles présentes à l'époque de Poe : Bridges explique dans son article que « les maisons […] suggèrent l'ambivalence des millenials à l'égard de la propriété immobilière depuis la crise financière[8] » : les *millenials* (personnes nées entre le début des années 1980 et la fin des années 1990) représentent l'un des publics cibles de la Nouvelle Horreur et ont été éduqués par des parents pour qui le rêve américain (voire l'américanité) a pu être atteint par la propriété immobilière. Une peur générationnelle des *millenials* pourrait alors se situer en partie dans l'idée qu'une maison est inhospitalière, que ses frontières sont fragiles : dans *Nope*, la maison a des limites poreuses, est perméable au monde extérieur, rappelant le manoir déclinant des Usher ; les maisons dans *Us* sont des lieux qui n'ont plus rien de protecteur ou de privé ; et, dans *Get Out*, les *baby-boomers* (i.e. nés entre la fin de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale et le début des années 1960, représentés dans le film par les beaux-parents de Chris, les Armitage) utilisent la maison qu'ils ont acquise dans une Amérique plus prospère pour asseoir leur hégémonie économique, raciale et eugéniste. Par ailleurs, dans les films de Peele, la maison représente aussi une menace en ce que quelque chose d'inexplicable et de dangereux se tapit parfois dans ses souterrains.

Le dessous des maisons a été utilisé à de nombreuses reprises comme le lieu de secrets et de tabous familiaux – comme, parmi de nombreux exemples, dans la série *Desperate Housewives* ou les films *Le Silence des agneaux*, *Psychose*, *L'Effet papillon* ou la saga *Saw*. Envisager le sous-sol comme un lieu d'horreur fait écho à la nouvelle « Le Chat noir », dans laquelle le narrateur finit par emmurer le corps de sa femme « dans la cave, comme les moines du Moyen Âge muraient, dit-on, leurs victimes[9] » (Poe, 1989 : 699). Dans *Get Out*, la tension ambiante est enfin compréhensible lorsque Chris découvre qu'il a en fait été piégé par sa compagne Rose et les parents de celle-ci. Après cette révélation, ils l'endorment et transportent son corps dans le sous-sol où tout le stratagème lui est expliqué sur un écran, pendant que l'équipement de lobotomie est mis en place par M. Armitage dans la pièce voisine. À son réveil, Chris scrute la pièce où il est attaché : un baby-foot, un jeu de fléchettes, un trophée de chasse – « une caricature de l'intérieur chaleureux des années 1950 […],

8. « *The homes […] suggest millennials' post-financial crisis ambivalence toward housing* ».
9. « *in the cellar, just as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims* » (Poe, 2012 : 247).

une tentative désespérée des Armitage d'empêcher le temps d'avancer[10] » (Walber, 2017). Il semblerait que la cave des Armitage arbore leurs idéaux inavouables. Cette maison, telle que la conçoit Peele, montre au monde un intérieur moderne et conventionnel mais cache, en son sous-sol, des idéaux de suprématie blanche qui ne peuvent être exposés directement à la surface – ce n'est que lorsque personne ne peut plus observer (lorsque Chris part errer dans les bois alentour) que les plans horrifiques de la *garden party* sont révélés au grand jour, dans le cadre d'un *bingo* ayant lieu en plein jour dans le jardin. Sinon, tout reste dans le sous-sol, qui n'est alors pas seulement le lieu de l'inconscient, mais aussi celui de sentiments et idéologies volontairement celés. Puis dans *Us*, les États-Unis tout entiers possèdent un sous-sol, dont ils ne peuvent plus s'occuper – comme l'indique l'épigraphe du film : « À travers les États-Unis, il y a des milliers de kilomètres de tunnels souterrains oubliés depuis bien longtemps[11] ». Peele imagine ces dédales sinueux comme le lieu d'inégalités sociales. Comme dans le mythe de la caverne de Platon, les *Tethered* sont tenus éloignés du monde, jusqu'à ce que Red/Adelaide se retrouve accidentellement à la surface et leur en rapporte la lumière dont ils avaient besoin pour se soulever. Encore une fois, Peele étend l'idée du sous-sol au pays tout entier, un pays qui tient volontairement à l'écart et ignore des problématiques qui finissent par éclater. Comme les autres films de Peele, *Us* questionne la condition des populations et communautés marginalisées, et notamment celle des Noirs états-uniens : l'égalité des chances peut paraître accomplie en surface, mais un souterrain d'inconscient et de personnes mutiques révèlent le contraire. Et, bien que, dans *Get Out*, le père Armitage se targue qu'il aurait volontiers voté une troisième fois pour Obama si cela avait été possible (« *Best president of my lifetime!* »), ce qu'il cache sous sa maison nous prouve l'inverse. Chez Peele, il n'y a aucun chat qui puisse faire éclater la vérité, comme dans « Le Chat noir » : le sous-sol n'est pas un lieu de révélation, mais le lieu d'horreurs à jamais enterrées. Dans *Us*, Red, jusqu'alors laissée ombre parmi les ombres, cherche à regagner de l'agentivité et prendre sa place dans le monde ; dans la partie éclairée de celui-ci, en tous cas. Et, en effet, il est intéressant d'analyser la manière dont Peele confère une agentivité à des personnages et des corps longtemps oubliés par Poe.

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10.   « *A caricature of the homey 1950s "den" [...], a desperate attempt to freeze their [the Armitages'] own lives* ».
11.   « *Across the U.S., there are thousands of miles of underground tunnels that have been long forgotten* ».

Personnages et agentivité

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Dans *Nope*, Peele oppose deux récits : d'un côté, le frère et la sœur Haywood, descendants d'Alastair Haywood (un jockey noir de la fin du xixᵉ siècle, première personne à être jamais apparue sur une image mouvante), qui enquêtent sur la présence extraterrestre qu'ils soupçonnent aux abords de leur ranch ; et, d'un autre, le tournage d'une série télévisuelle nommée *Gordy's Home*, des décennies auparavant, au cours duquel Gordy, singe vedette, a sauvagement massacré toutes les personnes présentes. D'une part un singe ; de l'autre, un extraterrestre. Ce parallèle n'est pas rare dans l'imaginaire occidental, où le primate est souvent considéré comme l'origine de l'homme, là où l'extraterrestre représente au contraire une sorte d'aboutissement technologique et ontologique (on pense par exemple à *2001 : L'Odyssée de l'espace*). Comme l'écrit le sociologue Jean-Bruno Renard, « l'image de l'extraterrestre s'est construite – consciemment ou non – par inversion de l'image de l'homme sauvage ; toutes deux ayant en commun d'appartenir désormais à une même mythologie : l'imaginaire évolutionniste » (Renard, 1984 : 71). Le sauvage – le primate – figurant ainsi la condition bestiale et erratique de laquelle l'humain s'est extrait ; et l'extraterrestre symbolisant un futur éloigné, un aboutissement social et intellectuel, où le voyage intergalactique a été rendu possible. L'idée du singe meurtrier convoquée dans *Nope* résonne évidemment avec les nouvelles d'Edgar Poe avec « Double Assassinat dans la rue Morgue », où un orang-outang tuait violemment une dame âgée et sa fille derrière les portes verrouillées d'une demeure parisienne – le but du protagoniste étant alors de résoudre cette affaire mystérieuse à partir des témoignages auditifs des passants, faisant de cette nouvelle l'une des premières histoires de détective. Il est assez étonnant de voir Jordan Peele utiliser un motif si explicitement poësque (le singe meurtrier), alors que

> [c]ompte-tenu des liens racistes existant entre les singes et les personnes noires, les meurtres de deux femmes dans « Double Assassinat dans la rue Morgue » mettent ingénieusement à l'épreuve les lignes conceptuelles existant entre espèces et entre races. […] Ces meurtres semblent enracinés dans la crainte raciste que les personnes noires se soulèvent – d'autant que ces soulèvements se porteraient alors sur des corps de femmes blanches[12] (Person, 2001: 213).

De nombreux critiques ont rappelé que l'amalgame entre le primate et le corps noir était si répandu au xixᵉ siècle qu'il est difficile de penser que

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12.   « *Given the racist link between apes and blacks, the murders of two women in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" ingeniously test the conceptual lines between species and between races. […] [T]he murders seem rooted in white racist fears of black uprisings – especially as those uprisings would register on the bodies of white women* ».

l'intrigue de Poe y soit complètement étrangère : l'idée d'un orang-outang concupiscent, dangereux et incontrôlable fait écho aux discours racistes de son époque. La figure de l'orang-outang est aussi grandement évocatrice puisque cette espèce a été utilisée comme point pivot entre la bestialité et l'humanité dans l'anthropologie coloniale de la fin du XVIIIe siècle (notamment en Angleterre) : l'esclavage put être alors justifié par un rapprochement fallacieux entre les orangs-outangs et les Noirs (Sebastiani, 2013). Quelle utilité Jordan Peele peut-il donc faire de ce motif particulièrement chargé historiquement, lorsqu'il met en scène le primate Gordy au milieu d'une équipe de personnes blanches qu'il finit par toutes massacrer (à l'exception d'un enfant-acteur, qui s'avère être la seule personne non-blanche du plateau) ?

Pour comprendre ce problème, il va nous falloir nous pencher sur l'antagoniste des Haywood : l'extraterrestre qui survole leur ranch. Lorsque, à la fin du film, il se déploie pour prendre la forme d'un gigantesque voile blanc, il peut alors métaphoriser un vaste écran de cinéma s'abattant sur les deux travailleurs noirs de l'industrie. En effet, le métier des deux Haywood est de dresser des chevaux pour Hollywood. Non seulement ils sont les seules personnes noires à travailler dans ce secteur (bien qu'ils descendent, comme dit plus tôt, de la première personne apparue sur une image mouvante), mais ils se rendent aussi bien compte qu'ils font maintenant partie d'une économie mourante, puisque Hollywood va aujourd'hui préférer les effets spéciaux à l'utilisation de vrais chevaux. Il faut se rappeler, par ailleurs, que cet extraterrestre en voile blanc a déjà englouti violemment le public d'un spectacle extérieur qui avait lieu dans un ranch voisin. Le film *Nope* est une critique explicite de la société du spectacle (Hogan, 2022). Il commence en effet par une citation biblique sur le spectacle, puis décrit avec beaucoup de cynisme comment le voisin des Haywood, propriétaire d'un parc d'attractions western, a décidé de faire un spectacle de l'arrivée de l'extraterrestre, qu'il a lui aussi pressentie. Le voile blanc, aspirant et broyant d'abord tout le public de ce spectacle en plein-air, puis essayant d'écraser dans un second temps les Haywood, permet un constat plutôt saisissant : l'écran du cinéma hollywoodien et/ou de la télévision dévore son public d'un côté ; et, de l'autre, étouffe les travailleurs noirs de son industrie. Avant d'aller plus loin, il est également important de garder en tête que le voile un blanc est aussi un motif poësque récurrent :

> Est donc particulièrement manifeste, dans ces trois récits de Poe [*Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym de Nantucket*, « Une descente dans Maelström » et « Manuscrit trouvé dans une bouteille »], la manière dont l'auteur joue des possibilités fantastiques d'une figure blanche énigmatique, liée à un phénomène météorologique inouï,

> aux caractéristiques fluidiques, ductiles, polymorphes. (Lécole Solnychkine, 2023 : 53)

L'autrice de ces lignes soutient par ailleurs dans son travail que ces représentations poësques constituent une préfiguration de l'écran blanc et du geste cinématographique : chez Poe, de surfaces et volumes blancs pouvaient déjà émerger des figures « instables et labiles » (63). En utilisant une forme blanche poësque, cette fois-ci écrasante, Peele met l'horreur dans le corps du cinéma même, qui devient alors une source d'effroi pour les protagonistes noirs.

Si l'on compare maintenant ces deux utilisations de Poe dans *Nope* – le singe meurtrier (qui véhicule nécessairement une intertextualité raciste) et le voile blanc – il semble que Peele fait un constat de la condition des personnes noires à Hollywood : elles sont soit, en tant qu'actrices, réduites à des représentations très réductrices au sein d'atmosphères excluantes, entièrement blanches et aliénantes (comme montré avec *Gordy's Home* où le primate renvoie aux imaginaires racistes du canon poësque) ; soit, en tant que techniciennes, étouffées par une industrie du cinéma qui les ignorent ou les rabaissent (comme montré avec l'extraterrestre oppressant et broyant qui terrorise les Haywood). Assumant sur certains aspects l'hérédité poësque, Peele réussit également à s'en affranchir en donnant à ses personnages noirs une certaine agentivité (alors qu'ils sont quasi, voire complètement absents des œuvres du maître du gothique), puisqu'ils parviennent à affronter l'extraterrestre, puis à l'abattre.

Jordan Peele fait aussi référence à Poe dans la manière dont il décrit ses protagonistes. Bien que *Nope* soit plus pluriel, *Get Out* et *Us* font s'identifier le spectateur à un(e) seul(e) protagoniste/narrateur(trice), dont on va suivre le point de vue. Contrairement à l'horreur hollywoodienne classique, Chris (*Get Out*), les Haywood (*Nope*) et Adelaide Wilson (*Us*) sont présentés comme des personnages tout à fait sensés qui, face au danger, restent pragmatiques et prennent les décisions les plus raisonnables. Quand on pourrait fréquemment reprocher aux personnages du cinéma d'horreur traditionnelle de prendre de mauvaises décisions, ce n'est pas le cas pour ceux de Peele. Et les protagonistes de Poe, eux aussi, se justifient d'un esprit raisonnable : dans « Double Assassinat dans la rue Morgue », le très cartésien monsieur Dupin résout l'affaire réputée insoluble ; dans « Manuscrit trouvé dans une bouteille », le personnage évoque « l'aridité de [s]on génie[13] » (Poe, 1989 : 113) ; dans « Le Chat noir », le narrateur précise : « Dès mon enfance, j'étais noté pour la docilité et l'humanité de mon caractère[14] » (Poe, 1989 : 693) ; etc. – ils le font principalement pour assurer

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13.   « *the aridity of my genius* » (Poe, 2012 : 1).
14.   « *From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition* » (Poe, 2012 : 239).

leur clarté d'esprit au vu des événements tout à fait étranges qu'ils s'apprêtent à relater. Jordan Peele réutilise la raison comme outil principal de ses protagonistes, alors même que la raison, dans la mythologie poësque, était montrée comme une qualité de la blanchité, comme on peut le voir dans « Double Assassinat dans la Rue Morgue », où sont mises en contraste la raison de l'homme blanc et la description raciste d'une bête féroce et furieuse (Barret, 2001 :160). Encore une fois, Peele use d'un motif poësque et l'applique à ses personnages noirs : Chris est très analytique et suspicieux, dès qu'il passe le seuil de la maison des Armitage ; Adelaide prend les décisions les plus stratégiques pour sa famille, leur permettant de rester hors de danger ; quant aux Haywood, ils installent un système de vidéosurveillance dont ils visionnent ensuite minutieusement les bandes. L'une des différences majeures est qu'ils vont apparaître comme dignes de confiance, ce qui était rarement le cas chez Poe, où les protagonistes mettaient tant d'énergie à vouloir prouver leur absence de folie qu'ils en paraissaient très vite d'autant plus suspects. Dans *Us*, cependant, on va bien s'identifier à la narratrice puis croire en elle, mais celle-ci nous trompe en réalité complètement. Chris, dans *Get Out*, s'étant révélé fiable, les audiences peuvent penser qu'Adelaide va tout autant être digne de confiance – et l'intrigue, jusqu'à son dénouement, nous incite à en faire de même. Mais *Us* finit sur un rebondissement. La double d'Adelaide explique pendant la scène finale que lorsqu'elles se sont rencontrées, enfants, dans le palais des glaces de Santa Cruz, les deux fillettes ont échangé leurs places : au début du film, une ellipse laisse croire que la jeune fille que l'on suivait revient mystérieusement indemne de la rencontre avec son ombre, mais c'est en réalité cette dernière que l'on voit ressortir, après qu'elle a étranglé puis faite prisonnière la protagoniste dans le souterrain. On comprend ainsi que la narratrice adulte que l'on a suivie n'est pas Adelaide mais son antagoniste ; que cette narratrice n'est donc pas ingénue mais connaît bien tout des *Tethered* et de l'endroit où ils se terrent (puisque ce de là qu'elle vient), alors que c'était un personnage tout à fait sincère et fiable. Peele renverse ici l'intrigue de « William Wilson », dont il s'est inspiré de manière si transparente. Dans la nouvelle de Poe, le double du protagoniste « commence avec de bonnes intentions mais transforme sa bienveillance en malveillance[15] » (Reuber, 2012 : 99), alors que le sosie de l'héroïne de Peele est d'abord présenté comme une menace, avant de devenir l'instance à laquelle le spectateur aurait dû s'identifier. Dans *Get Out*, on peut identifier un retournement de situation similaire lorsque Chris se rend compte que Rose, sa petite amie, prend également part à l'industrie familiale. Ses parents et son frère ont en effet un comportement très ambigu et Rose était la seule sur laquelle Chris et les spectateurs pouvaient compter dans cette maison où la tension devenait insupportable. À l'exception de Chris, c'est également le seul personnage apparaissant avant l'arrivée chez les Armitage,

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15.   « *starts with good intentions but transforms from the good to the bad self* ».

puisque le jeune couple partage une scène dans leur appartement citadin avant de prendre la route, puis une autre scène lorsqu'ils sont dans leur voiture – deux scènes au cours desquelles Rose est présentée comme particulièrement au fait des discriminations raciales subies par Chris. Lorsque ce dernier comprend enfin le double-jeu de sa compagne, l'ingénuité de Rose s'effrite et on voit disparaître la dernière possibilité qu'il avait de fuir l'étrange tension présente dans la demeure. Dans *Get Out* et *Us*, Peele présente des personnages innocents, sincères au premier abord – auxquels on peut facilement s'identifier (différents donc de ceux de Poe, très vite caractérisés par une sincérité ou une rigueur d'esprit questionnables). Mais Jordan Peele revient à un certain héritage gothique à la fin de ses intrigues puisque dans *Get Out* un personnage secondaire (Rose), puis dans *Us* la protagoniste (Adelaide), se révèlent stratèges et malhonnêtes. Cette façon de construire l'intrigue est aussi une référence à Poe, puisque les rebondissements finaux (*plot twists*), très présents chez l'auteur, sont repris volontiers par le réalisateur états-unien.

> Il y a aussi une tendance au « twist » dans les films d'horreur contemporains et, une fois encore, c'est un procédé qui, selon moi, est aussi connecté aux récits de narrateurs égocentriques[16] (McCoppin, 2012 : 109).

Cette critique datant d'avant l'émergence de la Nouvelle Horreur – puisqu'on fait généralement débuter le mouvement au *It Follows* de David Robert Mitchell en 2014 (Church, 2021 : 8) – montre que l'utilisation de *plot twists* n'a rien de nouveau dans le cinéma d'horreur mais, dans les films de Peele, et surtout *Us*, le *plot twist* se crée sur la fiabilité d'un personnage stable, sain, rassurant pour le spectateur ou les autres personnages, et qui est remis en question vers la fin de l'intrigue, ce qui, d'un côté, le distancie de l'héritage poësque (le personnage est présenté au début comme bon et fiable), tout en l'y inscrivant d'autant plus d'un autre (le personnage est en fait un imposteur, voire même un génie du mal).

Voix et sensations

Les protagonistes des films de Jordan Peele sont également pourvus d'une grande agentivité sensorielle. Comme évoqué plus tôt, Edgar Poe est considéré comme le pionnier du récit d'enquête[17]. Ses personnages

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16.   « *There is also a fairly new tendency toward the "twist" technique in contemporary horror films, and again, it is this technique that I argue is also connected to Poe's texts of self-obsessed narrators ["The Black Cat" and "The Tale-Tell Heart"]* ».
17.   Edgar Poe est reconnu comme un auteur particulièrement novateur, à l'origine de nombreux procédés et genres narratifs. Certains le voient même comme l'inventeur des récits de voyage sur la Lune, avant Jules Verne (Petersen, Bishop, 2012 : 167).

(pragmatiques, fins, analytiques) regardent et observent beaucoup (« Double Assassinat dans la Rue Morgue », « La Chute de la maison Usher », etc.). C'est également l'une des caractéristiques primordiales de Chris (photographe de métier), des Wilson et des Haywood. Ces derniers, après avoir installé tout un système de vidéosurveillance autour de leur ranch, passent des heures à scruter les enregistrements, ce qui finit par les mener à la vérité sur la matérialité de l'extraterrestre. Cela permet une nouvelle fois d'insister sur l'agentivité de ces personnages noirs qui s'affranchissent des attentes racistes que l'industrie hollywoodienne a d'eux. Peele confère également à tous ses protagonistes une certaine agentivité vocale, notamment dans la sphère extradiégétique. Les titres des trois films sont en effet tous tirés du langage parlé – et ne pourraient être compris isolément : ils sont, soit une réponse (avec « *nope* » : un « non » familier), soit une forme impérative dirigée vers un interlocuteur (« *get out* », que l'on pourrait traduire ici par « va-t'en »), ou encore un pronom dépendant d'un contexte linguistique (« *us* » = « nous » objet) – là où les titres de Poe sont, assez conventionnellement, plutôt des noms de personnages (« William Wilson », « Éléonora », « Hop-Frog ») ou des groupes nominaux (« L'Homme des foules », « Le Masque de la Mort rouge », « Le Portrait ovale », etc.). Le titre de *Get Out* inscrit immédiatement Chris dans un huis clos. *Us*, au contraire, est une horreur à ciel ouvert, dont le titre, comme évoqué précédemment, se concentre sur le corps collectif que forme le pays – encore que « nous » peut aussi bien référer à la communauté noire, la famille Wilson, ou encore Adelaide et son double Red, dépeintes comme les deux facettes du rêve américain. Ces deux titres créent une atmosphère avant même que les intrigues ne soient lancées – c'est notamment le cas pour *Get Out*. La tension croissante est apportée non seulement par les personnages dérangeants qui entourent Chris, mais aussi par le titre, que les spectateurs ont bien en tête depuis que le film a commencé, et qui peut porter à croire que le protagoniste s'engouffre dans un piège duquel il ne réchappera que difficilement. Cette annonce assez explicative fait écho à l'urgence que les spectateurs (autant que les personnages noirs du film) ont d'ordonner à Chris de s'enfuir dès qu'il le peut. Pour ce qui est du dernier film, *Nope*, il y a un clair effet d'ironie – il s'agit d'un adverbe familier exprimant la négation. Il revient plusieurs fois dans les dialogues du film : d'abord comme une moquerie, puis comme aveu d'ignorance et, enfin, pour représenter le déni d'un personnage. Les personnages se voient dotés là d'une agentivité à deux vitesses : ils sont réduits à leur incompréhension ou à leur incapacité à réagir ou à répondre. Le mot « *nope* » représente, en fait, assez bien l'horreur de Jordan Peele. Puisqu'il clôt un dialogue, laissant les personnages décontenancés, irrités ou effrayés, il permet de préparer le terrain pour la mécanique de « *jumpscare* », un effet qu'on retrouve couramment dans l'horreur traditionnelle (une séquence calme est suivie d'un son soudain, provoquant le sursaut des spectateurs) – de la même manière, le mot « *nope* » conduit au silence, tout en promettant une

tension montante, prête à éclater. Cet adverbe véhicule une possibilité d'effroi, tout en gardant la valeur humoristique qu'il a dans la langue quotidienne, résumant ainsi tout à fait l'horreur telle que Peele la conçoit : chargée d'angoisse et d'humour dérangeant.

Pour finir, revenons à *Us* et au fils d'Adelaide, Jason, dans la scène particulièrement marquante où il fait marcher son double (Pluto) dans les flammes pour s'en débarrasser. Depuis le début du film, la dangerosité de Pluto est augmentée par son obsession pour le feu – son visage a été partiellement brûlé lorsqu'il était enfant, il déambule avec un briquet, etc. Le duo Jason/Pluto résonne encore plus avec « William Wilson » que celui formé par leurs mères respectives, puisqu'il s'agit de deux enfants, comme dans la nouvelle. Bien que ce ne soit pas le parcours de Jason que le film *Us* suit, ce personnage gagne de l'agentivité à deux niveaux : d'abord, c'est lui qui se dirige dans les souterrains des *Tethered* à la fin du film, où sa mère le suit ; la scène finale laisse par ailleurs bien entendre qu'il a découvert le secret de sa mère (que c'est elle la *Tethered*, qu'elle a échangé sa place dans l'enfance), ce qui fait de lui le seul personnage au fait de cette révélation finale bouleversante. D'autre part, cette scène où Jason fait donc face à son double pyromane. Pour empêcher les Wilson de s'enfuir pour le Mexique, Pluto leur tend une embuscade et met feu à la voiture dans laquelle la famille est encore assise. Après qu'ils parviennent à s'en sortir *in extremis*, Pluto leur fait face, à plusieurs mètres de distance, se tenant devant les immenses flammes qu'il vient de provoquer. Le jeune Jason lève alors les bras et se met à reculer. Comme un pantin, Pluto reproduit, inconsciemment, le mouvement de son double en miroir, ce qui le fait marcher dans les flammes et prendre feu. Cette mort terrifiante rappelle les narrations de Poe, où l'immolation revient à plusieurs reprises – dans « Le Masque de la Mort rouge » et « Hop-Frog » notamment. Dans « Hop-Frog », un bouffon martyrisé, parce que difforme et étranger, décide de prendre sa revanche sur les membres de la Cour : après les avoir convaincus de se costumer en primates pour surprendre leurs convives, il leur met le feu, les laissant brûler vifs dans leurs costumes, devant une audience hilare de ce qu'elle croit être un spectacle[18]. Partant du constat que Hop-Frog représente le personnage discriminé par essence – et donc, par cette condition, l'« in-américanité » (Christol, 2023 : 90) – Florent Christol écrit :

> En transformant ses geôliers en singes – métaphore raciste par excellence dans la culture étatsunienne et occidentale – et en les enchaînant, Hop-Frog se venge par le biais d'une inversion symbolique, retournant la violence raciale et coloniale contre ses bourreaux. En transformant le roi en singe, Hop-Frog rend explicite la monstruosité

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18. Le feu meurtrier apparaît aussi dans « Le Masque de la Mort rouge » (Christol 95-96). On peut d'ailleurs remarquer que le petit Jason porte pendant tout le film sur le visage un masque rouge, qu'il relève parfois sur le haut de sa tête.

> du monarque, qui se trouve ainsi exhibé aux invités comme un *freak* dans un spectacle de cirque (Christol, 2023 : 94).

Les références intertextuelles à Poe étant rendues particulièrement explicites dans *Us*, l'utilisation du feu et de l'immolation est, de ce fait, percutante, puisqu'elle permet alors à Peele de connecter à nouveau l'angoisse et l'horreur à un propos racial – Christol rappelant par ailleurs plus loin dans son article que la suprématie blanche s'est notamment réaffirmée, entre la Guerre de Sécession et 1968, par le lynchage et l'immolation de nombreux Afro-américains (94). Dans *Us*, Jason, forme de William Wilson noir, se venge, comme Hop-Frog, mais ici contre la partie défigurée et marginalisée de son inconscient. Ensuite, après la défaite des *Tethered*, lorsque les Wilson regagnent leur voiture, Jason, suspicieux, fixe sa mère qui est au volant. Les spectateurs comprennent alors qu'ils sont tous deux au fait du secret d'Adelaide : ils sont les seuls à savoir la vérité et, dans un sens, les seuls à avoir acquis une certaine agentivité dans le film.

Conclusion

Par cet article, on a cherché à démontrer que, bien que l'intertextualité poësque n'ait rien de particulièrement novateur, puisqu'elle est devenue quasi-inévitable, et notamment dans l'imaginaire états-unien, les liens existant entre les récits d'Edgar Poe et le cinéma de Jordan Peele constituent l'un des critères permettant à ce dernier de se démarquer du cinéma d'horreur qui l'a précédé pour s'inscrire dans la Nouvelle Horreur contemporaine. En référençant, explicitement et implicitement, cette littérature gothique canonique, le réalisateur parvient à l'accepter tout en la questionnant à de nombreux endroits. C'est en acceptant, puis en s'affranchissant de ses héritages poësque et horrifique que Peele forge par ses films un mouvement à part entière. Bien que cette constatation ne puisse mener à une définition exhaustive de la Nouvelle Horreur états-unienne, elle permettra néanmoins d'offrir certaines clés d'analyse pour appréhender ce mouvement si singulier.

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Contemporary Trouble in America: *Us*, Jordan Peele, 2019

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Abstract: After a tentative definition of what characterizes elevated horror, the paper examines the different layers of meaning and web of references in Jordan Peele's *Us* to try to determine an agenda prolongating and deepening issues already present in his previous *Get Out* (2017).

Keywords: Elevated Horror; Intertextuality; Gender; Race; Ideology

Résumé : Après avoir proposé une définition de ce que peut être le sous-genre "*elevated horror*", le texte explore les multiples strates de sens et ramifications référentielles présentes dans le film de Jordan Peele *Us* afin de déterminer quelles sont les problématiques prolongées et développées après *Get Out* (2017).

Mots clés : *elevated horror*, intertextualité, genre, ethnicité, idéologie

It is not groundbreaking to assert that a movie director making a second film -after a celebrated, by both critics and audiences worldwide, and certainly commercially profitable[1] first- is taking a chance. Maybe all the more so if his area of predilection is the horror genre. However, forty-year-old Jordan Peele seems to have managed to pass the test successfully, not only by making the follow-up film aesthetically different from his previous one but precisely because *Us* also offers continuity, prolongation and deepening of the issues that were brought up in *Get Out* (2017). Indeed, under cover of an elaborately constructed film combining elements pertaining to both the thriller and horror genres, the director finds ample material in the exploration of matters of identity, of gender affirmation and dominance, of codes and norms of representation of ethnic groups,

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1. According to the website *The Numbers*, the cost of production of *Get Out* was 5 million dollars, with a global revenue theatrical of $252,297,405 – a figure that does not include "Home Market Performance". Source: https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Get-Out-(2017)#tab=summary – last accessed, February 2023.

and of social and ideological anchoring of mass media entertainment in the political context contemporary to the making and release of the film.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the specificities of Peele's recent work in the perspective of a troubled, troubling and troublesome appraisal of contemporary America. In order to do so, the observations have been regrouped within a certain number of themes which are intimately connected to the topic of trouble.

It is necessary however to start with a tentative definition of the framework within which the film is inscribed. *Us* belongs to the type of productions to have emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century, dubbed "elevated horror" or "art-horror".[2] Considered as a sub-genre of horror films, elevated horror could be said to justify the problematic use of the adjective by being more artful in the depiction of moments of extreme physical, emotional or psychological tension, and, arguably, because the films falling into that category share a multi-layered, multi-directional development not unlike that of the rhizome.

Thus, unequivocally, the double strikes the viewer as the foremost aesthetic and thematic component of Peele's film, and as such will be approached first. Further, *Us* is characterized by its palimpsest of cultural references which creates a challenging weblike construction for the viewer to explore. Finally, insofar as it is aesthetically distinct from ordinary horror fodder (too heavily relying on strictly linear narrative or visual clichés and tried and true effects —such as the infamous "jump scare" type of editing) and addresses issues thematically, and eventually ideologically grounded, Jordan Peele's movie cannot be seen without taking into account its social and political ramifications, connected to its time of release —as has always been the case for significant productions since Robert Wiene's 1920 *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari*.

Even before the spectator is allowed to enter the film itself, an essential trope is brought to the fore with most posters, regardless of the market they were destined to: that of the double. To give but a few examples, one visual shows an imitation of an ink-block test, with two profiles in black, looking away from each other, against a white background. Another shows the face of lead actress Lupita Nyong'o staring wide-eyed at us, a tear running down the right side of her face; simultaneously the left side of her face is covered by a look-alike mask she is holding with her gloved right hand. A third shows a pair of gilded scissors held by two hands, one of which is gloved, against what looks like red fabric.

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2.   For a discussion about the definition and cultural extensions of the term and other adjacent appellations, see Eddie Falvey, 63-81.

What immediately comes to mind is the rich variety of elements that can be connected to the motif, and the viewing of the film confirms this, as a brief summary of the plot illustrates: the Wilsons' serene beach vacation turns to chaos when their *Doppelgänger* appear and begin to terrorize them.

The origin of the director's reported fascination with the theme can be easily attributed to his having been impressed by a 1960 episode of *The Twilight Zone* television series called "Mirror Image"[3] in which a young woman is haunted by her double. At the risk of (partly) spoiling the enjoyment of the reader of the present lines, and/or viewer not yet familiar with *Us*, duplication is at the core of the filmic text: the premise of the fiction is that everyone in America has their own replica, called a "Tethered". It should be underlined however that these duplicates are not completely identical: minor physical differences exist and the only common trait all Tethered share is that they cannot speak –save for Red, Adelaide Wilson's supposed other self.

Intimately connected to the "double" motif, the notion of repetition stands out as being of paramount importance. It goes without saying that its variations are numerous in their literal manifestations: mirrors and other reflecting surfaces abound in the film. In matters metaphorical, the movie delves into its instances from the opening. As a matter of fact the first scene describes young Maddison Curry's Adelaide –or "Addy" (a discreet instance of duplication of identity)– and her frightful experience when she wanders alone in a hall of mirrors at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. If the traumatic moment itself is not shown then, it is revisited several times in the course of the film, thus proposing a new facet of the scene with each occurrence. As the tension grows, the protagonist's blocked out memory is amplified before the actual event is exposed in its entirety, hence revealing the final twist of the plot.

Similarly, a remarkably large number of other elements are paired, duplicated or repeated. To give but the most striking instances, the film opens with a TV announcement about the 1986 "Hands Across America" initiative, and ends with an aerial vision of a line of red-clad Tethered running across wooded hills as far as the eye can see; the Wilsons' friends Kitty and Josh Tyler (respectively embodied by Elizabeth Moss and Tim Heidecker) have twin daughters Becca and Lindsey (played by actual twins Cali and Noelle Sheldon); the ominous hall of mirrors mentioned above may change name (passing from "Shaman's Vision Quest Forest" to "Merlin's Forest") it still bears the same invitation: "Find Yourself", and functions as a locus of trauma and revelation; the man of each of the

3. Season 1, Episode 21. First aired April 26, 1960. Director: John Brahm. Writer: Rod Serling. Starring: Vera Miles, Martin Milner, Joe Hamilton, Naomi Stevens.

Wilson and Tyler families owns a boat… Even the end credits associate the names of the actors with the two roles they play, one lettered in white, the other in red.

In keeping with these deliberate choices in terms of scenario and aesthetics, yet more intriguing, is the sticker on the rear window of the Wilson family's car. It forms a schematic representation of one child on each side of the parental couple, all holding hands to form a line. The sticker is the first thing to appear after the ellipsis anchoring the main body of the narrative in the present of the diegesis. It also announces the composition of the said family (as well as their Tethered counterparts) and is taken up again symbolically when an aerial shot shows them arriving on the beach.

To take this chiasmic representation even further, the archetypal Wilson family unit is visually connected to the recurrence of the number 11: the two digits offering both repetition, duplication and symmetry. And the visual pun -which can only be fully grasped after repeated viewing- starts with the first shot of the film, evoked before, showing an old TV screen, and a news broadcast entitled "Tonight 11 at 11". In the early scene at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, young Adelaide's father wins at the "Coconut Shy" skill game, and the little girl begs to obtain prize number 11. Moments later she passes an odd lanky young man holding a cardboard sign that reads: "Jeremiah 11:11". The same sign appears later in the hands of an older man (an aged version of the young man, maybe) being carried off in an ambulance. One of the Wilsons' friends' daughters sports a Black Flag T-shirt with four staggered black lines that are reminiscent of the same repeated number. Further along the narrative, when the Wilsons return from their day at the beach, the husband, Gabe (Winston Duke), listens to a sports broadcast where two baseball teams are tied 11 to 11. That same evening, the Wilsons' son, Jason (Evan Alex), points his digital clock to his mother where the digits read: 11:11. To cap it all, when the Wilsons finally escape, it is with an ambulance whose assigned number, visible thanks to an aerial shot, is 1111.

On the face of it, the most accessible (and sustainable) reason for this recurrence is that it confirms Jordan Peele's savvy playfulness at the use of symmetry, which is coherent with the central plot. However one cannot dissociate this characteristic from the fact that not only is *Us* adroitly constructed (as was the director's previous movie) around the very classical building of tension leading to a final twist, it is also the place to provide a vast number of cultural references, almost as if the intent was to saturate the filmic text and lose the viewer, just as young Addy gets lost in the hall of mirrors.

The echoes of Americana (and maybe Anglo-saxon culture in genera) encompass the world of literary fiction. Chief among the thematically and aesthetically pivotal pieces Peele refers to stands Lewis Carroll's 1865 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, be it only with the long introductory pulling back of the camera revealing a slew of white rabbits in their symmetrically arranged cages, Adelaide's final descent echoing Alice's fall in the hole, or the confrontation with the "Red" Queen of the underworld… More covertly Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 *Doppelgänger*-based short story "William Wilson" (the commonality of the family name is a transparent indication) may also serve as a literary source in its mood and its implications. And more visibly explicit is Blake Nelson's 2007 popular tale for adolescents *They Came from Below,* whose title is a tell-tale clue, and a copy of which is visible on the Wilsons' daughter Zora (Shahadi Wright Joseph)'s bedroom nightstand.

This being stated, it must be added that the director also does not hesitate to use popular, low-brow entertainment. Board games serve as visual nudges: one cannot but cherish the situationally ironic echo of the game's name, *Guess Who?*, or the appropriately named *Monster Trap* that can be found in the closet where Jason hides from his horribly burnt-faced counterpart. Music also contributes to the contextual innuendo: Addy's father wins for her a Michael Jackson T-shirt promoting his 1982 *Thriller* album; a clue to the true identity of older Adelaide can be detected in her ineffective attempt to make her son snap his fingers in rhythm to Luniz' 1995 *I Got 5 on It*. One can surmise that Peele very consciously disseminated these pebbles of information in a Hop-o'-My-Thumb fashion for the viewer to be intellectually titillated: though the ample variety of clues does not hinder the reading of the filmic text if they are not immediately perceived, their sheer presence beckons us –not unlike the pleasurable and formative repeated readings of fairy-tales– to proceed to multiple viewings in order to savor the director's art of narration.

It also cannot go amiss that it is in cinema that Peele seems to have found the most plentiful store of references and cultural connections -and for good reason, as he has been an avid cinephile from a young age. When the camera pulls away from the television set at the beginning of the film, three VHS tapes can be seen sitting on a shelf next to it: *C.H.U.D.* (Douglas Cheek, 1984), *The Man with Two Brains* (Carl Reiner, 1983) and *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985), which are all thematically connected to the events presented in *Us*.[4] From that moment on, cinema references

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4. *C.H.U.D.* (acronym for Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers) is based on the fictional existence of grotesquely deformed vagrants living in the New York sewers – not unlike the Tethered. *The Goonies* relies on a similar exploration of underground tunnels – with a different goal. In *The Man with Two Brains*, the protagonist, a brain surgeon, falls in love with another woman's brain; the emotional connection between the two entities echoes the link between the Tethered and their surface counterparts.

abound: the Wilsons' son whose name is Jason and who wears a mask is a transparent reference to the *Friday 13th* classic horror franchise. Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* is also conjured: not only does Jason wear a T-shirt with the visual of the 1977 film when the family arrives on the beach, but the continuation of the scene in Peele's film is edited to emulate the sequence where Chief Brody anxiously surveys the ocean in wait for the first shark attack.

Perhaps less conspicuously the film's own narrative pace changes with the home invasion: from that moment forward there is a shift, with more fluid Steadycam shots, fewer cut edits and more whip pans over to other characters. This "dispositif" signals, like the lengthy shots in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*,[5] that the protagonists –and the viewer– are trapped in events supposedly happening in "real time". Similarly, cinematographer Mike Gioulakis' signature circling camerawork, which can be seen in the home invasion scene, echoes the visual approach he used in *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014). The process of metaphorizing entrapment works in both films when signifying the unavoidable force of external –visible or not– elements.

However it is more than obvious that the most evident source of cinematic references is *The Shining*. The –even moderately– attentive movie-goer in the audience cannot ignore the visually explicit references to Stanley Kubrick's 1980 classic: the labyrinthine dimension of the underground world duplicating the corridors of the Overlook Hotel; Addy's muted expression of wide-eyed dismay at the spectacle of off-screen horror mimicking Danny Torrance's; or the way the Tyler twin daughters speak in unison, and how their bodies are placed in the corridor after their murder –all elements duplicating Kubrick's film, to evoke but a few examples. From a thematic point of view, one of the most fascinating aspects of Peele's work is that it draws on the same exploration of the tension between seeing/not seeing present in *The Shining*: just as the protagonists in Kubrick's adaptation of Stephen King's novel are able to "see" what is going on in the deserted hotel –or are blind to it– and evolve with the knowledge connected to that capacity, so do the various members of the Wilson family. The realization of the Tethered's disconcerting physical semblance to their own by Jason is accepted his sister and mother, but not by his father. The latter ends up being the ineffectual element in the progression of events, while the other three cope and survive.[6]

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5. One of the films the director used during the preparation of *Us*, *Funny Games*' plot involves two young men who hold a family hostage and torture them with sadistic games in their vacation home by the side of a lake in Austria. The 2007 remake of the film bears the same name and is virtually identical to the original one, the scene now taking place in America.

6. For a more complete presentation of the links between the two films, see Joy McEntee (2-31) who convincingly contends that Peele "reimagines" Stanley Kubrick's foray into the horror genre, "which is mainly about whiteness, from an African American perspective".

To broaden the scope of the Kubrickian influence on Peele, it is noteworthy that not unlike his model, he also appears to be using his own cinema as matrix. Michel Ciment noted that, almost from the beginning of his cinematographic career, the American-born director settled in England created a self-referential system, with one film nodding towards a previous one (Ciment: 60-62). This interesting trait is perceptible through the Monkey Paw production company credit: the spoon rattling in the teacup is a key element in the narrative of *Get Out*. Visually speaking, two singular stylistic elements present in Peele's previous incursion in the horror genre are again used in *Us*: the way the characters move mechanically and at right angles, or the several close-ups on crying faces, which reinforce the unsettling dimension of the situation.[7]

All the above-mentioned elements could be considered as a means to induce a "tongue in cheek" relation with the viewer. However, if one changes the angle of approach, the director's use of intertextuality acquires another dimension. The sheer number of references creates yet another effect of saturation of the filmic text, to the point where the viewer's attention is unable to make sense of the collection of nods and nudges. In this perspective, the satisfaction of picking up the "bread crumbs" hides the possibility that what is really at stake lies elsewhere: to a certain extent, it could be argued that *Us* repeatedly and purposefully misdirects the viewer.

For instance, the incipit[8] proves to be a red herring *a posteriori*. All the more so if one is versed in American history, as images of the notorious "underground railroad" immediately come to mind. The development of the story does not confirm in any way this lead. Similarly, the viewer may not pick up all the variations on the multiple associations of the number 11, but the biblical reference to Jeremiah[9] cannot be missed, and begs the question of the director's intention when making use of the religious metaphor. Once again, the evolution of the plot does not give the divine ignorance of the pleas of the people of Judah any concrete materialization. As a matter of fact when Red, Adelaide's other self, asserts that she realized the "untethering" –that is to say, the release of the Tethered from their underground prison– was in response to a divine injunction, the viewer expects some form of biblical connection. Yet, the justification supposed to give more weight to this only comes across as vaguely metaphysical. To quote her attempt at formulating a narrative behind the Tethered's existence:

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7. However, this indication needs to wait for further expansion of Peele's filmography to be validated.
8. "There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States…
    Abandoned subway systems, unused service routes, and deserted mineshafts…
    Many have no purpose at all."
9. "Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them." Source: https://biblehub.com/jeremiah/11-11.htm – Last visited February 2023.

> And yet it was humans that built this place. I believe they figured
> how to make a copy of the body but not the souls. The soul remains
> one shared by two. They created the Tethered. So they could use
> them to control the one above. Like puppets. But they failed and they
> abandoned the Tethered. [1.36.18]

Rather, echoing Zora's line "Do you know there's fluoride in the water that helps the government control our mind?" earlier in the film, the rationale behind the words smacks of paranoia, remains unjustified and is rapidly brushed under the carpet in favor of a more pragmatic treatment of the home invasion situation.

Nonetheless, the unrealistic presence -justified or not- of the Tethered elicits a feeling of unease that is initiated by the elements that have been evoked earlier, among which the Blakian "fearful symmetry(-ies)"[10] and their visual corollaries encapsulated by the confrontational frontality of young Addy's wide-eyed stare into the camera throughout the film.

Also, the feeling of *Unheimliche* analyzed by Sigmund Freud develops with the Wilsons' home being invaded by what Jason first describes as "(a) boogey man's family". The young boy's observation is completed moments later by his affirmation: "It's us." This singular and sagacious realization has a series of repercussions.

For one thing Jason's statement is rendered problematic in Red's oddly funny answer to Gabe's question: "Who are you people?" "We're Americans." The context of utterance, the straightforward manner in which it is formulated and the development of the narrative all but draw an unflattering portrait of the inhabitants of the United States, as epitomized by the characters presented in the film. If the Tethered are Americans in the semblance of their models, then they are the prime examples of Capitalistic consumer society, where keeping up with the Joneses (or the Tylers for that matter) is both a revenge on historically anchored relegation to second zone citizenship and an *art de vivre* for educated (upper) middle-class African-Americans, as Gabe demonstrates by sporting a Howard University sweater, buying a boat (a staple of expandable income), making a pitiful attempt at defending his "property" and then resorting to petty financial bargaining when all else has failed to prevent the menace of being supplanted by frightful, moaning and groaning look-alikes.

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10. In William Blake's 1794 poem 'The Tyger', the eponymous tiger is connected to symmetry through the pattern of his fur, on the one hand, and on the other to the lamb also evoked in the text. The presence of the ambiguous adjective 'fearful' –which one could rightly comprehend as 'fearsome'– may be attributed to the fact that both animals being the production of their creator are radical opposites nonetheless. The creation of the Tethered could be construed as working along similar lines of opposition and complementarity.

The other model we are given to observe is the Tyler family, and the characteristics evoked before are amplified. Money may not buy happiness but it allows the foursome to spend their vacation comfortably in an immaculate two-story house[11] overlooking a lake, to drive a luxurious car, to own an expensive-looking motorboat. Like a painter, Peele patiently adds little touches to draw the portrait of each individual member of the family –save for the twin girls who, being twins, apparently need not function in any other fashion than as a single unit–: both adults seem to have grown irked by the other as the quips they exchange testify; Josh does not brag about his professional success but still manages to patronize his "friend" Gabe about the equipment –or lack thereof– of his newly-acquired craft; Josh's wife Kitty is self-absorbed, prone to evoke her short-lived career as an actress, the discreet plastic surgery she undergoes every year, and she is inclined to indulge her alcoholic tendencies; gymnasts of sorts, the twin girls –Becca and Lindsey– look down upon the Wilson offspring, when they are not outright offensive toward them, and toward Jason in particular. The final rendering is as unflattering -if less negative-as the portrayal of the Armitages, the white family in *Get Out*, and it is significant that their demise comes as a form of strange relief for the spectator, more accustomed to seeing the Black characters leave the screen first in more conventional horror films.

Another reading of the words used by Red presents the freeing of the Tethered as an act of revenge, and is essentially expressed through one of the elements most commonly associated with American culture: violence. Though it is part and parcel of the genre explored by the film-maker, what is striking in Peele's feature is that its radicality is more extreme in its message than in its representations. When considering the development of the story, we come to acknowledge that all the Tethered wear the same culturally connoted red jumpsuits and must kill their model in order to invest the world they have been deprived of. Because of the symbolic value of the color red and the final linear formation, one could also be tempted to infer a repositioned reference to the discriminatory practice of "redlining" put into practice in the 1930s and officially terminated in the 1970s. It cannot be dismissed that Jordan Peele's film may propose another possible metaphorical reading by reactivating the tenets of the ideological opposition -rampant in post-Second World War Hollywood cinema- between the United States and the Communist bloc. In this perspective, perceiving the red-clad Tethered functioning as a mindless, speechless, subservient mass[12] under the direction of a leader whose single purpose is to take over the "free world" and get rid of its perverted, capitalistic, bourgeois values

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11.   Equipped with state-of-the-art technology, and richly decorated with art, it aptly symbolizes the Tylers' superficiality.
12.   In this respect, one is inclined to connect them to the figure of the zombie that have been ubiquitously occupying screens big and small in recent years.

is textbook ideology –but then again, too blatantly so to be considered as a serious political statement. However, a more contemporary and politically engaging interpretation of the visual and ideological elements could allow us to consider the suits for what they are, regardless of their color. In fact in post 9-11 American history this type of uniform has become intimately associated to the garb worn by the residents of Guantanamo. And if we can consider the Tethered as a metaphor of the alleged terrorists sequestered in the Cuban facility, the ending of the film is far more ambiguous, and also forms yet another ramification of reference with Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*. One cannot but recall the fact that, on at least one of the visual supports of the 1997 version, a frame of the infamous "cat in the bag" sequence where the captive family's son's head is wrapped in a pillow case was used. With the release of the 2007 American version, the posters either focus on the lead actress' face or on the two young torturers. However, after the 2003 revelations about the tortures inflicted on prisoners by American troops in Abu Graib during the second Gulf War, the original films poster and the sequence have acquired a new symbolic significance.

Much less expected, and thus all the more intriguing, is the important place attributed to art in its connection to violence in *Us*. For one thing, the disturbingly familiar apparition of the Tethered on the Wilsons' driveway evokes images found in Hieronymus Bosch's paintings: the maliciousness inherent to the physically bizarre intruders in increased by their blankness –if the reader will pardon the pun– of expression. Another startling occasion is staged later in the film, when Jason wields a sculpture of a rock encased in metal to come to his mother's rescue. Even the final *mano a mano* between Adelaide and Red takes on an oddly artistic form, that of a lethal dance. And it is strikingly telling that, in the editing of the sequence, the struggle between the two women is combined with shots from the younger selves' actual –or duplicated– ballet endeavors.

This singular shock of forms –a characteristic of the film– could be perceived as a critical address –and maybe debunking– from the director to the propensity of commercial cinema to revel in the graphic display of gore or to aestheticize violence, and could therefore serve as yet another argument in favor of integrating Jordan Peele's work in the "elevated horror" category.

Another dimension of Jordan Peele's *Us* lies in its conclusion: the universe it describes does not return to a harmonious stability. Quite on the contrary, the viewer is faced with several challenging and troubling issues of various orders.

To begin with, it is rather evident that in the wake of the #MeToo movement the crisis staged in the film confirms the centrality and dominance of the feminine, first signaled by the posters described at the beginning of the present text. Not only that but, when considering the principal family, the viewer witnesses the jeopardizing of the male adult's role. Gabe progressively loses his supposed status of all-knowing, all-powerful father figure. Early on he acts like a child when he tries to coax his wife into going to the beach. As an alpha male, he also looks inadequate in trying to emulate his white friend Josh who apparently bests him in his material possessions –a bigger car, a bigger house…– by buying a boat that, unfortunately for his male pride, proves to steer to the left and is not fully equipped. Trying to frighten away the intruders by wielding a baseball bat, he ends up getting hit in the leg and limps –a metaphor of castration of sorts?– for the rest of the film. As previously stated Michael Haneke's film was a significant influence on Peele's production, and Gabe's predicament cannot but be perceived as yet another link with what happens to the Austrian tortured family – though with a different ending.

More challengingly, Gabe is unable to grasp the seriousness of the situation by trying to buy off his family's release when the rest of his family –and the viewer– immediately understand the pointlessness of this posture –and another critical observation of self-satisfied capitalism. Further emphasizing his role as a side-kick to his wife –not to say as the comic relief of the film– it is essentially through sheer luck that Gabe manages to avoid getting killed by his other self. The final discomfiture comes when he insists that they should stay in the Tylers' house after killing off their friends' replicas. He is then met with Adelaide's forceful: "You don't get to make the decisions anymore." Consequently, Gabe does not even get to drive a vehicle -and symbolically lead his family- from that point on… In light of what has been observed above, Jordan Peele seems to push the envelope even further by giving multiple –and contradictory– facets to the central feminine figure: the former Tethered who has replaced Addy to become Adelaide is a young African American woman who sheds her originally shy demeanor to become an assertive, willful and resourceful leader. As such, she distances herself from the characteristics proper to the "final girl" trope found in 1970s, 80s and 90s horror films such as Laurie Strode in the *Halloween* series, Elen Ripley in the *Alien* series or Sydney Prescott in the *Scream* series. In the context of the film, she combines the traits of a protective mother, a social liberator as well as a monster.[13] A combination which can then certainly be perceived as revolutionary in terms of gender, race, social and political representation.

13. For an extensive presentation of the monstrous feminine in recent films, see Christopher Sharrett (27-31).

An important element should also be considered which conditions, in a way, all the other particularities previously touched on. Language was present in *Get Out* in the form of a tool of manipulation. Here it is exposed through its cryptic inadequacy. From the onset of the film, communication is presented as problematic: Addy's father and mother don't seem to be on the same page concerning the little girl, regarding first the attention she requires and later the medical care she needs. After her fifteen-minute disappearance and her return in an apparently catatonic state, the psychiatrist in charge of Addy tells her parents that they should let her express herself to recount her traumatic experience through any means –other than language– possible. As an adult Adelaide acknowledges the fact she is ill at ease when she has to speak, and when Adelaide's *Doppelgänger* speaks, her voice sounds extremely odd, broken and erratic in its delivery.[14] Ironically –but in keeping with the intertextual strategy implemented by Peele–, when she justifies the home invasion she resorts to using the tried and true formulation: "Once upon a time, there was a girl, and the girl had a shadow". As the archetypal opening line of fairy tales this instance is intriguing. The edifying dimension of the tale is tainted from the start by the presence of the ominous "shadow". And the development of the narrative upsets and redefines the perception of the situation as it stood before the arrival of the intruders. As such, language is inadequate in its discrepancy from its original usage.

Furthermore, it could be argued that through the many-faceted issue of language, the director tackles the issue of connection. As has been noted at the beginning of the text, the film does open on the Hands Across America initiative presented in a TV announcement with the words:

> A four thousand mile-long chain of good Samaritans, hand in hand through fields of green, past purple mountains and across fruited plains, from sea to shining sea. That's right: this summer, six million people will tether themselves together to fight hunger in the United States. [1:38 – 2:10]

No need to be an expert linguist to pick out the words belonging to the semantic field of linking. What needs to be observed, though, is the fact that not only are the protagonists originally at various stages of distancing themselves from the others, but also that most technological tools of communication fail to fulfill their task in the film: upon arrival at their summer retreat Gabe tells Zora she does not need the Internet when there is the "outernet"; the telephones rapidly become useless; even the Tylers' home virtual assistant, in another moment of paradoxical comedy, fails to understand Kitty's desperate call for help –"Ophelia, call the police!"

14. A characteristic akin to spasmodic dysphonia, a condition involving involuntary muscle movement in the voicebox.

– and instead puts the N.W.A. song *Fuck Tha Police* on the sound system. As a potent symbol, the scissors visible on the visuals of the film appear time and again in the film to signal forceful symbolic separation: all the Tethered use scissors to assault their models; similar-looking scissors are used by Red in the final sequence to cut out –and cut off– paper figures, and slash Adelaide's body.

To add to the inadequacy of language, Adelaide's final words are meaningfully problematic. Addressed to her son, "Everything's gonna be like before!", though meant to be reassuring, should nonetheless be perceived as ambiguous. If we follow the logic of the diegesis, the bleak future suggested by the last images of the film comes as an apparent contradiction to her statement: what we see is that everything is indeed going to be different, as the entire population of the United States is bound to be replaced by duplicates incapable of speech, and led by a red-clad feminine figure. In addition, Adelaide takes for granted that Jason will believe her. Nothing is less sure, however: Jason stares at his mother and slips his favorite mask on, as he systematically does when prey to doubt. This is the fourth occurrence of the little boy's incredulity concerning the identity of his mother. In this final instance, the symbolic use of the mask is telling: he may accept what his mother says but hides his real thoughts behind the cover of a blank -again, pun intended- face, maybe not wanting to confront the reality of what surrounds him and his family, and what is yet to come.

This feeling created by the contrasted evocation of the world in *Us* may be a way for Jordan Peele to make a statement about the United States under the rule of the 45th president whom Spike Lee calls "Agent Orange".[15] While the cultural context[16] seems to be paradoxically favorable to African-Americans, and participates in the current modification of the entertainment film industry's continuum by having a director proposing a story that does not involve traditional white male-centered representation, the harsh reality of the Black Lives Matter movement in reaction to a seemingly endless string of police shootings puts into relief the ambivalence of the film's tone: the protagonists may be Black and have survived some form of general replacement, they are still led by a deceitful woman and headed for an uncertain future.

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15. After all, the letters of the movie's title do evoke those of the acronym used to designate the country.
16. At least in the domains of cinema, with the global success of various films such as Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) or Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018), to give but two examples at various ends of the spectrum, and television, with the extremely popular Marvel inspired series *Luke Cage* (created by Cheo Odari Coker, 2016-2018), or horror exploration of *Lovecraft Country* (created by Misha Green, 2020).

For what seems to be really at stake in Jordan Peele's cinema is the fundamental questioning of identity. A central issue in *Get Out*, the theft of identity -through slavery, acculturation or bogus scientific experimentation- is here presented in a different but no less problematic perspective. After all, the alternative designations of all the characters tell of a cold and distant –in a nutshell, inhuman– existence, which does not abode well for the future of the United States and all its citizens, not exclusively the African American community, at least as far as the ending of the film is concerned. However, where Stanley Kubrick uses the tension with the family nucleus to explore issues of race and class relations via the synecdoche of a hotel, Peele broadens the scope of his statement by addressing issues of class and gender from an African-American perspective encompassing the whole of the country.

In this perspective, it could also be contended that Peele's film also manages to expose an apparently well-intentioned action like Hands Across America for what it really was financially and ideologically[17] and to present it through another lens. The director's use of a supposedly memorable event, with all its flaws and shortcomings, questions the status of images. Peele revisits the past and actualizes it through fiction –the final images are not actual footage from 1986–, but by doing so, he prompts the viewer to reconsider the event as well as its recreation, and hence the ideologically manipulative power of cinema, even his own. The elaboration of an alternative presentation of a historical fact then stands as a dystopian "fake". It is both sinister in its implications –the possibility of a complete replacement of the population by a nightmare of a population– and a playful exploration of the possibility of an alternate outcome of what was –taking the imperfections of the noble initiative to a grotesque extreme.

And it should come as no surprise, then, that a similarly ambiguous revisiting of a historical event –combined with a cinematographic landmark– should occupy a significant part of Peele's latest work, *Nope*, released in 2022. Without spoiling some of the discoveries of the film, suffice it to say that the identity of the African-American jokey riding the horse in Eadweard Muybridge's series of stills turned into the first ever film is at stake.

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17. As a matter of fact, the initiative, whose purpose was "to cure homelessness and hunger" took place at the height of the Reagan era, during which economic growth, positivity and the firm belief in the supremacy of American ideals left room for unchecked capitalism. At the end of the day, the event lasted fifteen minutes, the chain had many missing links and raised thirty two million dollars, seventeen of which were used to pay the initiative's own bills.

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Revisiting the Haunted House: Remi Weekes's *His House* (2020)

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Abstract: *His House* (2020) is an uncommon generic hybrid that infuses horror with social realism. The film centers on a South Sudanese couple who have fled their war-torn country and are now seeking asylum in Britain. As the ghosts of their traumatic past have followed them to Europe, the couple cannot make a home of the subsidized house they have been granted, which turns into a gothicized haunted house. The unknown world outside is also a source of terror, as it is shown to be fertile soil for insidious trauma. This article reads the film as an exploration of in-betweenness whose specificity lies in the way it articulates two narratives of liminality: that of asylum seekers as "threshold" people, and that of a couple placed in the liminal state of grief. The hinge articulating the two narratives is the concept of home and the question of (not) at-homeness. Remi Weekes rewrites the Gothic *topos* of the haunted house by making it a house of mourning where the wish to move on is impeded by the pull of the traumatic past. Not only are the couple in the emotional limbo of grief, however: they are also in the stage of uncertainty experienced by asylum seekers who do not know whether they will stay and live or be sent back to die. Though the film gives the narrative of mourning a happy end, the refugee narrative is left ambiguously open-ended.

Keywords: Haunting; *His House*; Liminality; At-Homeness; Refugee Narrative; Trauma

Résumé : Hybride générique, *His House* (2020) allie le réalisme social à l'horreur. L'histoire est celle d'un couple de réfugiés sud-soudanais qui a fui son pays en guerre et qui demande maintenant l'asile au Royaume-Uni. Cependant, hantés par les fantômes de leur passé traumatique, les Majur ne parviennent pas à faire un foyer du logement social qui leur a été attribué. La demeure délabrée devient alors une maison hantée qui évoque la tradition gothique. Le monde extérieur est lui aussi source de terreur, car il fait planer la menace du traumatisme insidieux. Cet article lit le film comme une exploration de l'entre-deux dont la spécificité réside dans la manière dont il articule deux états liminaux : celui des demandeurs d'asile, figures de l'entre-deux, et celui d'un couple en situation de deuil. Les deux fils narratifs ont pour pivot commun le concept de « chez-soi » (« *home* ») et la question de l'appartenance. Remi Weekes réécrit le *topos*

de la maison hantée pour en faire une maison de deuil où le désir d'aller de l'avant est empêché par le poids du passé traumatique. Mais les Majur ne sont pas seulement dans les limbes émotionnels du deuil : demandeurs d'asile, ils sont également entre deux mondes et traversent une période de grande incertitude marquée par la peur d'un renvoi au pays. Si *His House* donne une fin heureuse au parcours du deuil, les réfugiés restent des êtres en suspens quand le film s'achève.

Mots-clés : Appartenance, *His House*, liminalité, hantise, traumatisme, réfugiés

Introduction

His House premiered at the Sundance festival in January 2020 and was released on Netflix in October of the same year. It won Remi Weekes the BAFTA for "outstanding debut for a British writer, producer or director", as well as the British Independent Film award for best director.[1]

The film stages a South Sudanese couple, the Majurs, who have fled their violence-torn country in a perilous journey during which they lost a child (though not their child, as it will turn out). They are now seeking asylum in Britain, and the story proper starts when they leave the detention center and are taken to the shabby council house that will be their dwelling place while their application for refugee status is being reviewed. The events of the film open the possessive "his" of the title to different but equally valid interpretations. While Bol does all he can to assimilate and make Britain his home, his wife Rial soon becomes convinced that they don't belong and decides to leave. In reaction, Bol locks her up in the house, so that the possessive "his" also designates a male-controlled space where the woman is imprisoned, in typically Gothic fashion. Finally, "his" also refers to the Apeth (or night witch), a spirit who has apparently followed the couple to Britain and manifests itself in frightening occurrences, taking possession of the house, and eventually trying to take possession of Bol's body.

The film has been positively received by critics, who describe it as an atypical horror movie and often label it "post" or "elevated" horror. They use the label mainly to point out that *His House* goes beyond what are considered "cheap" scares as its horror arises out of the refugee experience. A French reviewer describes *His House* as "a horrific Ken Loach" (Delachapelle, 2020: n. p.), and the Ken Loach parallel is also used in *The Guardian*: "There has never been a whole lot of overlap between the social realism of Ken Loach and the twisted horror of *A Nightmare on Elm*

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1. The two lead actors, Sope Dirisu and Wunmi Mosaku, were awarded the BAFTA for best performance by an actor/ actress. Wunmi Mosaku also won the BIF award for best actress in a leading role.

Street. But that's about to change with the release of *His House*" (Gilbey, 2020: n. p.). Both reviewers thus describe the film as an uncommon generic hybrid combining social realism and horror, its social realism residing in the cold look it takes at the way refugees are treated in the UK. Finally, another French reviewer situates Weekes's film "somewhere between Ken Loach and Jordan Peele" (Léger, 2020, n. p.), which is hardly surprising since both *Get Out* (2017) and *His House* have black protagonists and incorporate social commentary. Jordan Peele's overtly political film is often described as "social horror" as it pivots around racial inequality and "post-racial" liberal hypocrisy, delivering an incisive social critique. In the first book ever written on post-horror, David Church points out that it is rare for post-horror films to deal with urgent topical issues, *Get Out* being the main exception he discusses (Church, 2021: 39). *His House* is another such "exception", and it is even more firmly and explicitly grounded in its contemporary context, that of the South Sudanese conflict which started in 2013 and triggered massive forced displacement.

When discussing his film, Weekes makes the concept of trauma central, stating that *His House* shows how "the suppression of our traumas and our past can only make the pain more powerful" (in Evans-Powell, 2020: n. p.). The two main characters are indeed traumatized subjects who are grieving the loss of a homeland and a child. The film thus exploits what David Church identifies as a major theme in post-horror, namely, mourning.[2] All the examples discussed by the critic noticeably involve trauma, the loved one(s) having died "too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned" (Whitehead, 2004: 06).[3] The specificity of the traumatic experience of forcibly displaced people, however, gives the film a topical edge that impacts the viewer's reception of the narrative of mourning. The film is clearly meant to have the Western spectator empathize with the plight of the migrant Other.

Thus, *His House* uses the *topos* of the haunted house to explore the nature of traumatic grief as psychological haunting. It belongs with the post-horror films featuring characters who are, in Church's words, "trapped in an emotional limbo that they are unable to get beyond" (Church, 2021: 68). In what follows, I read the film as an exploration of in-betweenness whose specificity lies in the way it articulates two narratives of liminality: that of asylum seekers as "threshold" people, and that of a couple placed in the liminal state of grief. The hinge articulating the two narratives is the concept of home and the question of (not)at-homeness. First, Remi Weekes rewrites the Gothic *topos* of the haunted house

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2. The third chapter of *Post-Horror* is entitled "Grief, Mourning and Familial Inheritance", and it provides an in-depth examination of the theme of mourning in post-horror movies such as *The Babadook*, *Goodnight Mommy*, and *Hereditary* (68-101).
3. The major post-horror theme Church identifies may thus be more precisely described as "complicated mourning", as trauma complicates the process the bereaved go through.

by making it a house of mourning where the wish to move on is impeded by the pull of the traumatic past. Structurally, the film's disruption of temporal linearity mimics the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, a disorder that prevents the characters from making a home of the present. Not only are the couple in the emotional limbo of traumatic grief, however: they are also in the stage of uncertainty experienced by asylum seekers who do not know whether they will stay and live or be sent back to die. Though the film gives the narrative of mourning a happy ending, the refugee narrative is left ambiguously open-ended.

The haunted house of mourning

In his *Mourning Films*: *A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema,* Richard Armstrong repeatedly draws attention to the intersections between the horror genre and cinematic narratives of mourning, underlining that "archaic fears and phenomena link the mourning genre to horror cinema – fear of the dark, ghosts, primitive totems – resonating in the modern mourning film as dementia, hallucinations, and the susceptibility of children" (Armstrong, 2012: 4). Since then, an increasing number of scholars have pointed out that horror is particularly suited to represent the experience of grief. In "Horror Films and Grief", Becky Millar and Jonny Lee explore this suitability in terms of narrative development, showing how the irruption of the horror monster mirrors "the disruption to the protagonist's assumptive world caused by bereavement" (Millar and Lee, 2021: 174). *His House* is a mourning film that deploys what the two critics identify as the typical pattern of horror movies about grief: the child (and many other loved ones) dies prior to the events of the film, then the monster (the Apeth) intrudes and disrupts the characters' understanding of reality, before it is finally defeated when Rial slays its throat. The film borrows its monster from Dinka folklore,[4] and the fact that the Apeth of African legend has followed the couple to Britain ties the creature firmly to the traumatic events of the past. In the supernatural explanation of the haunting given by Rial, the night witch is the one who projects the sometimes horrific images the couple are made to see. The monster can thus be read as trauma embodied, but the film simultaneously makes it an embodiment of survivor's guilt. Indeed, the monster tells Bol: "Your life is not yours. You stole it" (1:01:55). The film will reveal that Bol stole a child to escape imminent death, a girl he blames himself for not saving when the refugee boat taking them to Britain capsized. The shocking revelation thus provides a possible psychological explanation for

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4.   The Dinka are one of the largest ethnic groups in South Sudan.

the fact that Bol's experience in the haunted house of mourning is much more terrifying than his wife's.

Like Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), a horror film that revolves around the effects of traumatic loss,[5] Weekes's *His House* uses the Gothic trope of haunting in its exploration of grief, making a gothicized council house the mourners' liminal space of transition. This house clearly becomes a projection of the haunted psyches of the protagonists. Significantly, though it is already in bad repair when the couple arrives, Bol further damages the house as his mental health deteriorates. He breaks through the walls with a hammer, the holes materializing the psychic wounds inflicted by trauma. The memories of the past that haunt the grieving mind are literalized in the ghosts both husband and wife see. More precisely, the spatialized representation of the mind is restricted to the two downstairs rooms, which reinforces the Gothic feeling of claustrophobia. The porosity of the traumatized mind is materialized by many openings within that confined, claustrophobic space, be they the holes in the walls or the open doorways on either side of the corridor separating the kitchen from the living room. The film makes ample use of these doorways to hint at the inner chamber where the traumatic past lurks. For example, when Rial tells the story of the Apeth, Bol is startled by a crashing sound from the kitchen, and the film cuts to a shot of the ominous doorway opening onto darkness (34:50). When he sees his "daughter" for the first time, she is framed in the living-room doorway, which locates her in the "beyond" as well as in a dark recess of the mind. Significantly, she is wearing a horrifying African mask, which externalizes the distortion induced by trauma (38:25).

The house being possessed by the ghosts of the past, the couple cannot make it their home. Like Amelia in *The Babadook*, Bol cries out to the disruptive monster: "This is my house" (50:02). But, to paraphrase Freud, Bol and Amelia are not masters of their own houses,[6] which have been taken over by the dark force of trauma. Their sense of self has been shattered. These words, however, take on extra resonance when placed in the mouth of a forcefully displaced migrant who must make Britain his home. Indeed, grief is not the only reason why the couple are violently thrust into an "abnormal" world: they are also thrust into the unknown reality of a foreign land and, on a smaller scale, into an unfamiliar house that they are expected to make their home. In his *Mourning Films*, Richard Armstrong underlines that in many a mourning film the grieving characters experience a sense of displacement, and that they "fail to inhabit the 'home'

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5.   The story starts seven years after Amelia's husband died in a car accident while driving her to the hospital to give birth. The film shows her struggling with depression and her son becoming obsessed with a horrifying monster, Mister Babadook.
6.   To emphasize the primacy of the unconscious in the psyche, Freud famously wrote that the ego "is not even master of its own house" (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 319).

they find themselves in", even when it is theirs, and he likens the experience to that of dwelling in a haunted house.[7] In *His House,* the mourners' displacement is also literal, so that the sense of not-at-homeness is doubly encoded. The two characters, however, deal with the loss of their homeland in two different ways, Bol wanting to suppress the past, while Rial is shown maintaining a strong link with her home culture.

The film writes two different narratives of mourning, correlating each with the way the character negotiates his/her past identity. Thus, Weekes incorporates a reflection on the immigrant experience as triggering an inner tension between assimilationist and less assimilationist pulls. When discussing his film, he almost explicitly elucidates the device of doubling the narrative of mourning:

> I feel like in many places in the West you're pulled in two very different directions: there's part of you that really wants to assimilate and fit in, and to not draw attention to yourself, but there's another part of you that feels very suspicious that the place doesn't particularly feel welcoming to you, so you find yourself pulling away again, wanting to rebel from that and to stick to your roots and stick out proudly. You're often torn in these two directions and battle within yourself, especially when you're trying to find your place in a new country. You find yourself always struggling to find a balance.[8]

The film externalizes this inner battle by projecting the opposite pulls onto the two main characters. Contrary to Rial, Bol is firmly decided to cut the link with the past and assimilate in the new country. His strong desire to suppress the past gives birth to a traditional haunted-house film, which features quite a few jump scares and several terrifying confrontations with the monster. In exploring this narrative, the film uses the visual codes of the liminal characteristic of Gothic film:[9] the strange phenomena happen at night, and the use of low-key lighting often makes what comes from "beyond" hard to see. Most of the time, "it" remains on the threshold between visibility and invisibility. In striking contrast, Rial always sees the ghosts in the daytime, most often in broad daylight, and she never shows any fear. The most striking example occurs when she finds herself alone in the living room while Bol is at the immigration office. The static shot that shows her sitting motionless on the couch lasts for about five seconds and the accompanying music plays very low (54:07—54:12). When she hears

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7. To quote Armstrong, the private space the mourners fail to inhabit "takes its cue from the charged 'homes' of classical and post-classical horror" (*Mourning Films*, 177).
8. Quoted in Nicholson, 2020: n.p. Remi Weekes is himself of mixed background.
9. These comments are based on Misha Kavka's examination of the aesthetics of Gothic film in "Gothic on Screen", in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 2002, 209-228. In this article, Kavka establishes a clear distinction between horror and the Gothic in terms of aesthetics.

the call "Mama" coming from behind a wall, only her eyes move, but she eventually turns her head when an arm emerges from a hole and drops the daughter's necklace on the floor. Rial then looks at the other holes in the walls, and the subjective shot shows ghostly faces peering in at her. Rial merely contemplates the ghosts, and her face remains expressionless. The scene thus pointedly excludes the traditional jump scare that may be expected in a more conventional horror movie. It may be described as "contemplative",[10] in striking contrast with Bol's active battle with the ghosts of the past. The next time the spectator sees Rial, she has draped a red sheet over her body to re-create an African-looking dress, which clearly signals her not wanting to leave the past behind (56:30). In contrast, Bol dresses in exactly the same clothes as those he has seen advertised in a poster. Unlike her husband, Rial is engaged in a dialogue with the past, which she does not try to suppress. The film shows her in a literal dialogue with the night witch (43:34), even though the latter remains invisible to Bol (and the spectator) and might just be a hallucination.

In short, the film exploits the two narratives of mourning along different aesthetic lines, one of which perfectly illustrates the minimalist, austere style David Church identifies as a characteristic feature of post-horror. Though less restrained, the narrative of mourning centered on Bol can still be considered as belonging to the category of "quiet" horror as it mostly resorts to the visual codes of the liminal or what Joan Hawkins calls "the aesthetics of the Uncanny" (Hawkins 2017: 3).[11] The two narratives, however, are structurally alike in the way they mimic the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Trauma and temporality

Trauma theory has underlined trauma's resistance to narration and suggested that it can only be represented through experimental forms. For example, in the introduction to *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead points out that Cathy Caruth's conceptualization of trauma[12] suggests that its representation "requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence" (Whitehead, 2004: 6). Indeed, to render the psychic collision between past and present in the wounded mind, trauma fiction often resorts to such devices as temporal disruption, ellipses, or fragmentation

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10. In *Post-Horror*, David Church repeatedly comments on the "contemplative aesthetics" of many post-horror movies. See p. 56 for example.
11. In her 2017 article, Joan Hawkins points to the emergence of a new Gothic impulse, which she further describes as "quiet horror". As it considers the "post-slasher history of the Gothic genre" (2), her discussion of this new trend largely intersects with ongoing discussions on post-horror.
12. Cathy Caruth discusses the irrepresentability of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, MA., The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

in an effort to mirror the inner crisis of the characters, who cannot make a home of the present. In Weekes's film, not only do the ghosts embody the intrusion of the past into the present, but linearity is repeatedly disrupted by intrusive memories as well as subjective flashback/nightmares that rarely announce themselves as such. For example, when Rial opens the door of a closet, she comes face to face with an image from the past (23:27—23:47). Here again, the film plays with the conventions of the scary movie, as what hides in the closet is not a monster that makes the character and the viewer jump, but an intrusive visual memory. The shift to Rial's subjective point of view shows refugees packed together at the back of a pick-up truck and staring at the blinding light of what is probably a torch pointed at them. The image takes the attentive viewer back to the opening flashback/nightmare, where the Majurs and the child are shown boarding the very same Toyota truck in South Sudan. The inside of the closet thus reveals a haunting memory lodged inside Rial's mind. It is to be noticed, however, that this visual memory crosses the spatiotemporal border of the doorframe since, before the image is revealed, Rial's face is lit up from inside the closet. The intrusive memory thus contaminates an apparently objective shot, blurring the borderline not only between past and present, but also between memory and reality. As the distinction between two temporal-spatial zones (Africa/"then" and the UK/"now") repeatedly collapses, the two main characters appear as spatially and temporally "unfixed". They are neither here nor there.

The film provides many examples of the blurring of borderlines between reality and memory/nightmare, some with a startlingly disorientating effect on the spectator. When the couple is shown having a tense dinner at the kitchen table, the camera eventually lingers on Bol, and then very slowly zooms out to reveal that he is no longer in the house but sitting at the kitchen table in the middle of an ocean bathed in reddish fog (45:25—46:13). Rial has disappeared and only a portion of the now broken kitchen wall remains standing.[13] The image is like a surrealist montage with a distinctly nightmarish tinge, and the film crosses into nightmare when zombie-like creatures (undead drowned migrants) appear and start closing in on Bol, who is then shown suddenly waking up in the living room (46:58). The striking ocean episode is obviously meant to disorient the spectator, who cannot at first "place it" within or without Bol's mind. Even when it is revealed as a nightmare, it is difficult to determine when the nightmare begins exactly, and to logically account for the temporal disconnect between the couple having dinner in the kitchen and Bol waking up in the living room.

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13.   *His House* (46:03), https://m.imdb.com/title/tt8508734/mediaviewer/rm2172573697/.

The long sequence that follows Rial's escape through the window is even more intricate and confusing, which makes it particularly difficult to summarize (1:05:12—1:15:02). When she climbs out of the window, Rial is suddenly back in Africa, the vivid colors and sunlight sharply contrasting with the grey suburban environment the viewer expected to see. Even Rial is surprised, but she allows herself to be overcome with joy when she is welcomed back by her female friends. The joyful reunion inside a school-room turns darker when Rial states that she knows that she is dreaming and asks about her daughter. As the singing of the women suddenly stops, the film cuts to a shot of Bol outside the doorway of the same schoolroom, looking for Rial (1:07:35). The dream has in fact turned into a (subjective?) flashback where Bol finds Rial coming out of the closet where she had been hiding while her friends were massacred. After a brief shot of the butchered bodies, the film shows fragments of the couple's escape journey from their country, before taking the viewer back to the schoolroom and an old woman telling Rial that she has "no daughter", before the (invisible) Apeth tells her it can bring the child back. The film finally cuts back to Rial lying beneath the window through which she escaped, having apparently and inexplicably fallen asleep after climbing out. The ten-minute sequence repeatedly crosses the borderline between flashback and fantasy, and it mirrors the disruption of temporality caused by trauma. Furthermore, the film does not attempt to make the insertion of this dream/flashback sequence plausible, but rather flaunts the absurdity of Rial falling asleep at such a time. The viewer is thus taken to a world where rationality is suspended, and (s)he is simultaneously made to experience the breaking up of the linear thread of time that characterizes the experience of the traumatized subject.

The narrative twist that occurs in this dream/flashback sequence is also a crucial turning point in the film's narrative of the overcoming of trauma. The spectators discover that they have been so far misled since the girl who died in the boat-wreck was not really the couple's daughter. As Rial herself had apparently repressed the knowledge, the discovery is made by the viewer and the "mother" at the same time. Because the film withholds the crucial information, it has the spectator go through the same shock as the traumatized character when the "dark secret" of child theft comes back to the surface of consciousness. Rial is now placed in a position where she may be able to "move on", but she only does so when Bol is being killed by the consuming demon in the film's final confrontation. In a sort of waking dream that takes her back to her friends in Africa, Rial is finally able to say goodbye to them, and she adds: "I'm going home" (1:21:58). "Home" is now the present. Home is the council estate house in Britain, her new homeland.

Because of the way it manipulates time and space, the film does not provide an easy ride in the haunted house of trauma. It may be deemed a rather "difficult" film as it repeatedly disorients the viewers and forces them to reconstruct the linear development of the couple's story. Compared to this overall complexity, the ending may seem a simplifying resolution of what has been shown to be an intricate inner crisis. The psychic wound of trauma apparently closes and a new life begins.

The birthing house

What is at stake throughout the film is the "rebirth" of the couple at the end of the transitional stage of grief. Indeed, rebirth is explicitly discussed by the Majurs during their first night in the house, when they both state in turn that they are "born again" (11:35). What follows will, unsurprisingly, show how wrong they are.

The film makes use of birth imagery in several places, for example when Bol has his hair cut, an obvious symbol of a wish for renewal. The most striking birthing episode, however, happens at night and shows the impossibility of moving on. After a length of wallpaper peels off, Bol finds himself confronted with a vagina-like opening in the wall (20:23). In this hole he finds a wire that becomes highly suggestive of an umbilical cord. As it keeps unrolling, it turns into a rope entwined with seaweed, an obvious return to the traumatic boat-wreck. The monstrous birth finally takes place when the doll that belonged to the "daughter" emerges from the wall (22:02). Suddenly, a hand springs out, grabs the doll, and pulls it back into the darkness. The episode makes it clear that Bol has not cut the umbilical cord tying him to his motherland and the past. It simultaneously hints at repression or suppression through the evocative power of "something" emerging from the depths of darkness. Throughout most of the scene, Bol's shadow on the wall can be seen pulling at the rope, too, and this shadow self is significantly bigger than the character who has lost control of himself.[14] As Bol cannot resist the pull of darkness, he is relentlessly heading towards madness and self-destruction. He becomes "the beast", as the night witch tells him in an exchange that comes very close to explicitly stating that the monstrous Other is in fact the self (01:02:11). The final confrontation with the Apeth predicates the monster's birth on Bol's death. After the latter cuts his arm to make the monster come and take his life, the Apeth emerges from the kitchen floor in another monstrous birth scene (1:19:49-1:19:59). A subjective shot even shows the now fully, if monstrously, embodied Apeth emerging between Bol's open legs. The whole

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14. *His House* (21:42), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8508734/mediaindex/?ref_=tt_mv_sm.

episode may be read as a suicide attempt, which Rial interrupts when she decides to save Bol's life. After she slays the monster's throat, the estranged couple reunite and can now truly inhabit the house. When immigration officials visit for the last time, Bol and Rial have fixed the holes and started painting the walls white, symbolically making them a blank page on which to start a new story. The Majurs seem to have moved past the "acting out" of trauma, that is, the repetition of the traumatic events in nightmares or hallucinations. They have at least partially "worked through"[15] their trauma, and, significantly, Bol is able to verbalize his now pacified relationship with the past. He tells their case worker: "Your ghosts follow you. They never leave. They live with you. It's when I let them in, I could start to face myself" (1:24:23-36). Rial then adds: "This is our home".

The epilogue makes ample use of doorways again, but it uses them in a strikingly different manner from the rest of the film. After the immigration officials leave, the couple sees Nyagak in the kitchen doorway. The scary mask has been removed and the girl stands perfectly still.[16] At the end of the film, the doorway is no longer an opening onto a frightening world that may intrude, but rather a frame around the photograph of a dead one. Photography is very often described as a ghostly medium, but it fixes the past and contains it within a frame. The framing and "taming" of Nyagak echoes the scene where Rial sees the ghostly faces through the holes in the wall, faces that are like framed photographs which Rial quietly contemplates. The image of the now framed child is followed by a shot from her point of view, in which Bol and Rial are standing among a group of South Sudanese in a sort of family picture (1:25:28), except that the group overflows the frame and spills into the corridor and the kitchen. There is something disturbing in this overflowing, but the film switches back to framed photographs, first of the "daughter", then of the couple, who are holding hands and looking straight at the viewer when the screen switches to black. As in *The Babadook*, the traumatic past has been "tamed" when the film ends, as the couple have made peace with their ghosts.

The epilogue is an optimistic happy end that may be used as an argument against the inclusion of the film in the post-horror cycle, which usually favors more ambiguous or disturbing endings. Church considers *The Babadook* as a peripheral film in the cycle mainly, though not exclusively, because of its happy resolution (Church, 2022: 79). Yet, *His House*'s happy (and perhaps oversimplifying) closure of the trauma narrative is

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15.   In *Representing the Holocaust*, trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra uses the concepts of "acting-out" and "working-through", which are derived from psychoanalysis, to distinguish between two forms of remembering trauma. He underlines that the relation between the two, however, should not be reduced to a from /to relationship as they are interacting processes. "Acting-out" may never be fully overcome.
16.   *His House* (1:25:52), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8508734/mediaindex/?ref_=tt_mv_sm.

counterbalanced by the open-endedness of the refugee narrative, as the fate of the couple is still hanging in the balance when the movie ends. In this narrative, the "monster" is not a supernatural creature but the UK asylum system, as well as the hostility the Majurs often face.[17]

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Housed but unhomed:
the transitional home

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Remi Weekes also revisits the trope of the haunted house by making it a transitional place for liminal or "threshold" people. The couple have lost their homeland, but Britain is not yet their home, as they are reminded by immigration authorities before they leave the detention center: they are not citizens yet, they are "released on bail" (4:22). Because they have not fully transitioned, they are neither "here" nor "there". Thus, they are in the stage of uncertainty experienced by asylum seekers, a stage presented in the film as a sort of probationary period in which they are to demonstrate that they are part of "the good ones". This may be seen as a rite of passage, that is, as a liminal state of transition before they are incorporated into the host country as citizens.[18] The film, however, emphasizes how degrading this indefinite period of in-betweenness is. Their assigned dwelling is a prison-like house, which they are forbidden to leave until their case is processed. They are not allowed to receive friends, let alone to organize parties. They are not allowed to work either. Furthermore, as they live under the constant threat of being sent back to die, they are positioned between life and death. The film twists the meaning of a common warning in haunted-house fiction, when the creepy next-door neighbor tells Bol: "I'll give it a week" (55:05). She does not mean that the new dwellers will be scared away from the house, but that they will soon be kicked out by the authorities anyway. The other meaning, however, is not erased since the night witch has already started tormenting Bol.

That the couple is in a state of limbo is emphasized by the fact that the house looks deserted. Rubbish has accumulated in the front yard, an obvious comment on immigrants being considered the refuse of society. Because it looks unoccupied, a girl peeing in the backyard is surprised at seeing Rial through the window, and she exclaims to her off-screen friend(s) "I think there is someone living there" (29:32). Rial's existence

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17. Jordan Peele labels *Get Out* a "social thriller", which he sees as a way of pointing out that the monster in his film is "society itself". See Max Webstein, "Society is the Monster: Jordan Peele on Racism as Horror".
18. Research on asylum seeking often uses Victor Turner's concept of liminality to define the experience the seekers go through. Many point out that the rite of passage is in fact a "ceremony of degradation". See for example Marina Gold, "Liminality and the asylum process in Switzerland", *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 235 (2019), 16-19.

thus seems to remain uncertain, which points to her ghost-like, liminal status. In this episode, she is seen through the kitchen window, which simultaneously reflects the brick wall of the backyard. The image encapsulates Rial's liminality, since the superimposition of image and reflection makes her ontological status unclear: she is no more "solid" or "real" than the reflected image on the windowpane. Furthermore, the house is not precisely located in space and becomes a sort of "no-place". The film draws attention to this indeterminacy when Bol asks the barber to confirm that they are in London. Rather than setting him right, the man answers "why not?" (17:43). The place is never given a name and thus, even though the refugees are housed, they are still "unplaced".

This transitional home turns out to be almost as porous as the characters' haunted minds. Not only does a girl pee in their backyard, but the Majurs seem to be constantly spied upon by their next-door neighbor. Immigration can apparently visit whenever they please to check that the rules are followed. They have the right to intrude on the couple's intimate sphere and their intrusions act as a constant reminder of the threat of deportation. One scene establishes a clear link between intrusion from the outside and irruption within the mind. While Bol is standing alone in the dark living room, the voices of young people loitering in the street can be dimly heard in the background. Suddenly something is thrown through the window (13:00) and the shattering sound triggers a post-traumatic auditory hallucination in Bol, who stops his ears in a desperate attempt to silence the screams inside his head. Thus, a micro-aggression is put in parallel with the traumatic violence of the past, suggesting that there are also sources of terror outside the haunted house. Rial also faces such micro-aggression when she ventures outside the house for the first time. Weekes has underlined the influence of *The Shining* on this sequence,[19] which shows Rial losing her way in a labyrinth of narrow alleys, where she twice comes upon the same boy playing football against a wall (24:59-26:38). At the symbolic center of the maze, she comes face to face with "the monster". Thinking the three black boys she comes across will help her find her way, she walks up to them, only to be mocked for her accent and fooled with, before eventually being told to go back to "fucking Africa". Though they share the same skin color, the three boys in school uniforms turn out to be fierce guardians of the border, excluding Rial as one who does not belong. In short, the film presents the host country as fertile soil for what is now commonly called "insidious" trauma, that experienced by people targeted by racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

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19. Director Remi Weekes includes Polansky's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) among his favorite horror movies. The two films are usually considered as major influences on the post-horror cycle.

In several places, the film very subtly establishes the continuity between past and present. The importance of doorways opening onto the traumatic past has already been underlined. The film makes a striking use of a doorway when the couple leave their room in the detention center. When walking along the corridor, they go past the open door of another room where a migrant is being violently beaten up by the figures of authority (03:37). Thus, doorways also open onto violence in the "here and now", which recalls the violence of the couple's past. The film also invites the viewer to see a parallel between what happens inside the haunted house and what happens in the immigration office when Bol tries to convince his case worker to move them to another house. Bol cut his hand when tearing at the walls, and he is still wearing a bandage when he visits the office. He cuts the same hand again when he crushes the glass he is holding, overwhelmed by distress and frustration at not being heard (53:44). More importantly, the muted electronic-sounding music that plays at the end of this scene carries on into the next, the sound bridge inciting the viewer to see the parallel between the two. The next scene (which has been discussed above) shows Rial looking at the ghostly faces that appear through the holes in the wall. The still faces are a visual echo of the faces of the two immigration officials staring with hostility at Bol after pointing out that their houses are smaller than the one the couple has been granted (53:58). Thus, though the film's focus is on inner demons, it also points an accusing finger at the "monsters" outside.

The film locates the sources of terror both inside and outside the house, and the parallel between the two reinforces the negative judgement the film passes on the way migrants are treated in the UK. *His House* is also social horror, though the incisive social critique remains peripheral to the film, being outweighed by the narrative of trauma.

Conclusion: "Pictures can't hurt me" … or can they?

In its depiction of the plight of forcibly displaced migrants who are not made welcome in the new country, *His House* evinces an intense awareness of the contemporary lay discourse on trauma. As this is also true of many of the post-horror movies discussed by David Church, one may hypothesize that the emergence of this new cycle is concomitant with the popularization/ trivialization of the academic discourse on trauma that thrived in the 1990s and crossed the borderlines between different disciplinary fields.[20] Trauma has indeed become a household word and the

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20.   Trauma studies developed in the 1990s, with such key figures as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. For an overview of this development, see for example Michelle Balaev, "Trauma

subject has thoroughly permeated popular culture. The underlying ethical question is whether post-horror is exploitative in its use of trauma, a question even more acutely raised by *His House* as it is so firmly grounded in the "reality" of the refugee experience.[21]

"Make yourself at home. Pictures can't hurt me", Bol confidently tells the Apeth when he realizes that the latter can only project frightful images (1:03:28). The film shows that pictures can indeed hurt, to the point of one choosing death over seeing. Bol's defiant statement takes on an obvious metafilmic dimension, asking the question of the impact of horror movies on the spectator. Indeed, the context in which Bol utters the words is strongly evocative of a moviegoing experience. After deciding to summon the Apeth, Bol settles on the couch in front of a window that becomes evocative of a screen. The light progressively dims, and he finds himself in a dark room in front of the bright window/screen. When his eyes close, he enters the "other world", and an embedded horror movie starts. Bol is thus placed in the position of a horror-movie spectator, and the experience does have a physical effect on him, as revealed when his wife finds him in a state of stupor and notices that he has wet his pants.

Horror movies attempt to provoke a bodily response of fear and/or disgust in the spectator, and *His House* does trigger this reaction in several places. As trauma fiction, however, the film also attempts to trigger empathy for the plight of traumatized refugees. Through its aesthetic and structural choices, it has the viewer go through "something like" the inner crisis triggered by trauma. But contrary to the horror-movie spectator, Bol cannot turn his head, as the Apeth physically forces him to watch. This is how *His House* envisions the experience of the traumatized subject: as being shown a horror movie you cannot not watch.

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21.   David Church discusses the question in his chapter about grief in post-horror. See p. 95.

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