The Black Gothic Imagination: Horror, Subjectivity, and Spectatorship from the Civil Rights Era to the New Millennium.

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The Black Gothic Imagination: Horror, Subjectivity, and Spectatorship from the Civil Rights Era to the New Millennium

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Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Black spectators have maintained a deeply fraught relationship with the horror film going at least as far back as the 1950s, and this relationship persists even today. Yet, little research has been done that considers this audience, their various viewing positions and practices, or the historical and industrial forces that have shaped how they interact with the genre. That a substantial black audience has been drawn to the modern and postmodern horror film despite or perhaps even because of its notoriously negative treatment of blackness is a phenomenon that warrants closer attention; it is precisely these kinds of ambivalent and contested cultural negotiations that reveal how racial subjectivity informs ideas about the horrific and vice versa. More than just a genre of fright that anticipates and articulates cultural anxieties, horror operates as part of a larger ideological sphere that informs how Americans conceptualize intersectional relations of power.

Building upon the work of scholars such as Linda Williams, Saidiya Hartman, and Carol J. Clover, this study asserts that narrative horror has assumed a dialectical relationship with American rights discourse. Both fields draw from a familiar gothic vocabulary that positions the abject human frame at their centers and both are bound by a similar transactional economy whereby persecution yields entitlement, suffering pleads for violent retribution, and injury demands vengeance. Horror’s appeal for black audiences during the latter half of the twentieth century can therefore be traced not simply along axes of circumscribed representation, but more significantly, to its insistence upon coding otherwise nebulous antagonisms in the readily legible terms of monsters and victims, persecutors and oppressed. Ultimately, the horror film has allowed black spectators a means through which to interrogate issues that have remained central to black life in the wake of [legal] desegregation, namely questions of autonomy, mastery, mobility, ownership, vulnerability, and empowerment. Utilizing various interdisciplinary approaches across five thematic chapters, this study contributes to an ongoing conversation concerning how people make use of cultural products and how patterns of cultural production and consumption operate in relation their social, spiritual, psychological, and political lives.
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For Mom and Dad – Thanks for letting me keep the tv on.
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Introduction

This study examines black spectators' engagement with the modern and postmodern American horror film. The genre's handling of blackness has by now become so noteworthy – and for many, notorious – that even the casual observer can identify the limitations that have typically been placed on black characters; they are often forced to occupy what Stuart Hall identified as a problematic set of binary extremes: "good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to do both of these things at the same time!"1 In the specific context of horror, these binaries tend to look more like saintly/demonic, superstitious/hyper-rational, cowardly/preternaturally violent, repulsively monstrous/alluringly malevolent. When black characters are not themselves being marginalized or demonized, the spaces and places they inhabit are presented as the loci of evil. Making contact with black spaces and places usually signals an unredeemable contamination for unsuspecting white characters who trespass into “darkness.” Similarly, the alien creatures, diseases, and phantasms that emerge from these spaces are viewed as imminently threatening to whiteness and its attendant institutions.

Given such entrenched patterns of racial circumscription, it is a wonder that black spectators would be attracted to these films at all. Yet individual accounts, black press sources, and patterns in production, distribution, exhibition, and marketing all strongly

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suggest that black audiences have had a long-standing investment in horror. Moreover, the film industry has courted this investment since the mid-1950s and perhaps even earlier. Several questions follow from these apparent contradictions: How have black spectators understood and made use of the American horror film? To what extent does racial subjectivity shape their ideas about the horrific and vice versa? Where do the boundaries between real and recreational horror narratives begin and end? What is the role of the state in defining and containing horror? Does the circumstance of black horror spectatorship mimic or subvert black subjectivities in the wake of legal desegregation? How can particular ways of thinking and speaking about horror enable or obscure people's ability to recognize shared interests and to collectively organize across lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and geography? And what are the consequences of that thought and speech for subjectivity, especially for those black subjects simultaneously claimed and disavowed in utterances of nationhood?

It is with these questions in mind that horror becomes more than just a genre of fright that anticipates and articulates cultural anxieties, but also a larger narrative and interpretive sphere that informs how Americans talk about relations of power. Horror originates in the Gothic tradition characterized by Leslie Fiedler and several other scholars and is bound by a transactional economy in which persecution yields entitlement, suffering pleads for violent retribution, and injury demands vengeance. Because these same politics of exchange have dominated national conversations about rights and entitlements since the 1960s, I bring the rhetoric of horror and that which is frequently enunciated in rights claims into dialogue with one another. To articulate this mutually constitutive relationship with more precision: horror is performed as discourse
both of and about monstrosity. It has the power to create monsters both literal and figurative, and to read that monstrousness onto people, places, and spaces. It therefore also has the power to aggressively police disruptive difference, and in the end, to mediate access to rights. Although it is perhaps most profoundly realized via narrative, the rhetoric of horror neither originates in text nor does it remain there. Far more disturbing, this rhetoric transcends the textual realm and informs whether people are allowed to live as fully realized subjects or not. We do not just tell horror stories; we use horror to narrate our claims to rights — for the freedom to act in service of our interests and the freedom to protect ourselves from that which might threaten our sense of individual and communal selfhood. It is, however, precisely our weddedness to a horrific narration of rights that undermines the pursuit of those freedoms, creating monsters and victims that struggle to speak truth to power.

Much of my argument here is intended to build upon Linda Williams’ work on race and melodrama. For Williams, melodrama has served as “the fundamental mode by which American mass culture has ‘talked to itself’ about the enduring moral dilemma of race.”

Williams thus positions melodrama and gothic horror as flipsides of the same dialogic coin rather than as a binary, oppositional pair. And if it is true that melodrama is “ultimately concerned with a retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering,” then we might similarly argue that gothic horror concerns itself with the retrieval and staging of malice through confrontation with the abject. Gothic horror is

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3 Ibid, 20.
then best thought of as the mechanism that legitimizes violence through perceived victimization, entitlement, or a powerful conflation of the two.

Both fields draw from a familiar gothic lexicon that positions the abject, traumatized human frame at their respective centers. This consanguinity facilitates the borrowing and adaptation of visual and linguistic signifiers while constructing a new horror iconography. Hence, horror’s appeal for black audiences can be mapped not along axes of circumscribed representation, but in its insistence upon coding otherwise nebulous antagonisms in the readily legible terms of monster versus victim. It is my contention that the vexed positioning of black subjectivities in relation to legal desegregation has been mimicked in the circumstance of black spectatorship for horror.

In chapter one, “Undead Carnival: Monsters Magic, and Make Believe in Michael Jackson’s *Thriller,*” I take a critical look back on my own childhood responses to Jackson’s most resonant horror show. Despite being paralyzed by an initial response of near-totalizing fear, I was eventually able to incorporate my anxiety into a more fluid matrix of pleasure. In order to move beyond assertions about horror’s desensitizing tendencies, I narrate the process through which I learned to interpret the genre’s core rhetorical cues and make sense of them using the familiar childhood mechanism of “playing make believe.” Mine was an example of early spectatorship whereby I was continually being armed for contentious negotiation with popular culture rather than being protected by an overbearing parental gaze. That I was exposed to a music video with such loaded imagery at a young age did not signal parental neglect, but rather a resistance to idealized notions of childhood in my community – an ideology that would have sought to shield me from potentially harmful representations rather than
encouraging me to understand those images and their function. My positioning in a small black community (within a predominantly white, Mid-Atlantic, seaside locale) also disrupts constructions of black spectatorship as exclusively poor and/or urban. Massive changes in the patterns of production, distribution, and exhibition in the late 1970s and early 80s such as the rise of the multiplex, the advent of home video, the proliferation of cable television, and the influence of music video, were felt just as dramatically in small towns like mine as they were in major urban centers and perhaps even more so. I subsequently situate reflections on my individual experience against larger industrial and phenomenological shifts in horror spectatorship.

Although a kind of autoethnographic approach guides much of this chapter, I also analyze Thriller textually in relation to several other contexts including: early childhood interpellation and the practice of mimicry, lyrical themes of encirclement and abjection, competing theories of parody and pastiche, horror’s postmodern shift toward metatextuality and special effects display, the racialization of occult monsters (specifically the werewolf and the zombie), director John Landis’ previous work, Jackson’s career-long obsession with body transmogrification, and his queering of black masculinity. Ultimately, I read Thriller as a postmodern pastiche that, through its invocation of the carnivalesque, problematizes the gothic trope of monstrous bodily transformation while at the same time critiquing figurations of black masculine corporeality as primitive, bestial, and dangerous.

In chapter two, “The Devil and James Baldwin: A Theory the Black Gothic Imagination,” I turn my attention to Baldwin’s three-part essay on film, The Devil Finds Work. This text has proven to be an incredibly useful resource for spectatorship studies
because of his unique ability to narrate his experience at the movies and to offer astute critique of popular films. But whereas most studies have concentrated on his childhood identification with Bette Davis or the influence of the Pentecostal tradition on his rhetoric, I focus on what his reflections can tell us about the relationship between horror and subjectivity. More specifically, his culminating discussion of The Exorcist features some of the most thoughtful theorizations of horror and its appeal for spectators to be found anywhere. For Baldwin, the film manipulates its audience by presenting the spectacle of a young girl’s supernatural possession (and her physical violation) as so utterly “real” that other, more immediate ills like racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism are obscured. The result is a narrative that allows an American audience to deny their culpability in the perpetuation of real, tangible forms of evil. Still, Baldwin’s rootedness in black vernacular culture and thinking prevents him from exercising the same kind of curt disregard that many white critics showed toward the film. On the contrary, he recognized that for many black spectators – particularly those who were reared in religious traditions that took seriously the prospect of spiritual possession – the stakes of watching The Exorcist were quite high and could not be altogether dismissed. He uses his engagement with the film as an opportunity for legitimate introspection and turns his analysis into more than just a review: it becomes a chronicle of his subjectivity in the making.

Baldwin’s creative response to horror serves as an example of the progressive possibilities in black film spectatorship via a hermeneutic I term “the black gothic imagination.” Borrowing from Isabel Cristina Pinedo’s idea of “recreational terror,” an exercise wherein “controlled loss substitutes for loss of control,” I argue that black
spectators use their confrontations with horror texts as sites for imagining mastery over hegemonic discourses. While the black gothic imaginary is initially formed in response to the imminent sense of alienation that often infuses black subjectivity, it is also a strategy that affirms the distinct pleasures of black vernacular experience. Baldwin is chiefly interested in three specific phenomena: the emphasis that black expressive performance places on corporeal intimacy, African Americans' willingness toward dynamic modes of identification, and a deeply fraught but vibrant tradition of syncretic black spiritual practices. In short, the black gothic imaginary functions as an interpretive schema through which spectators are able to resist the gothicization of blackness and offer alternative albeit not necessarily dissident visions. In addition to discussing this formulation, I consider how The Exorcist's exhibition in places like Beverly Hills threatened to reshape the cartography of black spectatorship.

Chapter 3, “Strange Enjoyments: The Africanist Presence in Roger Corman’s 1960s Poe Adaptations,” moves chronologically backward to consider some other unexpected pathways of black horror spectatorship. I begin with a detailed analysis of a 1965 article from the Chicago Defender in which a photographer surveyed black spectators about their favorite movies. An accountant named Lawrence Jones cited Corman’s Tales of Terror (1962) as one in which he took “strange enjoyment.” An anthology film, Tales reinterpreted several Poe stories and, in some instances, incorporated aspects from different stories to form new narratives. These new narratives shared with their forbearers concerns about the role of power in the constitution of subjectivity, the physical, psychological, and spiritual costs of possession, and the

excesses and limits of autonomy. Utilizing Toni Morrison’s theory of the “unspeakable unspoken” as well as the work of Joan Dayan and several other Poe scholars, I argue that Jones’ “strange enjoyment” epitomized a specific kind of pleasure that accompanied black horror spectatorship during the height of the long civil rights movement, one that allowed black spectators to contend with the rhetoric of gothic horror in the relatively safe space of the theatre and gain some limited kinds of mastery. I analyze Tales of Terror, Corman’s treatment of The Mask of the Red Death and The Tomb of Ligeia, as well as Poe’s original stories at length for their racial implications. For if Poe’s original antebellum texts were haunted by the presence of a captive black population – one against which the boundaries of citizenship were defined – then the renewed popularity of his work during the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement can be explained in part through a yearning to understand the shifting dynamics of personhood presented by desegregation. I conclude this discussion by drawing parallels between the Africanist presence in Corman’s Poe adaptations and his civil rights film The Intruder.

Chapter four, “Beauties and Beasts: The Marketing and Reception of Horror from the Mid-1950s to Blaxploitation,” contextualizes black spectatorship of horror by investigating periodical sources such as The Chicago Defender, The New York Amsterdam News, The Los Angeles Sentinel, and The Pittsburgh Courier. Horror films were among some of the most prominently advertised films in these publications during the period in large part because companies like American International Pictures began actively seeking black dollars along with the teenage drive-in set starting in the late 1950s. Under the auspices of James H. Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff as well as the legendary king of lowbrow directors, Roger Corman, AIP thrived by producing quickly
and cheaply made genre fare. Hackneyed science fiction pictures, beach party yarns, “women in prison” stories, biker gang flicks, and eventually black action and horror films like *Coffy* and *Blackula* were the company’s specialty. Quality notwithstanding, these films were well suited for black audiences whose spectatorial practices had long been highly participatory, vocal, and even outright disruptive. Jacqueline Stewart has described black spectatorship in the early twentieth century as “reconstructionist,” whereby viewers “reconstitute themselves as viewing subjects in the face of a racially exclusionary cinematic institution and social order.” It only makes sense that these reconstructive strategies became more sophisticated as the terrain of racial representation in film became more complex. Indeed, horror often encourages active spectators aware of generic conventions for the expressed purpose of either subverting those expectations or fulfilling them with new vigor. In this sense, black audiences’ preemptively defensive posture toward the genre has ideally positioned them to witness its mutations over time.

I examine various articles, publicity stills, and promotional trailers which suggest that rather than being turned off by racially charged images and rhetoric, many black spectators appeared to be attracted to films that more honestly reflected the tumult of the period. This interest was also reflected in cross-genre pollination between horror, violent westerns, racy thrillers, authoritarian crime dramas, and of course blaxploitation action and horror films. Rather than engaging with horror as an isolated field of representation, black spectators experienced horror in conversation with a whole host of cinematic and non-cinematic texts, many of which were also informed by gothic rhetoric.

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The final chapter, "Slipping Into Darkness: Critical Responses to Horror in Black and White," compares and contrasts responses from critics in black newspapers to white critics in mainstream publications from the early seventies and the slasher film revival of the mid-nineties. Earl Calloway, James Murray, Bill Lane, Nelson George, Dewey Chester, Michael McQuown, Gerri Ransom, Philip Harrigan, Alan Bell, Abiola Sinclair, Anthony Hutchings, Mel Tapley, and Malaika Brown are amongst the black critics whose work I analyze as well as popular white critics like Vincent Canby, Janet Maslin, and Roger Ebert. Black critics of horror during the late twentieth century expressed a wide variety of interests and approaches including auteur criticism, formalist critique, philosophical rumination, sociocultural and political commentary, and harsh industrial critique. Questions of racial representation inevitably made their way into their analyses of horror films, but these were not their only or even primary concerns. While their discourse often aped that of white critics, especially when they complained about the proliferation of sequels or overemphasis on special effects, some black critics also made connections between on-screen violence and real violence plaguing black communities. What black critics did consistently recognize is that horror seems to have had a unique capacity to capture different cultural anxieties and reflect industrial trends, which made it worth paying attention to. They contended with horror on the same terms that most black spectators seem to have: with an ambivalent spirit of indulgence and heightened sense of awareness about how horror shapes and is shaped by racial subjectivity.

The concluding discussion returns to the autobiographical by revisiting my experience of seeing Wes Craven's Scream films as a teenager. Scream 2 (1997) and its highly metatextual opening sequence in particular, signaled a continued investment on
Craven’s behalf to challenge racial representation in the horror genre as well as a deliberate attempt to draw black spectators into the slasher film revival. Addressing the politics of race in horror directly did not, however, come without consequences, and for at least a few brief moments, seeing the film with a predominantly white audience revealed deeper tensions inherent to horror spectatorship. From an industrial standpoint, the success of the Scream films and the resurgence of the slasher film that followed are significant because this trend may have shifted the course not only of the horror genre, but also of black film as well.

The unifying theme in this study is the privilege that I grant to the power of imagination, a move that raises questions about the gap between theory and praxis. After all, what difference does it make how racial subjectivity affects one’s relationship to narrative horror if real horror awaits people of the black diaspora at every turn? I argue that before we can begin to change the frequently horrific terms on which we narrate rights claims, and even more basic claims to authentic personhood, both in our intimate lived experiences and our public speech, we first must be able to imagine a way of inhabiting our subjectivity that does not come at the expense of others’ sovereignty. It is my hope that this project serves as a modest beginning toward this end.

Methodology and Previous Scholarship

Much of horror scholarship over the past three decades has been indebted to the work of Robin Wood and more specifically, to his attempt to synthesize psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, and queer theory in the landmark 1979 essay, “An Introduction to
the American Horror Film.”

But while race and ethnicity were listed among his categories of repressed groups whose disruptive presence always threatens to reemerge and destroy dominant societal structures, questions about gender and sexuality have nevertheless dominated conversations about horror. The most influential studies that followed after Wood during the eighties and early nineties by scholars like Barry Keith Grant, James Twitchell, Gregory Waller, Noel Carroll, Vira Dika, Andrew Tudor, David Skal, Barbara Creed, Jonathan Lake Crane, and others were largely silent on racial issues despite their other valuable contributions. Carol J. Clover’s analysis of whiteness in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* as well as Elizabeth Young’s work on *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) are perhaps some of the most notable exceptions to this trend.

While I reference Clover’s seminal work throughout this study, the most direct discussion of it is featured in Chapter 5.

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6 Wood’s essay was originally published in *American Nightmare: Essay on the Horror Film*, ed. Andrew Britton et al. (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979).


Throughout the nineties, more horror scholars began paying closer attention to race and how the history of American racial relations has been reflected in horror texts. Mark Jancovich and Judith Halberstam offered some especially useful discussions.\(^9\) One of the most important contributions to my own thinking about black representation in horror comes from James Snead’s “Spectatorship and Capture in *King Kong*: The Guilty Look.”\(^10\) Although Snead did not necessarily intend to theorize blackness in horror – he positioned *King Kong* as emblematic of Hollywood’s treatment of blackness more broadly – his triumvirate of “mythification,” marking, and omission make for a solid foundational schema. As Snead defined these terms, mythification refers to “the replacement of history with a surrogate ideology of elevation or demotion along a scale of human value,” marking to the redundant, overdetermined delineation of blackness, and omission to “the repetition of black absence from locations of autonomy and importance.”\(^11\) These strategies have in many ways remained central to how the horror genre deals with blackness even today. Snead also recognized, quite vitally, spectators’ capacity to oscillate between multiple points of identification before, during, and after encountering a given narrative.

Pinedo’s aforementioned *Recreational Terror* also stands out as one of the more significant contributions to writing about race and horror as well as raced horror spectatorship. Pinedo writes from the intersection of multiple subject positions – feminist, Catholic, working class, Latina immigrant, and ardent horror fan – subsequently opening

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\(^11\) Ibid, 5-6.
up new spaces to consider how racial and other subjectivities affect horror spectatorship. Her discussion of “race horror,” that is, films in which horror is shown to emanate directly from racial otherness also provides valuable insights into the genre’s transition into postmodern narrativity.\(^\text{12}\)

The new millennium brought increased scholarly interest in the horror film, at least some of which has dealt specifically with race issues and raced horror spectatorship. Two of the most important investigations came from Kevin Heffernan and Harry Benshoff, who examined the distribution and exhibition of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) in inner cities and blaxploitation horror respectively.\(^\text{13}\) Although two new horror collections were published at the turn of the century, Aviva Briefel and Sianne Ngai’s piece on *Candyman* (1993) was the only one in either to focus directly on race.\(^\text{14}\) Several scholars such as Fatimah Tobing Rony, Patrick Gonder, Peter Hutchings, Joshua Bellin, Alexander Nemerov, Charlene Regester, Elizabeth Young, Lawrence Novotny, and others offered important contributions on race and horror during the aughts.\(^\text{15}\) *Genders*

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\(^\text{12}\) See Chap. 5 “Race Horror” in *Recreational Terror.*


online journal 2004 Special Issue, “Scared of the Dark: Race, Gender, and the Horror Film” also featured several compelling entries. Historical studies by Joseph Maddrey, Adam Lowenstein, and Kendall Phillips have acknowledged that racial politics helped guide the direction of the genre.16

The second decade of the twenty-first century has so far been incredibly prolific for horror scholarship with already more than two dozen new books released, and yet despite this rush of new work, studies on race in horror and raced horror spectatorship remain thin on the ground with some notable exceptions. In his history of the first slasher cycle, Richard Nowell deduces that horror filmmakers in the late seventies and early eighties “presumed young minority audiences would attend horror films irrespective of whether the characters on screen were the same race as them.”17 I suggest throughout this study that this presumption on behalf of the film industry extends much further back, at least to the fifties when American International Pictures films first became popular among teenage audiences. Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley have noted that highly

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limited racial representation and what are often outrightly racist politics continue today in
many teen-focused horror films today.\(^{18}\)

Angela Smith’s *Hideous Progeny* as well as David Roche’s *Making and Remaking Horror* both offer some sustained engagement with race issues in horror as well. Whereas Smith’s study considers how early twentieth century racial discourses about eugenics inform classic horror cinema, Roche explores how the racial politics of horror films originally produced in the seventies mutate when reformulated in a twenty-first century context.\(^ {19}\) Phillips discusses black representation in the films of Wes Craven and George Romero in his auteurist study of modern horror. Still, as of this writing, Robin Means Coleman’s *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* stands as the sole book-length study dedicated to exploring black presence in horror. The influence of gender studies, queer theory, psychoanalysis, and increasingly, trauma theory, transnationalism, and industrial considerations guide much of how critics continue to look at horror.

Because discussion of race in horror film studies has been limited, I utilize ideas from gothic studies, which has frankly been more thoughtful in attempting to make connections between America’s fraught racial history and horror texts. Leslie Fiedler’s classic *Love and Death in the American Novel* as well as some of the studies it inspired, namely those from Teresa Goddu and Justin Edwards, as well as the collections *The


Gothic Other: Racial and Other Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination and American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative are essential to the theoretical framework that undergirds my discussion of Corman’s Poe adaptations. The horror film locates its origins in gothic storytelling that predates the advent of the cinema and gothic rhetoric has long infiltrated racial discourses in America. It is only natural then that the gothic becomes a fundamental aspect of a discussion that situates black spectators at its center.

While this project focuses on reception, it does not include a thorough interrogation of or engagement with much of spectatorship and apparatus theory in part because so much of that scholarship, which remains bound by psychoanalysis, implicitly assumes a white spectator or tends to focus on the earlier half of the twentieth century. By concentrating on the latter half, my impulse is to think through what we know about how horror texts circulated within larger systems of meaning and shifting industrial contexts. I would not go as far as Janet Staiger has in her claim that “contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our

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everyday lives."\(^{21}\) I would, however, suggest that text and context cannot be usefully separated and that positioning black spectators as the primary focus affords us the opportunity to think through horror texts and their contexts in less conventional terms.

Where necessary, I draw upon historical scholarship related to civil rights or other aspects of black diasporic experience in order to contextualize the circumstances in which black audiences have encountered horror cinema. Although some of the conclusions drawn here are speculative, they assume that informed analysis can be performed based on historical records and by observing larger patterns of moviegoing. Those interested in film reception, in the horror film, and in black studies are perhaps most likely to take interest in the discussions that follow, but it is my hope that some of the ideas considered will be of use to those interested in rights discourse and film history more broadly construed as well.

Undead Carnival: Monsters, Magic, and Make Believe in

Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*

**Horror and the Primal Screen**

Some of my earliest memories are of horror. One such memory includes me running away from the television in fear the first time I saw Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (1983). That I was only three years old at the time has not stopped my family from teasing me about the incident incessantly. I get only slightly less grief for my panicked response to the appearance of Jabba the Hutt when my sister took me to see *Return of the Jedi* that same year. Sadly, I reacted this way not only to scary visual images but also to frightening sounds: I can distinctly recall the difficulty of trying to fall asleep if the eerie theme music of *The Twilight Zone* was playing in the next room. For the sake of my own fragile pride, I will withhold the details of the reaction I had to *Jaws 3-D* save that I did not learn how to swim in the ocean until I was eight years old despite or perhaps because I lived just blocks away from the beach.

While all of these incidents indicate that I was an excitable child, they also suggest that horror was a fundamental part of my film spectatorship from the very beginning. For me, becoming a film spectator demanded becoming a beholder of horror, however representational it may have been. I doubt that I was alone. Exposure to filmic images intended for a much older audience, often via cable television, seems to have been

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22 Rod Serling’s classic science fiction-horror television show ran in syndication on CBS through the early eighties. See Peter Wolfe, *In the Zone: The Twilight World of Rod Serling* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997).
an inescapable rite of passage for many of us in the MTV generation. I was also
diagnosed as hyperactive at a very early age and my parents, both of whom worked
fulltime, quickly discovered that the small screen was one of the cheapest and easiest
ways to placate a restless child. If my memory of childhood exposure to what Noel
Carroll has called “art-horror” should appear too individuated or simply the result of
neglectful care-giving, I would add that mine was among the first generations of children
for whom home video and an abundance of cable stations were an everyday aspect of our
formative years.

Scrambling to find an unsupervised space where we could seek out
the spectatorial pleasures and dangers of adults was a ritual that began when we were
very young and that grew only more sophisticated as we reached adolescence. The sheer
proliferation of screen images and time spent in front of those images ensured that I
would eventually be confronted by something for which I was unprepared.

Yet, Jackson’s *Thriller* offered a unique set of contradictions and challenges for
me, and I imagine, other young, black spectators. It was on the one hand an epic piece of
pop art marked by its high production values, feature film-style narration, elaborate dance
sequence, and of course the magnetic, even magical presence of its star. At the same
time, the destabilizing of Jackson’s own black bodily integrity was what provided the
video with its narrative structure, transforming him first into a ravenous werewolf, then

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23 Carroll defines emotions associated with “art-horror” as based on the assumption of the
respective audience member identifying with the emotional state of the fictional
characters threatened by the story’s monster. Essential to this framework for Carroll is
that the monster be regarded as simultaneously “threatening and impure,” thus prompting
both fear and disgust. Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the
Heart* (NY: Routledge, 1990), 27-28. For more on the rise of cable television in the late-
seventies and early eighties, see Chapter 9, “Cablemania (1980-1984)” in Patrick R.
Press, 2008).
into a dancing zombie, and finally into a mysterious, yellow-eyed trickster. To see
*Thriller* on these terms was to bear witness to a black body mutated and reconstructed
with all the sublimity of Dr. Frankenstein’s monster. Of course Jackson would continue
throughout his career to alter his “real” body with such frequency and to such a radical
degree – including changes in skin tone that were not entirely within his control – that his
flesh did become, at least for some, truly monstrous. Many of Jackson’s album titles now
read, posthumously, like knowing winks at the claims made upon his endlessly signifying
frame: *Off the Wall, Thriller, Bad, Dangerous.* His body was at different moments all of
these things and more. Given, however, his conscious and deliberate manipulation of
both his body and public persona, not to mention his explicit claims of authorship over
his work, we are prompted to wonder if Jackson was not playing Dr. Frankenstein to his
own monstrous self, a mad scientist or sorcerer casting a very elaborate spell.

In her comparative reading of Shelley’s Frankenstein myth and Jonathan
Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs*, Judith Halberstam locates much of the crisis posed by the
gothic monster within the excesses of its skin: “Skin houses the body and it is figured in
Gothic as the ultimate boundary, the material that divides the inside from the outside.”

Jackson’s skin during the latter half of his career was simultaneously a problem and point
of intrigue: it became too light, too surgically enhanced, too inconsistent, and perhaps
most threateningly, too much like a mask that was hiding *the real Michael*. As Susan Fast
has argued, the instability surrounding Jackson’s body is perhaps best attributed to its
disruption of readily-accessible identity markers, a disruption that pleaded for
reconciliation: “Please be black, Michael, or white, or gay or straight, father or mother,

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24 Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*
father to children, not a child yourself, so we at least know how to direct our liberal
(in)tolerance. And try not to confuse all the codes simultaneously.25 This semiotic
incoherence – particularly after the drastic change in his appearance that accompanied the
release of the Bad album in 1987 – was clearly foreshadowed by the transformations he
undergoes in Thriller. And while I have no desire to speculate about his personal
psychology, the fact that he almost obsessively revisited the theme of metamorphosis in
later videos suggests that he did learn something significant about the body’s capacity for
change after having it so dramatically refashioned on screen. Victoria Johnson claims
about this obsession that his body became a “malleable, newly ‘rewritten’ text”
functioning “as a site of mediation between the rational and the supernatural.”26

The prospect of such somatic fluidity proved both horrifying and spellbinding for
me when I first tried to watch Thriller, consequently making my primary encounter with
Jackson’s horror show a ritual of interpellation wherein the ambivalences of film
spectatorship were first realized. In this chapter, I consider more carefully my initial
reaction to the video as well as the processes through which that fear was then
incorporated into a more fluid matrix of pleasure. By narrating this experience, I hope to
better understand two things: 1.) how racial subjectivity inescapably becomes a part of
horror film spectatorship 2.) just what precisely is at stake in such “negotiated readings.”
Stuart Hall’s reception theory seems especially appropriate here first, because it was
conceived with television in mind and second, because it speaks to the unpredictability of
imaginative exegesis inherent in early childhood spectatorship. If Hall is correct and

25 Susan Fast, “Difference That Exceeded Understanding: Remembering Michael Jackson
26 Victoria Johnson, “The Politics of Morphing: Michael Jackson as Science Fiction
those who are already embedded in dominant sign systems can still negotiate alternative and oppositional readings to cultural texts, then there are even greater possibilities for children who are still learning how to read the signs. The question then becomes: Just what exactly did I and perhaps other young black spectators see, hear, and feel upon bearing witness to Jackson’s monstrous metamorphoses in Thriller? The answer is of course as varied as black subjectivity itself has proven to be, but as Hall suggests, “Polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism.”27 That is to say, we should not mistake the challenge of trying to duplicate a specific spectator’s experience for an absolute boundlessness of interpretation or as an insurmountable obstacle to analysis. Thriller was “encoded” by its own negotiation with the fraught racial politics inherent to the horror genre along with a host of other forces that informed its construction, what Hall refers to as the “technical infrastructure, relations of production, and frameworks of knowledge” surrounding the text.28 These forces can be identified and analyzed to at least some degree and such analysis contextualizes otherwise subjective and admittedly unreliable recollections like my own. Ultimately, I read Thriller as a postmodern pastiche that, through its invocation of carnivalesque sensibilities, critiques the gothic horror trope of monstrous bodily transformation as well as gothic conceptions of black masculine corporeality.

28 Ibid, 94.
Rituals of Horrific Interpellation

My extreme initial reaction to *Thriller* is laughable to those who know me and especially to those aware of my current film tastes, but it also points to a time when I had only the most rudimentary resources at my disposal for dealing with horror. I was scared in a way that stymied my ability to articulate not only the precise nature of my fear, but really anything at all. Even if I had had more than a toddler's vocabulary at my disposal, a precise articulation of my fear would likely have remained elusive. The reduction or erasure of sophisticated expression that horror performs is perhaps most akin to the often cryptic, fragmentary speech of those just coming into language, or back into it. In this way, the immediate source of terror represented by Jackson's video – or more likely by the delineation of Jackson's body in violent transformation – gave way to horror: to the threat of a more existential erasure of self-meaning that, humorous as it may be in retrospect, would serve as a vital initiation. It was as if the lyrics at the end of the song's first verse were personally directed at me: "As horror looks you right between the eyes/you're paralyzed." Of course that I was able to act, to run from the room, meant that I was not really "paralyzed." But was this necessarily the kind of paralysis to which the song referred? Was horror's real threat not that of physical immobilization but rather that it might reveal language's inadequacy to speak back to one's fear? The lyrics that precede

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29 My thinking here is informed by Elaine Scarry's claims about the effect of pain on language: "Physical pain is not only itself resistant to language but also actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans. To hear those cries is to witness the shattering of language. Conversely, to be present when the person in pain rediscovers speech and so regains his powers of self-objectification is almost to be present at the birth, or rebirth, of language." See *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), 172.
those mentioned above seem to suggest as much: "You start to scream/But terror takes
the sound before you make it." This question of the limits of language inevitably raises
another: Are the kinds of utterances that terror and horror prompt — screams, cries, wails,
gasps, flight, or contrarily, speechlessness, whimpering, catatonia, freezing, fainting —
perhaps the truest, or even most successful responses? That is certainly possible bearing
in mind that even these forms of speech, unless properly coded, might fail to articulate
one's fear in a way that is readable to others. Reflecting back on myself as a young child
experiencing the full weight of fearful emotions for what may have been the first time, I
cannot help but wonder if part of what made the experience so frightening was this lack
of idiomatic tools. If I could not speak my horror to those charged with my care in a
meaningful way, then that horror would be mine to keep and, subsequently, something
from which I could never entirely part.

Presuming, as I probably did at the time, that language would allow me to safely
encapsulate my horror was in itself fantastic and likely based on the faulty perception that
adults claimed no such ownership over their fears, much less took pleasure in them. As I
would soon discover, a neat separation from horror was neither possible nor was it
necessarily desirable as a spectator. Repeatedly watching the video, especially once it
began to play on MTV in abbreviated form, made the experience easier and eventually
even fun. To be clear though, I am not suggesting that I became desensitized to the
horrific images, that they became less dangerous for me through familiarity. This brand
of self-administered immersion therapy so common in both scholarly and popular
accounts of youth horror fandom seems, at best, an insufficient way to describe how
horror is integrated into subjectivity and, at worst, an all too convenient psychic
recuperation that reinscribes violent individuation as the only legitimate means of confronting those haunted forces within the self.\(^30\) Bombarding oneself with horror serves as a poor means of inoculation against it; that process is more likely to result in violence against the horrific object than in truly transcending one’s fear. In other words, killing the monster does not actually signal the end of horror so much as a fleeting and ultimately failed attempt at repression.\(^31\)

More important for me than vaccinating myself against whatever forces might have made \textit{Thriller} scary was learning horror’s language. I needed to learn how to read horror’s core rhetorical cues using an immediately accessible vocabulary, which at that age was largely one of make believe. In its simplicity, “make believe” conveys the powerful influence that imagination has in constituting subjectivity and should not therefore be thought of as in opposition to how we interpret the textual world, that is, as a mode of interpretation \textit{cured} by other, ostensibly more mature, logical hermeneutics. In this case, using the powers of make believe meant making my own sense of what was happening to Jackson’s body in the video. Mimicry naturally assisted in that task: I was


\(^{31}\) Inoculation seems like a particularly ineffective solution to the problems horror poses if we consider the psychic and physical damage wrought by first hand confrontations with it, such as with combat soldiers who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Given that combat training, much of which includes deliberate, repeated, and violent exposure to trauma (a process intended to encourage mastery), often still fails to prepare many soldiers for what they experience, something other than desensitization must be at work for those who survive horror with their psyches relatively intact. My intention is not to compare the experience of the war-ravaged soldier to the child spectator, but rather to point toward the former as an instance that clearly challenges many of our assumptions about how people actually deal with horror. Having borne witness to a given instance of horror may, in some basic way, offer a kind of preparation for future horrors, but the notion that immersion facilitates some kind of psychic invincibility denies both the complexity and versatility of the ways in which those, on either side, make sense of their experiences.
soon just as eager as anyone else to begin imitating haphazardly the movements of the funky zombies and mumbling along with Vincent Price’s rap. My parents were also insistent that I watch the behind the scenes “making of” documentary that featured director John Landis and special effects artist Rick Baker as they demonstrated the technical processes responsible for the highly affecting movie magic. While I am sure that they felt a common parental need to assuage their child’s fear, race and class may also have played a significant role in how my parents chose to mediate (or not) my make-believe.

Rather than being treated as an “innocent” that needed protection from the screen’s corrupting influence, it was far more common for my parents to insist upon my gaining some understanding of what I saw. They seemed acutely aware that despite always leaving me in the hands of capable and responsible caregivers, they simply would not be able to police everything that I watched, nor was it necessarily expected for them to do so in my community. Situated in the one of the only predominantly black sections of a small South Jersey beach town, most parents in my neighborhood felt that there were far more profound evils awaiting us kids than whatever may have been coming through the television screen. Although, it is worth clarifying that my parents did remain carefully attuned to the racial politics of what my siblings and I watched and encouraged us to exhibit the same kind of cynical awareness. So, while we were by no means allowed free reign to watch whatever we wanted, distinguishing what was appropriate viewing seemed largely a matter of the individual child’s temperament and whether or not his or her presence was going to impede upon the grown-ups own viewing plans. It was, for

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example, a given that the kids forfeited their TV privileges if the babysitter’s “stories” were on.

Black parents’ rejection of “the cult of the child”33 in my neighborhood was probably both a recognition of and preparation for the real dangers facing their children in a mostly white area with a seasonal tourist economy. While not plagued by the violence of inner city Philadelphia – of which there was always some scandalizing report on the local news – my little seaside hamlet did suffer from deeply ingrained, systemic racism, articulated primarily via white privilege, that was no less devastating for all its elusiveness. It is perhaps not so surprising then that my parents, and those of my friends, mobilized their defensive energies in other directions than the screen, such as keeping us from being racially profiled at local stores or thrown off of the beach because we could not afford beach tags. While analyzing Jackson’s own tenuous appropriation of childhood iconography, Tavia Nyong’o affirms this same skepticism in many black communities about the notion of childhood innocence:

black popular culture, with its pained awareness that the privileges of childhood are unequally distributed, has long held an ambivalent stance toward this dominant culture of the child. We can be as sentimental as anyone else about imagined childhood purity, but our culture also contains great reservoirs of skepticism...And since one of the first and hardest lessons black children learn is that innocence is not necessarily a defense, this knowingness is often embraced as an unsentimental education.34

When I think back on my early looks at *Thriller* and a host of other horror texts, I can also see the beginnings of precisely such an “unsentimental education,” one that encouraged the use of my imagination in interpreting cultural texts while never being negligent about their potentially dangerous influence.

However instrumental my parents may have been in helping me to deal the onslaught of media that I was encountering, actually learning how to embrace *Thriller* was a quite intimate affair. The song’s own aesthetic power no doubt played an important role in my own transformation from a petrified child left alone with his horror toward a willing fellowship in a legion of the dancing undead. “Thriller” is an instantly danceable piece of pop soul that showcases deliberate craftsmanship and charismatic performances. Its specific compositional features are perhaps easy to overlook because the video so successfully wedded music and visuals, but even as a standalone composition, without its famous visuals, the song is compelling.

First, macabre imagery and sexual innuendo permeate the lyric to an extent that even a very young listener could sense, although the various double-entendres probably went unnoticed: “This is thriller, thriller-night, ‘cause I can thrill you more/than any ghost would ever dare try.” This quasi-threatening voice articulated during the chorus appears throughout the song and firmly situates a masculine speaker talking to his feminine love interest as they watch a horror film at home. This narration is also in keeping with what Linda Williams describes as a patriarchal pattern of spectatorship, one that demands the woman avert her gaze from potentially dangerous images while her male counterpart affirmatively fixes and controls his. According to Williams, this pattern
mimics the narrative logic of many horror films that punish women who demonstrate an active gaze and therefore active sexual desire.  

Narrative point of view notwithstanding, a possibly richer aspect of the aforementioned lyric is that it presents a recreational engagement with horror as the precursor to sex, which should be distinguished from a more familiar sublimation of violence for sex. The narrator does not seem to be asking that horror become the couple’s sole erotic currency, only that it function as a special type of foreplay. In this escalating trajectory, one kind of “thrill” is clearly expected to lead to others, even if just what kind of sex being horrified might facilitate remains unspoken. Still, one need not fully understand the lyrics (as I surely did not at the time) to understand their sexual quality. The evocative and at times unnerving sensuality always present in Jackson’s delivery is difficult to mask and would have remained perceptible even if he only offered his signature hoots and hollers. Kobena Mercer, in what it is still the most thorough and astute analysis of the song and video, draws upon the work of Roland Barthes and similarly claims about the above double-entendre that it is “the ‘grain’ of Jackson’s voice that expresses and plays with [the] sexual sub-text and it is this dimension that transgresses the denotation of the lyrics and escapes analytic reduction.” With this in mind, “Thriller” becomes as much about sex as horror and, in fact, inextricably links the two. It summons the rhetoric of horror into the soul music soundscape and, consequently, heightens the intensity of both realms by enlivening soul with horror and making horror

35 See Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks” in The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.
sexually soulful. Jackson's voice is not, however, the only one featured. During the famous climax, his high-pitched, assonance-dominated vamping is intermingled with Vincent Price's deep-voiced, consonance-driven enunciation, creating a tension that is itself thrilling. While Mercer reads this juxtaposition of Jackson's soul-style vocals and Price's gothic rap as a part of the song's larger move toward parody, the mix of seemingly disparate elements might be more accurately described as pastiche.\footnote{Ibid.}

Descriptive precision matters here because parody fails to sufficiently capture the song's aesthetic success and suggests a critical distance not affected by Jackson as performer. We should consider that "Thriller" was meant to work, to at least some degree, as a serious piece of music if Jackson was ever to perform the title track of his album alongside others like "Billie Jean" and "Beat It." Even with all its deliberate self-referentiality and camp inflections, the song still avoids slippage into novelty the likes of Bobby Pickett's "Monster Mash" and retains a convincing albeit mediated sense of earnestness.\footnote{B. Lee Cooper and Wayne S. Haney situate Pickett's highly successful song as one among many popular recordings that adapt monsters to musical imagery. While they are right to assert that the appearance of horror iconography in rock is under-examined by researchers, there is no discussion of heavy metal and its various offshoots (where horror images thrive) in their study either. See "Horror Films," \textit{Rock Music in Popular Culture II: More Rock 'N' Roll Resources}. NY: Harrington Press, 1997.} I should also confess that Price's presence did not play with particular irony for me when I heard the song as a child, nor does it now; it simply seems like a natural part of the song's aural texture. "Natural" of course demands some qualification in this context, signaling less the traces of organic composition and instead referring to an intuited affinity between Price's gothic rap and Jackson's soul singing.
Both the rhetoric of gothic horror that Price's presence symbolizes and the black expressive traditions that Jackson invokes are concerned with narrating subjectivities that if not in and of themselves horrific, are indeed informed by confrontations with abjection. Julia Kristeva has famously described the horror of the abject as "something from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object...what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."\(^{39}\) That African Americans have themselves often been situated as abject Others in relation to the larger body politic takes no great leap of understanding, but so too has that population (not unlike the victims of the horror film) often been violently confronted by the evidence of their own abjection. Thus, the "naturalness" of Jackson and Price's vocal miscegenation emanates from the common aspiration that many gothic horror narratives and much of black soul music share: to voice violently embodied subjectivity as it has been constituted through its relationship with horror. Perhaps one of the most useful ways of describing "Thriller" then is as a haunted text like a palimpsest whose earlier markings are not only still visible but that are in fact still speaking and competing with the writing on the surface. As the lyrics offer a simultaneous threat and invitation to let "the evil of the thriller" overtake the listener, there is also the uncanny feeling that we have been here before and that all this seemingly playful horror talk signifies something more.

I would argue that reading "Thriller" at the lyrical level calls attention not only to the primary conceit (the young couple watching the horror film) or even its secondary polemic (the sex and horror dialectic) but also to the overarching theme of encirclement.

The imagery created during Jackson's verses describes a world where existential horror is persistently encroaching and resistance is futile. Humorous displacement onto classic cold war monsters such as aliens from outer space or "the thing with forty eyes" effectively arbitrates this horror, but the acute sense of dread in the phrasing is still difficult to ignore: "there's nowhere left to run"; "you're out of time"; "no one is going to save you"; "there ain't no second chance"; "there's no escaping"; "they're out to get you/there's demons closing in on every side." Price's gothic rap only further reinforces this foreboding tone when he speaks of the "grizzly ghouls from every tomb/[that] are closing in to seal your doom." Encirclement is also mapped along a specific, local cartography during Price's section: "creatures crawl in search of blood/to terrorize y'awl's neighborhood." The result is a shift in emphasis away from the randy, insular couple at home to a larger community in potential peril, and given the vernacular diction of "y'awl's neighborhood," we can assume a folk community. How are we to reconcile this seemingly whimsical treatment of horror-as-amusement with the historical reality of terrorism in/of black communities? How is it that the lyrics seem to recognize the power of horror and make a claim upon that horror as a source of pleasure?

Much of black popular music, particularly that which derives from the southern blues tradition, has been shaped by an imminent sense of horror no less prominent than the more hopeful desires for individual and collective spiritual renewal, for autonomy over one's own lived experience and the ability to narrate that experience, and for communal uplift. That the harsh reality of the former condition brings about the need for the latter aspirations is obvious. The development of the blues both as an oppositional ideology and praxis attests to precisely this need to imagine effective responses to the
very tangible dangers of black vulnerability to violence. Adam Gussow has positioned
the blues as an expressive mode formed in the American south during “the nadir” largely
as a means of dealing with the ever-present threat of disciplinary white violence. This
violence was realized most emphatically in the ritual of spectacle lynching and the abject
black corpse that was both its medium and message. Drawing on Kristeva’s work,
Gussow goes on to describe what he calls the “blues subject’s” first encounter with the
devastated black body (either literal or figural) as a “primal lynching scene” that serves as
“unparalleled site of abjection.” While it is not my intention to argue here, as I have
elsewhere, that we might expand Gussow’s notion of the blues subject to include a figure
like Jackson (though he would certainly fit the criteria), it is important to recognize that
“Thriller’s” treatment of horror was not a unique phenomenon. Instead, the song falls
within a larger lineage of black expressive traditions that ask their audiences to
acknowledge horror and even embrace it. Gussow’s emphasis on the abject corpse also
seems relevant to the Thriller video in that Jackson’s dancing zombies directly challenge
abject status, offering their liminal, monstrous, and yet highly kinetic bodies as an
example of an alternative ontology – as part of a carnivalesque spectacle of undead
expression and performance.

40 See Adam Gussow, Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence in the Blues Tradition
(Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 2002, especially Chapter 3,
“Dis(Re)memberment Blues: Narratives of Abjection and Redress” and Chapter 4,
“Guns, Knives, and Buckets of Blood: The Predicament of Blues Culture.”
41 See Mikal J. Gaines, “Spike’s Blues: Re-Imagining Blues Ideology for the Cinema” in
Fight the Power!: The Spike Lee Reader, ed. Janice D. Hamlet and Robin Means-
Coleman (NY: Peter Lang, 2009), 147-170.
Pastiche and Black [Post]modernism

The earlier question still remains: Is this blend of black soul music and the rhetoric of gothic horror best characterized as parody or pastiche? In his oft-cited essay that connects postmodern expressivity to the more reductive discursive tendencies of global free market capitalism, Fredric Jameson distinguishes between pastiche and, in his view, the more politically potent form parody:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, \textit{the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language} [my emphasis]. But it is neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs.\footnote{Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" in \textit{Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of late Capitalism} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005; 1991), 17.}

As richly polemical as Jameson's critique of pastiche is, it is not without certain difficulties. To begin with, his definition relies on a narrative of historical digression in which the postmodern proliferation of meaning has irrevocably undermined parody's necessity. How after all could a parody successfully attack its chosen target in a world in which that target no longer has a definitive message? Pastiche for Jameson then becomes "that strange new thing" that substitutes for \textit{true} parody once the latter has lost its "vocation."\footnote{Ibid.}

If this genealogy does not feel entirely convincing, it is because Jameson, on the one hand, does not sell pastiche as a uniquely postmodern phenomenon, and, on the other, that he seems to ignore the possibility of pastiche and parody existing side-by-side.
He also suggests that fundamental stylistic purity is possible in the first place, that the peculiarity, uniqueness, or idiosyncrasy of the style being imitated is not itself the product of a conscious and unconscious borrowing of representational traditions, in short, its own form of pastiche. One is prompted to question if there really is anything particularly postmodern about pastiche at all, especially in non-white expressive modes where deliberate and critical engagement with the past is expected if not demanded by both the performer and anticipated audience. In her discussion of Jackson's performances as what she calls “Black modernisms,” Michele Wallace suggests that there is little distinction between postmodernism’s alleged decentering of meaning and the historical reality of black subjectivity:

The past for Afro-American culture, particularly that oral ‘tradition’ (which includes jokes, stories, toasts, black music from spirituals to funk, and black English) pursued by the black masses has been precisely a postmodern one inevitably inscribing (and inscribed by) our absence from history, the dead-end meaningfulness of the signifiers, ‘equality’, ‘freedom’, and ‘justice’, and our chronic invisibility to the drama of Western civilization and European high culture.44

It would seem safe to say that there are likely some aspects of the postmodern condition that even African American culture could not have anticipated, but it is also clear that much of what might be deemed postmodern has been part of black expression for quite some time. The greatest irony in Jameson’s claims about pastiche is that his acute and justifiable frustration with late capitalism prevents him from performing precisely the kind of dialogical reading of pastiche that he calls for in The Political Unconscious, one that would recognize how a figure like Jackson pieces together a dynamic (although

perhaps not revolutionary) individual utterance, or parole, within the larger, dominant discourse, or langue.45

We can say with some confidence that postmodern expression does prefer and even thrives on pastiche above parody even if there has not been a complete subsuming of one by the other. I am admittedly playing the familiar postmodernist game here by challenging Jameson on the very notion of originality, but not for the purpose of reducing him to the crotchety old man who yells at the postmodern kids for cutting across his immaculately manicured, modernist lawn. Instead, I would simply like to suggest that if it is possible that his distinction between the two forms is based on an uncertain presumption about the originality of style and a faulty historical account of pastiche’s popular use, then parody is perhaps no more inherently capable of subversion than pastiche. Even more intriguingly, pastiche may be as capable of subversive signification as parody, which certainly leaves open the possibility that neither is, has been, or ever could be subversive at all.

In fact, there is little historical evidence to suggest that using any particular form guarantees a product that definitively disrupts dominant representations. And assuming that such a discursive act is even possible, the product would still need to be distributed, exhibited, and consumed in such a way so as to maintain its initial intention. As Christopher Sieving has argued about black-themed cinema of the 1960s, the overwhelming desire to create counter-images that challenge an inheritance of crude and

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45 Jameson argues about the dialectical approach in “On Interpretation”: “This is the framework in which the reconstruction of so-called popular cultures must properly take place – most notably, from the fragments of essentially peasant cultures: folk songs, fairy tales, popular festivals, occult or oppositional systems of belief such as magic or witchcraft.” See The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 85-86.
hurtful stereotypes about blackness has often proven to be a suffocating concern for those interested in alternative visions. Caught between a misguided search for “authentic” or “positive” images of African American life and the need to actually draw black audiences to theaters, many of the most aesthetically and thematically oppositional films of the period failed to successfully contest the limited black representation in the mainstream because not enough people saw them and many who did were still unsatisfied. Yet even films like Michael Roemer’s Nothing But a Man (1964) or Shirley Clarke’s The Cool World (1964), both of which attempted to examine closely the lives of black people, were deeply informed by Italian neo-realist aesthetics and therefore evidenced the potential power of pastiche.

The most unique aspects of Jackson’s own performative style – his vocal delivery and bodily movement – also serve as a case in point. These features were as much patchworks of his forbearers James Brown, Jackie Wilson, and Fred Astaire (to name just a few) as they were the products of his innate talent. The same could be said for Brown whose “original” style was a conscious mutation and evolution of artists he worked with as a young performer such as Little Richard and Ray Charles. (This lineage extends at least as far back into the diaspora as it does outward to incorporate other expressive traditions.) The degree to which these performers were aware of their influences and deliberately sought to both incorporate and modify those influences challenges Jameson’s notion of “neutral mimicry.” Pastiche never fully escapes the political and historical baggage of the styles it borrows from no matter how thoughtlessly compiled. In this case,

“Thriller” could not simply take elements from the American horror film without dealing, perhaps unsatisfactorily, with the genre’s notorious gothicization of race or the heavily gendered politics surrounding horror spectatorship. Neither could the song dig into the well of black soul music – with its burdened outcries of pleasure and pain – without recalling the turbulent history to which the music was simultaneously responding and helping to shape.

Perhaps more disturbing is the possibility that the idiosyncrasies of Jackson’s on-stage style during the latter part of his career, such as the percussive (nearly sadomasochistic) use of his body while dancing, his much parodied crotch grab, or even his signature scream, could all be assertive gestures informed by his traumatic childhood, a way of asserting a kind of bodily mastery for which he continually struggled off-stage. Simply put, if Jackson has often served as an embodiment of unique stylistic expression, than that expression is undoubtedly a pastiche, one that combines both his own distressed past and an informed understanding of the expressive traditions in which he was steeped. These traditions obviously included soul and funk, but also older and more widely adaptable modalities such as the blues. There is still quite a difference, however, between Jackson’s own stylistic pastiche and Weird Al Yankovic’s multiple parodies of that pastiche. If anything, the prominence of pastiche in late-capitalism has expedited the speed at which pastiche becomes parody so that Jackson’s videos for “Beat It” (1982) or “Bad” (1987) exist alongside Yankovic’s “Eat It” (1984) and “Fat” (1988), and subsequently compete for dominant meaning. The two imitative forms remain separated by parody’s intent to implode that which it imitates while “Thriller” seems more interested in a purposefully incomplete synergy of generic elements.
So, while Jameson’s suspicion of the unknowing and/or unthinking use of past representational modes and aesthetic codes should be heeded, the mode of pastiche used in *Thriller* is far too complex to be so easily dismissed. I am inclined to consider the more progressive influence of the postmodern on the parodic. In so doing, I am casting my lot with scholars such as Linda Hutcheon and Henry Louis Gates who have also recognized something useful in the postmodern inclination toward intertextuality. Like Jameson, Hutcheon’s argument is grounded in distinction: she seeks to differentiate between “apolitical” pastiche and “postmodern” parody claiming that postmodern art can “[use] parody and irony to engage the history of art and the memory of the viewer in a re-evaluation of aesthetic forms and contents through a reconsideration of their usually unacknowledged politics of representation.”

In other words, postmodern parody is capable of revealing the politics that shape representational traditions and the historical constructedness of those traditions as traditions. While she therefore shares Jameson’s apprehension of pastiche’s “nostalgic, neoconservative recovery of past meaning,” Hutcheon believes that there is a postmodern parodic that can undermine such impulses. Still, her objection to “the relegation of the postmodern parodic to the ahistorical and empty realm of pastiche” reveals the extent to which the argument is an overdetermined one. Is it possible to “wear a linguistic mask” and signify something other than “dead speech”? Indeed, can pastiche be something more than “neutral”?

Henry Louis Gates has suggested an affirmative answer to these questions in his well-known and often hotly contested study of the African American “signifyin(g)”

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48 Ibid, 94.  
49 Ibid.
tradition. Gates positions the motivated and unmotivated ways that black authors "riff on" or revise the work of other authors with whom they feel a literary kinship (and competition with) as one of the primary modes of African American literary signification. He, like Jameson and Hutcheon, distinguishes between pastiche and parody, but with a decidedly more positive view:

Pastiche only renders explicit that which any literary history implies: that tradition is the process of formal revision. Pastiche is literary history naming itself, pronouncing its surface content to be the displaced content of intertextual relations themselves, the announcement of ostensibly concealed revision. Pastiche is an act of literary "Naming"; parody is an act of "Calling out of one’s name."50

Despite Gates’ often-problematic appropriation of European poststructuralism into his theory of African American literature, his claims about pastiche’s power are still useful for examining Jackson’s text(s).51

Jackson stitches together a range of signifying traditions that ultimately make both the song and video versions of his text richer than they might appear upon first glance. Accordingly, I would argue that Jackson’s song and, to a much greater extent, the accompanying video can be read in the following ways: 1.) as a postmodern pastiche that

51 For more on some of the critiques leveled at Gates’ work see the heated exchange in the Winter 1987 edition of New Literary History between Gates, Joyce A. Joyce, and Houston Baker. See also Joyce’s retrospective account of the earlier exchange in her article, “A Tinker’s Damn: Henry Louis Gates Jr. and The Signifying Monkey Twenty Years Later,” Callaloo 31, no. 2 (2008): 370-380. Dale Peterson has also offered a compelling account of the intersection between African American critical theory and Bakhtinian dialogical analysis claiming: “Literature itself, in cultural-historical terms, was introduced as a European institution that was both alien and central as an exclusionary norm of articulate identity. Under these circumstances, Russian and African American literary texts tend toward formal anomaly and ‘hidden polemic.’ In both communities, literature texts became theaters of enactment for self-conscious and ‘double-voiced’ utterances pitched against a presumed literacy. “Response and Call: The African American Dialogue with Bakhtin,” American Literature 65, no. 4 (1993): 771.
“names’’ horror and, more precisely, one that signifies upon the classic gothic horror
trope of hidden monstrosity 2.) as a neo-gothic text that challenges dominant
representations (especially masculine ones) that equate somatic blackness with bestial,
even elemental malevolence 3.) as a carnivalesque celebration that disrupts the dominant
symbolic order by blurring the boundary between animate and inanimate bodies and 4.)
as an embrace of abjection that situates Jackson within a continuum of black expressive
traditions, namely the blues. Rather than simply being taken over or “possessed” by a
hidden “beast within” during his transformation into a werewolf and a zombie, Jackson is
able to amplify the tension between polarities of violent repulsion and morbid attraction
always inherent in the construction of the gothic monster. His body exercises a kind of
ontological fluidity through which he is able to move back and forth between monstrous
and non-monstrous forms seemingly at will. If the slippage into these different bodies can
be read as a kind of masking, then we are witness to a mode of speech abided with
meaning and by no means “dead” as Jameson might have it.

Carnival Masks, Mimicry, and Meta-textuality

Gates seems to allow for a less condemning view of pastiche than either Jameson
or Hutcheon largely because he ascribes greater significance to the role that masking of
various sorts has played and does play in black diasporic expressive traditions as well as
in black survivance more generally. A modicum of deception and/or disguise has long
been a part of performing blackness in America. The image of Du Bois’ “veil” as well as
the haunted legacy of blackface (by both black and white performers) naturally comes to
mind.\textsuperscript{52} Still, such performative masks cannot and should not be separated from the use of literal masks in many diasporic rituals and ceremonies. It is possible in fact that Jackson’s masking in \textit{Thriller} is informed by older practices that make a clear distinction between the different forms difficult to discern. Take for instance, anthropologist John Picton’s account of one of the masquerade rituals conducted the Ebira people of Nigeria. During one part of the ritual, masked performers enter the houses of men belonging to the lineage of the mask’s owner, upon which food and drink are offered. At this time, the main performer may remove his mask. Picton observes, however, that:

\begin{quote}
Although the performer will remove the mask…his followers will continue to call him by the name of the mask. There is no sense of a dislocated personality: he is not possessed; but he is no longer himself. The removal of the mask is merely a temporary strategy, and it will soon be replaced as they prepare to move on. In any case, the performance is not interrupted by the removal of the mask.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

While these observations are only based on a single case study, they suggest that creating a strict binary between performer and his or her masked persona is not necessarily the goal of masquerading in some diasporic rituals. We cannot assume that one hopes to have his or her identity completely subsumed or supplanted by that of the mask. Alternatively, the aim could be to create a hybrid image that reflects both the wearer and the mask simultaneously. This appears to be the case in the Ebira ritual in which the donning of a mask simply reveals another facet of the wearer’s own subjectivity as opposed to signaling its dislocation, and it appears to be the case in Jackson’s performance as well.

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Jackson's masquerade is, however, facilitated by the cinematic apparatus (special effects, camera placement, editing, etc.) rather than by a traditional mask, thus further distinguishing it from the ritual Picton describes. Be that as it may, there remains some continuity between wider diasporic conceptions of masking and what happens in *Thriller*. The masks that Jackson puts on in the course of the video's action never do the work of fully effacing his image; that image persists albeit superimposed with other more threatening ones. In this sense, Jackson's deliberate act of wearing monstrous masks seems especially peculiar. Of all the masks Jackson could have chosen to wear at this moment in his career, why that of the werewolf and the zombie? What associations do these figures conjure up and, even more significantly, what does it mean for Jackson to have masked himself through those associations? We should leave room for the possibility that while cracking MTV's color line Jackson took what might have easily become another reductive and exploitative bit of “shuckin' and jivin’” and, instead, strategically deployed several masks to turn *Thriller* into something considerably stranger and less recoupable: a kind of *undead carnival*.

While Gates does not explicitly consider it, carnival can be considered one of the most powerful modes of “signifyin(g)” because it prioritizes collective participation in favor of acts of individual will. One can perhaps exhibit aspects of the carnivalesque individually, but one cannot truly have a carnival alone. Carnival can then become the signifyin' ritual “of the people” that still allows for the expression individual freedoms. In its spirit of revelry, subversion, inversion, and excess, the carnivalesque demands that its participants try on linguistic and other masks in order to intensify and explode the liminal space between the often-grotesque surfaces of those masks and what hides behind them.
And while carnival's obsession with gaudy exteriority would appear to betray signifyin(g)'s insistence upon indirection and misdirection, carnival's goals extend beyond its orgiastic display. Instead, a utopian aspiration suffuses carnival's desire to upset the status quo. While discussing Mikhail Bahktin's carnivalesque in relation to film and other cultural texts, Robert Stam similarly claims:

The carnivalesque principle abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions. In carnival, all that is marginalized and excluded - the mad, the scandalous, the aleatory - takes over the center in liberating explosion of otherness. The principle of material body - hunger, thirst, defecation, copulation - becomes a positively corrosive force, and festive laughter enjoys a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts.54

To engage in carnivalesque display is to draw attention to the real consequences of systemically imposed structures by willfully upending them, by revealing the arbitrary and yet strictly policed boundaries between the elite and abject, even if such subversion is temporary and partially sanctioned by official figures of authority and state institutions. As Jackson puts on and takes off monstrous masks, particularly during the famed dance sequence, he deploys the carnivalesque to challenge the horror that the gothic tradition normally imposes onto the monstrous body in transition. He instead inhabits an image of a body imbued with supernatural kinesis, protean malleability, and a trickster's power.

Before moving immediately onto a close analysis of the video, however, I would like to return briefly to the music. Jackson and Price's voices are coupled with horror film sound cues (creaking doors, a howling wolf), driving drums, a thumping bass line, funky rhythm guitar, synthesized horns, organ (during the bridge), and perfectly harmonized

back-up vocals. I draw attention to these musical details not because *Thriller* is necessarily in need of validation. If there is after all one Michael Jackson record likely to still be listened to a hundred years from now it’s *Thriller*. But I do think it important to consider some of the other forces that swayed my youthful horror spectatorship. As it turns out, my horror was not the only thing at stake nor was the act of looking the only sensory operation with which I had to contend. Hearing was just as important if not more so than sight and by that I mean something beyond the kind of hearing I might have done while watching a more straightforward, feature length horror film. Whereas I would typically have been expected to process visual images in conjunction with an accompanying score that told me how to feel about those images, *Thriller*’s postmodern pastiche set grotesque imagery incongruously against music that made me want to dance.

To continue to run away from the screen would have also required denying the way the song prompted some of my first impulses toward deliberate rhythmic movement; the sound of *Thriller* just seemed to provoke motion. Anyone who has ever seen a very young child try to dance knows that it is one of the most revealing moments of corporeality, not necessarily because the will to move is hampered by limited capacity – as in grasping for an out of reach toy – but because the attempts at movement seem so spastic, incomplete, and full of yearning for mastery. And unlike the desire for mastery that serves a clear function – as in reclaiming a toy or expressing, in words, a need or want, the early urge toward rhythmic movement seems to covet mastery for its own sake. The first time someone feels the urge to dance, however clumsily or offbeat, therefore serves as just as important a formative psychological moment as any other and is perhaps even more significant than most. The vitality of what we might call the “primal dance
scene” becomes only more clear if we consider that the act, especially given the young child’s limited range of mobility, must demand some extraordinary blend of instinct and imagination, mimicry and creativity. Just as with some of our first responses to horror, it is a moment where conscious and unconscious reactions to external stimuli are experienced by the body in a profound way. Both instances also present a similar problem of articulation: an excess of information stifled by insufficient means of expression. In practical terms, this means that I had to process another equally powerful sensory negotiation in conjunction with the horror I experienced while watching Thriller, a negotiation only further tangled by the instability of Jackson’s body in the text.

The mysterious desirability of Jackson, whose on-screen presence has yet to be matched, was also a part of the process by which I was able to conquer, or more accurately, incorporate my fear into pleasure. Watching the Thriller video now, I am struck at how Jackson’s body remains unfixed, transforming back and forth between the then dark-skinned, androgynous, soft-spoken pop star, and the other forms he takes on throughout, namely a werewolf and a zombie, but not only these. Mercer contends that the transformations that Jackson’s diegetic body undergoes resonate with the racial, sexual, gender ambiguities surrounding his real life body at the time of the video’s release. Mercer also considers how the video’s treatment of horror film conventions, performed by filtering Jackson’s star image through the trope of hidden monstrosity, can be read as a subversion of masculine constructions.55 Mercer ultimately reads Thriller as a text in which a rigid horror film framework encapsulates staged disruptions of normality, thus firmly re-establishing hierarchical boundaries. I am less convinced of the

55 Mercer, 40-43.
text’s neat closure; more specifically, I am less convinced that Jackson’s body at the end of the video (both real and imagined) has not been in some way irrevocably altered as a consequence of its revealed fluidity within the text(s). In fact, if we consider the graphic transformations that Jackson’s body experiences during Thriller it should come as little surprise that his image would, for many, become a kind of lived-distortion, a traumatized body capable of traumatizing other vulnerable bodies, namely those of children including both his own and other people’s.

Admittedly, my resistance to a reading of Thriller as closed is subjective in that I find such a reading fails to account for my own simultaneous youthful fear and fascination with Jackson’s appearance. One of the moments that best exemplifies such sublimity was not one of complete transformation but, more interestingly, of Jackson caught in the liminal state between his recognized visage and the werewolf. This transformation comes after a short opening that features Jackson out on a date with his girlfriend, both dressed in stereotypical 1950s costume: he wears a red, white, and yellow varsity jacket and his date is decked out in full hoop skirt and saddle shoes. The young couple find themselves conveniently stranded in the woods after their old school, big-body American car breaks down. In an obvious homage to American International Pictures drive-in classics, particularly I Was a Teenage Werewolf (1957), Jackson tells his date that he’s “not like other guys.” Then, mimicking the feat of revolutionary special effects used in Landis’s own film, An American Werewolf in London (1981), Jackson transforms into a werewolf in a series of real-time close ups. One of earliest of these shots, where Jackson suddenly turns to reveal overlarge fangs and yellow eyes, is particularly arresting because the hideous creature is still, in part, recognizable as
Michael Jackson (Figure 1.1) In fact, I can distinctly remember the relief of tension signaled by his complete transformation. The “big bad wolf” that proceeds to chase the helpless girl through the woods was far too similar to the Warner Bros. cartoon Tasmanian devil to prompt real fear. The earlier image of Jackson while in transition, however, was far more disconcerting because it represented the traumatic transformation of a body the limits of which I thought had been firmly established. He was, at that moment, not so much abject as abjecting. He was still in the process of casting himself out and I was being asked as a spectator not only to see this process be done, but to do it, to make a monster out of Michael even if an unconvincing one.

Figure 1.1 – Abjecting Michael

Expectedly, werewolf-MJ catches his victim and after a series of point of view close-ups between them, there is a cut to a wide shot that reveals the whole bit to be part of a film within a film. Jackson and his date sit “safely” in a crowded theater as the audience cowers and screams at the violence of the werewolf’s attack, which is presented as on-screen for them yet off-screen for us. Given the slasher film’s rise to genre prominence in the late seventies and early eighties, this postmodern reveal presents a telling irony in that what would be the most graphically violent moment of the meta-film is exactly the moment when we are pulled out of it.56 We do not get to see the monster ravage its young victim, but are instead left to imagine that violence. The omission makes sense given that such an explicit display would not have been a representational option in the earlier horror films being parodied. The film audience shown in the video, however, does bear witness to this violence just as a real audience certainly would have during many of the horror films released in close proximity to Thriller. They respond accordingly with frightened expressions, jumps, and screams, although a careful look at their reactions challenges Williams’ strictly gendered pattern of spectatorship: at least some of the men appear to be cowering away from the screen as their female companions smile with pleasure. Part of the pleasure for those women spectators might have

something to do with seeing Jackson’s body become an on-screen spectacle, an object of the camera’s gaze in a manner normally reserved for women.

Landis’ *An American Werewolf in London* is of course filled with explicitly violent displays as well as with the nudity and sex that *Thriller* strategically avoids. Our abrupt exit from the meta-film in the latter text signals an important shift in the horror landscape from radioactive monsters and alien invaders of the late fifties and early sixties to the emphasis on “body horror” that took hold with the improvement of special effects in the 1970s. What it meant to be a horror film spectator changed during this period demanding not necessarily that one bear witness to more violence, but to more frequent displays of body-centered violence that emphasized the grotesque and carnivalesque.57 While William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1974) is perhaps most emblematic example of this shift, the films of emerging auteurs, especially David Cronenberg, John Carpenter, and Ridley Scott, fit solidly into this new “body horror” category as well. Linda Badley has argued about the period that “Horror became a hysterical text or a theater of cruelty specializing in representations of the human anatomy *in extremis* – in disarray or deconstruction, in metamorphosis, invaded or engulfing, in sexual difference, monstrous otherness, or Dionysian ecstasy: the body fantastic.”58 So, while Jackson’s initial transformation into a werewolf might very well have been sufficient for the postwar drive-in set, early eighties horror audiences demanded that the monstrous, “fantastic” body also be visibly unleashed on more “normal,” vulnerable ones, thus opening up the

57 My hesitation in suggesting that horror films became unequivocally more violent during this period than they had been in the past stems from an uncertainty about just how violence in film is defined.
latter to violation. *Thriller*’s self-conscious opening simultaneously recognizes that demand aurally while denying it visually.

Stepping successfully into the larger horror milieu of the early eighties, especially with subversive intentions, demanded a careful awareness of what audiences well versed in this new generic topos would expect. This was also more than just a performative exercise for Jackson who had a deeply ambivalent personal relationship with horror. In addition to the routine physical abuse he suffered at the hands of his father, there were also more singular incidents of psychological trauma: Joe once crawled through Michael’s bedroom window wearing a frightening Halloween mask in order to teach him not to leave his window open at night. The episode left a lasting impression on Michael and informed their relationship afterwards.\(^ {59}\) It might have served as a lesson for his own play with masks. Even more noteworthy is Jackson’s behavior upon the completion of *Thriller*. A practicing Jehovah’s Witness, he was apparently informed that the video promoted demonology and that he would be excommunicated upon its release. This news drove the star into a panic and prompted him to lock himself away in his bedroom at his Encino, California estate.\(^ {60}\) After Landis was able to settle Jackson down, they agreed to go ahead with the video’s release, but only with a disclaimer attached at its preface: “Due to my strong personal convictions, I wish to stress that this film in no way embraces a belief in the occult.” In true postmodern fashion, and perhaps to Jackson’s chagrin, the inclusion of a second disclaimer during the credits directly undermines the first: “All characters in this film are fictitious. Any similarity to actual events or persons, living, dead (or undead) is purely coincidental.” Yet, even as these two opposing disclaimers

\(^ {60}\) Ibid.

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seem to cancel each other out, dismissing Thriller's association with the occult is not so easy. In fact, it was Jackson's own compulsion to publicly declare his faith, and to claim that his songs were examples of divine power speaking through a willing vessel, that threatened to position the video as something other than a neutral, secular text in the first place.

*Thriller's Racial Occultation*

In the first of two 1984 interviews with Robert E. Johnson for *Ebony* magazine, Jackson confessed about his creative process: "I don't really write anything to tell you the honest truth [my emphasis]. I can say 'me' but I don't really think it's from me. I think it's from a much higher source than me."61 His use of the redundant phrase, "honest truth," hints at the degree to which he often appeared to be consciously crafting his controversial public persona. "Honest truth" does after all imply that there were other kinds of truths, perhaps less honest ones, that he might choose to reveal at any given time. Fusing truth with fiction, even during moments of purported transparency, only added to his magical allure. Sentiments like the one above also pulled his religious beliefs into the conversation about how his work could or should be interpreted, and in likening himself to a supernatural vehicle for Godly communication, he called upon the audience to find the spiritual message within his pop, funk, rock, soul, and R&B alchemy. The problem was that if Thriller was indeed the product of some supernatural force speaking

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through him, then it also raised questions about what he truly believed and just whose voice he was supposedly channeling.

Given the erratic behavior that characterized the latter part of his life, it is easy to read his panic at his church’s response as an early sign of mental instability or even religious fanaticism, but was he entirely irrational? Could *Thriller* have really led his audience to suspect that he was a “believer in the occult,” or, more pointedly, in “black magic?” Didn’t the video’s tone make it clear that he was merely playing a game of masquerade, an elaborate kind of Halloween prank? Well, yes and no. The mystery surrounding his private life coupled with his meteoric rise to fame did at least raise the specter of some darker allegiance (perhaps a Faustian bargain?) and his personal faith was already an admission of trust in something beyond ordinary [human] understanding or knowledge. In that sense, Jackson was – like most Christians – a believer in the occult to the extent that he acknowledged the presence of otherworldly forces animating and affecting the events of his life.

His dismay might have also derived from his own somewhat sentimental thinking about the acting process, which he discussed in the second *Ebony* interview with Johnson: “I don’t think acting should be acting... if you’re acting you’re just imitating realism. You should create realism. It should be called believing...I don’t want to see an actor. I want to see a believer...I want to see a person that’s gonna believe the truth...That’s when you move an audience.”

62 This kind of naïve rhetoric about a good actor’s ability to make the audience forget that they are, in reality, watching a *staged* emotional display is to be expected from a consummate performer like Jackson, but the

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histrionic quality of his comments might also help to explain why he took the possibility that \textit{Thriller} could be misconstrued so seriously. For if the video did indeed \textit{move the audience}, then, by his own logic, he must have \textit{believed} in the truth of its occult premise convincingly enough to captivate their imaginations. This is a good story, but the content of the video alone, specifically its pastiche of horror iconography, would likely have given people pause regardless of anything Jackson said or even what he really believed.

When all was said and done (and all disclaimers adequately disclaimed) \textit{Thriller}'s supernatural plot was premised on not one but two different occult mythologies – the werewolf and the zombie – both of which had long-standing racial and ethnic associations in popular culture. And despite his supposed racial ambiguity and androgyny, it seems hard to believe that Jackson, as a black male entertainer, would not have realized that taking on the guise of monsters (even temporarily) might come with lasting consequences for his image.

Although its origin extends back to Greek mythology, the figure of the werewolf in American film and popular culture has been linked most frequently to medieval European folklore and in some instances to Native American shape-shifting legends.\textsuperscript{63} Universal Studios' \textit{The Wolf Man} (1941) starring Lon Chaney Jr. is arguably still the most iconic werewolf story if only because it, along with \textit{Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman} (1943), established many of the subgenre's most recurring conventions: the wolf's origination in a mystical curse (signified by an association with the pentagram), the transmission of the curse through the bite of another werewolf, the wolf's cyclical transformation as subject to the lunar cycle (thus aligning him with the "monstrous

feminine”), his internal torment at the discovery of a “beast within,” his failed attempts at repression, and his tragic death usually at the end of silver bullet. That the werewolf is typically portrayed as a white male is also no coincidence. Chantal Bourgault du Coudray has pointed out that following “the famous case of Freud’s wolfman,” the werewolf in popular culture has remained thoroughly underpinned by psychoanalysis and is usually articulated as a crisis of masculinity threatening to disrupt the patriarchal order. In short, the werewolf symbolizes unrestrained male sexuality as an inherently bestial force without the civilizing influence of the symbolic to keep it in check. Thus, when the monster within does materialize, it triggers a crisis not just of personal subjectivity, but also of social identity and authority for the man – and potentially the society – who has lost control.

The frequency with which white men are positioned as the doomed protagonists in werewolf films suggests that these crises may also signify a figurative slippage into abject blackness, or at least something other than whiteness. Non-white men’s bodies, and black men’s in particular, have so often been portrayed as always-already primitive and animalistic that a black man’s transformation into an untamed beast would not offer the same kind of extreme contrast that makes the werewolf a source of horror for most spectators. This is not to say that the werewolf has not at different historical moments stood in as a metaphor for a host of different sociocultural concerns or as Coudray

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66 Coudray, 79-80.
suggests, “a composite Otherness which gave expression to anxieties about working class
degeneracy, aristocratic decadence, racial atavism, women’s corporeality and sexuality,
and the human relationship to the animal world.” But what it does mean is that the
conventional werewolf narrative is wedded to a particular racial politics that is difficult to
ignore. We might also consider how the visual representations of werewolves in interwar
pulp fiction—dark, burly creatures with helpless white women in their clutches—
compares with the image of the “black beast rapist” that loomed so large in the southern
white imagination from the Reconstruction period through the nadir.

The appearance of Chaney’s wolfman in the forties did not therefore emerge in
representational vacuum, but drew upon a distinctly racialized, sexualized, and gendered
genealogy for its key components. It also firmly set in place a narrative trajectory that
remained relatively consistent up until the eighties: a well-disciplined body is cursed
and/or infected and then slips into a primitive state that signals abject otherness. It was
perhaps precisely this rigidity in the werewolf story that made it such a ripe target for
parody in the opening of Thriller, leaving no doubt that audiences would recognize the
standard conventions and laugh at the ways in which Jackson’s presence disrupted them.
In fact, the meta-film’s humor depends on the extreme incongruity between Jackson’s
superstar image and the audience’s familiarity with the werewolf film. He made an
unlikely werewolf for several reasons not the least of which was the highly unstable
affect of his masculinity; his almost effeminate speaking voice and non-threatening

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67 Coudray, 50.
68 Amy Louise Wood, “Lynching Photography and the “black beast rapist” in the
Southern White Masculine Imagination,” Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture, edited by
Peter Lehman (NY: Routledge, 2001), 193-211.
69 Mercer, 39.
demeanor prior to the change are so disarming as to mitigate the likelihood of any truly monstrous creature hiding beneath such a soft exterior. The contrast between facades is strong enough to short circuit the all too familiar binary of “domesticated man” vs. “wild man” that the werewolf relies upon for its allegorical significance. Jackson’s delicate comportment and that of the ravenous wolf are so discontinuous and exaggerated as to implode that dynamic altogether. The failure becomes especially apparent when the image of Jackson fully transformed undermines rather than affirms the werewolf as object of masculine aggression.

The sight of Jackson as a werewolf also folds in upon itself because of the discrepancy between his public image (which was based upon a highly volitional type of embodiment) and the werewolf’s involuntary transition into monstrous form. If Jackson’s persona at that moment in his career depended on any single assumption, it was that he had control over his body to an extraordinary degree and could call upon it to do his will as soon as the music began to play. He seemed to be able to give off the appearance of sexual confidence with the flick of his diamond-gloved wrist or mysteriously “moonwalking” feet. As with most aspects of his image though, it was never certain how much of that sexual confidence was mere performance and how much of it he truly claimed ownership over. Nevertheless, the notion of “Michael Jackson” as a fumbling teenage boy suffering uncontrollable, body-altering hormonal spasms was not a role that he fit into convincingly and one that becomes a little absurd given the bodily command he demonstrates in other parts of the video. If the werewolf signifies an inability to police the body’s baser instincts or to effectively balance those instincts with accepted social
norms, Jackson’s somatic proficiency suggested that such balance was not only possible, but also deployable to his own ends.

As I have already suggested, his lithe, androgynous black physique was also not that of the typical protagonist in a werewolf movie, a subgenre that during its resurgence in the early eighties, still featured strapping young white men in the leading role. That these films were racialized so consistently is conspicuous precisely because many of them sought to unsettle established generic codes either through outright satire or what Philip Brophy described as a “violent awareness of the genre’s saturation.” Still, none of them made the most obvious subversive move of casting a black protagonist as the werewolf like *Thriller* did. Neither did these most of films question the connection between the werewolf myth and the “old world” occultism with which Jackson feared he might be mistakenly associated. What these films did do effectively was to tweak certain conventions in interesting ways while leaving much of the stock mythology in place.

Both Larry Cohen’s *Full Moon High* (1981) and Daniel Attias’ *Teen Wolf* (1985) played up the werewolf’s transformation for laughs instead of scares; Cohen’s film is a full-on b-movie parody that deliberately poked fun at all the recognized conventions while the more popular (and more fondly remembered) Michael J. Fox vehicle functioned as a surprisingly earnest coming-of-age allegory. Joe Dante’s cult classic *The Howling* (1981) ramped up the psychosexual subtext of Freud’s original wolfman by putting particular emphasis on the spectacle of monstrous male body transformation; it also notably featured a female werewolf. Michael Wadleigh’s *Wolfen* (1983) took a more middlebrow approach (both aesthetically and thematically) in what amounted to a ham-fisted political

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statement about the impact of civilization on indigenous peoples while Neil Jordan’s *The Company of Wolves* (1984) played as a feminist spin on *Little Red Riding Hood*. *Silver Bullet* (1985), based on a Stephen King novel, actually shifted the focus away from the werewolf and onto the teenage, wheelchair-bound boy trying to catch him.

Expectedly, *An American Werewolf in London* is the film in this cycle that informs *Thriller* most directly. Landis’ predilection for dark humor is evident in both texts as is the use of vivid special effects to facilitate the monstrous transformation of the protagonist. Particularly striking are the ways in which the werewolf’s decidedly public rampage at the end of the film appears to mimic Jackson’s staged zombie dance. In each case, monsters normally restricted to the gothic shadows are pulled into plain view. The resulting “performances” invoke the carnivalesque by revealing ideological hierarchies and temporarily unsettling them. *An American Werewolf* demonstrates how the abject monster’s attempt to reenter the discursive center can be violently suppressed; the police simply kill the werewolf thus meting out discipline in unequivocal fashion. *Thriller* is more open-ended in its conclusion: Jackson not only survives his carnivalesque transgression, but also appears to emerge as more powerful being as a result of it. Landis’ earlier horror-themed invocation of the carnivalesque provides a useful comparison and contrast to *Thriller*.

**The Lynching of an American Werewolf**

The plot of *An American Werewolf* is set in motion when an American college student named David Kessler (David Naughton) and his friend Jack (Griffin Dunne) are
attacked by a werewolf while backpacking through the moors near a small village in England. Jack dies horribly in the attack while some local townsfolk intervene to save David at the last minute; they are clearly aware of the danger before it happens and even try to warn the boys, although not very strongly, to “beware the full moon.” Significantly, David runs away to save himself when the wolf first attacks before eventually returning to help Jack. The guilt from this early act of cowardice informs much of the remaining narrative, though it is clear that David could not have saved his friend since he too is easily overpowered by the wolf and bitten for his effort. The townsfolk subsequently stage an unconvincing cover-up to hide the werewolf’s existence as well as their occult dealings. David awakens afterwards in a hospital in London.

He almost immediately forms a romantic relationship with his nurse, Alex (Jenny Agutter), but his infatuation is juxtaposed with a series of violent and surrealistic dreams. At first, the dreams are merely suggestive, clearly signifying the realm of the unconscious: he runs naked through the woods and feeds on wild animals or sees other flashes of himself as a monster. His final dream, however, is much stranger and does not appear to be connected to his plight at all. He sits peacefully while doing homework back at home in the family living room until a group of monsters (anthropomorphic wolves, ghouls, and goblins adorned in Nazi uniforms) break in and begin slaughtering everyone, he among them. As if to emphasize his culpability, he is forced to bear witness to his family’s execution before his own throat is slit in graphic close-up. Rather than simply exploiting the sanctity of family and the horror of the holocaust for shock value, this scene purposefully imbricates mythical and real-life horror by having the raiding party wear the iconic uniform of Hitler’s secret police. In her reading of the film through the
lens of the European misadventure story, Diane Negra argues that the Nazi monsters are especially significant given the care the film takes to mark David and Jack as Jewish. She goes on to claim that this final dream sequence “speaks simultaneously to David’s sense of alienation and vulnerability as he lies hospitalized far from home and of his terror of Europe as a site of historical trauma, a place where the legacies of the past live on in the present (as in the werewolf curse).”

Coupled with the townsfolk’s collusion in perpetuating the werewolf curse, this sequence shifts the question of culpability to the narrative’s center and, more specifically, onto David. As if to emphasize this point, he begins receiving regular “waking” visits from his now undead friend Jack. As Jack explains it, all of the werewolf’s victims are forced into limbo until the curse is destroyed at its source, that is, until David kills himself. Angela Curran has suggested that David’s untenable positioning realigns the characterization of the werewolf along an axis of tragedy in addition to horror in that he is portrayed as a fundamentally good person who has the terrible curse thrust upon him. He must then confront the truly existential dilemma of suicide or a life as a monster.

Predictably, David remains unable to reconcile his plight before transforming and killing multiple victims. The transformation scene undoubtedly serves as the film’s most impressive set piece, staging David as a carnivalesque spectacle of what Barbara Creed

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72 As interesting as Jack’s continued presence in the story is – particularly the incredible special effects used to represent his deteriorating body – it doesn’t make sense within the film’s own logic. The townsfolk have already killed the werewolf that attacked Jack and so he should not inhabit the same limbo as David’s victims.
refers to as the “metamorphosing, transforming body.” Creed claims that when the body in a horror film alters its physical construction, the change inevitably recalls ideas about “degeneration, devolution, deformity, loss of control, magic, Satanism, and witchcraft.”

Even more significantly, “the possibility of bodily metamorphosis attacks the foundations of the symbolic order which signifies law, rationality, logic, truth.” With this in mind, David’s transformation does more than simply abject him personally: it also poises his monstrous body with a kind of ideological power that must be dealt with by the state.

Some other important aspects of the transformation scene that should not be ignored include its unusually long duration, its insistence on detailed, spectacular display, and the special emphasis it places on David’s pain. Rather than relying on time-lapse photography or extreme close-ups, David’s mutation happens in real-time right before our eyes over the course of three minutes. Extending the transformation in this manner, and making it so visibly transparent, breaks down the border between the real and the fantastic, something that Mercer recognizes as vital to the way that Thriller’s plot functions as well. The audience of course recognizes that this moment is a sort of staged pageant for special effects, and yet the convincing quality of those effects provides the sequence with undeniable uncanniness. David’s terrifying screams and pained expressions only exacerbate the tension, as even he appears to be shocked at the drastic nature of his transformation. At one extraordinary and unexpected moment during the transition, David actually stares directly into the camera almost as if he were asking the

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75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Mercer, 40-43.
audience for help. What are we to make of this? If it is as much the monster’s pain that
determines the audience’s positioning in the horror film as it is the victim’s, then our
orientation in relation to this sequence is clearly a masochistic one wherein we are
punished for failing to take responsibility for our own monstrosity. The audience is
(like the townsfolk who allow David to be attacked in the first place) made complicit in
the werewolf’s actions by being forced to endure the pain of his metamorphosis.

Ironically enough, David does try to turn himself over to a policeman in Trafalgar
Square once he becomes aware of his transgressions. The policeman quickly dismisses
his admission of guilt as a prank. One possible reading of this moment is that the state
fails to recognize certain kinds of monstrosity until there is little choice but to respond
with violence. David’s protestations go unheeded by those in positions of authority thus
calling into question their usefulness in dealing with the most pressing issues. Other state
institutions represented in the film, namely the medical establishment, also fail to act in
time to prevent bloodshed. David’s doctor suspects that there may be more going on with
his patient than mere post-traumatic stress, and even returns to the town where the attack
took place to investigate, but he ultimately does not act fast or forcefully enough to alter
the tragic outcome. What the narrative seems to continually suggest is that the curse of
the werewolf and its accompanying cycle of violence is perpetuated first and foremost by
human agency (or lack thereof) despite whatever supernatural forces may be at play.

Aviva Briefel argues that the horror film offers audiences two contrasting identificatory
paths each corresponding to the respective gendering of the monster: masochism for male
monsters and menstruation for female monsters. While her argument is highly insightful,
I am not sure that she adequately addresses how the monsters in many horror films defy
strict sexual and gender categories. See “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and
Identification in the Horror Film,” *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 16.
After his attempt to turn himself in fails, David briefly contemplates slitting his wrists. Again, he finds himself unwilling to take the necessary action in order to end the curse. David then notices Jack -- who is now almost completely decomposed -- standing outside of a porn theater in Piccadilly Circus and follows him in. Once inside, Jack introduces David to all of his victims who are similarly trapped in limbo. They proceed to offer him suggestions on how he might kill himself in a scene that plays like a kind of undead intervention. Despite their urgings, David still lacks the wherewithal to commit suicide and remains in the theater until he begins to change for a second time. This transformation is greatly abbreviated in comparison to the first, although it is still presented as a kind of masochistic pleasure through the juxtaposition of his writhing pain with the writhing pleasure of the bodies in the porn film playing in the background. In fact, the usher mistakes his guttural grunts for those of an overexcited patron. David proceeds to devour the usher as if to cement the conflation of sex with bloodlust.

The police arrive to the scene and attempt to keep David locked inside. Strangely, a crowd rushes to the theater to see what is happening despite being told that there is a dangerous monster trying to escape. In one of Landis’ many inside jokes placed throughout the film’s mise en scène, a policeman screams, “Would you people get out of the way?” as an advertisement in the background reads “NON STOP ORGY.” The joke draws attention toward the crowd’s eroticized desire for spectacle violence (promised by the monster’s appearance in public space) thereby paralleling the werewolf’s eroticized appetite. There will be an orgy of sorts, but one with a much different focus than the one advertised.
David eventually breaks loose from the theater and begins wreaking havoc, including decapitating a police inspector and storming through the square, which prompts car wrecks and other property damage. Both of these transgressions can be read as assaults on the dominant order. The first is a direct attack against one of the state’s disciplinary personnel while the second signals a violent disruption of Piccadilly Circus’s main function as a center for tourist commerce. The brazenness of the acts also raises the possibility that David retains part of his human consciousness when he takes on werewolf form and is therefore deliberately behaving in such a way as to ensure his own execution.

The conclusion supports such a reading. David makes his way down a dead end alley and the police corner him. Alex and the doctor, now aware that David’s suspicions about his hidden monstrosity were true, hurry to the scene. Alex breaks through the police line as well as the large crowd that has gathered and slowly approaches David. They exchange forlorn glances as she confesses her love and begs him to let her to help. Just when it appears that she may have subdued the beast, he growls at her and is quickly shot by the police. As Alex begins to weep, the crowd actually begins to applaud, feeling as though the monster has been effectively slain. The doctor and the police approach only to find David returned to human form and riddled with bullet holes. If the monster’s relegation back to the abject margins had not been made clear enough, David’s bloody corpse is situated on a bed of trash in the film’s final frame. An abrupt cut to the credits follows along with the sound of The Marcels’ classic, “Blue Moon.”

The ending of Landis’ film is compelling as much for what it explicitly displays as for what it omits. David’s rampage is staged as a kind of public riot to which the state responds expectedly with forceful suppression; the reaction to the monster’s violence is
swift once the threat it poses can no longer be ideologically (or physically) encapsulated, that is, once David cannot be simply dismissed as crazy and his actions actually disrupt economic activity. The final exchange between he and Alex is also interesting because it implies, through the use of close up shot-reverse-shot editing, that David’s final gesture of violence is actually an act of sacrifice. He clearly recognizes Alex enough not to attack her when she approaches, but he is also aware of the police. He anticipates how the police will respond and growls precisely to provoke what is essentially his own lynching.

I would also argue that although the film ends abruptly after David’s death, it resists complete closure. Yes, the monster has been defeated, but we are provided nothing to suggest that what we have just seen is somehow less than the truth. There is no recuperating denouement detailing a conspiracy by the authorities to erase from view (or memory) the intrusion of the uncanny creature into the everyday world. Scientists do not appear to explain away the absurdity of a giant werewolf attacking citizens on the street in full view of law enforcement. Nor do we receive testimonials from witnesses who deny what they saw as part of some kind mass delusion brought on by the trauma of the experience. Such mystifying gestures would undermine the logic of the diegesis. After all, the interjection of David’s surreal dreams combined with the matter of fact tone of his conversations with an increasingly decaying Jack, have already done the work of thoroughly disrupting the boundary between the real and the fantastic. To attempt to reinforce that division at the close of the story would surely have proved a fatal flaw for a text that at least attempts to exhibit transgressive possibilities.

*An American Werewolf in London* takes on the familiar werewolf story simultaneously with black humor and an unexpected level of seriousness. Accordingly, it
has much in common with *Thriller*’s treatment of occult themes. My reading here has not included any of the same retrospective insight that I am bringing to bear on Jackson’s video for the simple reason that it was not a film that I saw as a child. I suspect that while I would have found certain moments quite sublime – such as David’s gaze into the camera during the transformation sequence – that Jackson’s video would have remained the more gripping spectatorial experience. Certain distinctions between the texts were unavoidable, the first being Jackson’s presence. David was not an unsympathetic protagonist nor did his “performance” as the monster lack its own *thrills*, but he was no Michael Jackson. Again, Jackson’s magnetism as well as the music and dancing he performs in *Thriller* were vital to my making meaning out of the text. Without similar elements, it is difficult to imagine how another text could have competed. The duration of the film would probably have made for a similar challenge. Only rarely when I was very young did I watch whole movies during a single sitting. Instead, I usually took in bits and pieces for as long as my attention could stand and filled in the blanks upon repeated screenings. *Thriller* was simply short enough so as to hold my attention until the final frame.

Gore would have been another source of difficulty. Even though many of the same mechanical and prosthetic tools were used in both texts, the special effects in the feature length film were much more visceral than that of the music video. Fast-paced editing and an overall darker mise-en-scene in the latter had the effect of mediating the gore’s visceral impact, thus allowing me more choices about where to focus my attention. By contrast, I could only have avoided the hyperrealist quality of Jack’s decomposing body (often shown close up in brightly lit settings) by closing my eyes. Self-referential
humor is also a key characteristic of both texts, but many of the inside jokes in Landis’s film were simply beyond the purview of a genre neophyte. *Thriller*, on the other hand, seemed to present images in an archetypal fashion; one need not have seen a zombie movie to recognize what the ghouls were, although having seen Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) would have added another layer of signification. The same sense of continuity was true in terms of casting and location in that the film was set abroad and featured an almost entirely white cast, while the video’s main characters were black and its locations reasonably familiar. All things considered, *Thriller* offered me a more readily accessible brand of make believe than *An American Werewolf*.

What both texts did share, however, was the idea that bodily transformation carries with it representational and ideological consequences as well as physical ones. Landis’s film is much more pessimistic about what the likely outcome for this kind of corporal metamorphosis might be, especially if the new body in question legitimately threatened existing hierarchies. If I had seen the film as a young spectator, it would have offered a rather harsh counterpoint not only to *Thriller*, but also to other boyhood fantasies of bodily transcendence circulating at the time, most notably the *He-Man* animated series. Instead of being magically invested with invincible, phallic power, David’s transformations are painful, debilitating, and frightening. Furthermore, the power he does gain comes with a heavy moral burden and, in the end, proves impossible to sustain. *Thriller’s* view of the changing body is more open, suggesting that transformation need not translate to tragedy. But if it is a more optimistic text, that is probably because the zombie is a more flexible cipher than the werewolf, although no less complex in its origins or representation.
Emanating from Haitian folklore, and more specifically from the syncretic religion of Voodoo, the figure of the zombie arguably carries a more thoroughly racialized history than any other gothic monster. The term has typically been used in its Caribbean context to refer to someone who has been possessed by the magic of a “bokor” or “hungan” (a Voodoo priest or holy man). The zombie labors at the behest of its master performing prescribed duties absent individual will and desire. Although sometimes an actual reanimated corpse, the zombie’s liminal ontological status is what accurately classifies it among the “living dead.” Zombies behave as humans but lack the emotion and volition for a fully realized humanism. The first accounts of zombies can be found in eighteenth-century histories of West Indian sugar colonies and proceed in travel literature and anthropological accounts of the region through the late nineteenth. In this sense, they are inextricably connected to the colonial experience and speak directly to the history of African slavery in the transatlantic world. The practice of voodoo and real presence of occult beings like zombies cast the region, and more specifically the authoritarian plantation regime, as a gothic institution. As Markman Ellis claims about the occultation of slavery: “The zombie, like the cannibal, is an ideologically motivated rhetorical device deployed to demonstrate and establish the moral superiority of civilised colonial authority over the barbarous slaves.”

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80 Ibid, 208.
It was during the United States’ occupation of Haiti in the early part of the twentieth-century (1915-1934) that the zombie really entered American popular consciousness via travel literature and pulp fiction, particularly Williams Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929) and in various EC Comics.\(^8\) Ellis says of the Seabrook text that the zombie stood as an apt metaphor for labor exploitation during what many Haitians felt was simply the reinstitution of neocolonial imperialism under The Haitian-American Sugar Company, which essentially functioned as a slave plantation policed by gang bosses.\(^8\) Victor Halperin’s *White Zombie* (1932), starring Bela Lugosi as the crazed Voodoo priest, “Murder Legendre,” is widely considered the first zombie film and makes liberal use of the racial occult context in both its setting and plot. Other zombie films followed, mostly notably Val Lewton’s *I Walked with a Zombie* in 1943, but it was of course George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) that became the paradigmatic modern zombie text.\(^8\) Romero’s film altered the traditional zombie myth by making cannibalism (an immediate physical threat) rather than existential death (an abstract one) the zombie’s primary source of uncanniness. He also removed many of the religious and occult associations in favor of a scientific explanation. Most importantly, he extricated the figure of the zombie from its original slave/master dialectic and invested it, as Peter Dendle has suggested, with a “drive” rather than a function.\(^8\)

Zombies now operated without masters, slaves only to their singular “need to feed.” This did not mean, however, that racial subtext disappeared. Instead, race

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\(^8\) Ellis, 222.
\(^8\) Bishop, 199.
remained a crucial issue throughout Romero’s original trio of zombie films. Night of the Living Dead seemed especially invested in racial questions, casting an aggressive, self-assured, and even violent black male in the lead at a moment when Sidney Poitier was still the gold standard for mainstream black representation. As some critics have suggested, the infamous ending recontextualized monstrosity in order to address a specifically American racial past that was closer to home than a Caribbean sugar plantation. Images of protagonist “Ben” (Duane Jones) being lynched at the hands of white mob seeking to “restore order” resonated with black audiences and suggested that the zombie’s association with race would remain a consistent part of the mythology. Thriller’s zombie dance is so compelling in part because it draws on both the original transnational associations as well as Romero’s more regionalized prototype. But does Jackson’s authorship and seeming omnipotence in the video threaten to situate him as a witchdoctor holding dominion over a horde of prancing minions? And possibly even over the audience watching at home as well?

After exiting the meta-film, Jackson’s date tightly grips his arm in fear and asks to leave. He rejects the request claiming curtly: “No, I’m enjoying this.” Williams’ pattern of gendered spectatorship reifies itself here as Jackson’s “character” not only demonstrates mastery over the fear that might be experienced by a feminized spectator, but also exhibits a perverse pleasure in those emotions. We will of course discover


shortly that he is completely at home in the world of horror and is, in actuality, its chief architect. In the meantime, his date storms out in exasperation claiming that she “can’t watch.” He relishes in the gore for a few more moments before rolling his eyes with impatience and eventually going after her. Outside of the theater – which is littered with posters for beloved Vincent Price horror films like *House of Wax* (1953) – he tries to reassure her by claiming “It’s only a movie.” This now clichéd colloquialism would have been a familiar one for horror fans, perhaps best known as part of the tagline for Wes Craven’s cult classic, *The Last House on the Left* (1972; remade in 2009). The phrase is also significant because it allows Jackson to articulate the girl’s fear for her rather than granting her the agency to speak back to her own horror. Imagine how much differently the sequence might have played if she stopped to correct him (if she suggested some wholly different explanation for why she found the film so hard to sit through).

Unfortunately, she does not challenge his assessment of her reaction and we are left to take Jackson’s word for it – even if we shouldn’t.

Jackson’s “It’s only a movie” dismissal is difficult to accept because it underplays how the meta-film positions him for the remainder of the text. More than a simple “Gotcha!” moment, it establishes Jackson’s corporeal elasticity as well as his apparent ability to manipulate metaphysical boundaries. He seems to control what happens in the opening homage as well as what happens after. His authorship appeared to my young eyes as utterly transcendent, not just because he obviously had input into the video’s artistic direction, but because he seemed to take on a supernatural ability to manipulate

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the video medium itself. He moved across spatial, temporal, and diegetic boundaries all of his own accord, and, as a result, compromised the trustworthiness of what the audience was seeing at any given moment. In this way, Jackson’s power seemed akin to another gothic trickster that would make his way onto the screen and into my imagination the following year: Freddy Krueger of Wes Craven’s Night on Elm Street (1984). It is also worth mentioning that despite the Landis’ established success as a big-budget feature film director, the video opens with the explicit title card: “Michael Jackson’s Thriller.” It is Jackson who emerges as something more than a performer and becomes a magical master of the world on screen.

As the main action proceeds, the couple walks down a dark and misty street while Jackson performs the song to her. Arguably the least compelling part of the video, it does stand out for two reasons. First, the surrounding landscape is decidedly urban, therefore standing in immediate contrast to the rural or suburban setting typical of the modern horror film. This setting is certainly nothing like Romero’s pastoral atmosphere in Night. A derelict warehouse in the background frames Jackson’s playful dance around his future victim while also alluding to the very real decay of many American inner cities in the eighties (particularly those along the rust belt) that were reaping the consequences of decades of white flight, a failed war on drugs, the active dismantling of organized labor unions, and a fleeing manufacturing base. Hence, even when the video appears to be at its most playful, it is still offering informed critique. The delivery of the main lyric is also intriguing in that Jackson humorously mimics the stiff, Frankenstein-style walk of the zombie, thus foreshadowing the second transformation still to come.
When the verse ends, and in a departure from the song’s original sequence, Price’s rap is played against the literal representation of zombies rising from their graves. These zombies appear to have all the familiar characteristics: decaying flesh, dangling limbs, protruding mouths, and perhaps most importantly, they remain slow moving. But very little in *Thriller* is as it initially appears to be. Jackson and his date find themselves suddenly surrounded at the conclusion of the rap. A swirling crescendo of separate score music followed by a disorienting 360-degree pan reveals Jackson to be one of the zombies (Figure 1.2). The transformation here is instantaneous as opposed to the lengthy, detailed, and painful one into a werewolf clearly suggesting that it is a voluntary change rather than some kind a curse. The ease of the change implies – to use an older metaphor – that Jackson is always *passing* for something other than what he appears to be. But unlike the classic “tragic mulatto,” he does not appear to be tortured by his split subjectivity. Instead, he delights in it and challenges the viewer to make what can only amount to failed speculations about his body’s limitations.

Some viewers in 1983 might have anticipated Jackson’s abrupt change, but I definitely did not. It was a moment startling enough that it threatened to sever my identification with him. There was of course a reasonable expectation that the video would feature a dance sequence of some sort, but I would now have to deal with Jackson’s newly grotesque appearance if I wanted to see him move. I was also going to have to reconcile another obvious disconnect that violated even seasoned viewers’ expectations: the same terrifying creatures that could barely walk just seconds before and whose limbs were falling from their bodies could now perform alongside Jackson,
echoing his every movement. One expected zombies to try to devour their victims, but to put on a show for them? How was this possible?

Figure 1.2 – Zombie Michael


The zombies’ sudden dynamic kinesis did not erase for me the reality of their grotesque bodies and faces; multiple close-ups prevent the viewer from forgetting that they are indeed reanimated corpses. Their gaping mouths, protruding eyes, decaying flesh are unequivocal examples of Bakhtin’s “grotesque realism,” which “images the human
body as multiple, bulging, over-or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete.” The impact of their freakish appearance was lessened, however, by the fact that their movement was clearly beholden to the music and to Jackson’s apparent command. He does in a sense perform like a witchdoctor here, casting a spell over the zombie troupe and demanding that they do his bidding. Yet, and this is crucial, his display of power does not demand that he separate himself spatially from the other performers. He remains with the group in a tight formation even while doing some of his signature spins and toe-stands, therefore emphasizing collectivity and individuality within the same performative utterance. (Figure 1.3) Hence, if the zombie is in essence a slave, “a labourer for whom there is nothing else but labour,” then Jackson casts his lot not as their master, but as one of their brethren.90

I do not mean to suggest that in taking a place beside the other dancers that all is equalized. Jackson retains special abilities and can shape-shift in-and-out of monstrous form as he sees fit. For instance, he suddenly returns to normal as the dance-break ends and the main chorus returns. The turn here, although similarly effortless, is cued by the necessity for vocal utterance – perhaps his power does have some limits after all. He may be able to move while wearing any of his chosen masks, but he seems able to speak or sing only when he takes on his human visage. His verbal silencing while in zombie form makes figurative sense in that narrating the condition of bondage is precisely what the zombie/slave cannot do. Its muteness is a fundamental aspect of its being, or, more accurately, its non-being. Still, there are some other more practical explanations for the

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90 Ellis, 221.
unexpected transition: the zombie makeup might have been too inhibiting for him to
perform his vocals comfortably with it on, or the sight of him singing in full makeup was
too incongruous, threatening to move the text away from pastiche and into parody.

Figure 1.3 – Michael as a Soloist Within the Congregation


The dancing, choreographed by Michael Peters, deserves some closer attention for
its seemingly contradictory quality. The movements are executed with an almost
ritualistic precision as though they need to be performed in a specific way, in a specific
order, and with a specific attitude in order to successfully invoke the appropriate
carnivalesque spirit. At the same time, the emphasis on severe angularity, the use of
extreme limb extension and asymmetry, along with abrupt starts and stops, implies an
awareness of alternative polyrhythmic patterns hiding within the established cadence.91
The zombies are indeed doing “the Thriller dance,” but at times move in such a way as to
suggest that there are aspects of the music that we as viewers cannot hear (or fully
understand). Their performance is a doubled-signification that obscures as it reveals. As
“slaves to the rhythm,” their unfinished movement hints at a more dangerous
revolutionary impulse while still keeping that impulse carefully regulated.92

Because the dance alone articulates so much, it is tempting to argue that the video
privileges physical over verbal speech. Yet, to reduce how the text creates meaning to a
single opposition is far too simplistic. Multiple binaries within the carnivalesque
spectrum constitute meaning throughout. The most obvious of these stems from what
Bakhtin identifies as the preeminence of the lower regions of the body in carnival. The
lower body (source of the sex drive and other abject bodily functions) represents
instinctual behaviors while the upper region represents thought and reason. But as Creed
distinguishes, the grotesque body of the horror film depends largely on a different
opposition, that between inside and outside.93 Thriller’s parade of undead yet still highly

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92 Ironically, Jackson used the notion of being “a slave to the rhythm” to defend his
infamous crotch-grabbing gestures in the “Panther” sequence of his “Black or White”
video. These movements too were carnivalesque in stressing the lower bodily stratum.
See Michael Awkward, “‘A Slave to the Rhythm’: Essential(ist) Transmutations; or, The
Curious Case of Michael Jackson,” in Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and Politics
93 Creed, “Horror and the Carnivalesque,” 136.
mobile bodies plays like a horror show set to music that also makes horrifying the
traditional musical by adding a third binary opposition: animate vs. inanimate bodies.
Jackson’s zombies do and do not behave as we have come to expect, and their defiance
adds yet another degree of instability in the boundary between the real and the fantastic
within this already unstable narrative.

The zombies’ uncharacteristic behavior does not go completely unaccounted for
within the diegesis: it turns out they are only able to dance when the song is playing. As
the song concludes and Jackson finishes his vocals, however, they quickly regain their
menace. His is date, terrified, runs to a nearby abandoned house in order to escape.
Jackson then slips back into zombie form and he and his congregation begin to pursue
her. They start breaking their way into the house and the girl eventually finds herself
cornered on the couch, screaming in utter terror. Jackson, still the leader of the pack,
eventually breaks through the front door. A series of point of view close-ups between the
approaching monsters and the helpless girl follow, mimicking the final moments of the
meta-film. Jackson reaches to grab her and she lets out a loud scream only to discover
that everything has returned to normal. Jackson jokingly asks, “What’s the problem?”
before offering to take her home. Just as all appears to be right with the world again and
the couple turns to leave, Jackson turns toward the camera and offers a sinister smile. His
eyes glow bright yellow in freeze frame as Price’s cackling laugh plays in the
background. (Figure 1.4)

Jackson’s final gaze into the camera is the video’s most astonishing moment
because it resists containment. Who is this figure staring back at us? Obviously, this is
not Jackson the werewolf, although he does share the same yellow eyes. Neither is it
Jackson the zombie, his flesh having been fully restored and evidencing none of the putrefaction of the abject corpse. Whoever (or whatever) this figure is, we can be certain that it is not the same Michael Jackson who we knew before. Something has changed that cannot be taken back, and Jackson was never quite the same after *Thriller*. The video marked the beginning of his career-long exploration of transitioning, transforming, and sometimes traumatized bodies. Susan Willis observes that Jackson often played a body-altering trickster in videos such as “Speed Demon,” where he becomes an animated version of Brer Rabbit, and “Smooth Criminal,” in which he transforms into a giant robot. Jackson’s rather troubling attempt to recreate *Thriller* with the short film *Ghosts* (1997) – a story about a curious man named “Maestro” who comes under attack by the “nice, regular people” of “Normal Valley” – features Jackson playing no fewer than five different characters including various ghouls as well as an overweight, bigoted white mayor. *Ghosts* is strange and frankly disturbing enough to warrant its own more detailed discussion elsewhere – the film served as a bizarre response to the child molestation charges that had been leveled at Jackson, the criticism he received over multiple reconstructive surgeries, and his increasingly erratic public behavior. Suffice to say that it serves as something of a troubling companion piece to *Thriller*.

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The text that actually sits in most direct conversation with *Thriller*, however, and which Landis also directed, is the earlier and far more controversial video for “Black or White” (1991). It featured, what was at the time, revolutionary “morphing” technology that allowed Jackson to become multiple people of varying races, ages, and genders while, quite strangely, also allowing them all to become him. The final image bears a startling resemblance to the end of *Thriller*. Jackson once again transforms into something not himself and we are left with another strange gaze into the camera, this time from a yellow-eyed panther. (Figure 1.5) This image provides no more assurance about
the state of Jackson’s body, or, for that matter, about the state of his image than Thriller did. Several scholars have offered compelling readings of “Black or White” as well as of the incredible ambiguities and categorical difficulties that Jackson’s body posed in the latter part of his career. As I hope this discussion has made clear, these destabilizations began much earlier and were no less elaborate in their execution or fruitful in their representational and ideological implications.

Figure 1.5 – Black Panther Michael

Telling Horror Stories

"Horror stories" like mine are hardly novel, although I admit that it begins a bit earlier than most. Still, that first encounter with a horror film, if it truly frightens, tends to linger in the imagination and demand narration. We seem to want to know that we were not alone, that someone else underwent this same minor trauma, and that to have responded with a combination of fear and fascination was normal. This collective desire to tell horror stories seems ironic and in context of Jackson’s often unsettling extraordinariness, like a rather melancholy exercise. It was this kind of communal, ritualized experience of normalcy that Jackson’s life seemed to seek and reject at every turn, except perhaps in those moments where he found himself singing and dancing in perfect harmony with others.

My own account of young, black, and male horror spectatorship does nevertheless offer some unique insights that cannot be found in others. I encountered images of monstrosity that seemed essential to the performance of Jackson’s perplexing (and possibly queer) brand of black masculinity. And I had this experience at a moment where my own acculturation into gender, race, and sexual norms was just beginning in earnest. I was – in the all the most simplistic and most complicated ways – impressionable. Thriller showed horror functioning as a tool of emotional manipulation, as evidence of bodily
mastery, and as an instrument of patriarchal control along one axis, but also as a catalyst for creativity, an agent of collectivity, and a necessary element of celebration on the other. While I am not foolhardy enough to suggest that I recognized any of these operations then, I also cannot rule out the possibility that the experience may have instilled a subconscious awareness that being black and male had something to do with what most people thought of when they heard the word “monster.”

In the following chapter, I move chronologically backward to examine James Baldwin’s response to one of the most notorious and frequently discussed horror films of all time, *The Exorcist* (1973). Baldwin’s approach in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), a similarly autobiographical account, in many ways serves as a model for the preceding discussion. What Baldwin’s narrative provides that my own does not, however, is a more definitive theory of black horror spectatorship. He approached *The Exorcist* not with critical detachment, but as a text and as a cultural phenomenon in which he was deeply implicated. His discussion aimed to uncloak the politics underlying many horror texts as well as the processes by which horror has pervaded conversations about race in America.
"Disidentification," "Witnessing," and Black Spectatorship

Much of James Baldwin's three-part memoir of movie-going, The Devil Finds Work (1976), features him taking popular cinema to task by interjecting his own emphatically raced, subjective experiences. Because he inserts himself into the work so prominently, Devil reveals as much about the trajectory of Baldwin's coming into race consciousness as it does about his experience at the movies. This tension has prompted some scholars to position his account as an example of the progressive possibilities of black spectatorship, as an extraordinary but useful example of how interaction with popular culture can incite the imagination rather than anesthetize it. It seems necessary for me to situate my argument in relation to some of these studies firstly because there is both overlap and disagreement in how scholars have read Baldwin's spectatorship and it is worth sorting out just what these interpretations have to say to one another. I also hope to expand upon previous discussions in order to consider Baldwin as more than just a model of raced spectatorship or performative identity. I am interested in how Baldwin's spectatorship engages a specific discursive nexus – specifically the intersection of racial subjectivity, popular culture, and civic life – that extend beyond the reach of the cinema.
and into the national narrative fabric. With this in mind, I will examine examinations of *Devil* by Jose Munoz, Jane Gaines, Cassandra Ellis, and Ryan Jay Friedman.96

Munoz cites Baldwin as instrumental in formulating his theory of queer performative politics. Hoping to move beyond either the assimilationist or constructivist positions that typically shape debates about identity and agency, Munoz proposes “disidentification” as a third mode that “works on and against” dominant ideology by attempting to “transform cultural logic from within.”97 Oscillating between reception and production, disidentification marks a survivalist-ambivalence in dealing with popular culture: To disidentify is to reject reconciliation of the contradictory emotions aroused through engagement with cultural fields like the cinema, cultural fields that so often, for minority subjects, evidence a disempowering representational hierarchy.98 Put another way, disidentification represents a way of performing engagement so as to extract pleasure without sacrificing one’s will for resistance; it signals the ability to take what one wants (or needs) from a narrative that might otherwise offer only damage, while recognizing that this taking does not necessarily escape damage either. According to

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96 Judith Mayne was perhaps the first to identify the importance of Baldwin’s account for the theorization of spectatorship and, more specifically, for the consideration of actual audiences instead of an abstract viewing subject. See *Cinema and Spectatorship* (NY: Routledge, 1993), 155-56.
98 Ibid, 25. I use the term “engagement” here rather than “consumption” out of concern about the latter’s imprecision. I am not sure that consumption adequately captures the relationship between people and cultural products defined more by their narrative quality than their material functionality. While even the most simplistic cultural objects are of course embedded within and by narrative – all artifacts have a story to tell – I am weary about the inherent limitation implied by consumption. Does not consumption suggest an act of desire with a beginning and end? A resource that once consumed will somehow run out? To what extent then can someone consume a story? The popularity of a particular story or the ability of that story to speak truth to the contemporary moment may wane, but the idea of a story being “used up” seems just not quite right.
Munoz, Baldwin disidentifies by using his own fiction writing as “a contested field of self-production” in which he re-imagines himself through surrogate characters that appear throughout his work. Baldwin consequently creates a new self that is as much a product of his fictionalizing as he is a producer of it.99

Munoz also points toward Baldwin’s affinity to iconic white actress Bette Davis as another example of his disidentification, claiming that “the African-American writer transforms the raw material of identification (the linear match that leads toward interpellation) while simultaneously positioning himself within and outside the image of the movie star.”100 Munoz recounts Baldwin’s unexpected identification with Davis well enough that I will not revisit it again here. Suffice to say, however, that Baldwin’s ability to see something of himself in the legendary bug-eyed star – across the differences of race, age, gender, and class – challenges many assumptions about how spectators read narrative texts as well as the characters in those texts in relation to themselves.101

Jane Gaines expands upon Munoz’s theory of “disidentification” in order to examine Baldwin’s camp-inflected identification with Davis and locates within it opportunities to better understand black appropriations of white images. For Gaines, such “ambivalent confessions” may offer insight into the power of the imagination to fend-off or reconfigure the damage inflicted by white hegemony.102 Gaines is also interested in the challenges that Baldwin offers for psychoanalytic film theory, and she is hardly alone. Several critics have argued that psychoanalysis tends to exclude many initiating

100 Ibid, 18.
experiences along lines of race and class. The first section of Devil, “Congo Square,” contradicts not only the notion of a singular, definitive moment of mirroring, but any theory that fails to recognize the interconnectedness of popular culture reception.

Baldwin connects his first experiences of the cinema with his voracious reading habits,

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103 Manthia Diawara posits that the terms “black spectator” and “resistant spectator” often operate interchangeably when audiences resist dominant modes of representation. While his analyses of films like Birth of a Nation and The Color Purple do draw attention to troubling racial politics in each film, he tends to conflate resistant, black spectatorship with black male resistance therefore underestimating the intersectionality of race and gender. See Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance” in Black American Cinema, ed. Manthia Diawara (NY: Routledge, 1993), 211-220. Black women scholars of spectatorship have offered more nuanced although not unproblematic notions about how black spectators can and should resist debilitating stereotypes. Examining black women’s appropriations of old Hollywood stars, Michele Wallace argues that there is a way in which black female viewers possessed the films they watched which suggests a “process that may have been about problematizing and expanding one’s racial identity instead of abandoning it.” See Michele Wallace, “Race, Gender, and Psychoanalysis in Forties Film: Lost Boundaries, Home of the Brave, The Quiet One,” also in Black American Cinema, 264. Like Diawara, Jacqueline Bobo also examines The Color Purple but to decidedly different effect. She considers how Steven Spielberg’s privileged subject position and ambivalent directorial techniques undermine the subversive elements of Alice Walker’s original novel, which was intended to appeal directly to black women audiences. Despite some highly astute analysis, Bobo overestimates the singularity of film authorship and underestimates the ability of black women spectators to find a multiplicity of uses even for seemingly white, patriarchal texts. She also fails to account for the character Celie’s (Whoopi Goldberg) first person narration via voice-over in the film. See Jacqueline Bobo, “Reading Through the Text: Black Women as Audience” also in Black American Cinema, 272-287. bell hooks, like Wallace, situates black women’s spectatorship as an “oppositional gaze” through which the pleasure lies in interrogating the text. This is an act that, for hooks, becomes a way of protecting oneself from the pain of erasure or denigrating representation. The foreseeable problem with the establishment of a definitive “black female gaze” is the formation of another marginalizing paradigm that will inevitably fail due to its overgeneralization. See bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” in Black American Cinema, 288-302. Ann duCille’s notion of “identifying against” probably shares the greatest affinity with Munoz’s “disidentification.” Particularly compelling about duCille’s call to action, which comes out of a deeply personal examination of her own childhood investment in Shirley Temple, is that we must move away from constructions that conflate blackness solely with the vernacular. For duCille, these limiting definitions of blackness prevent black spectators from being able to attack damaging representation or fully acknowledge traditions of black intellectual achievement. See duCille, “The Shirley Temple of My Familiar” in Transition, no. 73 (1997): 10-32.
his transformative experiences at the black cast theater, and the drama of the black Pentecostal church. All of these engagements become part of the same mystifying environment that must be decoded if he is to discover what it really means to be black "in the history of [his] country, and in [his] own history." And this process of interpretation – of learning to make sense of the world – remains an incomplete one that extends beyond the confusion of his childhood or even the torments of adolescence.

So while I agree with Gaines and Munoz that Baldwin’s childhood spectatorship offers special insights, the overemphasis on his early experiences still seems problematic. One is left with the sinking feeling that the latter parts of his account are somehow less important or less profound, or worse, that the observations of Baldwin the adult critic tell us less than his younger ruminations. In this way, Gaines’ consideration of Baldwin replicates the Lacanian-based film theory that his dynamic spectatorship should disrupt, thus prompting the questions: What happened once Baldwin became a more seasoned, sophisticated viewer? Once he familiarized himself with the medium and the industry that produced it? Once he left the church? Once he left his homeland to travel abroad? When he returned “home”? How did he make sense of what he saw on the screen as a man carrying the weight of his past?

Cassandra Ellis’s discussion of Baldwin, although no less interested in how his account challenges classic film theory, is not as bound to the image of young Baldwin at the movies. Ellis suggests alternatively that Baldwin “bares witness” to the cinema

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throughout his life as a means of "retrospection, recuperation, and finding [his] voice." \textsuperscript{105}

"Witnessing" is, in some ways, a more compelling framework for thinking about Baldwin's spectatorship than disidentification because witnessing demands a greater indebtedness to history and, more specifically, to others with whom Baldwin recognizes a shared history. While Munoz certainly does not suggest that one can somehow disidentify outside of history, the strategic survival with which disidentification concerns itself does seem largely individualistic. This adaptability is part of its strength, but Baldwin almost always prefers collective terms to singular ones; his testimony typically looks to help others find a way "to get over" too.

Witnessing also reveals more about the relationship between Baldwin's spirituality than disidentification does. This is especially significant because Baldwin negotiates not just the performance of his identity, but also with a spiritual world that intensifies that performance, turning even a film screening into nothing less than a matter of the soul. Ellis suggests, in fact, that it is through this relationship that Baldwin "mediates the distinctions of sacred and profane, high and low, literature and popular culture." \textsuperscript{106} But in mediating between realms, these lines get blurred and the boundaries inevitably collapse. By the end of \textit{Devil}, where I am suggesting that more attention be paid, Baldwin tells truth to the lie that the sacred and secular, or for that matter, the world of high art and popular culture, can be neatly separated.

More recently, Ryan Jay Friedman has examined how Baldwin uses textual analysis as an ethical model for encountering both the self and others. According to


\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
Friedman, Baldwin prioritizes "flesh and blood" personhood not merely to distinguish between the theoretical "viewing subject" and the concrete, historical spectator, but to mark "the individual's existential condition of being a radically singular entity and, at the same time, an entity that is unavoidably linked to all social others – through shared history, mutual experiences of abjection, physical desire, or the obligations of love."\(^{107}\) Drawing on Baldwin's own tropes of explosion and breakage, Friedman describes this deep sense of connectedness as "intersubjective communion: the shattering, abyssal encounter of the individual with the other – and thus him- or herself."\(^{108}\) I too am interested in the ways in which Baldwin's spectatorship insists upon an often disquieting if not devastating look inward. Moreover, when he bears witness to his experience of watching the horror film, *The Exorcist* (1973), his testimony provides what may be one of the most analytically productive psychological and historical accounts of what some black spectators, in the wake of legal desegregation, may have encountered during a trip to the movies.

*The Exorcist's [Black] Magic Spell*

"All kinds of people, it seems, have been infected by Exorcist fever...Most audiences, however, tend to be young and to contain a far higher than average proportion of blacks and, in some cities, people of Spanish origin. 'Voodoo, you know,' a black file clerk said matter-of-factly." – "Exorcist Fever"\(^{109}\)

Throughout most of *Devil*, Baldwin uses a largely deconstructive polemic that resists escapism and which brings a nearly overwhelming sense of historicity to bear on his viewing. He is most often concerned with how popular storytelling contributes to the

\(^{107}\) Ryan Jay Friedman, "'Enough Force to Shatter the Tale to Fragments': Ethics and Textual Analysis in James Baldwin's Film Theory," *ELH* 77, no. 2 (2010): 396.

\(^{108}\) Ibid, 397.

perpetuation of particular systems of order, namely white supremacy. For Baldwin, the cinema becomes a demon that crafts lies with truth and perhaps nowhere is his frustration more apparent than in his concluding discussion of *The Exorcist*, which appears in the final section of *Devil* entitled “Where the Grapes of Wrath Are Stored”:

The mindless and hysterical banality of the evil presented in *The Exorcist* is the most terrifying thing about the film. The Americans should certainly know more about evil than that; if they pretend otherwise, they are lying, and any black man, and not only blacks - many, many others, including white children - can call them on this lie; he who has been treated as the devil recognizes the devil when they meet. (571)

Immediately evident in Baldwin’s reading is the way he extracts a racial politic from a film that did not appear to be expressly concerned with race. In this sense, his analysis here does not differ radically from the earlier sections of his account. What does seem peculiar, though, is that he should choose to conclude his first extended foray into film criticism with an analysis of such a distinctly marked genre film and that his reaction to it should be so volatile. Clearly, Baldwin felt that there was something more at stake in this simplistic horror story than cheap thrills or healthy catharsis. But if not any of these pleasures, then what did the film offer to spectators? *The Exorcist* seemed to perform some kind of special magic to which black audiences were not immune.

In what is perhaps one of the most direct attempts to account for the film’s popularity, reporter Judy Klemesrud traveled to Cinema I in New York to interview people standing in lines wrapped around the block despite the bitter cold.\(^{110}\) While her interviews revealed varying motivations on behalf of the audience and included a wide swath of people from different demographics, Klemesrud specifically observed that

"Anywhere from a fourth to a third of the crowd was black, generally a high figure for an East Side theater."\(^{111}\) Even more interestingly, Klemesrud spoke with a black Manhattan secretary who postulated: "A lot of blacks relate to voodoo and witchcraft and that kind of devil stuff. Many still believe in black magic, especially those from Haiti and the Deep South."\(^{112}\) The secretary's theory, although too simplistic to explain entirely the film's appeal for black audiences, was probably not that far fetched. She was simply recognizing a long-standing tradition of diasporic religious syncretism. Santería practitioners or members of Pentecostal congregations for example, would not have found the notion of spiritual possession, of speaking in tongues, or the exorcism ritual to be alien cultural referents. The secretary's observation also suggested something more important: the possibility that black spectators were integrating their cultural and spiritual lives into an exercise of what Isabel Cristina Pinedo has called "recreational terror." In her study of Latina women's spectatorship, Pinedo uses "recreational terror" to position the horror film as "an exercise in mastery, where controlled loss substitutes for loss of control."\(^{113}\) For black spectators during sixties and seventies, however, this kind of exchange of loss would necessarily have been more than a matter of personal psychology: The mastery they sought over a film like The Exorcist bespoke a broader desire for mastery over their own subjectivity in a nation, that despite moves toward legal desegregation and the passage of civil rights legislation, still did not grant them equal opportunity or many of the other promises of full citizenship.

\(^{111}\) Ibid.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.

Another indication that there was more at stake in black spectatorship of *The Exorcist* can also be found in a review by critic Stephen Farber in which he described a gripping moment of civic and spatial disruption:

In Los Angeles the crowds were so huge that Warners had to find a secondary theater in a hurry; the only one available was an art theater in Beverly Hills that most often shows foreign films. Since the audience for *The Exorcist* is at least one-third black, and since the only blacks in Beverly Hills are maids, this movie may have done more to integrate Beverly Hills than any civil rights action. The confrontation has been fairly explosive. Three days after the Beverly Hills opening, a heard of angry citizens stormed the City Council meeting to complain of litter, noise, and people urinating on their manicured lawns.  

Perhaps the most striking feature in Farber’s narration of events is the matter-of-fact way he categorizes not just the racial demographics for the film, but also that of Beverly Hills and the service workers who attend to it. He positions film spectatorship (especially of this particular film) as a contest shaped by historical relations of power, and while he delivers his claim about the film’s potential to actually further civil rights action with such smugness as to resist a straightforward interpretation, he was not wrong to assert that the film threatened to pull black spectators into spaces and places where access would normally be restricted. This conflict, initially framed in terms of inappropriate or unruly spectatorship – as in the public urination which functions here as a defiant embrace of abjection – quickly “explodes” into one where territory, marked as white and moneyed, needs to be protected from a population that is neither.  

Farber’s description of the Beverly Hills residents as “angry citizens” further suggests that this controversy was really ignited by deeper concerns about race, class, property, and civic status; “angry citizens” presupposes that the trespassing filmgoers were non-citizens or, more precisely,

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114 *Film Comment* 10, no.3 (1974): 32-33.
115 Ibid.
that their failure to perform proper spectatorship negated whatever rights to citizenship that they may have had. Incidents like this suggest that black spectators went to see *The Exorcist* in large numbers and that black spectatorship itself – in this case black horror spectatorship – during this period symbolized a civic act as well as a cultural, social, and economic one. By traveling to see a horror film in hostile territory, and really by insisting on participating in a larger American cultural phenomenon, these black spectators asserted a rights claim to public space that revealed some of the ways in which segregation held fast despite whatever progress had been made during the previous two decades.

Of course most screenings of *The Exorcist* did not cause this much contention, but the discrepancy between the film’s popular reception and that of professional critics unveiled another important fissure in public discourse about what made film matter, what criteria should be used to judge it, and who was best suited to make those judgments. Critics found themselves unable to account for *The Exorcist*’s wide appeal and even less able to sway popular opinion as audiences kept packing themselves into theaters to see it. Baldwin’s response simultaneously did and did not fit into this overwhelmingly negative critical consensus. In order to better understand what makes his approach unique, it is useful to establish just what he, other critics, and contemporary audiences were responding to in more detail.
Exorcising The Exorcist

"The fact is that The Exorcist ...is an exceedingly well-made bad picture...It should be scorned, and when it opened, every critic I read did indeed scorn it. There remains the question of the audience." – Robert Hatch

Trying to recapture the experience of seeing a film like The Exorcist in its original context is in many ways precisely the kind of challenge reception studies hopes to meet. Yet even most contemporary viewers can detect, however, that the film gains its power through a kind of twofold, blunt force trauma. As a sensory experience, the overt depictions of violence and horror work to beat the audience into submission, forcing the viewer to accept the presentation of supernatural events as fact. This sensory presentation then colludes with a meticulously executed editing strategy that allows the film to move as of its own accord; it carries with it an uncanny kinesis, ruthlessly cutting from scene to scene often before the end of conversations and absent logical progression. Critic Gerald Forshey described the film's editing as "[having] been done with a pair of blunt-nosed scissors and a bottle of Elmer's glue." As a consequence, the narrative construction of the film itself strategically eliminates any detailed explanation of the characters' motivations or of the plot's various contrivances.

118 In a comparative study of The Exorcist and Nicholas Roeg’s Don’t Look Now (also released in 1973) Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston argue that The Exorcist takes on an "antilanguage position" through oppositional representations of language against visual and aural representations. In Kinder and Houston’s reading of the film, language is stripped of its explanatory power and becomes effective only as demonic instrument. “Seeing Is Believing: The Exorcist and Don’t Look Now” in American Horrors: Essays
To summarize, *The Exorcist* tells the story of the demonic possession of a pubescent girl named Regan (Linda Blair) who lives in Georgetown with her actress mother, Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn). They have an almost idyllic relationship until strange things start to happen: Chris notices rustling sounds in the attic and unexplained temperature drops in Regan’s room. Soon, Regan herself begins to change by exhibiting increasingly violent behavior and hurling obscenities at everyone who encounters her, including her mother. The Regan storyline is crosscut with that of Father Karras (Jason Miller), a young Jesuit priest in the midst of a crisis of faith. Although Karras’ difficulties are evident from the beginning, he becomes truly tormented after his elderly mother dies in a mental ward (in part because he cannot afford better accommodations). In the meantime, Regan’s “symptoms” rapidly worsen: she becomes more violent, begins speaking in a voice not her own, and undergoes mysterious bodily deteriorations and disfigurements. After physicians and psychiatrists expose her to various painful and archaic procedures, it becomes clear that her fits of rage and blasphemy are more than mere adolescent temper tantrums. In one of the film’s most notorious scenes, Regan stabs herself violently in the vagina with a crucifix while screaming: “Let Jesus Fuck You!” Regan then forces her mother’s head to her bloodied groin while demanding that she “lick [her].”

Chris’ friend, Burke, is also mysteriously thrown from Regan’s bedroom window and down a steep flight of stairs to his death, leaving his head turned completely backwards; this mimics a feat that Regan herself performs while in the possessed state. Following the advice of doctors still at a loss to explain Regan’s condition, Chris reaches

out to Father Karras, who becomes convinced of Regan's possession only after some harrowing one-on-one encounters with her. He appeals to the Church for permission to perform an exorcism and an older priest named Father Merrin (Max Von Sydow) – to whom we have already been introduced in the prologue – is called in to perform the ritual. Merrin and Karras begin the ritual together, but Merrin, weary with age, succumbs before it can be completed. Filled with rage at the demon and racked with guilt over his mother's death, Karras dares the demon to release Regan and take possession of him in her stead. The demon takes the bait upon which it/he turns toward Regan with the clear intent to harm. Karras is able to resist the demon's will and hurls himself out the window and down the stairs in a final redeeming act of self-sacrifice. At the film's end, Regan appears to have returned to normal with no memory of the possession.

Many critics have rightly recognized that *The Exorcist* makes monstrous the emerging sexuality of Regan's pubescent body. In Barbara Creed's discussion of the "monstrous feminine," she situates *The Exorcist* within the larger trajectory of the modern horror film, arguing that it deliberately directs attention toward "the fragility of the symbolic order in the domain of the body which never ceases to signal the repressed world of the mother."\(^\text{119}\) In other words, *The Exorcist* stages a contest between good versus evil in terms of an abject and demonic maternal world against that of an ordering, "sacred," and paternal law. Creed's feminist and psychoanalytic reading is only bolstered by the not so subtle suggestion throughout that Chris and Regan's fatherless (and faithless) home makes for an especially ripe target for the influence of evil, outside

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forces. As critic Ruth McCormick noted in a contemporary piece for *Cineaste*, however, one hardly needed to identify as a feminist or have ready access to the vocabulary of psychoanalysis to observe *The Exorcist's* gendered construction of evil. She went even a step further, arguing that:

the film is explicitly sexist. All the women – the wholesome, average young woman who turns into a hermaphrodite monster; the pseudo-sophisticated but basically vulnerable and hysterical mother; the innocuous prep-school-girlish secretary; and Karras’ frail, dominate-through-guilt mother – are passive, helpless and lost in a cruel world without male help and guidance. The red-blooded American male doesn’t have to be any kind of sadist to appreciate the message.120

In his history of the transition to “New Hollywood,” Peter Biskind plainly claims that the film “presents a male nightmare of female puberty” and is “filled with disgust toward female bodily functions.”121 Baldwin similarly observes a hint of misogyny in the film’s treatment of Regan’s mother, referring to “her failed marriage, her star status, her ambition, her relation to her daughter, her essentially empty and hypocritical and totally unanchored life” as “her emancipation” (570).

Denunciation of *The Exorcist’s* gender politics was only one among many objections leveled against it. Many critics’ seemed to feel threatened that a film they had panned so thoroughly scored so well with audiences; this stark disjuncture between professional critics and audiences signaled a fundamental instability in the film art discourse critics had worked to create as well as in their own authority and efforts toward self-promotion.122 *The Exorcist* also represented a larger shift in the structure of

122 For more on the creation of the intellectual film-art discourse that emerged during the 1950s and 60s, see Shyon Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*
American film production, distribution, and exhibition, better known as the transition to “New Hollywood,” which arguably granted more power to auteurs and favored box office populism above the opinions of elite tastemakers.\textsuperscript{123} It didn’t help that Friedkin explicitly resisted any claim to artistry: “I’m interested in making pictures for audience enjoyment. I’m not a thinker. I don’t take credit on my own pictures, a film by so and so. If it’s a film by somebody instead of for somebody, I smell art. I look at what I do as a good job, the best job for me that I could think of, but I have no image of myself as an artist.”\textsuperscript{124} The overwhelming commercial success of a film made with this kind of anti-art ethos in mind reinvigorated older debates about whether the best art came from innate artistic vision and carefully exercised restraint or from skilled craftsmanship and a talent for manipulative excess.\textsuperscript{125}


\textsuperscript{123} I take much of my understanding of “New Hollywood” from Geoff King who identifies two main connotations of the term, the first of which refers to a particular wave of young filmmakers and their films from the mid-to-late sixties through the mid-to-late seventies, also deemed by some as the “Hollywood Renaissance.” The second usage of New Hollywood is typically applied to American filmmaking after this period, which has been dominated by multimedia conglomerates and emphasizes on big-budget attractions. King acknowledges that many often use New Hollywood as an umbrella term for both these periods thus positioning the “renaissance” as the first phase in a larger movement. Geoff King, \textit{New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction} (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).


Pauline Kael, John Simon, and Joe Flaherty were offended less by *The Exorcist*'s popularity or Friedkin’s alleged artistic failures than by the air of seriousness with which the film was made.126 Beneath their protests though, lay an underlying cynicism toward the idea that the horror film should be taken seriously or that the genre itself could address serious subjects. Critics also raised concerns about the film’s controversial “R” rating and more specifically, about whether the massive budget had prompted the Motion Picture Association of America to excuse its graphic content.127 At least one reviewer went as far as to argue that *The Exorcist*’s “immediate assault upon the emotions is as real as that of any child-beater’s fists.”128 Similar moralist complaints positioned the film as a piece of horror pornography while also making the audience complicit in Regan’s exploitation.129 Activist Jerry Rubin was more contemplative, arguing that the film presented an opportunity for spiritual introspection. He wrote a passionate review for *The Village Voice* with the explicit goal of parsing out *The Exorcist*’s appeal and contended that one could “See the movie as an allegory relating to every person who experienc[ed]”


127 See previously cited reviews by Vincent Canby, John Simon, Pauline Kael, and Robert Christgau.


He went on to claim: “The world controls us—through us... We are all little, sweet, innocent, darling Regans, run by the evil of forces outside our control that control us.”

Rubin’s discussion, as indicated by the title, “I Am Regan, You Are Regan,” was obviously meant to read the film’s representation of demonic possession as a metaphor for a more universal sense of being possessed by one’s past and familial legacy. In spite of his pathos, however, one cannot help but notice that the self-proclaimed revolutionary describes a world where everyone is a psychic victim. Evidenced most clearly in his own awkward phrasing, Rubin posits a conveniently circular relationship: we are controlled by the evil of forces outside our control that control us. This position, as a writer in the Editorial Comment section of The Christian Century argued, is dangerous because it “varnishes false hopes of persons who don’t like to think of evil as a matter of personal responsibility.”

Surely many of us are indeed “possessed” in some form or another, and make decisions often based irrational supposition, but this hardly explains away the relations of dominance and subjugation that all too often characterize American history. More than this, Rubin’s world of psychic victims does not account for the victimizer or what one gains from Regan’s exploitation. If everyone is Regan, then her torment at the demon’s hands becomes, quite problematically, her own fault rather than that of the millions who waited in line to watch it.

Manhattan child psychiatrist, Hilde Mosse, made a far more damning historical connection to The Exorcist’s appeal:

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131 Ibid.
The idea that we can solve our problems by magic instead of by rational solutions is destructive. I lived through this before Hitler came to power..."Listen to the language of your pure Germanic blood, your unconscious." The Jews in Germany then became the devil to be exorcised. The only thing *The Exorcist* can do is to pull young people down to a primitive level.\(^{133}\)

We should be suspicious of Mosse's motives for such a dramatic comparison considering the highly negative treatment that psychiatry receives in the film. He runs the risk of coming off simply as an embittered rationalist disappointed with the characterization of his profession in popular culture. Yet, his reading shares with Baldwin's the sense that a film is never just a film - that both narrative and how people respond to it tell us something more about ourselves in relation to our history.

Perhaps the "mindless and hysterically banal" vision of evil that Baldwin described was exactly what the American public, still reeling from the counter-cultural upheavals, the assassinations, and the mass eruptions of civil unrest during the previous decade truly craved. Kendall Phillips has argued that *The Exorcist* displays the same apocalyptic angst and pessimistic tone as Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). While there is merit in Phillips' comparison, it seems vital to remember that Hooper's film was made outside of Hollywood on a shoestring budget while Friedkin's stood as a hallmark of New Hollywood production and directorial authority. And as Hooper's film circulated through small theaters and drive-ins, *The Exorcist* entered theaters with a built-in following based on the success of William Peter Blatty's 1971 novel. This made it nearly impossible for any serious critic to ignore what quickly became a box office juggernaut and larger episode in American cultural history. None other than Pauline Kael echoed precisely this sentiment in her hostile review of the film.

claiming that: “A critic can’t fight [The Exorcist], because it functions below the conscious level. How does one exorcise the effects of a movie like this? There is no way. The movie industry is such that men of no taste and no imagination can have an incalculable influence.” Baldwin was far less concerned with who wielded power in Hollywood than with Americans’ refusal to confront injustice on either a systemic or an individual level.

Although some critics echoed Baldwin’s feeling that something much more pernicious lurked beneath The Exorcist’s slickly produced surface, his response is distinguished by his inability to separate his own history from the experience of spectatorship, or, to use Ellis’ language, by a desire to testify to his experience and use that testimony as the basis for critical analysis. Baldwin was also unable to condescend to the film’s popular audience in the same way as most white critics. In contrast, he casted his lot with others who felt that The Exorcist somehow spoke to them – even if just what it was saying remained, at best, illusory, and at worst, offensive. Perhaps the greatest difference, then, between Baldwin and other professional critics, was his willingness to acknowledge his own complicity in the culture that produced the film. At the same time, he was hardly the average viewer either because he does, as Ellis suggests, “both see and linguistically perform that act of seeing” therefore encouraging others to question their own spectatorship. He rejects the sense of bewildered fascination that the film would insist upon and acts as an obstruction to its deceptive kinesis.

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A Working Theory of the Black Gothic Imagination

For Baldwin, the simplistic vision of monstrosity that *The Exorcist* invokes is insidious primarily because it allows the audience to deny any culpability for the perpetuation of evil in the world – to believe that true evil operates independently from human will and desire. Baldwin typically viewed this sort of purported “innocence” as a dangerous kind of denial, or as Laurie Balfour has suggested, “a kind of willful ignorance, a resistance to the horrors of the American past and present and their implications for the future.” He suggests, instead, a conception of evil that demands we look inward:

> For I have seen the devil, by day and by night, and have seen him in you and in me... It is that moment when no other human being is real for you, nor are you real for yourself. This devil has no need of any dogma – though he can use them all – nor does he need any historical justification, history being so largely his invention. He does not levitate beds, or fool around with little girls: we do. (571)

In Baldwin’s frustration with *The Exorcist*, however, we can also see the development of another more useful, oppositional ideology. He refuses to separate the acquired wisdom of vernacular understanding from his recreational horror spectatorship and in so doing, formulates what I term the “black gothic imagination.” And while I take heed to Ann duCille’s warning against notions of blackness as solely “vernacular,” the term does seem appropriate here because Baldwin’s “vernacular” does not exclude traditions of black intellectualism. More accurately, he has stitched together his own vernacular, his own network of kinship expansive enough to include black folk and religious rituals, and

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137 See note 5 for more on duCille’s discussion.
popular American cinema among other sources. Simply put, he utilizes a variety of means in order to build (and continually reconstruct) his subjectivity because the assaults on it are no less varied in intensity or scope.

Although Baldwin’s connectedness to black history deeply informs how he responds to horror, it should not be mistaken for some mysterious brand of “race memory.” It emanates instead from an intensely felt sense of Ron Eyerman has called “cultural trauma.” Eyerman argues that, “as a cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory.” 138

The enslavement of African Americans and their continued subjugation (which has often been the direct result of official and unofficial state policy) undoubtedly constitutes one of our greatest cultural traumas. One of the ways through which such power structures are maintained is through a rhetoric of gothic horror that appears just as often in American legal and civic discourse as it does in explicitly marked horror narratives. The black gothic imagination serves as a space for re-imagining the horrific, for deciding whether to meet horror with force, to try fleetingly to separate oneself from it, or to find some way of accepting it and possibly even embracing it.

It is at this site of re-imagining that both memory and imagination become more than just the unreliable vehicles of neuroses, more than hysterical or paranoid recording machines, and operate instead as primary instruments of self-making. The black gothic imagination serves as a

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138 Cultural trauma: Slavery and the formation of African American identity. Cambridge, UK; NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1. He goes on to say: “As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion,” 2.
imagination posits a more meaningful confluence of creativity, collective consciousness, and historical awareness; forces that when galvanized by a desire for social, cultural, political, and yes, spiritual reckoning, form a provocative mechanism for coping with horror both real and representational. Thus, in Baldwin’s response—which represents only one manifestation along a broader continuum—we find a means of dealing not merely with the demons of the present but also with past and likely, future traumas inflicted on black minds, bodies, and souls as well. His resistant stance demands that the racial politics of a film like *The Exorcist*, which were simultaneously essential to its logic and obscured from view, do not go unnamed or uninterrogated. Baldwin’s approach also insists upon a critical reassessment of how racial subjectivity influences different processes of spectatorship. And perhaps most significantly, his engagement with gothic discourse reconfigures the process of abjection, calling into question the rhetoric of horror and how it is deployed.

What we gain, then, is insight into the connection between the gothic’s impulse to manufacture and police difference in what Saidiya Hartman has characterized as a national history in which the “long-standing and intimate affiliation of liberty and bondage made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint or personhood and autonomy separate from the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self.”

139 The specific forces that inform the black gothic imagination include an imminent and inescapable sense of peril that infuses everyday lived experience, a deeply fraught relationship to the tradition of black spiritual practice, an emphasis on the liberating

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potential of corporeal intimacy, and the advent of a new vocabulary of interpretation that privileges the imaginative above other modes of understanding.

Activating Imaginative Space

Baldwin’s discussion of *The Exorcist* represents his most direct commentary on the relationship between horror and racial subjectivity in *Devil*, but this discussion persists throughout. When discussing *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), for example, he rather boldly asserts:

Blacks perceive danger far more swiftly, and, however odd this may sound, then attempt to protect their white comrade from his white brothers: they know their white comrade’s brothers far better than the comrade does. One of the necessities of being black, and knowing it, is to accept the hard discipline of learning to avoid useless anger, and needless loss of life: every mother and his mother’s mother’s mother’s brother is needed. (562)

Baldwin speaks here both to the value of black life and to how living under the constant jeopardy of having that life taken away has unfortunately underpinned much of what it means to be black in America. Not surprisingly, this endangered self-consciousness reifies the very same inequities that produce it by forcing black Americans to unpack whiteness in a way that whites themselves are rarely asked to. Nevertheless, such existential perilousness has, at least in Baldwin’s view, been crucial to black survival – a kind of intergenerational defense mechanism.

Baldwin’s feeling that black folks are (and should be) more attuned to hazard clearly comes in part from his own fright-filled background. In the opening section of *Devil*, for instance, when he recounts his early experiences with popular culture, he continually puts his readings in context of what he describes as a “terrifying” childhood
and adolescence. In fact, the words “terror,” “horror,” or some derivation thereof appear throughout *Devil* no less than thirty-seven times, including ten times in that first section alone. When describing his affection for Orilla “Bill” Miller, a white theater teacher who worked for the Works Progress Administration and who introduced Baldwin to the cinema, he claims: “It is certainly partly because of her, who arrived in my terrifying life so soon, that I never really managed to hate white people – though God knows, I often wished to murder more than one or two” (480-481). When his father calls him “the ugliest boy he had ever seen,” he similarly remarks: “I was a boy, and so I didn’t really too much care that my father thought me hideous. (So I said to myself – this judgment, nevertheless, was to have a decidedly terrifying effect on my life)” (482). In the first example, Baldwin describes a healthy, mutually respectful relationship with a white person that saves him from what would ultimately have been self-destructive hatred of all whites – hatred that would have been all the more appealing because fear already controlled so much of his young, “terrifying life” (480-481). In the second, he internalizes his father’s judgmental gaze, which similarly dominates him through fear. After all, the sins of the ugliest boy would probably never go unnoticed and his punishments would come that much more swiftly and harshly for their visibility. For better or worse, fear becomes a central aspect of his worldview.

The deliberateness of Baldwin’s diction usually demands that his words be taken at face value, but his slippery use of “terror” in the moments described above prompts questions about the difference between terror and horror. Are these terms interchangeable? Or should each condition be given its own distinct weight in terms of how they are perceived by the imagination? From a rhetorical standpoint, it makes sense
that Baldwin would strategically swap one word for the other in order to help a given sentence sing. Adaptive definitions are also standard in African American oratory, a tradition the customs of which Baldwin would have become adept during his tenure as a child preacher. These possibilities notwithstanding, most theorists would still distinguish between terror and horror based on the source of origin, their different temporal qualities, and the kinds of responses each phenomenon prompts. Both David Punter and James Twitchell suggest that terror is fear that comes from an external source and that has finite duration.\textsuperscript{140} Even if that external source is, in actuality, a projection of internal trauma, feelings of terror (or an act of terrorism) will eventually end. When confronted by terror, we are still able to mobilize a response, to find ways to make the source of the terror “like us” and therefore similarly destructible.\textsuperscript{141} To quote the infamous Arnold Schwarzenegger line from \textit{Predator} (1987): “If it bleeds, we can kill it.” Horror, on the other hand, may come from an internal or external source, exists perpetually, and signifies the impossibility of action in the face of monstrosity. We do attempt to fight horror but with the knowledge that the battle remains futile. Even if we were to beat back the monster momentarily, it will return, likely with greater ferocity than before. This accounts for the indestructible villain in the modern horror film. Freddy Kruger, Jason Vorhees, Michael Myers, and even \textit{The Exorcist’s} possessing demon are inevitably defeated but so too do they inevitably return in sequels (and prequels).

To suggest that horror itself is perpetual is not to say that the monsters we create are atemporal. We experience horror within a particular historical context and within


\textsuperscript{141} Twitchell, \textit{Dreadful Pleasures}, 21.
specific places and spaces. Our monsters also most often cohere through their frightening corporeality or, in some instances, the lack thereof.\textsuperscript{142} Rather than oppositional emotional states, terror and horror function interdependently: terror thrives on horror's resistance to coherent articulation while horror demands that new objects of terror be created in order to give it form and voice. It is through terror that horror finds a legible code, which allows it to be uttered and comprehended even if only in limited ways.

This interdependent relationship between terror and horror helps explain why Baldwin often uses one word when the other is perhaps more accurate. His use of "terror" in the above examples carries special significance because being in a continued state of terror so profoundly affects him as to alter his perception of reality. And it is that ongoing sense of fear - the waking-awareness of black vulnerability to oppressive forces and the knowledge that the next moment could threaten abjection or even total oblivion - that becomes a fundamental part of the way Baldwin imagines himself in the world. He has little choice then but to filter the world in terms of potential threats. Yet, only at certain moments is Baldwin able to locate the specific object of his fear: "I had found white people to be unutterably menacing, terrifying, mysterious - wicked; and they were mysterious, in fact, to the extent that they were wicked: the unfathomable question being, precisely, this one: what, under heaven, or beneath the sea, or in the catacombs of hell, could cause any people to act as white people acted?" (481) Although Baldwin clearly designates "white people" as the source of his unease in this particular instance, he still

\textsuperscript{142} Several critics have spoken to the ways in which monstrosity is connected to bodies that blur boundaries whether it be between the living and the dead, male and female, anthropomorphic or alien. Particularly interesting in this regard is Judith Halberstam's \textit{Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) as well as Barbara Creed's aforementioned discussion of the monstrous feminine.
avoids essentializing. He does not attribute his fear to whiteness in and of itself, but rather to his association between certain manifestations of whiteness and certain associated, systemic patterns of behavior. He goes on to say: “From Miss Miller, therefore, I began to suspect that white people did not act as they did because they were white, but for some other reason, and I began to try to locate and understand the reason” (481). Hence, he responds to his fear by seeking knowledge and understanding of that which provokes it rather than seeking shelter, retribution, or mastery. For Baldwin, complete mastery of one’s emotions does not seem like a viable or even desirable option.

Baldwin implies that horror is an inevitable aspect of subjectivity in other portions of Devil as well. He says at one point in referring to his father’s rearing: “He formed me, and he raised me, and he did not let me starve: and he gave me something, however, harshly, and however little I wanted it, which prepared me for an impending horror which he could not prevent” (486). While Baldwin does little to specify what this “impending horror” is at this particular moment, he does suggest in another passage from the second section, “Who Saw Him Die? I, Said the Fly,” that it may, in fact, be the question of identity itself:

The question of identity is a question involving the most profound panic – a terror as primary as the nightmare of the mortal fall...An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger; the stranger’s presence making you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself. Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one’s nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one’s nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one’s robes. (537)
This moment, which is perhaps one of Baldwin’s most eloquent and concise statements about the fluid nature of identity, goes strangely unmentioned in Munoz’s, Gaines’, and Ellis’ discussions. I draw attention to it now not because it contradicts their assertions about Baldwin’s importance but rather because it reinforces many of their points. The idea that trust in oneself is empowering seems like exactly the kind of affirmative albeit obvious epiphany that disidentification or witnessing intend to produce. Lest we forget, though, that the menacing of identity instigates this process most profoundly. For it is in responding to “a terror as primary as the mortal fall” that the most innovative strategies for maintaining energetic, nurturing subjectivities are born according to Baldwin. Thus, where the American gothic tradition might suggest that the collapse of identity and the collapse of the individual are one in the same, the black gothic imagination sees this process as a vital beginning—a baptism by fire. My recourse to religious metaphor here is admittedly cliché but it also seems inevitable given that similar imagery penetrates so much of Baldwin’s own language. His use of “the mortal fall,” for example, reflects the extent to which his own history in the black Pentecostal church influences his responses to horror.

If we return specifically to Baldwin’s look at *The Exorcist*, we can see how a deeply fraught relation to black spiritual practices shapes his film critique. After all, if he could simply have dismissed the film, then it would not have prompted him to respond so earnestly, but he cannot:

I tried to be absolutely open to it, suspending judgment as totally as I could. For, after all, if I had once claimed to be “filled” with the Holy Ghost, and had once really believed, after all, that the Holy Ghost spoke through me, I could not, out of hand, arbitrarily sneer at the notion of demonic possession. The fact that I had been an adolescent boy when I believed all this did not really get me off the hook: I can produce no documents proving that I am not what I was. (567)
Here, he seems haunted by his past, by his own embeddedness in a tradition of what Yvonne Chireau calls black "supernaturalism," wherein traditional African cosmologies were combined with the practice of conjure, healing and harming ritual, adapted forms of Christianity, and other vernacular spiritual practices. He may have found *The Exorcist's* notion of evil to some extent absurd and he had long since left the formal church, but the stakes of his spectatorship were still elevated, if not burdened, by his spiritual past, which was itself characterized in large part by fear. He goes on to say: "It was very important for me not to pretend to have surmounted the pain and terror of that time of my life, very important not to pretend that it left no mark on me. It marked me forever" (571). Baldwin's spiritual history does seem to have marked him indefinitely, prompting recourse to religious imagery and rhetoric that persists throughout *Devil* sometimes causing what might seem like bemused abstraction. In fact, just before beginning his analysis of *The Exorcist* he delves into what seems like a tangential explanation of a religious ritual called "pleading the blood." The ritual tries to pull a tormented soul "out of agony," and into what he calls "revelation": "One is set free, then, to live among one's terrors, hour by hour and day by day, alone, and yet never alone" (566). Upon closer inspection, this seemingly off-topic divergence points toward a unexpected response to horror, a way of finding a home for it within one's subjectivity rather than repressing it. Baldwin's revelation proposes an ambivalent embrace of the abject that threatens to undo the subject. But if this "revelation" appears too romantic, we should not forget the way in which, as Clarence Hardy has pointed out, Baldwin finds all

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This is perhaps because no matter how abstract or transcendent his thinking about human relations becomes, he seems unable to escape a clear emphasis on the value of corporeal intimacy.

Throughout much of his work Baldwin seems transfixed by the potential of the body, by the idea that it is inherently imbued with a certain epistemological utility that can be further enhanced through open, nurturing expressions of sexuality. In Devil, however, he seems less preoccupied with questions of sexual knowledge than with the sense of liberation that comes from recognizing another person’s bodily strength and vulnerability, characteristics that he suggests cannot be separated from one another. Nowhere is this more evident than in his discussion of the differences between live theater and the cinema. For Baldwin, the screen fails to catalyze a truly meaningful connection between performer and audience: “The distance between oneself – the audience – and a screen performer is an absolute: a paradoxical absolute, masquerading as intimacy” (500). In comparison, he argues that the theater thrives on a personal relationship between performer and audience as well as the creation of intimate space: “One is not in the presence of shadows, but responding to one’s flesh and blood: in the theater, we are recreating each other” (501). Still, his desire for this sense of mutual, cooperative “recreation” is, if we are to trust his own testimony, not as absent from the cinema as he suggests. He underestimates the ways that his own spectatorship – his unpredictable paths of [dis]identification and his resistance to hegemonic narrative logic – are in and of themselves acts of textuality in which he fully participates.

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This is not to say that the theater and cinema offer him precisely the same chances for thinking through the body in order to understand his own place in the world around him. There does indeed seem to be something quite special about the “liveness” of theater that instigates his self-consciousness.\(^{145}\) His most revelatory moments involve bodies that license his own claims to being, such as when he watches Canada Lee’s performance as Bigger Thomas in Orson Welles’ version of *Native Son*: “his presence, like the physical presence of Paul Robeson, gave me the right to live. He was not at the mercy of my imagination, as he would have been, on the screen: he was on the stage, in flesh and blood, and I was, therefore, at the mercy of his imagination” (503). Baldwin seems to be suggesting that live theater allows for a more vulnerable and, consequently, more meaningful experience than the cinema in part because he foregoes control of the exchange between performer and spectator. But this arguably masochistic posture is also mediated by a paradoxical relationship whereby Lee’s physicality engenders Baldwin’s selfhood, leaving the latter “at the mercy” of the former’s imagination – a technology that would at least appear to transcend the physical plane. If live theater succeeds for Baldwin where the cinema fails, it is not by virtue of any tactile interaction, but rather through a perceived sense of “flesh and blood” correspondence that prevents Lee from becoming just another object of Baldwin’s gaze – from becoming merely another readable text as me might on screen. This paradox recalls what Judith Halberstam describes as the gothic’s function as a “technology of deviant subjectivities” against which “normal” is constructed and entrenched.\(^{146}\) But it is unlikely that Baldwin would consider his


\(^{146}\) Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 2.
subjectivity or anyone else's for that matter as fundamentally "deviant." More likely, Baldwin would interpret the move toward repression - of the desire for intimacy and for intimate desire - as deviant, and the stifling of imaginative responses to trauma as a matter of true human tragedy.

If there is, in fact, a unique aspect of Baldwin's re-imaging the rhetoric of horror, it is that he privileges a vocabulary of imagination, one that manages to recognize a history of intolerance, subjugation, and exploitation without understanding that history as the limit of human possibility. Take, for instance, his aforementioned statement about Bill Miller. He claims that while his relationship with her prevented his hatred of white people, he often "wished to murder more than one or two" (481). The hyperbolic tone of his murderous confession should not necessarily be dismissed so much as suspiciously interrogated. There is little question that he feels to have legitimately suffered at the hands of abusive whites, and that Bill and others have as well. His desire for violent reciprocity therefore seems both natural and understandable. Yet, the compassionate consciousness that he evidences throughout the text betrays his incapacity for malice. At one point he casually reveals: "I don't seem ever to have had any innate need (or, indeed, any innate ability) to distrust people" (481). This suggests that truly destructive, finalizing violence would shake him to the core. He would no sooner actually murder one of his persecutors than he would abandon someone with whom he felt kinship. Still, the invocation of the "wish" remains significant. A wish gains its power precisely from its involuntariness, from the innate need to satisfy internal drives.147 But such movement

within the imagination is grounded in a double-bind: the wish cannot, *must not* be fulfilled because fulfillment brings about the end of desire and the encroachment of painful actuality upon fantasy, the disruption of ecstasy by the stain of blood on the hands, the rapture of one’s yielding to passion met by the sudden, devastating, and undeniable realization of one’s capacity for cruelty. While Baldwin may have recognized and even understood the appeal of a film that provided an external explanation for evil, he also seemed to feel that bearing the full weight of wrongdoing on one’s conscience was a burden we all owed it to each other to carry.

**Extraordinary Spectatorship or Just an Extraordinary Spectator?**

Baldwin’s radical response to *The Exorcist* illustrates perhaps some of the most compelling possibilities for pleasure and danger in black spectatorship, but his unique facility for critical insight and his liminal status in relation to the “black community” inevitably raises questions about his representativeness. He certainly situated himself as a black critic, but were his observations indicative of anyone’s experience except James Baldwin? Did other black spectators, particularly those who may not have had access to similar means of mobility, respond in similar ways for similar reasons? These are fair but difficult questions to answer with precision. While many considered Baldwin one of the primary spokesmen on black issues in the U.S. during the 1950s and 60s, the hypermasculine and often blatantly homophobic rhetoric of the much of the Black Power Movement (and corresponding Black Arts Movement) coupled with his own transatlantic
persona had rendered him something of an outsider by the publication of *Devil.*

Doubts about his ability to speak for “the black audience” with authority would explain his impulse to pull in corroborating witnesses at strategic moments during his account. He mentions, in fact, about his trip to see *The Exorcist* that:

I first saw [it], in Hollywood, with a black friend of mine, who had his own, somewhat complex reasons for insisting that I see it: just so, one of my brothers had one day walked me into the film, *The Devils,* which he had already seen, saying, cheerfully, as we walked out, *Ain’t that some shit? I just wanted you to see how sick these people are!* Both my friend and my brother had a point. (567)

I have already discussed Baldwin’s own complex motivations for seeing the film, but his friend and brother’s purported motivation deserves attention as well. It doesn’t make much sense that these black men would sit through a horror film just to verify their own suspicions about the “sickness” of white culture – and they certainly would not have to prove as much to James Baldwin. Going to the movies costs both time and money, and spectatorship based solely on the desire to prove one’s moral superiority to the rest of the audience is a luxury typically reserved for professional critics. Probably closer to the truth is that these men were at least partly aware of the stakes in their horror spectatorship. They knew that confessing, openly, to a desire for horror is tricky business given the genre’s history of racial stereotyping, its uneasy blend of sex and violence, and none too subtle depictions of victimization and vengeance. Awareness of these all too consistent narrative elements does not, however, keep them from the theatre and in fact seems to have been a large part of what draws them in. Less articulate and less

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148 Eldridge Cleaver’s notorious attack of Baldwin is the perhaps best example of the incompatibility of Baldwin’s politics and public persona with leading black revolutionary figures of the period. See “Notes on a Native Son” in *Soul on Ice* (NY: Delta, 1968), 122-137.
transparent than Baldwin, his friends are still conscious spectators who, given the choice between engagement and non-engagement, opt for the former.

A moment like this reveals that Baldwin was not quite as estranged from the everyday movie-going experiences of many black Americans as we might expect. Going to the movies is for Baldwin a social activity and his critical and emotional responses are very much affected by the interactions he has with other spectators. At the same time, Baldwin’s filmic interests tend toward the highbrow; *The Exorcist* is about as far down the scale as he goes with the exception of a film adaptation of a Boris Vian novel, *I Spit on Your Graves* (1959), not to be confused with Meir Zarchi’s notorious cult rape-revenge film *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). So maintaining some healthy suspicion about just how much Baldwin’s spectatorship can tell us about racial subjectivity and horror is not a bad idea either.

*Devil* recounts Baldwin’s life at the movies, but it also inadvertently chronicles his loss of faith in the medium of film – especially in its more gothic incarnations – to speak real truth about the emotional, spiritual, and moral aspects of people’s lives. There is evidence that many other black spectators did not abandon the horror film or the cinema more broadly and may have applied much of Baldwin’s imaginative critical thinking to their spectatorship in ways even he could not have predicted. In the chapter that follows, I will turn my attention Roger Corman’s Edgar Allan Poe’s American International Pictures, the film company that most thoroughly cultivated, marketed to, and exploited a black audiences from the late fifties to the early seventies. Black audiences came out for AIP films and AIP knew it. Yet, the kinds of horror films that
attracted black spectators and the kinds of pleasure they found in them were perhaps more complex than even Baldwin understood.
Mapping the Politics of Black Spectatorial Pleasure

In June of 1965, the Chicago Defender ran a short column entitled, “Inquiring Photographer,” in which five black moviegoers answered a very loaded question: “What is the most enjoyable movie you have ever seen?” This inquiry was especially fraught because it situated pleasure in vague, even indeterminate terms. Just what kind of enjoyment was the photographer talking about? Did he mean the film that prompted the most visceral response? The one with the most compelling or original storyline? The one featuring a favorite leading man or lady performing in familiar ways? The one the spectator most wanted to see again? The one with the most affirming didactic message? Or perhaps the one that fit some more objective set of evaluative criteria? Without negating or confirming any of these possibilities, the question allowed the responders to define “enjoyment” along their own chosen axes of pleasure and confess only what they wanted to reveal about their personal cinematic experiences.

Most of the spectators’ responses to the questions were if not wholly predictable, then certainly within a range of expected possibilities. Housewife Lois Watson liked the Sidney Poitier vehicle Lilies of the Field (1963) and even suggested that: “[It] was the best picture I have yet to see. This was a movie that had humor, excitement, and a message. Too little films of this type are being made and it is time we made more like it. Give the American public more of this and we may cut down on our crime rate in major

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Several things stand out about her answer. Firstly, she recognized *Lillies* as fitting into a specific category of film even if she did not name a precise genre. The story featured a traveling handyman named Homer (Poitier) who helps to build a church for a group of nuns recently escaped from communist-held Berlin. Based on a novel by William E. Barrett, it worked as a religious film with a racial subtext, one which producers had difficulty marketing because it promised neither sexual titillation nor violence. Indeed, by listing its moral “message” last in the triumvirate of distinguishing qualities, Watson emphasized the film’s clean entertainment value above its other characteristics. She gives the sense that while humor and excitement were important aspects of what she considered in a great film, no amount of either could compensate for the power of a singular, definitive Christian message. Like her nonspecific reference to film type, however, the exact nature of this message goes unarticulated, presumably because it was so obvious that anyone who had seen the film already knew what it was.

The ownership and authorship that she claims over the film medium is more difficult to explain given how little creative or financial input that black filmmakers or actors had in the production of mainstream cinema at the time. Who was she referring to when she asserted: “it is time we made more [films] like it”? She could have simply been recognizing the financial imperative of supply and demand between producers and

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150 Ibid.
151 In a *New York Times* article published on September 29, 1963 entitled, “Considering ‘Lillies in the Field’,” director Ralph Nelson talked at length about the difficulty of finding a title for the film that would make it sellable to a wide and presumably white audience. Poitier’s race and ironically enough, his association with “violent” films were also among the difficulties of getting the film made. The irony being that while some of Poitier’s films did in fact contain violence, he was rarely if ever the agent of it. This characterization also stands firmly at odds with his integrationist image.
audiences, or she could have been making a more racialized call for films with “positive” black images. It is also possible (though less probable) that she was acknowledging a dialectical relationship between filmmaker and audience as creators of meaning.

Unexpectedly, Watson casts her net in wider terms than any of these possibilities by situating herself as part of “the American public.” This gesture toward nationalized affiliation feels strangely egalitarian given that patterns of segregated moviegoing persisted in many parts of the country. The assertion that a film like Lillies could help cut down the crime in inner cities also belies the idea of such a unified audience. Who else after all, aside from the mostly black inhabitants of those inner cities, did she hope would be somehow rehabilitated by the film’s influence?

Watson was not alone in her desire for a film with clear and discernible moral message. A clerk named Georgia Clark exclaimed: I think my most enjoyable movie was The Robe. It told the story of the crucifixion and the glory that was our lord. This type of movie appeals to me more than others. It is a pity that more movies of this sort are not in constant demand by the public. I, along with my family, feel that this type of picture has a

The resonances between Clark and Watson’s admissions are striking despite that the latter chose a drama with a relatively modest scope and the former selected a big budget biblical epic. They both singled-out films that explicitly addressed Christian themes and appeared to believe that such films held a special edifying value, though neither spectator offered to illuminate the process by which one might actually gain spiritual or moral insight from watching the film in question. The more interesting commonality between their responses is that they each expressed their pleasure as lack; they were frustrated that their tastes were not being met with other similar offerings in the marketplace. Rather than being uncommitted or uncritical viewers, these black women wanted more opportunities for pleasurable spectatorship and did not hesitate to name their dissatisfaction. But unlike Watson’s dubious use of an unidentified yet collective “we” to express her dissatisfaction, Clark placed the blame for this drought on a public whose cravings were less than morally fulfilling. For her, the audience was the group that could influence mostly significantly the kinds of films being made, and she charged them with aspiring to higher or at least different standards. She also introduced another important element into her response: her family. Not only did she include them as part of the way she evaluated films, but she even went so far as conflate their enjoyment with hers, assuming that they each held movies to the same moral standard. We should be suspicious of this, and especially of the notion that her children, whose viewing opportunities she probably predetermined, would share those standards. Be that as it may, her account indicates that her own singular pleasure was not the only thing at stake in her

spectatorship. Others’ pleasure, or, in her view, their moral well being, was bound up
with that choice as well.

If we were to judge based only on Clark and Watson, we might conclude that the
women spectators that the photographer spoke to appeared to favor films that held an
immediate moral purpose beyond entertainment, or at least ones that they perceived as
having such purpose. The women spectators’ responses cannot be so easily gendered,
however. Another housewife, Helen Anderson, claimed: I really went for the movie [The]
Mark of the Hawk. This movie displayed current actual happenings in Africa. I don’t
really care too much about shows, but I’m glad my husband made me go with him to see
this one. If the Negro would take advice from the theme of this movie our problems
would be lessened.”154 It seems hardly a coincidence that Anderson named another
Sidney Poitier film given his box office appeal to both black and white audiences.155 This
1957 film, cast Poitier in the role of “Obam,” a man caught between his native African
countrymen and British colonialists. Whether or not the film truly “displayed current
actual happenings in Africa” is debatable, but the tagline “Against voodoo fury…The

154 Ibid.
155 That Poitier seemed to be carrying the symbolic load for black cinematic
representation during the fifties and sixties is certainly no secret. Donald Bogle refers to
Poitier as “the top black box office draw” of the period mostly a result of being
continually cast in safe, asexual roles. His characters frequently sacrificed themselves for
whites or otherwise sought assimilation into dominant white culture. See “Sidney Poitier:
A Hero for an Integrationist Age,” in Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattoes, and Bucks: An
Interpretive History of Blacks in American films (NY: Continuum, 2001), 175-183.
Thomas Cripps has positioned Poitier opposite Harry Belafonte who consistently
struggled to gain the same crossover appeal as his less threatening counterpart. See
Chapter 9, “Settling In, Settling For,” in Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message
Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993),
250-294. For more on Poitier’s precarious positioning as a racial symbol see also Arthur
Knight’s “Sidney Poitier: ‘It Is No Great Joy to be a Symbol’” in New Constellations:
Movie Stars of the 1960s, ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik (New Brunswick, NJ; London:
Flame of Faith" hardly seems indicative of a narrative seeking to challenge stereotypes or other representational distortions. Still, Anderson seemed to accept that the film presented a certain level of realism. Even more significant, she articulated a kind of Pan-African consciousness by trying to connect struggles for independence from colonial rule abroad to the plight of black Americans suffering from various forms of persistent discrimination and disenfranchisement. She cared just as much about pedagogical utility as the two other women, but finding a model for racial uplift interested her more than religious instruction. As with Clark's inclusion of her family in the scheme of spectatorship, Anderson presented herself in unconventional terms: she attended the film under what sounds like mild coercion by her husband. Her pleasure is then mostly accidental, an unintended moment of enjoyment that becomes enmeshed with her racial subjectivity and politics. Like the other women, she seemed to feel that the right kind of film had the power to influence perspective and behavior. Interestingly, none of the women interviewed chose "women's films," perhaps because questions of racial representation or morality superceded gender considerations, or because few of the films targeted toward women during the period seemed expressly concerned with black women's issues.  

The two men that the photographer surveyed expressed their pleasure in very personal and emotional terms. Businessman R.H. Lawrence chose a 1948 Western called Panhandle as his favorite: "It starred Ron Cameron as a gunfighter who, in my opinion, can never be equaled for a western. There have been other movies which I have enjoyed,

157 Douglas Sirk's classic melodrama Imitation of Life (1959) was perhaps the most notable exception with its conceit about "passing" situated at the center of the narrative.
but this one is tops in my book. I wish the TV companies would run this film again so I could get to view it again.” Lawrence was the only one of the spectators that chose a relatively older film and the only one to link that choice to a specific actor’s performance. His affinity for “Ron” Cameron was framed in such a way as to suggest that he was fan of the genre and had seen enough other performers in similar roles to offer a comparative criticism; Lawrence may also have had debates with other genre fans about their favorite screen gunfighters in a way not dissimilar from horror fan debates about their favorite movie monsters.

The irony of Lawrence’s testimony is that while he appears more invested in a singular actor’s image than in tenuous causal links between spectatorship and behavior, his confession still rings unreliably. The Canadian-born actor who starred in several westerns during the 1940s and fifties (along with parts in detective and horror films) was actually Rod Cameron not Ron. We can never know whether or not this was Lawrence’s mistake or someone else’s; the photographer could have misheard his pronunciation or, more likely, the newspaper may have made a typographical error. In any case, the inaccuracy draws attention to the fragility of the image of the star, to the duplicity inherent in any mode of potential identification with him or her, and ultimately to the possibility that the spectator’s pleasure is little more than the product of an elaborate series of perceptual illusions. It does not seem to matter whether or not Lawrence got the name right given that his attachment is probably tied more to the kinds of characters Cameron played than to the actor himself. The more important point is that he expresses an attachment to a standardized genre that seems dependent on cross-racial identification

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with a white performer. In comparison to the women's descriptions, none of which singled out an individual actor as important to their enjoyment, Lawrence's narration feels both more intimate and more insecure. Cameron as "the gunfighter" serves as the main attraction and the question of the film's larger "message" never enters into the equation. His request for the film to be broadcast more regularly on television also feels more idiosyncratic than the women's broad social and political appeals. Uninterested in the tastes of other filmgoers or in addressing a perceived dearth of preferable films in the marketplace, he only seemed invested in trying to recreate his own original experience of watching *Panhandle*.

As subjective as his disclosure may have been, his response was still forthright and relatively transparent. He knew what he liked and why he liked it and did not express any detectable concern that his answer might affect how people might perceive him. The other man surveyed, an accountant named Lawrence Jones, was far more apprehensive. He seemed acutely aware that his pleasure required special explanation: "*The Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* was the best flicker I have seen. Maybe it's because I like the horror and terror that goes along with the sinister. I am not violent or weird, out [sic] these type of movies hold a strange enjoyment for me."159 Jones' defensiveness separates him from all the other spectators including the other man in the group. He may not have understood why, but he recognized on some level that his desire for "these type of movies" raised doubts about his subjectivity in ways that a religious/racial melodrama, a biblical epic, or even a western did not. The typographical error that substitutes "out" for "but" in his answer only heightens this tension, creating a slippage upon which narrating spectatorial

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159 Ibid.
pleasure becomes akin to queer confession. Admitting to his “strange enjoyment” in the public space of a newspaper essentially signals his “coming out” as a horror fan.

Indeed, the anxious combination of affirmation and hesitance that one might expect from a coming out narrative becomes immediately evident when compared to the other spectators who expressed confident ownership over their choices while, Jones, in the very act of confession, was clearly still trying to reconcile his feelings. That he began his second sentence with “maybe” is the most obvious indication of his reticence, resulting in a claim that sounds more like a question than a declarative statement about his pleasure. “Maybe” also left open the possibility that his attraction might have had some other more mysterious source that remained unknown even to him. His use of both “horror” and “terror” (instead of one or the other) is similarly troubled, though this was more likely the result of him having incorporated advertising language into his speaking voice than because he was actually attempting to distinguish ontologically between the two terms. Even some posters for the film deployed both terms, describing the film as “A Trilogy of Shock and Horror.” The influence of advertising probably also explains his use of the awkward phrase “the sinister.” Few circumstances in colloquial usage would prompt an expression with such vague directionality. Who or what was being sinister in this scenario and toward whom or what were these sinister intentions being directed? Jones’ last sentence is the most telling in that he goes out of his way to disavow any assumptions that might be made about his private proclivities. Westerns are of course often as violent as horror films if not more so, yet Lawrence felt no need to deny that he might also be violent just because he enjoyed watching them. Jones, on the other hand, feared that outing himself as a horror fan raised the real possibility of a direct connection
between the violent content and his personality. "Weird" is trickier to interpret. It could have meant he took some kind of perverse pleasure in the violence, gore, and depravity often shown in horror films. The more compelling reading, however, would be to interpret "weird" as a sign of his queer potentiality. Hence, Jones could only admit to his "strange enjoyment" after having tried, unconvincingly, to foreclose questions about his sexuality.

If going out of his way to deny violent or deviant sexual tendencies seems like an overreaction to a simple question, Jones was only projecting back onto the newspaper’s audience that which the horror genre already assumes: that non-normative sexuality and/or gender identity arouse violence. Films like *Psycho* (1960), *Cruising* (1980), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and *High Tension* (2003) are only some of the many films that feature homosexual or transgendered killers whose monstrous actions are directly attributed to their sexual orientation or unstable gender. It is no secret that in the world of horror, sexual or gender ambiguity makes one homicidal.¹⁶⁰ Jones wanted to make it clear that he should not be mistaken for one of horror’s queer villains even if he did enjoy watching their ghastly deeds on screen.

I have spent so much time here at the outset on this somewhat random inquiry from the mid-twentieth century black press (and to my knowledge not one that seems to have been repeated with any regularity) both because of what it yields and what it keeps

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hidden from view. If what we want to know is how black spectators have made use of film texts in their own words, then the photographer’s question appears to grant those spectators with just such an empowering kind of narrative agency. Unfortunately, their all too brief answers do not occasion a complete account of their interpretations (if such a thing exists at all). And because the column appears to have been a one-off occurrence, we cannot compare and contrast responses over time. We are left with a set of inevitably guarded and truncated reactions that while not without a certain depth, obfuscate almost as much as they reveal.

This brief survey nonetheless draws attention toward some of the larger forces that influence how people talk about pleasure in relation to their spectatorship. Perhaps one of the most obvious of these forces concerns the temporality of enjoyment. The photographer’s question took for granted the spectators’ ability to locate what they liked about their chosen films as a finite certainty rather than understanding pleasure as oscillating and likely to shift with repeated viewings and conversations.161 Surely, their choices might have changed with time and if they did not, the explanations for them might have. Each of the spectators also used their own highly personalized criteria for evaluating their respective choices and their expectations were shaped in part by genre. It is unlikely, for example, that any of them would have sat down to watch The Robe, Panhandle, and Tales expecting to experience the same kind of pleasure from all three films. The precise nature of spectatorial pleasure seems to have everything to do with the

161 As Matt Hills points out, the horror genre is particularly prone to viewer reevaluation because it relies so much upon innovations in special effects, on representational allowances and prohibitions, and on fans’ intertextual knowledge. Much of the pleasure for horror fans also seems to reside in a given film’s ability to duplicate or at least approximate the primal scene of their first fright. See “Part II - The Pleasure of Horror in Fan Practices” in The Pleasures of Horror (London and NY: Continuum, 2005), 71-108.
kind of film in question and with the expectations that different genres anticipate. The spectators' responses also make plain a readily apparent but easily forgotten reality: that viewer pleasure is determined as much by social, cultural, and other factors as textual ones. As was the case with James Baldwin in the previous chapter, these spectators brought their own personal histories, their own already established relationships with popular culture, their spiritual and political beliefs, and their own insecurities about how they might be seen to bear on their accounts of pleasure.

Chief among these factors for my purposes here is race, which only further complicated how the spectators responded; they each had to navigate how their choices might reinforce or short-circuit ideas about their racial selves. Given the surrounding context of the civil rights movement, choosing the “wrong” kind of film could have signaled a failure to recognize how larger structures of oppression were maintained in part through the limitations placed on African Americans in popular culture. Put more simply, if the spectators confessed to enjoying a film that stereotyped or caricatured blackness, it would have suggested a fundamental lack of awareness about how limited black representation in the media was partly responsible for upholding systemic discrimination. The respondents with strong religious beliefs, like Watson and Clark, had yet another dimension to navigate in that they represented not only themselves and their families, but probably their respective churches as well. Naming films with more secular concerns could have prompted questions about whether or not they truly lived a Christian lifestyle. The newspaper’s audience might also have looked askance at Lawrence’s masculinity (and sexuality too) had he favored a romantic comedy as opposed to a western. I could go on to name a virtually endless series of such mediating forces that
might have influenced the responses, but my larger point is that in answering the photographer’s question, these black spectators actually faced a whole constellation of issues that made some answers much safer than others.

I do not mean to suggest that no account of spectatorship is trustworthy. Instead, I hope to illustrate just how quickly talking about spectatorship can become labyrinthine when pleasure is at stake. Even if someone could readily identify the aspects of a film that provide pleasure, there are a number of reasons – particularly in a society with repressive and even puritanical prohibitions on what kinds of pleasure one can enjoy, not to mention where, when, and how they might be indulged - that might prevent people from telling the whole truth. To ask someone about his or her “enjoyment,” especially in public, is to demand a confession of subjectivity that threatens to unmask, and as Baldwin would say, revealing one’s “nakedness” has consequences. Still, not all confessions reveal to the same degree. For instance, spectators and professional critics alike have far less difficulty confessing their displeasure with a given film and rarely assume that disclosing those feelings reveals anything about their private selves. Had the photographer asked about “the least enjoyable film they had ever seen” it seems unlikely that the same disquiet would hover over the responses.

I have also drawn prolonged attention to these responses because they illustrate that horror spectatorship carries along with it a set of problematics that do not burden most other genres. Jones’ testimony stands out at once because it feels like a secret and because he appears to be responding to unspoken ideas about horror fans. The follow-up question that the Defender photographer did not ask and that I would now like to consider

is why Jones would have been drawn to a film that seems to efface blackness and to a
genre that, more broadly speaking, treats blackness as a negative sign and source of
unrest? How does race confound our assumptions about horror film spectatorship and the
ideological implications of horror narratives themselves? The prominence of advertising
for horror in black press sources like the Defender, which I will address in the following
chapter, suggests that Jones could not have been the only black spectator drawn to Tales
of Terror and that part of its appeal may have derived from the ways in which Poe’s
fiction was already embedded with racial implications even when it appeared to ignore
them.

Poe’s Africanist Shadows

The film to which Jones referred is better known by the shorter title Tales of
Terror (1962). It was the fourth in a series of Poe adaptations that Roger Corman directed
for American International Pictures in the early sixties, nearly all of which starred
Vincent Price in a leading role. The anthology featured three loose adaptations of Poe
stories including “Morella” (1850), “The Black Cat” (1843), and a final vignette based on
“The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar” (1845). By contemporary standards, Tales is a
decidedly tame affair and would probably be classified as a “thriller” if only because it
lacks much of the viscera that genre fans have come to expect. The second section in
particular, which featured Price and Peter Lorre doing a campy send-up of a fancy wine
tasting, deliberately plays for laughs and can most accurately be described as horror-
comedy. Despite taking such liberties with Poe's stories, *Tales* still managed to maintain many of the original "sinister" elements that Jones described. Classic gothic themes such as bodily possession, unlawful containment, familial betrayal, and unnatural death prevail throughout. Most importantly, the stories still hinged upon characters that, either through their own cruel ingenuity or some other more supernatural means, behave monstrously toward one another.

What Jones would not have encountered in the film were any obvious markers that it was intended to appeal to black audiences. Unlike "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839) or "The Gold Bug" (1843), the stories adapted in *Tales* featured no black characters or settings and made no explicit references to blackness aside from the title, "The Black Cat." As Toni Morrison has illustrated, however, it would be a mistake to assume that the seemingly conspicuous absence of blackness in these narratives signifies its actual occlusion from them. In fact, the overwhelming whiteness of *Tales* draws attention to itself precisely because so much about these narratives hinges upon the characters' "dark" inner selves coming to light. In her landmark 1988 lecture, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" and later, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison sought to draw attention to how the presence of African peoples in America or, in some cases,

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164 I am modifying James Smethurst's list of five primary aspects of the classic gothic that he suggests can also be found in the American slave narrative: 1.) unrightful and violent usurpation 2.) the prominence of patriarchal tyranny 3.) transgressive sexuality that accompanies relations of power 4.) instability in the markers of social identity (family, class, race, gender, nationality, etc.) 5.) doubling of slave and enslaver. See "Invented by Horror: The Gothic and African Literary Ideology in Native Son," *African American Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 29-30.
their resoundingly absent presence, has operated as a structuring force in much of canonical literature. This denotative and connotative blackness constitutes an “Africanist presence” or “persona” against which true Americaness — constructed as free, white, and male — is always defining itself. “Africanism” therefore becomes “the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.” For Morrison, this Africanism also explains an obsessive concern in American texts with questions of autonomy, authority, newness, difference, and absolute power — all of which stemmed from the near-totalizing dominion that slave masters in particular, but whites en masse held over the nation’s black population. She eloquently conveys the ideological utility of a captive, liminal non-citizenry at the heart of the body politic:

this Africanist other became the means of thinking about body, mind, chaos, kindness, and love; provided the occasion for exercises in the absence of restraint, the presence of restraint, the contemplation of freedom and of aggression; permitted opportunities for the exploration of ethics and morality, for meeting the obligations of the social contract, for bearing the cross of religion and following out of the ramifications of power.

Morrison’s theorizations, at once social, cultural, historical, and psychological, seek to clarify mechanisms of racialized projection, that is to say, the ways in which the cementing of whiteness in the American imagination has largely been a matter of definition by difference.

Both the brilliance and difficulty of her argument lies in the notion that blackness is everywhere in our national literature “even and especially” when it seems to be

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166 Ibid, 44.
nowhere at all. Radical in its obviousness and scandalous because it illuminated the process by which whiteness has been manufactured as the norm, her call to begin searching for “unspeakable things unspoken” threatened a frightful, even *gothic* kind of revelation about the essential character of American literature. Most critics had of course long-assumed that black-authored texts invested considerable energy articulating a clear, distinguishable black identity in relation (or outright opposition) to prominent visions of whiteness. The idea that white authors and texts were similarly dependent upon blackness, however, menaced assumptions about the purity of whiteness, about its inevitable “naturalness.” This was of course the same naturalness used to construct the canon in the first place and that reinforced the fiction of those texts’ aesthetic and ideological innocence. An inequitable yet undeniable romance between whiteness and its opposite, or at least what had been figured as such, had all the gothic allure of a long buried family secret that could and should be unearthed if critics were willing to dig deep enough.

Yet Morrison’s call for a paradigm shift was not entirely revolutionary; it was rather an extension of assertions that got Leslie Fiedler into trouble years earlier with his notorious *Partisan Review* essay, “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” (1948), and later in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). Morrison and Fiedler’s discussions are connected by the overriding sense that American storytelling has always been haunted by its repressed, abject, or otherwise expelled elements. And like all proper ghosts, our phantasms have refused to go quietly. We could also mark continuities between Morrison’s work and that of Georg Hegel, or more precisely, Franz Fanon’s

\[168^{168}\] Ibid, 46.
critique of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic; her thesis is of course nothing if not inherently dialectical.  

Fanon problematizes the mutuality of Hegel’s dialectic between master and slave suggesting that it underestimates the extent to which a relationship constituted by dominance reproduces that dominance in all its operations. As Fanon says in a footnote: “I hope I have shown that here the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work.” See “The Negro and Hegel,” Black Skins, White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 220-221.

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170Morrison describes the evolution of her own thinking on the Africanist presence: “But then I stopped reading as a reader and began to read as a writer. Living in a racially articulated and predicated world, I could not be alone in reacting to this aspect of the American cultural and historical condition. I began to see how the literature I revered, the literature I loathed, behaved in its encounter with racial ideology.” Playing in the Dark, 16.

171One cannot help but notice that Morrison’s collected lectures manage to do powerful critical work in under a hundred pages while Fiedler’s notorious treatise clocks-in at rather self-indulgent five-hundred-plus.

172This is not the place to attempt a historiography of whiteness studies nor do I mean to imply that Morrison’s work was singularly responsible for generating the field and its various offshoots within different disciplines. It does, however, seem appropriate to mention at least a couple of the literary studies that perform the kind of analysis Morrison

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I would be remiss not to point out that Morrison’s work also benefited both from her stature in the literary community at the moment of its publication as well as an unprecedented willingness on behalf of the academy to listen to black women’s voices. The inroads that black women made into theory and criticism during the previous two decades coupled with the fissures opened up by the canon wars provided Morrison with an audience primed to challenge conventional readings of classical texts. We might say that she was at the right discursive place at the right discursive time. Still, the work itself is what made it resonate, particularly her decision to focus on Poe as the American writer in whose work Africanism is most profoundly felt.

Poe’s almost neurotic focus on themes of exteriority vs. interiority, of mastery vs. madness, and of light vs. darkness place him neatly within a critical framework that hopes to reveal the hidden racial politics of “white” texts. His identity – as a southern writer who lived in close proximity to slavery and who even advocated for the institution’s merits – also made him a logical and convincing choice to bolster Morrison’s case. Yet the regionalizing of Poe, and more specifically of his racial attitudes, has been overstated if not necessarily by Morrison, than by other critics who have kept him at a distance from the American literary renaissance. Teresa Goddu, whose work is called for such as Valerie Melissa Babb’s *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (NY: New York University Press, 1998) and McKay Jenkins’ *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940s* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

173 A brief survey of the Winston Napier edited *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (2000) reveals an impressive twenty-four of fifty-one total essays written by women. Morrison’s work would likely not have had such an impact without the theoretical foreground laid by scholars like Barbara Smith, Deborah McDowell, Hazel Carby, Hortense Spillers, Barbara Christian, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Evelyn Hammonds, Ann duCille, along with many others. That many of these scholars themselves addressed Morrison’s work points toward a nurturing dialogical relationship between author and critic that deserves more attention elsewhere.
transparently informed by Morrison, argues against the tendency to use Poe's gothic oeuvre and the American South more generally as "the nation's safety valve: as the repository for everything that the nation is not."\(^{174}\) Poe's significance cannot be so conveniently quarantined and his texts, though undoubtedly influenced by his southern experience, bespeak larger concerns about how liberty has been defined. We would be better served to understand Poe's "sinister" themes as indicative of a national ambivalence about race and rights, or, as Saidiya Hartman has argued, about how enunciations of freedom and subjugation have presupposed one another in American culture and law.\(^{175}\) Goddu elaborates Morrison's Africanism for the purpose of situating "the American gothic within specific sites of historical haunting, most notably slavery."\(^{176}\) She goes on to address Poe's work, and more specifically *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, not in order to redeem the text from his proslavery sentiments, but to historicize his politics within the highly unstable and often contradictory articulation of whiteness that manifests within his gothic universe.\(^{177}\)

Several other scholars have also taken up Morrison's call to investigate more thoroughly the racialized themes in Poe's work. Eugenia DeLamotte uses Morrison's Africanist persona to examine the relationship between what she calls the "Anglo-Gothic" and the history of racial formation. For DeLamotte, the compulsive search in gothic novels to articulate and cordon off a unified and rational self from some more primitive "dark" otherness mirrors cultural attempts to solidify race as an essential,

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\(^{176}\) *Gothic America*, 10.

\(^{177}\) Ibid, 82.
biological category. As she observes: "the rise and flowering of the Gothic novel in
Britain and the U.S. between 1765 and 1850 coincides with the emergence and
codification of modern conceptions of 'race.'"\(^{178}\) The historical formation of the
American gothic narrative, along with its central metaphors and characteristic figures of
speech, was therefore inseparable from the encoding of race in cultural,
[pseudo]scientific, and legal terms. Justin Edwards has gone even further arguing:

> It was a 'racial gothic' discourse that employed striking and metaphoric images to
filter and give meaning to the social hierarchies of racial domination and
subordination institutionalized through slavery and maintained in the
disenfranchising effects of the segregation laws and lynching of the postbellum
period.\(^{179}\)

Although both Edwards and DeLamotte are primarily concerned with nineteenth century
texts and discourses, their observations are useful for thinking about Corman’s Poe
adaptations in the early sixties. For if Poe’s original work evidences the racial tumult of
the antebellum period by exploring an equivocating whiteness, then it is also possible that
Poe’s work, once translated to the medium of film, might have offered similar
opportunities for interrogating a shifting national discourse of race and rights. In other
words, it makes sense that Poe’s stories regained popularity in the early sixties, during
what was arguably the peak of the long civil rights movement: a cultural moment when
the ideologies underlying white supremacy were being aggressively challenged, when the
legal mechanisms that both affirmed white privilege and assured black discrimination
were being forcefully contested, and when new narrations of black subjectivity and self-

\(^{178}\) Eugenia DeLamotte, “White Terror, Black Dreams: Gothic Constructions of Race in
the Nineteenth Century” in *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the
Literary Imagination*, ed. Ruth Beinstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard (Jefferson, NC:
\(^{179}\) *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and The American Gothic* (Iowa City, Iowa:
University of Iowa Press, 2003), xi.
determination were being prominently articulated. In this context, the Poe adaptations serve as “documents in the history of racial formation,” or, more accurately, of racial reformation.\textsuperscript{180}

Several of the adaptations, which included in all, \textit{House of Usher} (1960), \textit{Pit and the Pendulum} (1961), \textit{Premature Burial} (1962), \textit{Tales of Terror} (1962), \textit{The Haunted Palace} (1963), \textit{The Raven} (1963), \textit{The Mask of the Red Death} (1964), and \textit{The Tomb of Ligeia} (1964), wrestle with constructions of whiteness and blackness on both literal and metaphorical terms. In fact, the regularity and intensity with which some of the films conjure an Africanist presence draws attention to the racialized cultural maelstrom surrounding their production. \textit{Tales} presented black spectators like Jones with an opportunity to engage with a modified, twentieth-century “racial gothic” via the relatively \textit{safe} terrain of the cinema. One could encounter what Jones called the “horror and terror that goes along with the sinister” and what I interpret as the nuclei of power relations of late-Jim Crow coded in supernatural and psychological allegory from the comfort of a darkened theater rather than in a provocative demonstration. And because of the lack of literal black characters, one could do so without also having to navigate questions about black actors’ representation in popular film. I am not arguing that black spectatorship for horror could ever in and of itself constitute activism – far from it. My point, admittedly less radical, is that horror spectatorship submitted itself as an alternative means for black folks to interrogate the structural dynamics of American racism from along an axis of pleasure. Furthermore, Corman’s adaptations created a visual vocabulary for enunciating the terms of racial subjection and invited [black] spectators to imagine mastery over those

\textsuperscript{180} Delamotte, “White Terror, Black Dreams,” 19.
terms by unpacking gothic rhetoric. In claiming *Tales* as his favorite film, Jones asserted ownership over a representation of monstrosity and victimization that resonated all too familiarly with contemporaneous discourses of race and rights.

**Tales of Terror, Property, and Possession**

Joan Dayan has argued that, “Poe’s fiction is about property and possession and moves rhetorically back and forth between extremes of affect (heartfelt or undying love) and dispassion (cold mutilation or self-absorbed insensitivity),” and this is an apt description of the narratives in *Tales*\(^{181}\). The film begins with a black screen and the sound of what the narrator (immediately recognizable as Vincent Price) informs us is the beating heart of a dying man. A pulsing light then begins to flash, subsequently matching the rhythm of the heartbeat and illuminating a disembodied heart positioned at the center of the frame. This kind of confrontational and gruesome opening was to be expected by anyone with even a cursory familiarity with Poe’s subject matter, and yet as the narration continues, it directs us away from the literal and toward more metaphysical questions. As Price asserts: “It is with death and dying that we concern ourselves, [with] what happens at the point of death [and] what happens after.” From the very beginning then, *Tales* captures what Dayan identifies as Poe’s preoccupation with questions about the constitution of personhood both civically and ontologically, a concern derived from the tension in antebellum America to mark the slave body as civically “dead” for the purposes of inheritance or the transmission of property, but as a volitional, accountable

subject in the commission of a crime. Hence, the frequent appearance of persons trapped in liminal states between life and death throughout Poe’s fiction reflects the haunting presence of populations, namely slaves and prisoners, who were essentially “undead” in relation to the law. The stories featured in Tales enact the drama of undead personage with a vehemence that points toward a larger cultural need to redefine the boundaries of personhood, the limits of autonomy, and the perimeters of individual sovereignty in context of a changing discourse of civil rights and race consciousness.

The first story featured in the film, “Morella,” begins with the melancholy reunion of Locke (Price) and his estranged daughter Lenora (Maggie Pierce). We soon learn that they have not spoken in nearly twenty-six years because Locke was so grief stricken after the mysterious death of Lenora’s mother (for whom the story is eponymously titled) that he could no longer bear her presence. Their reunion grows all the more morbid as a consequence of three other revelations: 1.) that Morella died just months after childbirth and explicitly blamed Lenora for the strange illness that befell her 2.) that Lenora is herself dying from an unidentified illness 3.) that Locke keeps Morella’s corpse on display in one of bedrooms of their gothic estate. Not even a full night passes before Morella’s spirit rises from slumber in the form of a dark shadow; a series of tracking shots and dissolves trace the shadow’s movements to Lenora’s room where the ghost appears to strangle her to death. Believing Lenora dead, Locke covers her with the white bed sheet but then hears sounds coming from the corpse. When he pulls back the sheet to investigate he finds Morella fully restored. Struck by the uncanniness of his dead wife now alive before his eyes, he rushes to the room that houses her body only to discover

\[182\] Ibid.
Lenora's has taken its place. After a dropped candle sets the house aflame, Morella takes her revenge by strangling Locke to death as well. The final shots confirm the implication of possession as Lenora lies on top of Locke's dead body with her hands around his throat while Morella lies in bed with a devilish grin, her revenge apparently complete.

In typical Corman style, the adaptation literalizes the doubling of Morella and her daughter to an extent far beyond the original story. Poe's version has the narrator articulate Morella's motives with more precision: she proclaims from her deathbed that her child will serve as a kind of psychic recompense for Locke's failure to love her in life. She thus affects a conscious will to haunt and the child, "which breathed not until the mother breathed no more," functions as a tool of her transcendent power over Locke.\(^\text{183}\)

The original tale also locates much of the horror of Morella's being in her voracious mental capacity and linguistic mastery or, as Locke puts it, her "profound erudition" and "[gigantic] powers of mind" (EAP, 234). The obvious way to read Morrison's Africanist presence in this dynamic is to understand Morella's monstrosity as akin to a once illiterate slave that when confronted with the opportunity for idiomatic gaming, exhibits a chilling locutionary aptitude and even begins to speak back to his masters with vicious command. That Morella's simultaneous possession and reincarnation of the child is realized at the precise moment when Locke feels mysteriously compelled to offer up her name at the baptism, only further sustains this interpretation. Moreover, Morella's insistence upon projecting her felt presence, even after death, signifies not unlike a bondsman who could only write his or her full name rather than making the nondescript

“X” mark, which of course really marks nothing and at best designates the bonded individual’s “undead” status.

If the trope of possession manifests through sophisticated albeit cloaked supernatural form in Poe’s antebellum text, it is ironically because the contemporary dynamics of property and possession were not so ambiguous. Dayan argues that Poe had prime examples of exercises in dominance to draw upon for his fiction, specifically the slave market that was just blocks from his office at the Southern Literary Messenger as well as Eastern Penitentiary – the model for the infamous “Philadelphia system” of incarceration, which he became familiar with during his time in the city from 1838 to 1844. Dayan argues persuasively that these institutions informed many of Poe’s explorations into how “law can make one dead in life...can determine just how dead one is and when and if one can be resurrected.” Maybe even more directly applicable to the character Morella are the ways that she fits within the familiar paradigm of Poe’s women protagonists, women whose extraordinary and even death-defying will signals “an appeal to the paradoxes necessary to maintain slavery, to its specific forms of degradation and figurative death.” Hence, a figure like Morella, who punishes her unloving husband by giving birth to her own monstrous double, provided an apt metaphor for the generational impact of delimiting blackness as an undead positionality in relation to the state.

But what then of adapting these concerns to the early 1960s? Why is it that the film version represents possession in terms both more literal and more convoluted? One simple answer is that the film medium allows for and encourages the visual

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186 Ibid, 113.
representation of what can be only implied in written text. I would argue, however, that Corman’s film responded to its own concurrent relations of property and possession that rather than being concretized, were being further mystified by the discourse of civil rights. More specifically, I would like to think through how a film like Tales, released seven years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision and two years before the 1964 Civil Rights Act, reflected a dynamics of possession and property that was shifting in radical ways – or at least purported to. The prospect of ending segregation represented not just a profound legal and sociocultural transformation, but also the potential for a massive overhaul of the structural machinery that maintained discriminatory practices and policed the boundaries of citizenship. To state the case more bluntly: If the main ideological work of slavery as an economic and political institution, along with the forms of forced labor and social marginalization that followed, was to construct the rights-bearing American citizen primarily as a straight, white, male, property owner, then the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century presented both a practical threat to firmly entrenched traditions and an ideological reformation of proprietorial relations themselves.187 The challenge for Corman’s Poe films was not how to adapt the author’s metaphysical poetics to the screen, but how to render those poetics in such a way as to be relevant for a new audience of spectators like Jones – spectators contending with a confounding set of real life power relations. The Poe films would have to wrestle with the same question many black Americans were facing in the early sixties: What did it mean

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to be an autonomous, rights-bearing subject in theory, but still a thoroughly
circumscribed and civically undead subject in actuality?

The adaptation of “Morella” addressed this paradox by altering the character’s
motivations as well as the nature of her monstrosity. In the original tale, for example,
Locke describes her as an almost otherworldly being with preternatural linguistic
capabilities. She exercises her monstrousness primarily through acts of speech that, over
time, infiltrate his mind and overtake his will:

would Morella place her cold hand upon my own, and rake up from the ashes of a
dead philosophy some low, singular words, whose strange meaning burned
themselves in upon my memory. And then, hour after hour, would I linger by her
side, and dwell upon the music of her voice – until at length, its melody was
tainted with terror, - and there fell a shadow upon my soul – and I grew pale, and
shuddered inwardly at those too unearthly tones. (EAP, 235-236)

Language and perhaps even more importantly, voice, becomes a primary tool by which
she elicits his submission. For as Dayan so shrewdly suggests: “Poe’s dramatization of
possession – a reciprocal devouring of self and other – reminds us of the force of
language, especially literary language, to allow the covert continuation of domination.”

In this sense, both the weaponry of Morella’s conquest and the property to which she
continually attempts to lay claim transcend the physical realm and encompass the
landscape of Locke’s mind, will, and sense of autonomy. As he says about his unwitting
surrender to her: “I abandoned myself implicitly to the guidance of my wife” (EAP, 234).
Poe configures “Morella” only partly then as a story about spiritual possession; it is more
accurately a tale about the sense of entitlement and mastery that comes with possession,
about a conception of selfhood that can only register others as property. For evidence of

188 Joan Dayan, “Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves,” American Literature 66,
this epistemological scheme, we need look no further than Locke’s own frustrated, resentful narration of Morella’s control over him and his attempts to wrestle it back. He exclaims in eager anticipation of her death: “for many weeks and irksome months – until my tortured nerves obtained the mastery over my mind [my emphasis], and I grew furious with delay…like shadows in the dying of the day” (EAP, 236).

In stark contrast, Corman’s film actually strips away much of Morella’s monstrous erudition by having the story begin after her death. None of the elements central to her characterization in the written tale, such as her mysterious progeny, intimidating intellect, verbal dexterity, or inexplicable comprehension of the “principium individuationis,” make it into the movie. Instead, she appears simplistically as a vindictive ghost who wants revenge on both her daughter and Locke. Problematically, though, the film never explains just what affront she seeks to avenge, only that she blames Lenora (and presumably Locke by extension) for her death. Simplifying the character’s pathology in this way feels much like an overworked attempt at ramping up the drama of a narrative lacking built-in cinematic set pieces (e.g. “The Pit and the Pendulum”) or explicit physical violence (e.g. “The Black Cat”). And yet a more circuitous and perverse possessive relationship between mother and daughter complicates what initially seems like a dumbing down of the source material. No longer the conscious author of her own monstrousness, Morella becomes a victim trapped in a vicious pattern of usurpation with her offspring, with mother and daughter each expropriating the life force of the other in order to birth or rebirth herself. Possession thereby plays itself out in

189 Amidst the philosophical inquiries that occupy Locke and Morella’s conversations is the concept of the “principium individuationis” defined in the story as “the notion that identity which at death is or is not lost forever,” “Morella,” 235.
exceedingly destructive fashion in the film, yearning not simply to mark the possessed as property, as with Morella’s psychic hold over Locke in the original story, but rather threatening to obliterate both the keeper and kept in an all-consuming rage.

With this in mind, the distinction between how each text deals with possession can perhaps be best conceptualized in the following way: Poe’s antebellum story narrates the condition of mental enslavement while the adaptation depicts acts of literal, physical occupation. In fact, the latter text emphasizes the corporeal to such an extent that even its few attempts at figurative language fail. Consider, for instance, how Locke describes his state of being in the wake of Morella’s death: “When she died, I died with her. All that remained of me was this…this walking corpse, this shell, this ghost of flesh [my emphases]. Thus, the rhetoric of possession, which has been altered here to reflect Locke’s positive admiration of his beloved rather than his deep-seated resentment toward a master, demands embodiment in a way that the original story did not.

In addition to narrating his liminality in markedly physical terms, Corman’s Locke also articulates the configuration of the master/slave relationship as a process of self-erasure. As such, the film alters his characterization from the original story almost as much as it alters Morella’s. Whereas before he acted as the beast of her burden, doomed to labor at the behest of her psychic dominance, he now becomes a full-fledged subject whose ontology mimics hers. Ironically, however, this restructuring of Locke’s subjectivity does not make the character any fundamentally freer than he was in Poe’s tale. He becomes only a partial participant in the scheme of possession and property, and his enfranchisement is still structured by Morella’s haunting presence. In keeping with the film’s tendency to literalize the original story’s more metaphorical representation, her
hold over him is exhibited not in an increasingly monstrous resemblance between her and her daughter, but in her actual decaying corpse. Locke refuses to leave the dilapidated, gothic estate or properly inter Morella's body, further evincing the degree to which his subjectivity continues to be shaped by their possessive relationship even after her death.

Perhaps the truly sinister quality in Tales – the same quality in which Jones seemed to find "strange enjoyment" – was its desire to present characters confined by forces both tangible and intangible. In this sense, Locke, Morella, and Lenora each come to symbolize a different kind of bonded subjectivity along a continuum of mid-twentieth century race consciousness. Such a reading would understand Locke's circumstance as akin to black Americans who simultaneously espoused and were encapsulated by civil rights rhetoric that sought integration but offered only desegregation in its stead. In other words, Locke becomes a subject that has volition without agency and awareness without mobility. Alternatively, Morella resurrects herself and overcomes the paralysis of undead personage only to act out with all the misplaced rage and bluster of a riot. The problem with her violence is that her anger so overwhelms definitive utterance that it cannot speak truth to the weight of her oppression. Her anger can only consume; it cannot produce. So virulent is her rage that she actually consumes her own offspring. It makes sense then that Lenora bears the weight of both her parents' overburdened perspectives. We can even read the child's mysterious terminal illness as a manifestation of this generational liability. Lenora signifies, in her very personhood, a legacy of destructive and demoralizing proprietorial relationships, subsequently offering black spectators an unexpected point of identification. For just as they were struggling with the deleterious
effects of systemic discrimination, Lenora’s hauntedness seems to be killing her from the inside out.

Poe’s “Morella” originally expressed itself as a tale about mental slavery imposed through language because it was produced in a cultural (and legal) context in which the boundaries between those with a fully imagined sense of autonomy as well as access to literacy (and those without either) were so starkly demarcated.\(^{190}\) The experiential distance between a free, literate white man whose testimony could speak “truth” in a legal proceeding and the dismissible word of a black slave barred from even trying to acquire the skills necessary for certain language practices, could not have been further apart. Put another way, the always-apparent actuality of physical bondage coupled with prohibitions on slave literacy precipitated a need for narratives that voice the mental and linguistic aspects of possession. The “unspeakable unspoken” in Poe’s story emerges as a desire for a poetics that could capture the rhetorical action of captivity: the process by which language constructs one as property in both mind and soul, not just body. I am arguing then that Poe’s antebellum tale emphasizes the horror of cerebral and linguistic

containment precisely because the horror authorized by physical and legal power apparatuses was already so visible.

In turn, the early-1960s adaptation seems to fixate on corporealizing subjugation as if it was trying to hint at some latent longing for an easily readable poetics of possession. Yet, the attention paid to the body in Corman’s treatment cannot be adequately explained as a response to a lack of demonstrative physical control in the corresponding culture. If anything, the years immediately surrounding the film’s release were replete with reminders about the physical dangers still faced by resistant black bodies. Civil rights activists, in particular, deployed strategies that depended on the-body-in-peril and consequently revealed the degree to which black people (or those who allied themselves with their plight) were susceptible to palpable and immediate forms of violence. Organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, anticipated that dismantling the architecture of Jim Crow would be met by brutal opposition, but even they often underestimated the lengths to which those hoping to preserve racial hierarchies would go.

The attacks on the 1961 Freedom Riders serve as an important case in point. While attempting to fight transit system segregation in Alabama, the volunteers (both black and white) experienced vicious beatings, arrests, and perhaps most infamously, the firebombing of one of their buses. The cruel irony of this disciplinary violence was that it made the consequences of disrupting the dominant order more seeable than ever while simultaneously hiding the arbiters of force from view. As Raymond Arsenault describes in his history of the campaign, law enforcement officials colluded directly with white
supremacist organizations like the Klu Klux Klan and the National States Rights Party in order to sanction attacks on the Freedom Riders and also to ensure that evidence could not be collected after the fact.¹⁹¹ AIP released Tales against a cultural backdrop where both physical and mental regulatory techniques could be felt unmistakably. At the same time, many of the primary actors in this racial “drama” were able to resist identification, which created an image of power as a nebulous and omnipresent phenomenon.

Corman’s version of “Morella” was perhaps so pleasurable to watch because it works in quite the opposite way, using its supernatural conceits to assign monstrosity to the title character. Morella repossesses Lenora so completely that any ambiguity about who holds the power in the narrative disappears. This repossession fails as much as it succeeds, however, in that while the adaptation leaves the audience with an identifiable monster and an obvious set of victims, the conflict between them resists the comfortable restoration of familiar proprietorial relations. Fire engulfs all three characters, and there can be no safe return to the previous terms of possession – no going back to the comparatively simplistic relationship between owner and property, master and slave. To possess and more precisely, to possess in totality, announces itself here as a willful embrace of oblivion. In this light, the ruined gothic estate that occupies the vignette’s final frame and the burned-out Freedom Riders’ bus bear an uncanny resemblance to one another, each symbolizing the costs of proprietary notions of selfhood. Just as Morella could only have her revenge at the expense of everything else, angry white mobs could only reclaim the social order represented by segregated seating by destroying the whole vehicle. This act might have sent a clear signal about Southern hostility toward change,

but it also acknowledged the threat the Freedom Riders’ defiance posed to segregation and the white supremacist ideology that informed it. The bus bombing, not unlike the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist church in Birmingham was if not a nihilistic statement about the future of U.S. race relations, certainly an apocalyptic one.\footnote{For detailed discussion of the Sixteenth Street bombing, see Glenn T. Eskew, \textit{But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Movement} (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), Diane McWhorter’s \textit{Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution} (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001), and Spike Lee’s documentary, \textit{4 Little Girls} (1997; 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks/Home Box Office, 2001), DVD.}

The idea that black spectators would have found pleasure in an inherently pessimistic story like “Morella” flies in the face of the more aspirational narrative of the civil rights movement. Corman’s film showed little interest in modes of passive resistance and featured characters that took as their right the ability to answer perceived injuries with violence. Visions of a world immersed in flame come to overshadow, if not replace, those of a heavenly promised land, suggesting that the film sought to tap into a salient desire for a more portentous counternarrative to that of long-suffering victory. Going to see \textit{Tales of Terror} allowed one to indulge in fantasies of excess, destruction, and sadistic revenge performed by people that usually succeeded in their malicious endeavors, even if the cost was their own damnation or dissolution. The second vignette, which was titled the “The Black Cat” (1843) but also included elements from “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846), adhered closely to this formula. Like the treatment of “Morella,” it streamlined the poetics of possession originally represented in both stories.

I have so far referred to \textit{Tales} as Corman’s text both because of the auteur paradigm’s explanatory convenience and because I hope, by the end of this chapter, to locate some continuities within his body of work. But the question of who holds
authorship over the Poe cycle is of course not so simplistic. Weaving together a coherent narrative out of two unrelated stories is no easy job for a film adaptation to do (much less a short segment in an anthology film) and the effort draws attention to an as yet unmentioned aspect of the film: the writing. Lauded science fiction and horror author Richard Matheson had already penned scripts for the *House of Usher* adaptation and *Pit and the Pendulum*. Corman once again tasked him with transforming some of Poe’s most psychological investigations into an anthology of workable narratives for the big screen. His presence is significant here for two reasons. First, adapting the cerebral tales demanded not just revision, but adding new material and flushing out minor subplots that were only hinted at in the originals. This was especially true of the second segment, which utilizes a new adultery subplot in order to connect the tales. Matheson also made for an interesting choice in that his some other work, namely *I Am Legend* (which AIP adapted as *The Last Man on Earth* [1964], also starring Price in the lead), evidenced an inclination toward using horror tropes as metaphors for racial conflict. Some critics have read protagonist Robert Neville’s failed crusade against a pandemic that turns most of the population into vampires as a metaphor for integration.\(^{193}\) Matheson has denied having any allegorical intention in composing the novel, but I would suggest that issues of race and rights nevertheless manifested in his adaptation.\(^{194}\)

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It is worth revisiting “The Black Cat” in some detail because of what Matheson chose not to include in his treatment. It featured another of Poe’s signature unhinged male narrators, this time providing a confession from the gallows as he awaits execution. The bulk of his account concerns the tortured relationship with his favorite pet, “Pluto,” the ebony feline of the title. Like Locke, the unnamed narrator struggles with the fear that the animal’s affection threatens to encapsulate and then obliterate his autonomy, triggering what Lesley Ginsberg describes as “an investigation into the peculiar psychopolitics of the master-slave relationship.” To read Poe’s well-recognized tale as a racial allegory about the dangers of absolute power is hardly a stretch, but some other Poe scholars have been more resistant to this impulse arguing that it would somehow reduce the tale’s significance. Leland Person offers one such qualification claiming that, “we can appreciate [the tale’s] analogical relevance to the ‘perverseness’ of the master-slave relationship” without recourse to direct racial allegory. Suspiciously, Person moderates his readings of Poe tales in this way no fewer than seven times, like a kind of rhetorical tick that reveals how talking about Poe’s fascination with color juxtaposition and the structures of dominance becomes in itself a haunted act. He also cites fellow critics Louis Rubin and Sam Worley who suggest that there are more productive analytical gestures than the “reduction” of Poe’s tales to racial allegory. As a

197 Person draws specific attention to Louis Rubin’s The Edge of the Swamp: A Study in the Literature and Society of the Old South (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State
consequence, Person's analysis takes on a conflicted posture, seeking to illuminate Poe's entanglement in racial politics without owning that agenda. His defensiveness makes a certain degree of sense given the hostility that has greeted some investigations of how Poe's advocacy for slavery may have informed his work. Despite these numerous qualifications, however, Person still ends up performing a largely allegorical interpretation and, at times, does so in ways that are actually more ahistorical than a direct allegory might be. It is as though in trying to run away from one supposedly reductive critical stance he runs headlong into another. I am thinking particularly of two moments when he reads the practice of late-nineteenth-century spectacle lynching backwards onto both the "The Black Cat" and "Hop Frog" respectively. To be clear, I do not take issue with Person's actual examination of the theme of amalgamation in the text, which is on the whole, very compelling, only what seems like a rather troublesome reflex to perform a certain kind of criticism while disavowing it. Behind this hesitance lie two somewhat strange assumptions. First, is that to perform a racial, allegorical reading...
would somehow preclude other interpretations; this need not be the case since the fraught relationship between masters and slaves was only one among many potentially significant historical dialectics that may have infiltrated Poe’s work. It would, in point of fact, seem far more reductive to ignore how Poe consistently codes many of his women characters or animals in racial terms. Second, Person’s reluctance insinuates that reading the tale as a racial allegory would somehow pose a less valuable critical endeavor than other attempts to pry beneath the surface. Again, Person does not himself imply this but his tendency to habitually qualify already well-argued points feels like an attempt to cut such criticisms off at the pass.

While duly recognizing the problems that our limited knowledge of authorial intent as well as audience awareness pose for allegory, I am still inclined to embrace it here because it is first and foremost, Poe’s own insistent language and imagery that continually constructs the narrator’s relationship to his subservient pet as akin to that of a white slave master and his black slave. We receive our first indication as the narrator conjures up the picture of a bonded creature with an inner intelligence that betrays its supplicating exterior:

This latter was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise.201

Much stands out about this passage, perhaps the most obvious aspect being the way that the narrator evaluates Pluto as if he were a prize won on the auction block, as though he was an impressive physical specimen made all the more valuable by extraordinary mental

capacity. Pluto appears like the kind of well-built (“large and beautiful”) slave (“animal”) one could trust to perform heavy labor but possibly other duties that require more mental discernment as well, hence the telling use of “sagacious.” In the body of a slave, however, such an “astonishing” degree of intellect is detrimental and so the wife’s “superstition” tempers this threatening attribute by implying that the “animal’s” intelligence should be cause less for praise than suspicion. Intelligence when combined with the supposedly innate diabolism always linked to blackness can only be a vice. Or, to translate her fear more plainly: No slave, no matter how seemingly submissive or intelligent, can ever be trusted because of his or her inherent darkness.

Although the narrator’s relationship with the cat begins in these half-aggrandizing and half-denigrating terms, it quickly takes on a more monstrous quality – this is a Poe story after all. First, the narrator falls into alcohol addiction, which alters his once docile and tender temperament for the worse. Then, he begins to interpret the creature’s “dependence” as an attempt to claim ownership over him and in so doing, he, like any number of slavery apologists, actually reverses the economy of the master/slave dynamic: “I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets” (SW, 349). He fails to recognize the animal’s clingy behavior as an appropriate performance of servitude and can only comprehend it as a projection of his own need to possess. This is of course the same logic that allows the slave master to position those on whom he depends as his dependents. A similar kind of psychological displacement manifests when recounting the moment when he subsequently mutilates the animal for pleasure:

I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a
demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame [emphasis added]. (SW, 350)

The narrator would have us believe, at least momentarily, that an alcohol fueled “demon” takes possession of his will, prompting him to act in ways adverse to his “original soul.” Yet after this, Poe quickly exchanges a psychological imperative, “perverseness,” for supernatural possession in order to account for the narrator’s mental state. As defined in the story, perverseness exists as a primal propensity toward masochism, what the narrator characterizes as an “unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for wrong’s sake only” (SW, 350). This impulse supposedly compels the narrator to cut one of the cat’s eyes out with a pen knife while it is still alive and shortly thereafter, to hang it with a noose.  

But why the substitution of motives? And is perverseness a satisfying explanation for these actions?

I am inclined to agree with Person that neither addiction nor perverseness alone explains sufficiently the sadistic quality of the narrator’s violence toward Pluto. For while his alcoholism does prompt him to abuse his wife and to “ill-use” his other animals, the attacks on what he calls, “the unoffending brute,” carry other racial and legal connotations (SW, 350). More specifically, hindering the cat’s vision mimics the kind of semi-crippling injury a slave master might inflict on his chattel – something severe enough to display the master’s power without doing so much damage as to make the

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203 Person argues that the spirit of perverseness has a much more specific point of origin: “it is difficult to miss the cultural and political cross-references: the psychology of a white supremacy that recoils upon itself as the most intense fear and guilt.” See “Amalgamation,” 216.
property worthless. The hanging, on the other hand, signifies a criminal’s punishment, thus invoking the other civically dead figure that Dayan sees haunting Poe’s fiction. That the narrator speaks from the position of the condemned man and essentially acts out the same manner of execution that he will later face is one of story’s most fulfilling symmetries. Morrison’s aforementioned claim that the Africanist other served as a means of thinking through “exercises in the absence of restraint, the presence of restraint, [and] the contemplation of freedom and of aggression” also resonates with penetrating clarity here. Which is to say that reading Pluto as a stand-in for the black slave actually reconfigures the narrator’s “perverseness” as an epistemological exploration of the limits of domination. He does indeed make the great Faustian bargain that Fiedler would argue lies at the heart of all gothic American fiction but more interestingly, he also presumes that some special knowledge can be gained from killing that cannot be gleaned from simply keeping or even abusing a subservient pet.²⁰⁴ He murders the cat, in part, because he can, and because the act finalizes its subjection while fortifying his unmitigated ownership. In other words, he exhibits the violence that comes as the logical conclusion of unfettered authority:

[I] hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence.; — hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin – a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it – if such a thing were possible – even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God. (SW, 351)

Poe uses his trademark excessive sentence structure here in combination with overwrought, abstract religious rhetoric to condemn complete possession as something
equally devastating to possessor and possessed alike. Behind the hopelessness of eternal
damnation lies the more discernible offense that is the narrator’s decision to inhabit a
mode of subjectivity dependent upon others’ total submission. I should say that in
advancing this allegorical reading, I do not mean to dismiss “perverseness” as a viable
theory of psychosis in the text, only to suggest that it works in this instance to mask other
motives with more direct historical correlation. Behind Poe’s morbid story of disturbed
psychology, might also be one of his most compelling meditations on what it meant to
practice mastery over another sentient being.

Ginsberg comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that the ritualized hanging
reenacts slavery’s greatest crime, which was the “equating of humans with animals.”\(^{205}\)
She reads the tale alongside several contemporaneous texts including child-rearing
manuals (which rehearsed the scene of pet abuse), accounts of Nat Turner’s slave
rebellion, various abolitionist and proslavery tracts, children’s literature, domestic guides,
and finally Graham’s Magazine, which served as a “meeting ground” for oppositional
ideologies on either side of the slavery debate.\(^{206}\) For Ginsberg, “The Black Cat”
deconstructs gothic fictions, abolitionist discourses, and sentimental repression strategies
by staging a conflict between a vulnerable dependent and its tyrannical keeper; the
latter’s confession suggests that the horrors of bondage will no longer be denied.\(^{207}\)
Throughout the rest of the story, those horrors come out from the shadows and the
dangers of self-ascendancy are laid bare.

\(^{205}\) “Slavery and the Gothic Horror,” 119.
\(^{206}\) Ibid, 110-117.
\(^{207}\) Ibid, 99.
Almost immediately, the narrator’s attempt to enact a categorical possession through murder begins to haunt him, and unlike in “Morella,” Poe chooses fairly literal phantasms in order to represent Pluto’s haunting presence. First, a mysterious fire destroys the narrator’s home and leaves a figure of the hanged cat set “as if graven in bas relief” upon one of the fallen white walls (SW, 351). Both the unexplained blaze and the all too symbolic image of the murdered animal make it apparent that there will be costs for this transgression. A second cat, clearly Pluto’s doppelganger, also appears; it similarly lacks one eye but also features a new, large white spot on its breast that eventually comes to resemble the gallows. On one level, the mark foreshadows the narrator’s fate. It might also, by Morrison’s logic, be read as a manifestation of the narrator’s own repressed, malevolent whiteness projected outward and now returned to reclaim its rightful place. After bringing the new cat home, the narrator establishes a convivial relationship only to have his feelings once again develop into a harsh resentment. Tellingly, he relinquishes the earlier self-diagnosis of “perverseness” and cites instead, his “absolute dread of the beast,” something for which “even in [his] felon’s cell, [he is] almost ashamed to own” (SW, 353). More than a little irony attends this confession in that he hesitates claiming ownership only now that he himself has become one of the walking dead. The gesture takes on doubled significance if we consider that guilt for one’s crimes and the fear of execution are perhaps the sole objects the convicted may own wholeheartedly.208 Only once the state takes him into its custody does he recognize the perils of total possession.

208 As Hartman argues while describing an incident involving a woman slave named Sukie who burned her master with lye rather than be coerced into sex: “criminality is the
Following a predictable trajectory, the narrator’s fear of the cat leads first to the sense that he is somehow being persecuted by it, and then to a violent lashing out as he eventually tries to kill the animal with an axe. When his wife intervenes, however, he is overcome with rage and murders her instead. The familiar trope of wrongful interment found in several Poe tales follows. Walling up the body in the cellar of what remains of their former home, and in a “false” wall no less, signifies a deliberate attempt to reconstruct decaying architecture. As he describes: “I re-laid the whole structure as it originally stood” (SW, 354). This attempt at repossession, like his earlier undertaking, fails. It would appear that even though his (white) wife should represent a more valuable piece of property than a slave, not even her murder and entombment can fully affirm his sense of dominion.

The story’s conclusion goes on to emphasize concomitantly somatic and linguistic forms of bondage when, despite having allayed the police’s suspicion, the narrator finds himself undone by a strange compulsion to speak: “I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness” (SW, 355). In almost the same way that Locke’s aforementioned spastic baptismal incantation consummates Morella’s return, the narrator’s insistence upon taunting the police with the “well-constructed” quality of the house calls forth his wife’s wrongfully interred body, subsequently allowing the very same “hideous beast whose craft had seduced [him] into murder” to alert the law of his crime (SW, 355). It is the cat’s cry from within the tomb to which Poe lends his most vivid imagery at the story’s end, suggesting that the slave’s speech cannot only still beckon to the master from beyond the point of seeming only form of slave agency recognized by law.” See Scenes of Subjection, Chapter 1, “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance,” 41.
obliteration, but also transcend the limits of formal language. Moreover, the narrator’s
description of the undead cat’s voice offers the tale’s most pronounced articulation of
bonded subjectivity begging to be heard: “a howl – a wailing shriek, half horror and half
of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the
damned in their agony and the demons that exult in the damnation” (SW, 355). Poe once
again draws on dramatic Christian rhetoric, but he does so this time in order to imagine
the captive subject’s desire for recognition. It should come as no surprise that this
vocalization reflects the voice of both the tormentor and the tormented; for the marks of
subjugation, once inscribed on the body and psyche, cannot help but show up in
succeeding utterances. The screams of Pluto’s undead double pronounce the agony of its
imprisonment within the wall, the imprinted pain of the narrator’s previous “perversions”
upon its body, and the narrator’s monstrous, possessive psychosis all at the same time.
When the police finally knock down the tomb wall to discover the wife’s abject corpse
along with the cat, Poe also employs an ingeniously simple sentence that figures the false
wall itself as a decimated carcass: “It fell bodily” (SW, 355). Hence, “The Black Cat”
ends by likening the very architecture of possession to a crumbling human frame.

With “The Black Cat” we can begin to see a disjuncture in Poe’s treatment of
possession and property that complicates my earlier proposition. I still maintain that his
tales about women, such as “Morella” and “Ligeia,” concentrate on the mental and
linguistic aspects of bondage that culminate in embodiment, but many of his tales about
men seem more interested in illuminating how psychological and physical forms
engender one another, a concern marked by the frequent invocation of architectural
motifs. Indeed, one of the likely reasons that Matheson chose to combine “The Black
Cat” with “The Cask of Amontillado” is that both tales feature sequences where the respective narrators/protagonists erect walls; the unnamed narrator in the former hopes to mask the cruelty of his possessive violence while in the latter, Montresor takes revenge on his enemy Fortunato by entombing him alive. Both of these acts are indicative of what Poe expresses as a decidedly white patriarchal compulsion to neutralize perceived threats to one’s subjectivity by fabricating prison-like architectural structures. Murder and premature burial become for these characters the means by which a white property owner not only recaptures his lost power, but also reasserts his claim over the property once and for all. This point puts me somewhat at odds with Dayan who argues that Poe’s tales about women are in actuality about the weak men enchanted by them, men she characterizes as “the delicate acolytes of erudite ladies or the terrified victims of the lady revenants.”209 She goes on to say that, “In these tales, possession, multiple hauntings, and identity dissolutions suspend gender difference as a component of identity.”210 I suggest contrarily that not only does gender remain crucial to how Poe constructs identity in his tales about both women and men, but that he even goes so far as to gender specific kinds of possessive acts. For Poe, women possess through language or by using their mystifying intellects to manipulate masculine neuroses. Furthermore, he implies that these modes of possession are what make femininity in and of itself monstrous. Women like Morella and Ligeia terrify Poe’s “enfeebled” narrators at once because they are women and because they affect possession in roundabout, deceptive ways.211 “The Black

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209 See “Amorous Bondage,” 244.
210 Ibid.
211 Dayan asserts that “Poe is preoccupied with repeated and varied postures of enfeeblement: a deliberate weakness that leaves only feeling, an obsession with the heart
"Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" on the other hand, present physical possession as a primarily masculine enterprise, as an act of necessity justified either by the perception that some "Other" is trying to assert an ownership claim above his/her/its station or by a sense of personal injury that yields entitlement. By Poe's logic, then, men possess through physical violence and even more so when they feel the entitlements attendant to their subject position have been threatened.

The ways in which Poe genders possession is noteworthy in that although Matheson could have seized upon the racial symbolism of "The Black Cat" to address mid-twentieth century racial unrest, the adaptation instead dedicated its energy to this question of how and why [white] men take pleasure in the physical confinement of their property. And in combining specific elements of "The Cask of Amontillado" with "The Black Cat" the adaptation wrestled more productively with the volatile cultural milieu of the early sixties than a direct translation of either tale could have alone. How could avoiding the racial aspects of Poe's tale allow the new text to take on racial politics more effectively? Was this more veiled (and almost certainly unconscious) critique part of what may have made the film more appealing for black spectators like Jones? And aside from its emphasis on architectural imprisonment, what elements of "The Cask of Amontillado" made it an appropriate story (as opposed to one of Poe's other tales) to pull into a combination narrative?

"The Cask" proves a comparatively easy story to summarize: A man named Montresor, having suffered the repeated injuries of another man named Fortunato, finally decides to get even. One night during a carnival celebration, he lures Fortunato into his

that links the white male writer, the white woman of his dreams, and the ungendered, unmentioned black." "Amorous Bondage," 249.
family crypt under the guise of a wine tasting and, after getting him very drunk, proceeds to chain him to a set of steel floor staples. Montresor completes his revenge by walling the unsuspecting man in with brick and mortar. Fortunato presumably dies while prematurely interred, although the only real evidence we have for this comes from Montresor’s final proclamation: “For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed the [remains].” Whereas “The Black Cat” deconstructs and condemns the idea of taking absolute possession over another person, this tale, published just three years later, implies both that the act is possible and that a man of privilege can do it without being checked by other authorities. As Montresor coldly declares: “At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled – but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish but punish with impunity” (SW, 415). His insistence on unhampered vengeance is all the more chilling because we never learn the precise nature of Fortunato’s offense, just that Montresor has decided to act after bearing ambiguously described “injuries” that “ventured on insult” (SW, 415). More important than the details of the grievance, however, is the lucidness with which he imagines a sense of violent dispensation. Montresor sheds no tears while carrying out his plan nor does his victim’s phantasm return to haunt him. Much more disturbingly, he takes for granted that mastery is his right and that it should be defended with the most extreme methods available. Poe had created, in severe contrast to the anxiety-ridden narrator of “The Black Cat,” a figure morally and spiritually unencumbered by his lust for control. In drafting the adaptation, Matheson appears to have grafted the two

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archetypes together as if to represent (within in a single body) the conflicted psychopathology of white masculine possession for a twentieth century context. The protagonist of the second vignette therefore takes qualities from both the narrator of “The Black Cat” as well as Montresor, namely the former’s ill-tempered alcoholism and the latter’s sense of persecution and entitlement. I argue that the combination also encouraged black spectators to oscillate in their identification with the character, recognizing him first as a symbol for insecure white patriarchy and then as an example of how that force tries to reassert itself when threatened.

Although Matheson embraced attributes from both characters, he rejected the “perverseness” of the master/slave relationship or the idea of an ill-defined insult as sufficient motivations for their violence. He chose two other more tangible motives – financial gain and marital infidelity – as replacements. This move, like the emphasis on embodiment in the updated treatment of “Morella,” literalizes what the original stories present as primarily psychological disturbances within their respective narrators’ subjectivities. The shift could be described as one from the mental and linguistic terrain of possession to a more literal contest over property acquisition. The second segment opens by planting the seeds for this contest as the new hybrid protagonist, referred to simply as Montresor (Peter Lorre), stumbles home drunk and demands that his wife Annabel (Joyce Jameson) give him money. She first refuses, pointing out that he has not worked in seventeen years and that they are almost destitute. Here the adaptation picks up on the original’s subtle implication that the narrator understands his wife as just as much
of a dependent as his pet. The scene deliberately undermines this idea, however, by depicting Montresor as a desperate and insecure lout. At one point he even asks Annabel for her “sewing money” so that he can keep drinking. Black women in the audience would surely have taken note of this detail and the way that it draws attention to the undervalued earning power of women’s domestic work. Black audiences as a whole would have appreciated the irony of seeing an entitled white man, slave to his own alcohol addiction, begging his supposed dependent for the means to feed that very addiction. This opening scene restages the original story’s deconstruction of the logic of white possession by making explicit the master’s dependence. At the same time, it also shifts emphasis away from the symbolic relationship between him and the cat, substituting the possessive marital bond in its place. The hostile relationship between pet and owner does not disappear entirely, however. Montresor makes verbal and physical threats towards the cat in this opening scene, actions that tie his mutually constitutive fear and loathing of the animal to his having been unseated as the breadwinner. He has lost control of his household and lashes out at both the cat and his wife by smashing the vases where Annabel might have hidden money.

The theme of dispossessed white manhood is also evident in another sequence during which Montresor panhandles on the street. He offers up a list of fabricated subject positions each intended to court sympathy. At this moment, perhaps more than any other, the narrative critiques what Linda Williams situates as the dominant American melodramatic mode: the main rhetorical appeal through which racial groups have made

213 Ginsberg draws attention to antebellum texts that make the explicit connection between slaves, children, and wives as dependents of the master, especially George Fitzhugh’s Sociology for the South, or the Failure of a Free Society (1854). See “Slavery and the Gothic Horror,” 105.
rights claims. As she articulates it: “we do not gain the moral upper hand by saying simply that rights have been infringed. We say, instead, much more powerfully: ‘I have been victimized; I have suffered, therefore give me rights.”214 This logic prompts him to frame his pleas first as a veteran of the revolutionary war, then as “a moral cripple,” and finally as a dying man. When none of these petitions work, he resorts to the more abrasive demand: “Hey, I want money!” This sequence has no reference point in the original and functions here as a way of pulling the character’s sense of entitlement to the center of the story. Again, watching a white man who had fallen from his privileged position be rebuffed by other bourgeois whites would have provided the scene with an added layer of signification for black audiences. It would have been hard not to notice that Montresor displays the same kind of shiftlessness, hot-tempered physicality, abusive domesticity, and crassness stereotypically attributed to black men. And though there is no evidence to prove as much, Lorre, with his rotund frame and consistently bug-eyed expression, also played the character with a tongue-in-cheek self-awareness that made him resemble comedic black actor Mantan Moreland. In this sense, Montresor’s character suggests that stereotypes about blackness – which Moreland often had little choice but to act out in either grotesque physical gestures or clownish dialogue – find their origins in projections of white anxiety about class slippage.215

If the adaptation tried to pull black viewers in by having them identify against a failed white patriarch, they would not be allowed to do it without complication. Lorre is very much the star of the show and the narrative makes several moves designed to

215 Bogle describes Moreland as a “round-faced, wide-eyed, cherubic coon.” See Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattoes, and Bucks, 72-73.
sympathize Montresor. Perhaps the most important of these was the decision to make the character a source of humor. Whereas both the narrator of “The Black Cat” and Montresor remain alien characters separated by their extreme narcissism in Poe’s tales, the new combination character exudes an undeniable relatability. Part of this, as I have already suggested, is a result of Lorre’s jocular affect, but much of it is also due to how Matheson/Corman incorporated the Montresor character’s penchant for verbal play, particularly ironic doublespeak, throughout the adaptation. In several instances, Lorre delivers his lines so as to connote the very opposite of what he says, such as when he remarks, “Thank you for looking into your heart,” after he violently coerces Annabel into giving him money or when he proposes the wry toast, “To your long life,” just before feeding poison to Fortunato.\footnote{Witty banter and doublespeak actually make up the bulk of the action between Montresor and Fortunato in “The Cask of Amontillado,” with Poe placing a great deal of emphasis on repetition. One could make a strong argument that Poe was trying to reproduce linguistically the excess of the carnival atmosphere in which the story is set. See discussion of pastiche in Chapter one.} Where Poe used excessive sentence constructions and religious rhetoric to convey the “perverseness” of the narrator’s possessive psyche, the adaptation uses irony and black humor. For African American spectators steeped in traditions of vernacular subterfuge and other kinds of masked communication, Lorre’s Montresor would have been viewed as an adept practitioner at signifyin’.\footnote{Both Corman and Matheson confess to wanting to add some humor into the film after playing the \textit{House of Usher} and \textit{Pit and the Pendulum} adaptations relatively straight.}

Making the character more likeable also explains in part why Matheson wrote the campy wine tasting contest into the story.\footnote{Both Corman and Matheson confess to wanting to add some humor into the film after playing the \textit{House of Usher} and \textit{Pit and the Pendulum} adaptations relatively straight.} This scene did not appear in the original and is easily the most intentionally humorous section in any of the vignettes. Its main function is to resituate Montresor as a man whose lowbrow sensibilities stand in stark
contrast to Fortunato’s highfalutin affectations. Montresor might have appeared to black
and white audiences alike as an entitled, abusive drunk, but at least he was unpretentious.
In addition to making Montresor more affable, the scene also stages a competition for the
possession of expertise in which the worldly amateur proves every bit as capable as the
bourgeois professional – at least until Montresor gets too drunk to continue. In the
meantime, Fortunato’s exaggerated performance of the “accredited procedure” proves no
more effective than Montresor’s overindulgent gulps when it comes to identifying
different wines. The scene lends authority to Montresor’s gamesmanship as well as his
acquired practical knowledge in a way that black spectators might have saw as a minor
triumph of street smarts over formal education.

Maintaining this identification with Montresor through the rest of the vignette,
however, would have meant occupying a deeply ambivalent spectatorial position. On the
one hand, the discovery that Fortunato and Annabel are having an affair makes him more
sympathetic. On the other, he behaves less like a scorned lover than as if another man has
insulted him by trying to take away his property. As he remarks to a bartender just before
realizing the betrayal: “With women you have to assert yourself. It used to be that she
would argue with me and try to withhold what was rightfully mine [my emphasis]. Now
she gives me all the money I ask for and I can stay away the entire night doing exactly as
I please, which happens to be drinking.” Immediately after this he realizes his wife’s
performance of submission has been a ruse to distract him from the affair. It is therefore
precisely the moment when Montresor believes he has fully regained his mastery that that
mastery is most compromised.
The rest of the vignette stages his calculated attempts to recapture his lost sense of ascendency. First, he murders his wife, although Corman avoids the original scene's gory dismemberment in favor of a suggestive fade to black. We can read this formal device as an unintended manifestation of the Africanist presence within the story; slipping into visual blackness signals Montresor's own slippage into the realm of abjection, although not to become abject himself. Rather, Fortunato's attempt to steal his property has given him a taste of what it means to have one's authority taken away and so he responds with a totalizing act of possession by walling Annabel and Fortunato in together. In keeping with the original, Fortunato is alive when interred. Given the choice between either "The Black Cat's" condemnation of absolute power and "The Cask of Amontillado's" apparent endorsement of it, Matheson chose the former. Montresor does not escape with impunity but is instead haunted by his crimes in a bizarre dream sequence: Fortunato and Annabel break free from their tomb, rip Montresor's head from his body, and then play catch with it. Like the narrator of "The Black Cat," he also betrays himself through language, first while celebrating at a bar and then later as the police come to inspect the house. He seems unable to help himself from hinting at his crimes during his celebratory toast: "To my precious wife without whose money this splendid occasion would not be possible. Where she is now, she won't need it anyway." This suspicious remark leads the police to investigate and he taunts them until "the beast's" howl gives him away.

Matheson/Corman again chose to provide literal manifestations of the narrator's neurosis in the form of hallucinations (reptiles and spiders) as well as Fortunato and Annabel's mocking voices on the soundtrack.
The Corman/Matheson version of “The Black Cat” does not, therefore, try to adapt Poe’s racial allegory to confront twentieth-century race issues straight on, or in any conscious way, but it did pull a more implicit polemic in Poe’s text(s) to the center of the narrative, specifically the idea that maintaining white masculine subjectivity demands acquiring and containing property. Recognizing what Hartman identifies as the inextricable link between property ownership and racial formation in U.S. culture, black spectators could have read *Tales* as a meditation on what happens when white ownership claims are contested. Her characterization of the historical connection between race and property bears repeating:

race formerly determined who was “man” and who was chattel, whose property rights were protected or recognized and who was property, which consequently had the effect of making race itself a kind of property, with blackness as the mark of object status and whiteness licensing the proprietorship of self.219

So, while black spectators may have been able to take some “strange enjoyment” in “the sinister” by oscillating between a variety of perspectives during this second segment, that enjoyment would have likely been marked by the tensions associated with these historical imperatives. To identify against Montresor might mean inhabiting a familiar position of disenfranchisement in which one was once again subject to forms of aggressive containment. To laugh at his clever verbal play and his almost minstrel-like performance of white bourgeois masculinity would be to acknowledge how race gathers legibility as much from things like dialect and bodily movement as skin color. To take part in Montresor’s revenge would have meant making oneself complicit in his desire to repossess both his property and his proprietary whiteness. The point is not that taking on any one of these viewpoints is more progressive or regressive than another, but that these

219 *Scenes of Subjection*, 119.
along with a whole set of positions that we cannot entirely predict or reproduce) were available to black spectators. Further, the pleasure for these audiences might have lied in the way that the horror film, arguably more so than any other genre during mid-twentieth-century, not only allowed but even encouraged black spectators to imagine the various positionalities surrounding the act of possession.

The final segment in *Tales*, “The Case of Dr. Valdemar,” takes up issues of possession, autonomy, and mastery even more directly than the first two. This is perhaps because Poe’s story about an experiment in mesmerism provided such a readily applicable metaphor for the *undead* nature of black subjectivity. The doctor who performs the experiment and who also narrates the tale describes putting M. Valdemar under hypnosis at the precise moment of death, subsequently leaving him trapped in an in-between state. The experiment ends horribly when the doctor is forced to awaken Valdemar from his trance and his body dissolves into a “liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putrescence.” [220] Perhaps the signal difference between the antebellum narrative and the Matheson/Corman adaptation is that the former presents Valdemar’s captivity as a kind of benign albeit morbid experiment in scientific curiosity, while the latter unabashedly turns the doctor into a power hungry monster; in the film he assumes control over Valdemar in order to steal his wife and take possession of his estate. As with the other adaptations then, literal battles over property take the place of more abstract ones, which is not to suggest that Poe’s story did not lay the foundation for Matheson’s more adversarial take.

The language of possession permeates Poe’s tale such as when the doctor clinically describes his previously failed attempts to bring Valdemar under his command: “His will was at no period positively, or thoroughly, under my control, and in regard to clairvoyance, I could accomplish with him nothing to be relied upon” (SW, 408). Still, the doctor goes out of the way both to gain Valdemar’s consent and to relate to the reader that his subject “was entirely willing that I should make the experiment of mesmerizing him in his then condition” (SW, 410). In placing such a heavy emphasis on the voluntary nature of the experiment, the doctor seems to be compensating for the degree to which he supercedes Valdemar’s autonomy and enacts his own agenda once the hypnosis takes place. We would be hard-pressed to find a better example of Morrison’s Africanist presence rearing its head than in the doctor’s account of an experiment designed to test the limits of his power:

With a few rapid lateral passes I made the lids quiver, as in incipient sleep, and with a few more I closed them altogether. I was not satisfied, however, with this, but continued the manipulations vigorously, and with the fullest exertion of the will, until I had completely stiffened the limbs of the slumberer, after placing them in a seemingly easy position. (SW, 411)

Although scientific inquiry initially obscures his desire for mastery, passages like this one make it difficult to ignore. He uses “I” four times while describing actions performed on another’s body, suggesting that Valdemar has become his property to be done with as he pleases and, in effect, an extension of the doctor’s own body. That he is dissatisfied with his “manipulations” until having “completely” exerted his will over his undead test subject bespeaks a process whereby being granted some power leads to a greater craving for total dominion. Mental enslavement begets physical coercion and entrapment.
The adaptation makes no secret of these sinister motivations and even opens with a brief demonstration of Dr. Carmichael’s (Basil Rathbone) frightening mesmeric power. As in the original, he goes on to perform the experiment as Valdemar (Price) is in "articulo mortis" ("in the grasp of death"), subsequently trapping him somewhere in between worlds. It is possible that for some black spectators, Carmichael’s attempt to enslave Valdemar through hypnosis and seize control of his assets would have served as an apt metaphor for the lingering psychological and economic effects of black bondage. As Valdemar lay begging to be “released” – to be either a fully realized entity with a waking consciousness or a thoroughly outcast non-subject beyond the purview of a master – black audiences might have recognized something of their own predicament.

The ending of the adaptation takes a marked departure from the source text in that Valdemar wakes himself from hypnosis in order to save his wife from Carmichael. This exhibition of will enables him to temporarily transcend his liminal status and suggests, not unlike the black cat’s howl, that even the undead are still capable of certain forms of resistance. Much to Carmichael’s shock, Valdemar (who is now powdery white in hue) rises from his bed and slowly begins to come forward decomposing before his eyes, during which his body takes on a viscous brown color. Although this look is mostly attributable to the low quality of Corman’s cheap make-up effects rather than any intentional symbolism, the final frame nonetheless features Carmichael, the possessive white master, fatally absorbed in a gooey mess of milk chocolate brown “putrescence.” Valdemar’s color transition from sickly/dry/fossilized whiteness to liquid/fluid/living brownness would appear to pose something of a color paradox: undead figures in film (zombies, vampires, etc.) are often marked by their visual whiteness and literal lack of
pigmentation while also serving as metaphors for the liminality of modern black subjectivity. This paradox when read against Richard Dyer’s compelling argument about the association between whiteness and death would then suggest that Valdemar’s awakening is really a means of trying to resuscitate the life force of blackness or, in this case, brownness. 221 Before reading the moment too progressively, however, we should keep in mind that Valdemar’s final act kills him at the same time that it appears to end Carmichael’s reign. The film ends by imagining that resistance is possible for liminal subjects, but that the costs for such resistance might well be everything.

Despite its frequently campy tone, cheesy special effects, and over the top acting, *Tales of Terror* handles Poe’s gendered and racialized politics of possession with a surprising degree of nuance. By literalizing his implicit preoccupation with questions of autonomy and mastery, the film allowed black spectators a chance to inhabit multiple orbits of empowerment and disempowerment within each of the individual segments. The film may not have featured any black characters, but this need not have stood in the way of black spectators being able to recognize its powerful analogies for the continued struggle to free black subjectivity from the legacy of an oppressive ideology, policy, and material practice. And as James Snead has argued: “It is not true that we identify only with those in a film whose race or sex we share. Rather, the filmic space is subversive in allowing an almost polymorphically perverse oscillation between possible roles, creating a radically broadened freedom of identification.” 222 Through a series of possessions,

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dispossessions, and repossessions, the narratives in *Tales* encourage the viewer to exercise just such oscillation. Black spectators struggling to make sense of a contradictory historical circumstance – one in which they were no longer property and yet were still denied the rights and privileges of citizenship – could have used Corman’s adaptations as a site for imagining their own kind of mastery, if not over any actual property, than over the same gothic discourse that had been used to deny them rights in the first place.

When compared to more highbrow race problem films of the period such as *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) or *Pressure Point* (1962) – both Poitier films – *Tales* expresses a deeply pessimistic view about the possibility of peaceful resolution to structural conflicts. This skepticism made sense at a moment when many Americans were still fiercely committed to maintaining and/or resurrecting systems of black subjugation. As if responding to this social discord, *Tales* has its characters battle for the right to possess their own minds, bodies, and souls. That many of them lose this fight or regain their autonomy at the expense of complete dissolution seems beside the point. More significant is how the narrative staging of these contests for power simulated the struggle for black liberation and prompted the spectator to abandon oneself to an insistently politicized kind of pleasure. Black spectators might have went to see *Lillies of the Field* for moral uplift, or *The Mark of the Hawk* in order to develop a more Pan-African political consciousness, but they went to see Corman’s adaptations and other AIP horror movies because these films more accurately reflected the hostility of surrounding cultural and political discourses. Some of the adaptations also picked up on the persistent fear of black empowerment that suffuses Poe’s tales, adding another possible way into the text for
black audiences. When Poe’s few black characters get access to control they tend to use it
to exact brutal revenge on whites as punishment for their “racist efforts to ascribe fixed
racial identities.” By introducing the theme of black retribution into the adaptations
Corman’s treatments forecasted the turn toward more militant ideology in the latter part
of the decade and what became a staple of blaxploitation films.

Specifically, Corman’s version of *The Masque of the Red Death* features several
racialized scenes of discipline and punishment, along with displays of cruel amusement,
and demonstrations of absolute power. Mastery thus becomes one of the narrative’s
primary concerns. Poe’s original tale was, frankly, not interested in these issues and most
of these scenes were created for the adaptation, which would seem to suggest a much
more deliberate attempt to use the source material to explore questions of race and
contemporaneous civil rights discourse than was the case with the others. At the very
least, the revisions in the story reflect the influence of an increasingly chaotic cultural
environment whilst moving toward the middle of the decade. The most obvious evidence
of the contextual impact on textual content was the incorporation of elements from one of
Poe’s most racially-charged tales, “Hop-Frog; or The Eight-Chained Ourang-Outangs”
(1849) into the larger story. The last tale to be published during Poe’s lifetime, Person
refers to as “a gruesome scene of black revenge” while Dayan similarly describes it as
“Poe’s envisioned revenge for the national sin of slavery.” By pulling this second story
about a court jester’s sadistic revenge on his ruler into a larger narrative about a prince’s
attempt to quarantine himself and his followers from a deadly plague, the film coupled
condemnation of total possession with a parable about the failure of segregated spaces.

223 Person, “Amalgamation,” 220.
This same critique continues into the last adaptation in the Corman cycle, *The Tomb of Ligeia*. One of the more faithful treatments, it maintained and even amplified the original tale's combination of Africanism and Orientalism while at once interrogating the politics of possession. Taken together, Corman's final Poe films articulate a more deliberate racial consciousness than the earlier treatments and courted black spectators with unmistakable examples of whiteness haunted by blackness.

Corman’s Explicit Africanism

The first three adaptations, *House of Usher, Pit and the Pendulum,* and *Premature Burial,* all contain hints of Africanism akin to the scenes of supernatural possession and architectural imprisonment that happen in *Tales of Terror.* I have chosen not to do a comprehensive reading of all these texts both in order to keep this discussion to an appropriate length and because I felt the text that Jones specifically cited should take focus.225 I have also chosen not to discuss *The Haunted Palace* or *The Raven* because the former was a Poe adaptation only in terms of its advertising226 and the latter took a largely comedic approach – it was the furthest from horror of any of the films in the cycle.

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226 Although *The Haunted Palace* was marketed as part of the series of Poe adaptations, it was actually based on H.P. Lovecraft's “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward.”
Corman’s treatment of *The Masque of the Red Death* on the other hand, took a mostly philosophical tale and turned it into a rumination on the nature of evil and the limits of control. Price played the part of the evil Prince Prospero, a devil worshipper who lords over the destitute peasants of his domain with totality. His power and capacity for cruelty are established in an early exchange between he and Gino, one of the villagers. Although Prospero has come to invite the village to an annual feast, Gino responds resentfully:

Gino: And you’ll throw us the scraps from your table as if we were dogs.

Prospero: Exactly. But these dogs have a loud bark and show their teeth. Why? Prospero responds to the challenge to his authority by swiftly ordering Gino and another man, Ludovico, to be killed. When Francesca (Gino’s lover and Ludovico’s daughter) begs for mercy, Prospero tellingly responds: “If my hound bites my hand after I have fed and caressed him, should I allow him to go undisciplined?” He then prompts her to choose which man will die, an especially sinister means of issuing punishment that if carried out, would implicate the oppressed in her own oppression. The discovery that another woman in the village has been infected by the “red death” halts the execution, but the extent of Prospero’s power and his sense of entitlement could not be more apparent.

227 It makes sense that Corman situated Prospero, a character that originates in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, at the center of the adaptation given the ways in which that text deals with issues of slavery and possession. As Thomas Cartelli observes, *The Tempest* was increasingly reinterpreted in postcolonial terms in fiction and theoretical works during the postwar decades in texts such as Octave Mannoni’s *Psychology of Colonization* (1950), Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), George Lamming’s *The Pleasure of Exile* (1960) and *Water with Berries* (1971), Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest* (1969), Roberto Fernández Retemar’s *Caliban* (1971), and Ngugi wa Thiang’o’s *A Grain of Wheat* (1968). See Chapter 4, “Prospero in Africa: *The Tempest* as Colonialist Text and Pretext,” in *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (London; NY: Routledge, 1999), 88.
from this early scene that has no equivalent in the source text. For spectators reading along axes of race and class, the dialogue could just as easily have been pulled from a Richard Wright or Chester Himes story with Prospero taking on the figure of an abusive white boss and Gino acting as the exploited black laborer. Interestingly though, the film juxtaposes Gino’s angry resistance against Francesca’s devout supplication; she initially appears on screen wearing a larger silver cross and later admits that she is a “true Christian believer.” Given the film’s release in June of 1964, only months after Malcolm X’s “Ballot or the Bullet” and a bit more than a year after Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” we might view these characters as respective symbols for the militant and non-violent wings of the civil rights movement.228 Prospero orders both of them to be brought back to the castle along with Ludovico before having the village burned to the ground. His commands make clear that he plans to use his new captives for “entertainment,” reinforcing the image of Prospero as a kind of slave master. If this opening scene had not already done enough to signal a racial polemic, we are given an extended shot of a burning cross, an icon that positions the oppressed villagers as victims of Prospero’s Klu Klux Klan-style disciplinary terrorism.

Once at Prospero’s fortified palace, the prince’s sadistic need for entertainment takes center stage. The first scene of these orchestrated amusements introduces the Hop-Frog subplot. In Poe’s original story, the so-named dwarf and court jester suffers repeated humiliation at the hands of the king and his seven ministers. Despite these insults, Hop-Frog remains subservient, that is until the king makes the mistake of striking his friend

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and fellow dwarf Trippetta. He then devises a plan to have the king and his ministers
dress up as a coffle of chained apes at that evening’s masquerade ball, during which he
hoists them to the ceiling and sets them on fire. The story ends with the crowd of revelers
staring stunned at the grim sight of the “fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable
mass.”229 The narrator speculates that Hop-Frog and Trippetta escape back to their own
country. Paul Christian Jones has argued that Poe purposely uses abolitionist rhetoric and
other tropes from slave narratives in order to demonstrate the potential dangers of
sympathizing with slaves rather than their masters.230 While much about Jones’ reading is
convincing, particularly given Poe’s well-known hostility toward “fanatic” abolitionists,
his analysis misunderstands the violence always-already embedded within the
master/slave relationship. He asserts about the seemingly excessive nature of Hop-Frog’s
vengeance: “Not content simply to humiliate his tormentors, he enacts a wrathful murder
upon them.”231 Missing here, and what Poe’s antebellum readers would certainly have
understood, is that no slave would ever dare risk humiliating his master in the way Hop-
Frog does unless it was a finalizing act. The master’s response to being even temporarily
made a fool of by one of his slaves would be a harsh if not mortal punishment. Hop-
Frog’s vengeance must be total if it is to happen at all. There is a consistent enough strain
in Poe’s tales for us to confirm his fear that white possessiveness could yield violent
black revenge, but the sympathy he lends to Hop-Frog might just as well be linked to his

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229 “Hop-Frog; or, The Eight-Chained Ourang-Outang,” in The Selected Writings of
428. Hereafter, citations included in-text.
230 Paul Christian Jones, “The Dangers of Sympathy: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Hop-Frog’ and
254.
231 Ibid, 252.
“complicated patterns of racism and antiracist sympathy” regarding the peculiar institution. By parodying sentimentality the tale nonetheless highlighted just how thoroughly subjugation penetrated every aspect of the slave’s life and in allowing Hop-Frog and Esmeralda to escape back to their native land, Poe also narrates a slave revolt.

This ambivalence about Hop-Frog’s action in the original tale gives way to outright revenge fantasy in the adaptation. Corman’s film substitutes a secondary character, Alfredo (Patrick Magee) for the king and his ministers and also renames the dwarfs “Hop-Toad” (Skip Martin) and “Esmeralda” (Verina Greenlaw). When called to entertain Prospero and his guests, Esmeralda accidentally knocks over Alfredo’s wine glass and he slaps her. Hop-Toad’s revenge comes much later in the film, but this early scene underpins how the enmity of the master/slave relationship makes its way even into the performance of “entertainment.” As Hartman argues about these tense moments: “When slaves were required to perform before the master and even when they eagerly partook of entertainment, such pleasures were tempered by their fettered condition and the ever-threatening exercise of the master’s power.” In other words, the real source of Hop-Toad and Esmeralda’s “entertainment value” lies in the performance of servitude itself. Accordingly, Prospero responds by throwing a glass of wine into Alfredo’s face both to remind him of the pecking order and punish him for overstepping his bounds – the maintenance of property shall remain the prince’s alone. This part of the narrative couples Alfredo’s unwarranted barbarity toward the innocent girl with his obviously lascivious gaze and use of lewd innuendo; he mentions wanting to “corrupt” both Francesca and Esmeralda the moment he sees them. He also jokingly points a knife

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233 *Scenes of Subjection*, 44.
toward another woman’s throat just before Esmeralda’s performance. His sexualized allusions work to align the audience against the character, but this happens in part because of a sophisticated simultaneity in which the women are constructed figuratively as black slaves and visually as symbols of pure white womanhood. And because much of the plot involves Prospero’s attempt to undermine Francesca’s faith, she also figures as a sign of Christian virtue and chastity. Alfredo’s desire for these women then manages to symbolize the slave owner’s sexual abuse of black female slaves and the potential defilement of white womanhood at the same time. One could hardly have gone further to demonize a singular character given the cultural moment.

These moves toward negative characterization would have made watching as Hop-Toad manipulates Alfredo into participating in his own destruction all the more pleasurable. Hop-Toad cleverly lures the target of his rage into donning the ape costume by appealing to vanity: the costume will be the most novel and frightening at the masquerade. The real ingenuity of his verbal maneuver, however, is implying that he is in the market for a new master. Hop-Toad therefore ensures the “reversal of situation” by falsely soliciting his own domination.234 As Dayan, Person, and Jones point out, the association between the apes and black people would have been an obvious one for Poe’s readership and only more so for the post-King Kong audience watching in the sixties.235 Still, Corman’s film removed all doubt about the costume’s racial connotation by having Hop-Toad literally whip Alfredo after he puts on the costume. He exclaims in jest: “Back mighty animal! I am your keeper, brought from deepest Africa to control your great strength. Back! Back!” Again, this dialogue does not emanate from either of the original

234 Person, “Amalgamation,” 220.
235 See “Amorous Bondage,” 258 and “Amalgamation,” 213.
tales and seems like a deliberate attempt to address the sensibilities of the mid-sixties audience.

Hop-Toad's revenge is no less racially inflected. He wears a genie's costume and has painted his skin greenish/gold while Alfredo wears the ape suit. They enter from a steep staircase at the rear of the frame into a crowd of revelers. The "ape" pretends to attack a white woman dressed in a scant gold skirt and top, a costume choice clearly intended to draw a sharp contrast between her skin and the blackness of the ape suit. Claiming that the monster is "too playful," Hop-Toad then proceeds to tie Alfredo to the candlelit chandelier and hoist him above the crowd. Alfredo, recognizing that the joke has taken an alarming and humiliating turn, says he "shall set [Hop-Toad] to tortures unimagined." To which the dwarf responds: "You have already tortured by your cruelty to my Esmeralda." After tossing brandy on "the African ape," Alfredo catches flame and the guests begin to scream. Their stunned silence follows just as in the original. Hop-Frog then runs off after striking his whip on the floor next to the charred body. If Person was being anachronistic in his reading of the lynching ritual backward onto Poe's story, we need not worry about making the same mistake with the adaptation. It seems hard if not impossible to believe that black spectators in the mid-sixties would not have gotten the irony of a white man turned symbolically black and then forced to experience a form of spectacular white "justice." Almost as if to wink at black audiences, Prospero tells the guards to give Hop-Toad a reward for his unexpected and "entertaining jest."

Other scenes of cruel amusement and discipline proliferate the film: Prospero makes his guests behave like farm animals in one scene; in another he executes a group of peasants who beg for rescue from the plague; he even forces Gino and Ludovico to
play a modified game of Russian roulette with poison daggers. While the action in these scenes goes a long way to cement Prospero’s wickedness, the moments when he describes his disciplinary ideology are just as racially loaded if not more so. Much of the layered dialogue in these scenes is probably the work of screenwriter Charles Beaumont who had collaborated with Corman on some of the other adaptations and with Matheson on *Burn Witch Burn* (1961). He is credited with co-writing the screenplay for *Masque* along with R. Wright Campbell. Like Matheson, Beaumont wrote for *The Twilight Zone*, but he expressed more overt political sensibilities than his contemporary. Beaumont’s touch can be heard most prominently in moments such as when Prospero explains the process of training a falcon to Francesca: “Do you know how a falcon is trained my dear? Her eyes are sewn shut. Blinded temporarily she suffers the whims of her God patiently until her will is submerged and she learns to serve.” For Prospero, to usurp another’s will is not only to gain control over the subject but also to become the singularly defining force in his or her world. He echoes this sentiment in another scene in one of the palace’s color themed rooms. Standing awash in the glow of lush yellow, he recounts an experiment in which his father locked a man in the room until he could no longer stand to see the sun or any other naturally yellow object. This account underlines the lasting imprint of subjection rather than just its immediate impact. Prospero, like Dr. Carmichael is unsatisfied with anything less than totally ingrained, permanent submission.

His insistence on describing these exercises of power as part of what he calls a “common family pastime” also places him in a lineage of “slave breaking.” As a result, he assumes that supplanting the sovereignty of others is his birthright. And given that nearly all of his conversations with Francesca involve getting her to relinquish her faith
(and will) to Satan, he becomes all too literally a “white devil.” The film therefore uses its devil-worship subplot (another element not a part of either original tale) as a way of coding its racial critique. One of the most important pieces of dialogue that evidences this encoding has Prospero try to rationalize his need for dominance to Francesca as they visit his dungeons. After questioning her faith, she claims: “I cannot answer, I have no learning.” In addition to likening her to an illiterate slave, the statement also allows him the chance to further explain his reasoning: “The world lives in pain and despair, but it’s at least kept alive by a few dedicated men. If we lost our power, chaos would engulf everything. Sometimes that power must be used to teach harsh lessons.” The film may have been set in medieval Europe, but black audiences would have had little trouble seeing how Prospero’s thinking could be applied to contemporaneous race relations. An apology for oppressive state action and a justification for white supremacy, Prospero’s worldview demands and continually reconstitutes his own need for mastery.

While *Masque* brings a certain elucidating insight to the complex mechanics of subjection, it was not without other representational problems, perhaps the most significant being a bizarre dream sequence that features some of the only literally non-white characters in any of the adaptations. The dreamer in question is Prospero’s wife, Juliana, played by Hazel Court who also starred as one of the leads in *Premature Burial*. In order to demonstrate her allegiance to Satan, she asks him to “send her a demon” as a representation of her sacrifice and commitment. She then drinks from a chalice, which cues the sequence. She appears, wearing a white gown and running through maze of mist and white sheeting. She eventually stumbles upon a bed over top of which lies a black falcon statue. As she lies prostrate, four different dancing “demons” enter from the rear of
the frame to stab her. Each is given his own individual treatment. The first man has bronze skin, wears a feathered headdress, and carries a small dagger. The costume possibly suggests an Aztec warrior. The second man wears what appears to be a sultan’s costume including a long white robe along with a heavy beard and a square black hat. He also carries a staff and a long curved blade. The third man is dressed as though pulled straight from an Egyptian hieroglyph. He also carries a smaller knife. The final “demon” is the most easily distinguishable of them all in part because drums begin to beat loudly over the already hyper-dramatic score when he appears on screen. This African “bushman” also wears and feathered headdress, a loincloth, knee bands, and cowry shell necklace. A rapid montage follows during which each man appears for a second time to stab her again in rapid succession. The camera never actually shows the men’s blades penetrate her. The act is instead represented by extreme close ups of her face caught somewhere between abject fear and ecstasy along with corresponding cymbal crashes.

However strange I have made this sequence sound, I can only have undersold it. Rather than subverting standard gothic topos, it seems to reaffirm the traditional association of non-whiteness with evil through Orientalist and Africanist caricatures.\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^6\) It would not be an exaggeration to characterize the scene as a kind of multicultural gang rape wherein Juliana is literally and symbolically penetrated in order to consummate her marriage to the devil. How were black spectators to reconcile the blatantly racist imagery of this scene with the larger narrative? Where and how could they position themselves

within it so as to retain the film’s other pleasures? Would they have been as offended as many contemporary viewers or might they have come to expect and even take for granted that such representations would be a likely part of their excursion into the horror genre? I do not have concrete answers to these questions, but this contradictory invocation of Orientalism and Africanism was not exclusive to Masque. Corman’s The Tomb of Ligeia also depended on these associations as part of the foundation for its supernatural plot.

“Ligeia” is another of Poe’s tales about a witching woman whose monstrous erudition and extraordinary will allow her transcend death and affect her own reincarnation. Like several of the other stories Corman adapted, it deals with themes of possession and architectural containment. It also contained multiple allusions to African and Middle Eastern history and mythology, particularly in Poe’s descriptions of the bridal chamber of the narrator’s second wife Rowena, who becomes the vehicle for Ligeia’s mystical rebirth at the story’s end. Dayan and Person have discussed in considerable detail the various ways in which Poe suggests Ligeia’s possible mixed-race heritage along with other manifestations of the Africanist presence in the tale astutely enough that there is little reason to rehearse the discussion here. I will only say about Corman’s adaptation that the film once again literalized much the original’s racial polemic and made even more explicit its Africanist shadows. It does this most obviously by inserting a black cat that represents Ligeia’s reincarnated spirit throughout the film. Price, who played the haunted husband, “Verden Fell,” actually wrestles with the cat during the climax in one of the most unintentionally campy scenes in any of the adaptations. Aside from the clear association of Ligeia with blackness throughout the film, black spectators

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would probably have taken special note of the deliberate placement of Egyptian artifacts throughout the mise en scène. A pharaoh’s head statuette actually becomes the topic of conversation in one scene as Verden remarks:

It’s wax. It’s a reproduction. I managed to make it myself. You see I loathe to open ancient tombs. [To] rob a nation of its treasure and call it archaeology…The eyes they confound me. There’s a blankness, a mindless sort of malice in some Egyptian eyes. They do not readily yield up the mystery they hold.

Verden’s not so subtle condemnation of archaeological practices that exploit African culture suggests another deliberate attempt to appeal to the sensibilities of a mid-sixties audience, and particularly to black spectators. Further, the film conjures up an Africanist presence in order connote a more general sense of mysticism that becomes the narrative’s primary animating force, the catalyst that enables Ligeia’s continued attempts at possession. The Tomb of Ligeia is probably the most hackneyed of all Corman’s Poe treatments in part because its invocation to the unspeakable unspoken is the least imaginative. Still, for black spectators, particularly those that were beginning to reach toward a more transnational consciousness, it would have proven no less an ambivalent spectatorial experience than the other adaptations.

Corman’s Gothic Intrusions

Anyone familiar with Corman’s oeuvre will likely be surprised with the level of narrative and visual sophistication in the Poe cycle and definitely with the above average production values. These films were AIP’s attempt to go middlebrow, allowing the
always-efficient director to shoot over the course of weeks rather than mere days. We should not be so surprised, however, to find that these films are invested in questions of race and rights. Corman has expressed his leftist political inclinations and interest in civil rights issues in various interviews. Still, the best evidence we have of an intentional racial critique in his body of work is not from the Poe cycle but from his adaptation of Beaumont's novel *The Intruder* (1962). Corman made and funded the film independently in between Poe movies and although it never found a broad audience, black or otherwise, it took an unabashed look at contemporaneous American race relations. Rather than look at the film as an anomaly within Corman's body of work – as a moment when he took a break from his typical science fiction and horror fare – I would like to position *The Intruder* as a text plagued by "gothic intrusions," that is, moments wherein the language of gothic horror and that of civil rights reveal their interdependence upon one another. The genre films Corman directed versed him in the requisite gothic rhetoric to take on a narrative that explicitly addressed civil rights issues.

In brief, *The Intruder* is about a white man named Adam Cramer (played by a young and still unknown William Shatner) who travels to a small southern town named Caxton in order to stir up resistance to integration of the local high school. The diegesis clearly establishes that Brown v. Board Education has already been passed. Cramer first gains the trust of one of the town's most powerful white businessmen, Verne Shipman, and soon thereafter, stokes the already present ire of the white townsfolk. Interestingly, the white residents appear to have resigned themselves to the idea that integration is now

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law; they don’t like it or agree with it, but they have accepted that the fight has been lost. Cramer crafts his rhetoric to reinvigorate their animosity, mainly by questioning the validity of the law on the basis of who composes it. On two separate occasions, he responds to others’ resignations to legality by asking: “Whose law?” Perhaps even more significant is that when attempting to convince Shipman of the righteousness of white supremacy, Cramer makes use of classic democratic language arguing that democracy is defined by “the collective will of the people.” Thus, the move toward integration fails to recognize a majority desire. To this, I think we should be prompted to turn Cramer’s rhetorical game back upon itself and ask not “Whose law?” but rather, “Whose collective will?”

As the story proceeds, Cramer manages to work the townsfolk into a frenzy – or perhaps just back to their normal state – prompting the harassment of a black family by a white mob, a cross-burning, the firebombing of a black church, the vicious beating of the single white proponent of integration, and at the film’s climax, a near-lynching of a black teenager falsely accused of raping a white girl. The lynching is stopped at the last minute when another man, the husband of a woman whom Cramer rapes, reveals Cramer as a charlatan. Ultimately, Cramer comes off as an insecure coward in search of power for his own personal validation. While this move could have the potential effect of positioning bigotry as an isolated neurosis, Corman’s film avoids such reductionism and, indeed, points to the myriad ways in which communal violence is engendered by race, class, and sexual politics. In this sense, the real triumph of The Intruder lies in its inversion of standard gothic typologies.
One of scenes that demonstrate this inversion features Cramer giving an impassioned stump speech to what appears to be the whole of Caxton’s white population. As the crowd gathers before the courthouse steps, he echoes familiar conspiracy theories that link the N.A.A.C.P. to both secret Zionist and communist plots to undo the American way of life. Little that he says is shocking and would have been even less so for Corman’s early-sixties audience. More significant is the way Cramer crafts a narrative of imminent and wide-reaching doom using what Edwards refers to as “the rhetoric of apocalypse, threatening the destruction and subversion of that which is imagined to be simple, pure, and natural.” As Cramer argues, “the real problem” is not the ten negroes integrating the local high school but a much more dangerous proposition: negroes will literally...control the south...The vote will be theirs. You’ll have black mayors and policemen the way they do in Chicago and New York already. How’d you like a black governor and black doctors to deliver your babies...And that’s the way it’ll be.” Cramer frames the threat not as a single object of opposition that must be eliminated but rather as the incubation of an epidemic that must be quarantined. This rising tide of “black supremacy” is characterized in catastrophic terms, what another white character in the film refers to as “a great, big, black flood.” Hyperbolic biblical imagery notwithstanding, we do have to take this apocalyptic rhetoric seriously for the threat of integration did, at least in theory, pose an existential challenge to the world as most Americans knew it. Recognition of black rights would, in fact, signal an upheaval in the way that American citizenship itself was defined.

240 Gothic Passages, xii.
Tom McDaniel, an editorial writer for the local newspaper who also acts as the film’s liberal white conscience, openly questions Cramer during his speech, asking why he is willing to cast his lot along with Caxton’s threatened white minority, to which Cramer responds: “Because I’m an American sir and I love my country, and I’m willing to give my life if it be necessary to see that my country stays free, white, and American.” Cramer’s patriotic appropriation of the more familiar colloquialism, “free, white, and twenty-one” is indicative not of the way that conservatism recuperates the language of civil rights, but, instead, of how that language already presupposes certain racialized entitlements. Cramer need not bend this rhetoric to his own ends so much as follow it to its logical conclusion. Corman cleverly juxtaposes this verbal imagery of an invading black horde with the visual image of a clamorous white crowd, suggesting that true source of monstrosity lies in the collaboration between state sanctioned discrimination and communal, white mob violence. Cramer’s positioning on the courthouse steps, which legitimizes his hate mongering by allowing it to collude with official policy, is intercut with multiple wide-sweeping pans of eager white faces young, old, male, and female. The almost demonic presentation of the mob is further enhanced by the approving hoots and hollers that punctuate Cramer’s pleas for action. The scene also juxtaposes extreme high and low angles – a technique borrowed right out of Corman’s horror films. All of these elements, set against the backdrop of the sweltering, southern night create an image of a tribal, bloodthirsty mob – perhaps the only thing missing are torches and pitchforks. Cramer’s verbal assault attempts to situate monstrosity in an amorphous black hole, the mise en scène presents a deleterious bodily whiteout.
The following scene links Cramer’s rhetoric directly to violence as a group of angry white men attacks a black family in a passing car. The camera positions the viewer inside the vehicle as the mob attacks but then shifts perspective, situating the spectator outside along with the mob. Contemporary viewers are likely to recognize a resemblance between the approaching white mob and a horde of flesh eating zombies. The mother’s desperate pleas for the father not to resist along with multiple shots of their terrified children in the backseat ramp up the tension. Nearly drawn into striking one of the white men who spits in his face, the father settles for a desperate, “Why?” Tom intervenes to break up the action. It makes sense to read Tom’s name as a signification upon Stowe’s classic archetype, which is altered here from submissive, long-suffering black slave to a more resistant, but still long suffering white martyr. In essence, Tom’s utility lies in sacrifice, which he indeed does; later in the film Tom convinces the black students to return to the high school after being frightened off by the church bombing and is rewarded with a severe beating at the hands of a white mob that costs him one of his eyes. I would argue, however, that even more significant than Tom’s martyrdom is his characterization of the event at this moment. Recognizing the causal relationship between Cramer’s rhetoric and the violence that proceeds it, Tom actually uses the word “terrorized” when trying to get the sheriff to act: “a family was terrorized on the streets of Caxton.” This signifier distinguishes the attack not as an isolated incident but as part of larger, systemic act of policing that is advocated by the community and sanctioned by the state. The crowd greets the sheriff’s purely rhetorical suggestion that he should arrest everyone with laughter when it would be the right action. The attack is, after all, an act of terrorism in which the whole community is involved including the bystanders. It was of
course all to common to have police arrest all participants during demonstrations of black
civil disobedience. Only when this logic is inverted does it appear absurd to the white
mob. What Tom does in explicitly naming the attack on the black family as terrorism is
to draw attention to the complicity of the state in maintaining white supremacist ideology
and sanctioning violence. Naming terrorism also suggests that the failure to police on
behalf of African Americans – who are positioned by Cramer and others as abject, non-
citizens – is as much an affirmation of hegemonic systems as a decision to enact total
surveillance. Both policing and failure to police can be viewed as complicit in terrorist
action.

Tom simply walks away from the situation recognizing the futility in his stance,
but the next scene goes even further to complicate the film’s treatment of civil rights
discourse. It opens in extreme close-up on Tom’s latest editorial, which boldly proclaims:
“Last night a law was broken.” Again, Tom serves as the film’s liberal conscience and as
we might expect, his lukewarm acceptance of integration is transformed into full-fledged
endorsement by film’s end. But Tom’s written and verbal claims, each a recourse to
questions of legality, are ultimately dismissed in the following scene. In it, Shipman
enters with Cramer who wants to run an advertisement in the paper but Tom refuses,
citing the ad’s failure to meet the paper’s standards. Shipman pulls rank reminding Tom
of his controlling financial interest in the paper and Tom relents. When Tom then points
to the attack on the family as a crime, Shipman responds with an expected, “probably that
there negra was uppity” to which Tom responds, “That there Negro wasn’t uppity, he was
just passing through town which is his legal right.” If we compare this interaction to that
of the previous sequence, then Tom’s written and verbal appeals and Cramer’s diatribe
become parallel articulations. The narrative inverts the gothic in the earlier scene by juxtaposing Cramer’s horrific characterization of the supposed “black menace” with the white mob. Here, it shifts the center of monstrosity wholly onto a dialectical relationship between white terrorism and white-controlled media.

Despite its clever inversion of the standard gothic color iconography, *The Intruder* adhered to the mainstream civil rights movement’s message of tolerance, non-violence, and a gradual path toward understanding. The sympathetic white protagonists learn to embrace change and shed their prejudices. The bloodthirsty mob is diffused through the last minute intervention of a more sensible white man, and finally, the lone outside agitator sits destitute, his attempts at possession foiled. The film does not so much unpack the psychology of false white entitlement as it tries to argue that white liberalism coupled with black resolve are the best means to bring about integration.

In contrast, Corman’s Poe adaptations present a cynical, apocalyptic, and at times violently resistant counternarrative to assimilationist thinking. Some characters do survive in these films, but just barely and not without high costs. Over and over again, the chief theme is that most people will be unwilling to give up their claims to perceived entitlements without a fight and that there are fundamental limits to sentimental, sympathetic appeals. None of this should undermine Corman’s earnestness in wanting to make a civil rights film, but what I have tried to illuminate in this chapter is that he may have been much more effective in reaching black spectators sensibilities in his horror stories. It is in these narratives that he truly captured the racial power dynamics of the era and offered a picture of the conflict that they were not getting elsewhere.
Horror, Black Spectators, and “The Long Civil Rights Movement”

Between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, horror films were among the most prominently advertised in black newspapers, a pattern which suggests a consistent black audience for such fare, and that the film industry actively courted this audience even while marginalizing black participation on and off-screen. As Robin Means Coleman has observed, papers like the Chicago Defender, the New York Amsterdam News, and the Los Angeles Sentinel so frequently featured articles and advertisements for horror – even when no other films were discussed – that the genre appeared to carry a “favored status in Black communities.” This favored status is surprising both because of horror’s often unapologetic racism and because it coincides with the height of what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has called the “long civil rights movement.” Hall and others have sought to expand the dominant narrative of the movement – previously book-ended by Brown v. Board of Education and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 – to include earlier Leftist labor protests and on-going transnational struggles for liberation. While

243 Some scholars have questioned the relatively quick adoption of the “long civil rights movement” paradigm. Eric Arnesen, for example, argues that, “In the academy, the notion of the ‘long civil rights’ movement has become a widely accepted and rather unquestioned one, subject to little debate or theoretical scrutiny.” See, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement’, “ Historically Speaking 10, no. 2 (2009): 31. David L. Chappell similarly argues that, “Historians of race and rights…have constructed a nearly airtight consensus about ‘the long civil rights movement,’ where unquestioning faith in
acknowledging a longer “black freedom movement,” this chapter investigates the especially turbulent period between the late-fifties and the early seventies. Why and how did the horror film amass such popularity among black spectators during this time of heightened racial consciousness and hostility? What strategies did the industry use to reach black audiences, especially urban audiences left behind by white flight? And how did the desire to attract black spectators influence the genre’s development?

Because horror films were mentioned hundreds of times in black newspapers during this period, a comprehensive accounting would prove both tedious and critically counterproductive. Instead, I have chosen to focus on articles, advertisements, publicity stills, and promotional trailers that typify the tensions in how horror marketing addressed black spectators. These materials reveal that horror’s appeal for black audiences ran along multiple axes, at least one of which concerned the increased visibility of the abject body both in the films themselves and in the popular discourse surrounding civil rights. Black spectators were put in the rather surreal position of having to reconcile fictional images of bestial black monsters, innocent white maidens, and virtuous white heroes with very real examples of black bodily abjection and white violence, such as the lynching of Emmett Till. I explore this tension by analyzing two contrasting images of from a 1956

continuity is equated with being on the right side of a moral battle.” See “The Lost Decade of Civil Rights,” also in Historically Speaking 10, no. 2 (2009): 40.

244 As Kevin Heffeman has described in his vital discussion of the distribution and exhibition of Night of the Living Dead (1968): “By the late 1960s, the exhibition branch of the industry was finally learning to exploit the growing suburbanization of the white middle-class movie audience through new theater construction and changing distribution patterns. At the same time, downtown picture palaces and inner-city neighborhood theaters enjoyed proximity to a large percentage of the black movie audience and were developing strategies to serve the communities near those theaters.” See, “Inner City Exhibition and the Genre Film: Distributing ‘Night of the Living Dead’ (1968),” Cinema Journal 41, no. 3 (2002): 60-62.
issue of the *Daily Defender*, one taken from a science fiction-horror film and the other of a black beauty queen. I then survey a 1957 page from the *Amsterdam News* which suggests that horror did not operate in a representational vacuum, but operated in a dialogical relationship with a network of other genre films that shared common sensibilities. Black spectators appear to have been interested in genre films that dealt with race issues or that expressed anxiety about mainstream culture and values.

I turn toward the sixties in order to examine how racial mythologies persisted in horror marketing, and to consider how black spectators may have used the genre as part of a collective exercise in self-mastery. In particular, the content and marketing of William Castle’s films incorporated and anticipated evolving modes of black spectatorship by encouraging highly participatory viewing practices. These practices disrupted bourgeois patterns of silent, contemplative consumption, subsequently encouraging black spectators to approach horror on recreational terms. Within the relatively safe space of the darkened theatre, black folks could take on the rhetoric of horror – which bleed into aspects of real black experience – and conceivably emerge with a better understanding of how discourses about monstrosity work. As the sixties went into full swing, black newspapers promoted films that represented a range of other spectatorial experiences as well. One could get lost in the immersive worlds of Corman’s gothic Poe adaptations, be challenged by foreign art house horror films, or indulge in increasingly graphic displays of sex, violence, and other spectacles of excess represented by films like Herschel Gordon Lewis’ *Blood Feast* (1963). The end of the sixties brought with it the end of the Production Code and a new sense of representational freedom that directors like George Romero were all too willing to exploit. *Night of the Living Dead*
appeared on double-bills with other non-horror films that grappled more explicitly with race, which amplified its own racial subtext and, in turn, implied the cross-pollination of horror tropes into other genres. I also consider how the reputation that Castle accrued among black audiences was used to help promote *Rosemary's Baby*, on which he served as a producer.

No other company so deliberately sought to cultivate and capitalize on black audiences' affinity for horror more than American International Pictures, and during the early seventies, the company heavily marketed horror and blaxploitation films in black newspapers. Feature stories and interviews with AIP stars (many of which were white) accompanied ads and publicity stills. I examine some of these articles and discuss the work of celebrated illustrator Reynold Brown, who designed movie posters for many AIP releases. In the final part of the chapter, I argue that black newspapers situated the individualistic, defiant heroes and heroines of blaxploitation on the same imaginative plane with the authoritarian heroes in white crime dramas of the period. At the same time, the protagonists of blaxploitation horror films tended to resist such narrow constraints and offered to black spectators a more nuanced model of black empowerment.

By examining specific instances of horror marketing, I hope to gain a better understanding of how black audiences perceived the larger world of cinema around them, and how black media facilitated a dialogue about the movies while being used to sell a product rarely conceived with black spectators in mind. Most studies of race and the American horror film have focused on issues of representation, and how the genre has
reflected and even attempted to resolve certain socio-cultural anxieties about race. As much as these studies contribute to our understanding of how horror has dealt with racial questions, we also need to account for the industrial forces and trends that have influenced the terms under which audiences actually encountered the films. The language and images that were used to market horror to black spectators during the civil rights era—just like much of the content of the films themselves—were often sexist and racist. But these marketing hooks also appear to have attracted the very audiences that should have been most offended by them, thus prompting us to question their potential appeal.

Accordingly, this chapter examines the marketing tactics employed in black newspapers as a part of an economic strategy and as rhetorical cues that audiences could interpret in a variety of ways. Ultimately, I would like to encourage deeper consideration of how the notion of black spectatorship influenced the marketing—and also the content—of horror films during this important period in the genre's development.

Monsters, Maidens, and the Rhetoric of Miscegenation

Tucked toward the bottom of a March 1956 page of the Chicago Daily Defender, sits a standalone picture of a dark-skinned, bug-eyed monster with a set of phallic horns

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protruding from its head and an unconscious white woman in its arms (Fig. 2.1). This image, taken from Corman’s fourth film, The Day the World Ended (1956), echoed the same racial iconography that could have been found in many science fiction and horror films of the period. Posters for The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951). Forbidden Planet (1956), as well as other Corman films like Invasion of the Saucer Men (1957) and Attack of the Crab Monsters (1957) all similarly featured a helpless white woman in the clutches of a monstrous Other. Coleman even goes so far as to read the 1954 film, The Creature from the Black Lagoon, as “an obviously metaphorically raced, anti-miscegenation film” that foreshadows the lynching of Emmett Till the following year. The still from The Day the World Ended draws particular attention to itself first, because there were no other references to movies on the page, and because of its blatant racial connotations. Black spectators would no doubt have been familiar with the image’s subtext, its none too subtle vision of white womanhood terrorized by a “black brute.” It was a myth that had been crystallized in the infamous “Gus” sequence in D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation

246 “Untitled [standalone photo],” Daily Defender (Chicago, IL), Mar. 4, 1956, 17, col. 1.
247 See Bruce Hershenson, Who Goes There?: 1950s Horror and Sci-Fi Movie Posters and Lobby Cards (Bruce Hershenson, 2001).
248 Coleman, Horror Noire, 98.
249 The myth of the ‘black beast rapist’ served as an integral justification for lynching from the Post-Reconstruction period through the first half of the twentieth century. The public exchange between Rebecca Latimer Felton and Alexander Manly, which helped to incite the 1898 riot in Wilmington, NC, provides one of the most salient demonstrations of how the myth has been used to mobilize white violence. As Felton notoriously claimed: “if it takes a lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from drunken, ravening human beasts – then I say lynch a thousand a week if it becomes necessary.” See “Letter from the Atlanta Constitution,” Marrow of Tradition, Bedford Cultural Edition, ed. Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning (NY: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 411. See also Amy Louise Wood, “Lynching Photography and ‘the black beast rapist’ in the Southern White Masculine Imagination,” in Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture, ed. Peter Lehman, 193-212 and Robyn Wiegman, “The Anatomy of Lynching,” Journal of the History of Sexuality 3, no. 3 (1993): 445-467.
(1915), and then reified in various realms of American visual culture thereafter – posters for *King Kong* (1933) as well as propaganda posters produced during World War II utilized the same imagery.\(^{250}\)

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Patrick Gonder describes this specific visual trope as part of the narrative and visual "economy of lynching," in which the monster is figured as "the primitive black rapist who threatens white femininity and whose actions validate white male aggression against those of color."\(^{251}\) The caption fit Corman's still neatly within that economy: "BEAUTEOUS Lori Nelson is shown being carried to her doom [my emphasis] by terrifying monster in 'The Day the World Ended,' horror film starting Friday at the Regal." In this context, "Doom" functions as shorthand for both the literal and symbolic taint of interracial sex: an unalterable stain of corruption and unredeemable loss of virtue that accompanies the white woman's union with the monster. The caption thus puts the image if not in direct conversation with Till's murder, then certainly into dialogue with mid-twentieth century discourses about miscegenation; it was a picture stationed, anxiously, at the intersection of pop culture fantasy and socio-political imagination.

Upon closer inspection, however, the still is not quite as standalone as it first appears to be. A bit of poetic juxtaposition in the page layout situates the noticeably pale Nelson beside a picture of another "beauty" in the adjacent column (Fig. 4.1). This "Bronze Beauty," Nigerian-born Londoner Felicia Oladijo, received her title from a European magazine "in [a] competition with hundreds of other contestants," and can be

read as a black analog to Nelson. Yet, a comparison of the two “beauties” reveals distinct differences between them. For example, both women wear white in their pictures, but whereas Nelson’s full-sleeve nightgown signals her sexual purity, Oladijo sports a short-sleeved designer dress that playfully reveals the bronze-brown skin beneath and suggests her sexual availability. Their postures also differ in that Oladijo stands upright and returns the camera’s gaze with a warm smile as opposed to Nelson, whose limp unconsciousness manages to make her appear submissive and resistant at the same time—she can neither fight back nor give consent. And while the captions for both images serve a similar narrative function by providing a narrative about each woman’s futurity, Oladijo was not headed for “doom.” In fact, her prospects seemed very bright and she even hoped to one day become “a cabaret singer on order of America’s Ella Fitzgerald.”

That these two images, one of white feminine beauty in peril and the other of black feminine beauty confident and lauded, appear on the same page is not the exceptional aspect of their positioning. On the contrary, it is the fact that the two images are allowed to occupy the same representational space without canceling each other out. The “Bronze Beauty’s” presence neither short-circuits the incendiary nature of Corman’s image, nor does it escape its own affectedness; Oladijo’s pose is far too mannered and

252 “Bronze Beauty” [photo], *Daily Defender* (Chicago, IL), Mar. 14, 1956, 17, col. 2.  
253 Ibid.
she was experiencing her success abroad, in what might have seemed a world away for the Defender's readership in Chicago and the other areas where the paper circulated.\textsuperscript{254}

Both images represented exercises in mythmaking, condensed versions of opposing albeit familiar narratives that were being directed to black spectators at a moment of dramatic upheaval in the dominant social order.

Other discontinuities emerge from the pairing of these images as well. Nelson's supposed beauty, for instance, ceases to function as a self-evident, independent phenomenon, and reveals itself as mutually constituted by an Other's ugliness. Beauty, it would seem, very much needs her beast. Nelson herself also comes to inhabit a more paradoxical rhetorical position, symbolizing sexual vulnerability but incapable of expressing any self-possessed sexual desire. She exists mostly as a cipher or more precisely, as a catalyst that engenders violence by spurring white patriarchal forces into action to "save" her from the monster. The voice-over narrator from the film's theatrical trailer made the sexual nature of this threat explicit: "A monster such as the eyes of man has never before seen, killing one-by-one each of the few remaining men [and] hunting the most beautiful of the remaining women to take as his mate."\textsuperscript{255} Most troubling of all, the image of Nelson loses none of its power for being rooted in fiction and, indeed, gains a clarifying power by resisting a clear connection between Nelson and any "real" woman. In contrast, the 'real' picture of Oladijo smiling, with its aspirational claims about a future singing career, does little to acknowledge the hazards black women actually faced.


Hers is ironically an image of black beauty unburdened, one that favors a narrative about mobility and agency over one of immobility and powerlessness.

It is difficult to forget that the audience for these two images was comprised of the same *Defender* readership that had bore witness to pictures of Till’s corpse only six months before – his mangled body served as an undeniable reminder of the dangers of racist sexual mythology.\(^{256}\) When black spectators saw these images, was Corman’s science fiction monster haunted by the specter of Till’s abject frame? Did the image of Nelson’s white, girlish innocence recall that of Carolyn Bryant, the woman at whom Till had purportedly whistled, and whose honor needed to be violently defended? And did the insertion of the “Bronze Beauty” disturb this familiar triangulation of animalistic black masculinity, fragile white femininity, and white patriarchy in crisis? These questions are impossible to answer with any real certainty, but they nevertheless illuminate some of the tensions that black spectators might have experienced while being hailed by horror marketing materials. Greeted with rhetoric that coded monstrosity in racial terms, it is unlikely that they could have ignored the resonances between horror films and the often ugly realities of black social, political, and civic life. The publicity still for Corman’s monster movie typifies a broader anxiety evident in the ways horror films addressed black audiences, a mode that continued to rely on gothic iconography such as the “maiden in flight” and the monstrous racial Other in spite of changes that were occurring in the national racial landscape.\(^{257}\) In his aforementioned analysis of the *Creature from* 

\(^{256}\) For more on Emmett Till’s lynching and the display of his body in the *Defender*, see Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington, ID: AuthorHouse, Rev. ed., 2006), 6.

\(^{257}\) Leslie Fiedler says of the archetype: “Chief of the gothic symbols is, of course, the Maiden in flight – understood in the spirit of *The Monk* as representing the uprooted soul
the Black Lagoon series, Gonder argues that the white woman occupies "the space between the civilized and the primitive, a position of intense and anxious visibility, as contrasted to the relative marginalization or invisibility of the woman of color."258

Within the pages of black newspapers, however, black women's own anxious visibility (as well as other self-conceived narratives about black experience) could also be articulated, subsequently challenging the rhetoric being propagated in the marketing of horror films.

**Genre Films and Late-Fifties Anxiety**

It would be easy enough to reduce the marketing of horror films in black newspapers during the fifties to those images that alluded either directly or subconsciously to lynching. But the industry's approach during this period was much more varied and complex than a singular trope. More specifically, black spectators experienced horror as part of a network of thematically and ideologically related genre films. Some of these films trafficked in similar gothic rhetoric, some shared horror's preoccupation with sex and violence, some took on racial issues, and some reflected anxiety about white mainstream culture and values. A fairly typical page from a November 1957 issue of the New York Amsterdam News serves as a good case in point of the artist, the spirit of the man who has lost his moral home. Not the violation of death which sets such a flight in motion, but the flight itself figures forth the essential meaning of the anti-bourgeois gothic, for which the girl on the run and her pursuer become only alternate versions of the same plight." See Love and Death in the American Novel (NY: Dalkey Archive Press, 1966; 1960), 131. For a more systemic accounting of different instantiations of "the Other" in gothic texts see The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination, eds. Ruth Beinstock Anolick and Douglass L. Howard (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004). 258 Gonder, "Race, Gender, and Terror," 16.
Morningside Theatre listed an Allied Artist horror package that included *The Daughter of Dr. Jekyll* (1957) and *The Cyclops* (1957); these were the kind of hackneyed, low-budget entries that came straight out of the Corman-AIP schlock playbook. Yet, Morningside was also showing more serious films such as *The Joker is Wild* (1957), a biopic starring Frank Sinatra as comedian Joe E. Lewis, and *Gun Girls* (1957), a crime drama about a teenage girl gang. The listing for these films did not include any copy, but trailers offer some insight into what audiences could expect. *The Joker is Wild* trailer emphasized the darker aspects of Lewis’ life, what the voice-over narrator described as “the desperation of a singer whose voice and heart is slashed to ribbons by gangland knives.”\(^{260}\) The *Gun Girls* trailer struck a more titillating tone somewhere between a tabloid and a social problem film: “These girls stop at nothing, no crime is too great, no place too sacred once they go on the prowl. Their disrespect for law and order is a short cut to a prison term.”\(^{261}\) Audiences could of course expect the plotlines of these films to safely recuperate the morally ambiguous characters’ indiscretions into a normative moral framework by film’s end. For at least a little while though, spectators would get to revel in illicitness of it all, to relish the scenes of speakeasies and girls behaving badly.

RKO listed a double feature on the same page that could just as easily have been swapped with the one playing at Morningside; it also included a biopic, *The Helen Morgan Story* (1957), and a crime drama, *The Counterfeit Plan* (1957). This listing did,

however, include some copy, which promised indulgent thrills and in the case of the former, the pleasures and dangers of a bygone era: “QUEEN OF THE ROARING 20s... DARLING OF THE RACKET KINGS IN THE AGE OF JAZZ, GANG WARS, AND RUM RUNNERS.” The Counterfeit Plan was described more obtusely as a “HOT MONEY EXPOSE!” – a description that offered no real details about the plot, but carried with it enough sexual connotation to grab spectators’ attention.

These films, as well as the Morningside double feature, shared a focus on characters that lived within worlds of vice or who themselves operated outside the bounds of official authorities and laws. In this sense, the films shared the same angst and ambivalence about consensus culture as many horror and science fiction movies of the period. As Mark Jancovich argues about fifties alien invasion films: “They are actually deeply critical of conformity, and clearly distinguish their positive groups from the centrally-organised systems of Fordism.” With this in mind, it makes sense that black audiences might have been drawn to genre films that, despite not having any black characters, nevertheless reflected a sense of underlying cultural malaise and more precisely, the perceived unraveling of the white mainstream under the weight of its own oppressiveness. RKO’s other double feature reflected this same ambivalent sensibility with the revenge of nature monster movie, The Black Scorpion (1957), and a cheaply made knock-off of The Wild One (1953) called Hot Rod Rumble (1957).

263 Paul Wells defines the “revenge of nature” subgenre as “a range of horror films based on the idea that the everyday things that humankind take for granted in nature... will one day cease to operate in the anticipated manner, and inexplicably ‘rise’ to take its revenge on the exploitation and insensitivity of human beings.” The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch (London: Wallflower, 2000), 115.
Figure 2.2 – A Typical Page from the Amsterdam News

Other films advertised on the page seem (at least on first glance) to be more ideologically simplistic, but they presented their own brands of anxiety too. Loews was showing *The Tin Star* (1957), a western that featured Anthony Perkins as a young sheriff under the tutelage of an aging bounty hunter, played by Henry Fonda. While the ad presented these white masculine figures – one an idealist representative of the state and the other a jaded individualist – as heroes “standing-off a lynch mob,” the trailer fixed the horror of the mob safely in a distant historical past: “the screen penetrates the curtain of gun smoke and violence that separates us from this flaming era of the past...the story of real human beings facing the silent terror in a night that explodes into vigilante bloodlust.”

Mob mentality would have been anything but a distant memory for black spectators, but the fact that this film put lynching front and center in its plot might have proven to be an effective draw. If that aspect of the story was not enough to catch the attention of black audiences, the film also included a subplot involving an outcast white woman with a mixed-race child described in the trailer as “the light-haired girl whose son had the dark skin of his Indian father.”

*Mister Rock and Roll* (1957), a musical showcase also playing at Loews that weekend, represented a range of racial as well as other tensions. It was the fourth film in which famous disc jockey Alan Freed played himself as a crusader for the new musical

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265 Despite its representational and ideological limitations, black spectators appear to have been consistent fans of the western going at least as far back as the black westerns of the thirties. See Julia Leyda, “Black Audience Westerns and the Politics of Cultural Identification in the 1930s,” *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 1 (2002): 46-70.

266 Ibid.
form that shocked and offended the parents of white American teenagers.\textsuperscript{267} Although black artists had appeared in some of those other films, \textit{Mister Rock and Roll} boasted the biggest black line-up: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, LaVern Baker, Lionel Hampton, Brook Benton, and Clyde McPhatter all made appearances. The sexually charged music of many of these artists (not unlike many horror films) both concerned the body and appealed directly to it, making rock ‘n’ roll an easy target for critics who framed it as an infectious, corrosive force that threatened to undermine dominant mores. Segregationists saw an even more pernicious danger: a slippery slope beginning with interracial mixing (especially dancing) and leading inevitably to miscegenation.\textsuperscript{268} Going to see a film like \textit{Mister Rock and Roll} was therefore just as fraught as going to see a horror film might have been for many black spectators. As Glenn Altschuler argues: “Enmeshed in the racial politics of the 1950s, rock ‘n’ roll was credited with and criticized for promoting integration and economic opportunity for blacks while bringing to ‘mainstream’ culture black styles and values.”\textsuperscript{269} \textit{Mister Rock and Roll} can be read as a document of black performance and a celebration of subversive cultural expression that carried significant political implications even if it avoided making any overt political statements. For many spectators black and otherwise, the film could also have conjured up many of the very same anti-miscegenation discourses as Corman’s \textit{The Day the World Ended}.

\textsuperscript{267} The other rock ‘n’ roll-themed films in which Freed starred included \textit{Rock Around the Clock} (1956), \textit{Don’t Knock the Rock} (1956), and \textit{Rock, Rock, Rock} (1956).
\textsuperscript{268} Glenn C. Altschuler, \textit{All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 37.
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid, 35.
Loews’ Monday and Tuesday selections further support the idea that black audiences enjoyed genre movies set in worlds outside the American mainstream or that engaged explicitly with racial issues. The noir thriller, *Hidden Fear* (1957), had much in common with the previously mentioned crime drama *The Counterfeit Plan*—both films were set in foreign locales and involved characters embroiled in a counterfeiting scheme. The frontier adventure, *War Drums* (1957), focused on the conflict between a white man and an Apache Chief who fall in love with the same [white] woman. Once again, the promotional trailer provides some useful insight into a film that was listed with no descriptive copy. In it, a voice-over narrator used a sensationalistic tone that exploited the kind of racial antipathy indicative of many “frontier gothic” narratives:

Listen to the deadliest thunder that ever rolled across the west... The mighty war drums send their sounds through the land of the Apache, signaling the terrifying bloodbath that is to follow...led by the vengeful Apache chief, Magnus Coloradas, and Reba, his ‘white warrior woman,’ who fought like a wildcat, loved like a woman, and killed like an Apache!271

Lex Barker, best known for playing Tarzan in a series of films across the late forties and early fifties, starred as the “vengeful chief” while Joan Taylor, best known for her appearance in *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956), played Reba, the “white warrior woman.” In addition to a short clip in which Reba demands that another captive white woman be stripped and beaten in order to learn “obedience,” the trailer also featured

270 To echo David Mogen, Scott Sanders, and Joan Karpinski: “the literature of the American frontier gothic reveals that positive and negative forces are entwined in the pluralism that is at the heart of the American experience, in the parallel realities lived by the myriad groups of individuals who together are America. The revelation of not just dissonances, but of fundamental differences in our varied experiences of the structure of reality is cause for wonder and for terror, for hope and for anxiety.” See “Introduction,” *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Culture* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1993), 26.

snippets from gruesome battle scenes and privileged the unique allure of violent visual spectacles similar to the “four-SEE’s” strategy utilized by AIP and other companies. Large-font prompts solicited the viewer to come “SEE! The TRIAL BY LASH” as a white man whipped a Native American man tied between two horses, to “SEE! THE SAVAGE MARRIAGE RITES OF THE APACHE!” which apparently involved some bloodletting, and finally, to “SEE! THE ORDEAL OF THE THREE KNIVES.” This kind of rhetoric tried to hook spectators not with the lure of gritty authenticity or even whitewashed nostalgia, but with the promise of more graphic and taboo displays than they could get elsewhere. War Drums may not have been a horror film, but its marketing implied that it could solicit many of the same spectatorial pleasures.

The two largest ads on the Amsterdam News page were also the most explicitly sexual. Elysia, a 1934 documentary about a nudist camp, was playing on a double bill at New York Theatre with Miss Body Beautiful (1953), a romp about a businessman trying to discover the identity of a woman in a mysterious nude photo. Surprisingly, the ad featured the silhouette of two lovers in embrace as well as another nude (but strategically shadowed) white woman set below some provocative copy: “NOW! FOR THE FIRST TIME! A THRILL FOR ALL TIME! SEE IT! LIVE IT!” Such an overt attempt to arouse potential spectators betrayed a larger shift away from the sexual conservatism of the earlier part of the decade. Spectators were being asked not merely to sneak a peek at improper images, but to “live” them. A similar emphasis on sexual titillation accompanied the other large ad on the page for the French film, Razzia (1955). It featured international star Jean Gabin as a man named Henri, a gangster who has returned to

France from the U.S. in order to take over an organized crime operation. The film appears to have been marketed inconsistently as either a noir thriller or a racy horror film in different black papers. The *Amsterdam News* ad called it “Another SHOCKER from the author of *Rififi,”* a reference to the 1955 adaptation of the Auguste Le Breton’s crime novel of the same name. An ad from the *Defender* featured two suggestive stills of a man and woman kissing along with an “Adults Only” subheading. That ad also borrowed copy from a *Time* magazine review that characterized the film as “RAW, RED CINEMATIC MEAT” as well as another publication that called it “HARD-HITTING, SHOCKINGLY REALISTIC!” Just a few days later, yet another short *Defender* article described the film as “a shocker with excitement and risqué scenes that holds the audiences spellbound.” The take-away from all these ads was that *Razzia,* partly because it was a foreign film and partly because of its racy subject matter, would entice viewers with a visceral and yes, sexual experience.

My goal in examining this single sample page from the *Amsterdam News* is not to argue that genre distinctions would have been insignificant to black spectators. Nor do I mean to suggest that the potential pleasures horror offered were indistinguishable from those found in other genre films. What the page does indicate, however, is that black spectators during the civil rights era had to navigate a particularly dynamic cinematic topography of which horror and the rhetoric of horror were integral parts. As the sixties approached and the genre underwent dramatic representational and ideological changes, it met black spectators with a variety of unstable viewing positions, each with their own gratifications and complications.

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273 *Daily Defender* (Chicago, IL), Jun. 9, 1958, 18, col. 5.
Hurled Into a Sixties Mood

As the fifties came to a close, some trends in horror marketing from the previous decade persisted. A May 1960 publicity piece printed in the *Defender* exclaimed: “Triple Horror Films Electrify Fans at Regal.” It was a somewhat misleading title insomuch as only two of the movies in question, the Corman-directed horror-comedy *A Bucket of Blood* (1959) and the creature feature, *Attack of The Giant Leeches* (1959), could really be described as horror films. The genre’s popularity with black audiences was apparently strong enough to warrant mischaracterizing the contemplative wartime drama *Orders to Kill* (1958) as “a shocking tale of terror that adds to the shivering impetus of the other two films.” To be fair, *A Bucket of Blood* is not exactly a straight horror film either; its dark humor makes it a clear tonal precursor to Corman’s cult horror comedy *A Little Shop of Horrors* (1960). Trailers for the latter, as well as for *Attack of the Giant Leeches* (1959), again featured white women under attack from monsters, although each to very different effect. The trailer to the former focused on the protagonist Seymour Krelboyne (Jonathan Haze) acquiescing to the whims of his ‘master’ – a talking plant with a taste for human flesh. Black spectators probably would have recognized the irony in seeing a white man reduced to the status of a slave, and then coerced into feeding his own kind to an alien master. Another scene in which Seymour encounters a prostitute who unknowingly offers herself as a meal for the monster pushes the irony even further by deconstructing the maiden in flight trope. Their exchange literally turns her into a piece of meat:

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275 Coleman also draws attention to this particular article. See *Daily Defender* (Chicago, IL), May 4, 1960, 16. See also *Horror Noire*, 109.
276 Ibid.
Seymour: Too bony.

Prostitute: Too bony, nobody ever told me that before.

Seymour: Beef is better than veal.

Prostitute: You’re such a dodo. What do you call this, chop liver?277

By depicting the white maiden as a willing participant – and even something of a temptress – this trailer promised black spectators a film that would poke fun at racist horror conventions and perhaps even turn the theme of anti-miscegenation on its head. Moreover, black women might have taken particular pleasure in the monster’s rejection of the white woman’s too slender figure.278 The Attack of the Giant Leeches trailer took a less nuanced approach, featuring a shot of one of the slimy black creatures sucking on a white woman’s neck so that it could, as the voiceover narrator suggests, “gratify [its] distorted desires.”279 That this woman screams with a strange mix of ecstasy and horror during the attack only serves to underscore further the conflation of sex and consumption in this film’s marketing.

While Corman’s influence could be readily felt in monster movies like Attack of the Giant Leeches, it was director William Castle who really emerged as a bona-fide horror auteur in black newspapers during the late-fifties and early sixties. With the release of Macabre (1958), Castle began a cycle of gimmicky horror films that would

278 The musical remake of Little Shop of Horrors (1986), which was based on the off-Broadway play (1980), played upon racial constructions as well, by introducing a doowop-style Greek chorus and by having the talking plant deliver lines in street vernacular voiced by Levi Stubbs, the lead singer of the Four Tops. For more on race in the later version, see Marc Jensen, “‘Feed Me!’: Power Struggles and the Portrayal of Race in Little Shop of Horrors,” Cinema Journal 48, no. 1 (2008): 51-67.
cement his reputation in the genre as a master showman. An article from a June 1958 issue of the Defender declared: “Horror Film ‘Macabre’ Wins Praise.” The short publicity piece appealed to black spectators’ desire to see a moviegoing phenomenon that white audiences had already experienced: “The picture based on the horrors of death, and fright is one of the most talked of films of the season. The latter attracted huge throngs during its runs on Broadway and in Chicago’s loop and is doing the same thing in neighborhood houses.” Castle and his co-producer Robb White also deployed a saturation advertising campaign along with a “fright insurance” gimmick as a part of their marketing strategy. It seemed to work just as well on Chicago’s black audiences as it did on their white counterparts. As another article in the Defender promised: “Patrons of the 50 neighborhood theatres where the horror film is being shown are automatically insured for $1000 against shock due to watching the film.”

Other papers also devoted space to Castle, who seemed intent on creating his own Hitchcock-style persona. A Pittsburgh Courier article referred to him as “the master of the macabre” and claimed that “‘Homicidal’ reportedly has all the shock elements to make it a worthy successor to Castle’s past suspense hits.” The same page also displayed a large ad for the film, featuring Castle’s darkened silhouette at its center: he stands on top of the title text with his hands folded behind his back and a cigarette.

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281 Chicago Defender (Chicago, IL), Jun. 9, 1958, 18, col. 4.
282 Ibid.
283 Heffernan, Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold, 98.
285 Castle’s ‘Homicidal’ Appears at Gateway,” The Pittsburgh Courier (Pittsburgh, PA), June 24, 1961, 18.
dangling from his lips in an unmistakable nod to the opening credit sequence of Alfred Hitchcock Presents (Fig. 2.3). Other elements of the ad were similarly meant to reference the imagery of *Psycho* including the large knife that points diagonally downward to form the “i” in “Homicidal” as well as the subheading “THE STORY OF A PSYCHOTIC KILLER!” The ad did not miss the opportunity to present a scantily clad white woman who is positioned at the bottom while another (presumably the “psychotic killer”) is shown holding a knife toward the lower right hand side. The ad’s subtext seemed to shout that if you liked *Psycho*, then you would love *Homicidal*, even as the ad avoided any explicit mention of Hitchcock’s film.

Figure 2.3 – Castle Apes Hitchcock

The ad also explained another of Castle’s promotional gimmicks, the “Coward’s Corner,” in detail: “A coward’s certificate will be issued to you upon your arrival at the theatre. If you are too terrified to watch the blood curdling climax, follow the yellow streak to the coward’s corner at the time of the ‘Fright Break’ and present the certificate to have your admission sneerfully [sic] refunded.” Ad copy of this sort promised a thrilling ending but, perhaps even more important for black audiences, it also suggested the possibility of an intensified, collective, and secular experience that would provide them with an opportunity to engage with the rhetoric of horror without exposing themselves to the psychic trauma that accompanied other more tangible spectacles of abjection. As I argued in the earlier discussion of Baldwin’s response to *The Exorcist*, much of this experience probably would have been closer to what Isabel Pinedo has called “recreational terror,” wherein “controlled loss substitutes for loss of control.”286 In this sense, Castle’s marketing strategy stood in direct experiential opposition to the campaign for *Psycho*, which had in 1960 sought to immerse the spectator in the moviegoing experience by preventing anyone from entering the theater after the start of the film.287 Castle, on the other hand, purposely pulled viewers “out of” his film, and then asked them to consent to their continued manipulation. This gesture did not fully compensate for the paucity or lack of black characters in the films themselves, but it did

offer a form of self-mastery through spectatorship when mastery of any kind was extremely valuable to black audiences.  

The popularity of Castle’s self-conscious viewing environment did not, however, foreclose the possibility of other more absorbing and less consensual viewing experiences. In a promotional piece-cum-critical review for the Los Angeles Sentinel, an unnamed author described his total absorption into Corman’s second Poe adaptation, Pit and the Pendulum (1961): “The screenplay, a horror film giant, written by Richard Matheson … presents an aura of mystery from the beginning scenes and viewers are held in breathless anticipation throughout the 85-minute run of the picture.” Articles on film that appeared in black papers during the period were rarely negative and sometimes borrowed language from promotional materials, but the near-mystical power that the author lends to the film, especially with flowery phrases such as ‘aura of mystery; and ‘breathless anticipation’, goes beyond the typical endorsement. An even more evocative characterization of the film’s supposedly enchanting power followed:

Filmed in Panavision and in color, special effects of ‘Pit and the Pendulum’ are eerie yet beautiful, and sounds are realistic enough to hurl the viewer into moods [emphasis added] when he actually seems to experience the agonizing horrors of the pit, devised by its insane owner. Impact of the surprise climax keeps you thinking about the picture hours after the final reel.

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288 The Amsterdam News also did an article on the “Fright Break” gimmick. See “‘Fright Break’ Accompanies Film at RKO’s,” New York Amsterdam News (New York, NY), July 21, 1961, 19.
289 “‘Pit and Pendulum’ a Horror Film Giant,” Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 24, 1961, C3.
290 Ibid.
Much of this critic's confessional tone recalls Lawrence Jones' response to *Tales of Terror* discussed in the previous chapter; although here, the spectator's "strange enjoyment" derives from the visceral and dynamic experience of being "hurled into a mood" of masochistic subjection.\(^{291}\) There seems little doubt that he is "the viewer" who found himself flung into sublime identification with the film's victim. His slippage in the final sentence from the third to the second person can then be read as an attempt to displace the anxious sensation of spectatorial powerlessness back onto a more universal "you." As a marketing device, one could not have asked for a better testimonial to a film's power to capture the audience, or about the pleasure of allowing oneself to be taken over by it.

No such adulation accompanied a publicity still from AIP's *The Horror of Party Beach* (1964), which appeared in the April 1964 edition of the *Daily Defender* under the caption "You Think You've Got Troubles."\(^{292}\) Billed as "The First Horror-Monster Musical," this film was a bizarre genre hybrid that combined beach party scenes, rock 'n' roll bands, biker gangs, nuclear mutations, and zombies into one mishmash of a plot. The still avoided all of this genre confusion though, and simply depicted yet another white woman being attacked by a gruesome monster. As Coleman points out, *Party Beach* contained only one black character, a maid and mammy figure named "Eulabelle" who believes that the monsters are the result of Voodoo black magic.\(^{293}\) Her presence served as a sharp reminder of the disconnect between the kinds of political representation that

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\(^{292}\) *Daily Defender* (Chicago, IL), April 14, 1964, col.4, 17.

\(^{293}\) See *Horror Noire*, 100-101.
black Americans were demanding in civil rights discourses versus the types of demeaning representation that they were still receiving in films. Ironically, an article on the same page cited the white televangelist Billy Graham claiming that racial problems were “not going to be solved by demonstrations in the street, and not even by the civil rights bill.” Graham was right in the sense that culture would prove to be just as significant a battleground in the contest for racial equality as civil disobedience and legislation.

An article announcing that a double feature of The Horror of Party Beach and The Curse of the Living Corpse was coming to the Paramount Theatre in New York appeared in a May 1964 edition of the Amsterdam News. The piece emphasized the package’s likely appeal for teenage audiences and described a “Fright Certificate” gimmick clearly modeled after some of Castle’s earlier stunts. An ad for both films was positioned toward the bottom of the page right next to one for another horror package that included Herschell Gordon Lewis’ infamously gory Blood Feast and a domestic drama about a woman suffering abuse at the hands of her husband called Stark Fear (1962) (Fig. 2.4). Although the ads for all four films focused on the white maiden in distress, the rhetoric for Blood Feast was much more sexually suggestive, picturing one woman lying helplessly in the upper left corner and another on the right hand side who was chained to a wall with her clothes torn away. Tantalizing copy let spectators know exactly what these women, or more accurately, girls were in for: “While his nubile young girl victims

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294 Graham called instead for racial conflict to be met by “great mass religious gatherings on an interracial basis.” “Protests Can’t End Racial Woes: Graham,” Daily Defender (Chicago, IL), April 14, 1964, 17.
screamed out their life blood, he prepared the most horrendous of feasts."²⁹⁶ The ad also included "An Admonition" warning parents not to allow any "impressionable" adolescents to see the film. Blood Feast played along with The Sadist (1963) at the RKO Alhambra Theatre in New York in July of 1964, the latter film being a kind of true-crime story partially based on the violent exploits of spree-killer Charles Raymond Starkweather.²⁹⁷ It is difficult to understand just what the appeal of these very violent films would have been for black audiences in the mid-sixties: they dealt mostly with the perverse proclivities of sadistic white men and the torture of white women. But perhaps the idea that the greatest danger to white women came indeed from white men rather than "black brutes" was in itself a certain kind of validation for black spectators. In this sense, these films also addressed white male hegemony at a moment when civil rights legislation, specifically The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, threatened to undermine deeply rooted hierarchies. Horror films rightly suggested that such changes would not come without violence, and that ongoing power contests would be anything but civil throughout the rest of the decade.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.
Figure 2.4 – Exploitative Sixties Horror Ads Featured in the *Amsterdam News*

Art, Passion, and Horror in the Mid & Late-Sixties

While lowbrow horror films like Party Beach and Blood Feast were representative of those advertised most often in black newspapers, it would be a mistake to assume that the industry did not also try to sell black audiences relatively sophisticated horror movies as well. The Amsterdam News called the Japanese art house horror picture Kwaidan (1964) a “ghost film,” suggested that it was “[f]ilmed in the tradition of ‘Gate of hell’ and ‘Rashomon,’” and emphasized its Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.298 The slow-moving style, subtitles, and elaborately constructed mise-en-scène of Kwaidan placed it in severe contrast to a hokey film like Party Beach. Yet, as Heffeman has discussed, such disparate movies could both garner attention in black papers because independent distributors were attempting to respond to a product shortage initiated by the Hollywood majors reducing their output in the wake of the 1948 Paramount decision.299 Kwaidan was released by Walter Reade’s Continental Distributing – the company best known for putting out Night of the Living Dead (1968) – as a part of its own newly diversified line-up, which included art house films, mass appeal pictures intended for wide release, and films given special roadshow engagements.300 Kwaidan was not the only highbrow horror film to score well with black audiences in the mid 1960s. An Amsterdam News article also suggested that Henri-Georges Clouzot’s artsy thriller

299 Heffernan, Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold, 60.
300 Ibid, 208.
*Diabolique* or *Les diaboliques* (1955) was “a tale of horror and suspense hailed by critics and film buffs as the most diabolical and frightening ever filmed.”  

Perhaps the best example of a film that struck the perfect middlebrow cord with black audiences was Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968). Polanski’s taught direction, coupled with high production values, elevated a decidedly lowbrow premise about a woman forced to carry and give birth to the devil’s child to a polished study in paranoia and occult conspiracy. A feature in the *Defender* focused on Castle’s continued influence – now as a producer – in shaping the genre, as well as Mia Farrow’s rising star power. As the article declared: “When it comes to tales of cumulative horror tinged with the supernatural, Castle’s instincts are perhaps the most finely honed in the film world.”

Farrow was pictured above the headline receiving her famous pixie haircut from stylist Vidal Sassoon, along with a caption that claimed *Rosemary’s Baby* was “her most important assignment” and that it signaled her arrival as a “full-fledged star.” The article went on to describe the process of adapting Ira Levin’s novel, and referred to Castle as a “latter-day Alfred Hitchcock” – a comparison that was cemented a month later by an on-set picture in which Castle aped Hitchcock by sporting the English director’s signature suit and cigarette.

If *Rosemary’s Baby* was advertised as offering the right combination of sex and the supernatural for black audiences, it is little wonder that Umberto Lenzi’s even more...

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302 “Chicago Slates Suspense Film,” *Daily Defender* (Chicago, IL), July 22, 1968, 12.
303 Ibid.
304 Ibid.
sexually charged *Paranoia* (1969) also received a measure of attention in the *Defender*. Originally titled *Orgasmo*, this X-rated film told the story of what its trailer described as a “jet set widow [who] reaches out for thrills at any cost.” One atypically long article examined how *Paranoia* dealt with genre conventions that were seen to have been established by such films as *Psycho*. Strangely, the author refers to the lead actress and “victim” Carroll Baker, best known for her role in Elia Kazan’s adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ *Baby Doll* (1956), by her full name on three separate occasions in the piece. Although the article included no accompanying photo, these multiple references, in conjunction with her clear codification as a victim, create a subtext akin to that of the aforementioned publicity still from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. As with that image, the specter of Baker’s nubile, white body – invoked entirely through language – is troubled by a countervailing image of black feminine beauty in the adjacent column: a picture of the majestic-looking Nina Simone who was scheduled to headline a show at the Auditorium Theatre (Figure 4.5). If Baker’s character was to experience torment in this horror story, Simone appeared as a dark-skinned woman with a hard-fought wisdom and an understanding of the nation’s true capacity for monstrosity. Along with a host of other black artists who confronted racism in their work and through direct activism, Simone consistently suggested that the horrors being faced by many black Americans could not be dismissed as mere paranoia.

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307 “Paranoia” Horror Film Debuts At The Oriental,” *Chicago Daily Defender* (Chicago, IL): Aug. 16-22, 1969. My discussion here once again intersects with that of Coleman who also cites this particular Defender article but does not discuss it in detail. See Horror Noire, 109.
Simone’s disruptive presence notwithstanding, the article about *Paranoia* demonstrated a keen awareness of horror’s development as a genre, and more specifically, a recognition that horror films were increasingly being sold as much for their graphic sexual displays as their ability to solicit screams. This meant that black audiences could be assured that even more sensationalistic films would be coming their way as the strictures of the Production Code gave way to the MPAA’s more permissive rating system. Illicit themes actually elevated *Paranoia* above other horror films, at least
according to the article’s author, who suggested that it was “more avant-garde than usual in that it also includes sexual perversion and drug abuse.”

Whether or not Paranoia truly qualified as an example of the avant-garde is less interesting than the idea that this film’s value as a cultural product increased because it incorporated subject matter that would have been considered exploitative only a decade earlier. The commercial success of films like Rosemary’s Baby, Night of the Living Dead, and, to a lesser extent, Paranoia suggested that the lines between art and exploitation, between highbrow and lowbrow, and between high drama and mindless escapism were becoming less meaningful. For many of the black spectators that had been uniquely positioned to see connections between horror’s distilled myths and “real” American historical and political discourses, those lines of demarcation may already have been seen as arbitrary. Various forms of black expressive culture, particularly blues and jazz, traded on performer and audience knowledge of vernacular idioms while demanding a command of classical techniques. These expressive forms had also served as vital outlets for a range of different kinds of speech, from political commentary to fierce articulations of black sexuality. Black folks therefore had had no shortage of practice in either producing or interpreting cultural texts that were at once vulgar and nuanced, frightening and revelatory. However long and winding the road between Simone’s refined Technicolor blues and Romero’s blunt-edged, black-and-white nightmare might have been, black audiences who were studied in decoding the former would have been quite apt at also doing so with the latter.

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308 Ibid.
Black audiences would need those interpretive skills to make sense of films in which sensationalized action, brutal violence, and tawdry sex fused into a conflicted jumble of spectatorial pleasures. One need look no further than the historical drama *Slaves* (1969) to get a sense of what black audiences were up against. The film starred Dionne Warwick and Ossie Davis, and played on a double bill along with *Night of the Living Dead* in New York City during the winter of 1969. Although it was not “slavesploitation” in the vein of later films such as *Mandingo* (1975), promotional materials nevertheless positioned slave beatings and coercive sexual relationships as some of *Slaves*’ principal attractions.\(^{309}\) An *Amsterdam News* article featured a picture of Stephen Boyd’s slave master character, MacKay, delivering one such beating while a group of slaves looks on in fear; the article itself described the film as “a controversial drama in Technicolor that takes a bold look at the system of American slavery and tells of Boyd’s love for his slave mistress, portrayed by Miss Warwick, and its effect on the south’s rigid racial system.”\(^{310}\) It is difficult not to notice how the author deliberately attempts to distinguish Warwick from her character, but does not do the same for Boyd, who becomes conflated with his onscreen persona. This slippage demonstrates, on the one hand, an awareness of the limitations facing black actors with only a narrow range of available roles to play, and, on the other, a recognition that there was more at stake in blacks’ representation in American cinema than for most whites. For performers like Davis and Warrick to play slaves during a period when black nationalism was gaining


prominence would have been a fraught endeavor indeed and all the more so in a melodrama that black audiences would have viewed on the same bill as *Night of the Living Dead*’s defiant black protagonist Ben (Duane Jones).\textsuperscript{311}

So much has already been said about *Slaves*’ co-feature *Night of the Living Dead* that there is little need to belabor its significance here except to say that Romero’s film has become one of the most discussed and influential horror films of all time, prompting a litany of popular and scholarly criticism, as well as spawning countless imitations across various mediums. Yet, while *Night of the Living Dead* provides some of the richest social critique of any horror film before or since, it is unlikely that any of the themes that can be read into Romero’s film would have prompted black spectators to see the double feature in 1969. Both *Slaves* and *Night of the Living Dead* were first and foremost marketed as films that contained spectacles of the abject body. As an ad that appeared on the same *Amsterdam News* page as the still from *Slaves* claimed: “The screen explodes with PASSION and HORROR!” It was precisely horror’s willingness to trade in a kind of cinematic currency of abject bodies, to enable communal exercises in mastery, and to incorporate the pleasures of other lowbrow genres that made it such a potent source of social critique in the following decade. This characteristic is also what kept the genre alive among many black viewers during the civil rights movement, for if passion and horror were the order of the day, then one would not need to look far to find either in the horror cinema of the seventies.

\textsuperscript{311} I use the term “melodrama” in line with Williams’ characterization: “the fundamental mode by which American mass culture has ‘talked to itself’ about enduring moral dilemma of race.” See *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), xiii-xiv.
AIP, Reynold Brown, and the Iconic Faces of Early-Seventies Horror

AIP films continued to receive substantial attention in black papers at the beginning of the seventies, especially in Chicago where selections like *The Dunwich Horror* (1970), *Count Yorga, Vampire* (1970), *Cry of the Banshee* (1970), and *Scream and Scream Again* (1970) played at neighborhood theatres. A *Defender* article called *The Dunwich Horror* one of AIP’s “most ambitious undertakings” and offered this awkwardly phrased warning: “When people in a small village believe your home to be the descendants of demons, be prepared for the eerie and the men who invoke its power and the women who invite its shame.”312 The promotional poster for the film, designed by renowned illustrator Reynold Brown, was far less ambiguous and serves as one of the more arresting images to appear in black newspapers during the period (Fig. 2.6). Descriptive text appears at the top, providing a clearer sense of the premise: “A few years ago in Dunwich a half-witted girl bore twins. One of them was almost human.”313 This copy encouraged spectators to form associations between the film’s monster and other “hideous progeny” throughout the genre, from those in classic horror films to *Rosemary’s* more recent demonic birth.314 Below the text, a nest of serpents and talons protrude from the head of a crazed-looking man with a scraggly beard and one of the talons actually reaches out to grab the leg of a nearly nude white woman (lead actress Sandra Dee), who lies on her back at the bottom of the ad. She wears a terrified, open-mouthed expression.

313 Ibid.
and stretches her hand out toward the reader in a quintessential example of what art historian Karal Ann Marling has characterized as the “forward directed energy” evident throughout Brown’s poster work. Marling deploys this term to capture the way in which Brown’s subjects often tended to “zoom right out of the picture” and take on a three-dimensional quality that “ruptured the boundary between the place where art stops and life starts.”

The sheer aesthetic power of Brown’s imagination can be found in nearly three-hundred posters for various genres across four decades, some of which included big studio films like Ben-Hur (1959), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1958), and Spartacus (1960). His most iconic images, however, remain those he created for science fiction and horror films of the late-fifties and early-sixties such as Creature from the Black Lagoon, The Incredible Shrinking Man (1957), I Was a Teenage Werewolf (1958), Attack of the 50 Foot Woman (1958), House on Haunted Hill (1959), and The Time Machine (1960). Both Corman and AIP co-founder Samuel Z. Arkoff agree that Brown’s exquisitely detailed and often larger than life posters probably did more to sell their films to audiences than any other single marketing tool. Ironically though, The Dunwich Horror was one of his last assignments and came at a moment when Brown was becoming increasingly disgusted with what he felt to be a shift toward more lewd subject matter in Hollywood. He eventually left the industry altogether to paint in solitude in Nebraska.

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316 Ibid.
317 Ibid.
318 Ibid.
Brown's disgust with the industry's more graphic representations may have been less a matter of legitimate moral indignation than a disquieting sense that the ideological messages he had helped create and disseminate to millions of American moviegoers for years were being reduced to their most elemental codes. *The Dunwich Horror* did not, after all, represent a radical departure from his earlier work on the poster for *Creature from the Black Lagoon* or the many others he painted that featured a partially nude,
vulnerable, and vacuous white woman being threatened by a darkly-colored monster or some other apocalyptic force. And given the huge audiences who encountered his work, he was probably more singularly responsible for codifying the iconography of monstrous racial miscegenation than any other individual in the history of film; people saw his posters even if they never actually saw the films. His ability to create vivid mythological universes, which were usually far more energetic and complex than the actual films, provided a visual vocabulary for the desires and anxieties plaguing the national psyche.319

What makes Brown's poster art significant when thinking about horror's appeal to black spectators is that while he created images tinged with racism, sexism, and xenophobia, his most powerful tableaus also delighted in what Marling describes as a desire to see the myths of "American innocence, full of potential fecundity, menaced by alien quarters."320 Marling goes on to argue that it was precisely this internal tension that provided the necessary sense of animation in Brown's best illustrations:

It seems to me that it was in the 1950s, with these sleezezoid films that his imagination was fully engaged and that is, that underneath the placid surface of family man, and father of many, and exemplary suburban American there lurked a real sort of distrust of all those values, and a sort of desire to see them all brought crashing down by "monolith monsters." There's a relish for the destruction of all the tawdry stuff of American culture. There's relish for bosom-ripping sexuality. This guy didn't have eight children by accident.321

Despite Marling's humorous conjecture about Brown's personal psychology, we can of course never know exactly what drove his creative vision. He nonetheless created an archive of images that simultaneously manifested some of the most pernicious forms of

319 Ibid.
320 Ibid.
321 Ibid.
American racial angst while also revealing a deep ambivalence about white authority—an ambivalence shared by many black spectators caught between integration and more radical ideologies.

It is also significant that the version of *The Dunwich Horror* poster that appeared in the *Defender* explicitly mentioned that the film had been adapted from “H.P. LOVECRAFT’S CLASSIC TALE OF TERROR AND THE SUPERNATURAL!” This was an endorsement not without irony given the author’s unabashedly racist politics and the frequency with which those politics seemed to find their way into his genre-defining visions of monstrosity. While Brown does not ever appear to have articulated outright the kind of bigotry that Lovecraft did in some of his fiction and letters, the two seem to have spoken much of the same imagistic language. It makes sense then that Brown turned to paintings of an idealized American frontier after leaving Hollywood, almost as though he were trying to return to what he believed to be a more innocent, reassuring time. How horrified he might have been to realize that the gothic fantasies of *The Dunwich Horror* were only the logical extension of the frontier violence he hoped to romanticize. Or perhaps, he knew this on some level all along.

The *Defender* took an altogether different tack in its treatment of *Cry of the Banshee*, choosing not to focus not on the film itself, but on Swedish actress Essy Persson. A deceptively titled July 1970 article, “Horror Film Unfolds at the McVickers,”

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322 As Donald Tyson says about the author: “The least palpable aspect of Lovecraft’s character was his lifelong deeply ingrained bigotry and racism...Succinctly stated, Lovecraft hated on principle anyone who was not Anglo-Saxon.” *The Dream World of H.P. Lovecraft: His Life, His Demons, His Universe* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2010), 6. Some of Lovecraft’s most virulently racist tracts can be found in his letters such as “Aryan Supremacy,” “Supporting Hitler,” and “Jews and Foreigners” in *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography in Letters*, ed. S.T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000).
provided only a brief description of the film, calling it “American International’s macabre-piece [sic] about the struggle between paganism and Christianity.” The rest of the piece concentrated on Persson’s sexual allure, which was expressly linked to her ethnic and national heritage:

Meet “Miss Underbar”! Translated from the Swedish it means “Miss Gorgeous.” For that’s what they call 23-year old actress Esse [sic] Persson in her native Gothenburg. And as Gothenburg is famed as the town from which all the loveliest and sexiest Swedish girls come, the tag [my emphasis] is an enormously complimentary one.

This description not only appears to celebrate a distinctly white brand of beauty – already strange within the space of black newspaper – but it also situates her hometown of Gothenburg as a kind of factory that produces beautiful women as commodities for foreign consumption. Persson is quite literally “tagged” with the product label, “Miss Gorgeous” and emptied of anything beyond her consumable physical qualities. Her actual performance in the film never comes up, nor does the article offer any direct quotations from her that might have provided some insight into and how she felt about her label. What the author did discuss at some length, was how director Ake Falck first saw her in a magazine and was so “fascinated” that he cut out the picture and affixed the label “Miss Gorgeous.” Danish director March Ahlberg later saw the picture and cast her as a “nymphomaniac nurse” in his film I, a Woman (1965). Persson had essentially been “cut out” of one fantasy and then stitched into another. But for all of the attention paid to her sex appeal, her main contribution to Cry of the Banshee was to play “a

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324 Ibid.
325 Ibid.
326 Ibid.
beautiful girl who ages a thousand years in what could be one of the most grisly death
scenes ever filmed.\textsuperscript{327}

As odd as the article on Persson seems in the context of a black newspaper, it was
not wholly unusual for a black paper to do a feature story on a white horror actor. The
Amsterdam News had done a story some years before earlier on aging star Tallulah
Bankhead. She was perhaps best known for her role in Hitchcock’s \textit{Lifeboat} (1944) and
was currently starring in the Richard Matheson-scripted “hag horror”\textsuperscript{328} film \textit{Die! Die!}
My Darling} (1965). The article began by immediately situating her within that subgenre
alongside some of her contemporaries: “We’ve had Bette Davis and Joan Crawford in
‘Whatever Happened to Baby Jane,’ and Miss Davis again with Olivia De Havilland in
‘Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte’ – all horror films and vehicles to rejuvenize [sic] these
veteran actresses at the box office.”\textsuperscript{329} Rather than expressing any of the essentialist
exoticism found in the description of Persson, this piece was more interested in
comparing Bankhead’s performance to those by other actresses: “[The film] is real
spooky and chilling. Tallulah may be late in starting but she’s up front with the others in
the horror stakes.”\textsuperscript{330}

\textsuperscript{327} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{328} Also known as a “Grand Dame Guignol,” these were horror films that featured older
actresses in leading roles. As Peter Shelley describes: “The role the actress plays in
Grand Dame Guignol either presents her as a mentally unstable antagonist or as the
Woman in Peril protagonist...Like a ghost, the grand dame cannot rest until the
unbalance in the universe is corrected. A refusal to accept reality and the natural process
of the life exemplifies the fear of aging and death, and implicitly a fear of woman.”
\textit{Grand Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror from Baby Jane to Mother}
\textsuperscript{329} “Tallulah Shows Up in Chilling, Chilling Film,” \textit{New York Amsterdam News} (New
York, NY), May 22, 1965, 23.
\textsuperscript{330} Ibid.
Other stories in black newspapers similarly singled-out white performers with an investment in the “horror stakes,” and although these features usually focused on male stars, the actors that were highlighted shared with the grand dames guignol a habit of playing villains. “Price Back in Chiller,” announced one July 1971 *Amsterdam News* piece that discussed Vincent Price’s role as a “creative killer” in AIP’s *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971), a role that he would reprise in the sequel *Dr. Phibes Rises Again* the following year. The second Dr. Phibes film co-starred Robert Quarry, who played the title character in another set of AIP-distributed horror films *Count Yorga, Vampire* (1970) and *The Return of Count Yorga* (1971). Defender columnist Earl Calloway conducted an interview with Quarry in which he described the latter as “one of the most popular Hollywood stars among all ages of people.” Quarry seemed unconcerned with being typecast despite having played a vampire in three recent films and, instead, confessed to being a life-long genre fan that took special pride in being a horror “hero” to the kids in his neighborhood. Although he had enough stage and screen experience to warrant an A-list pedigree, he suggested that playing Count Yorga was less “about a good performance” than being able to “creep into the mind’s world of fear and unlock emotional responses.” He also speculated about the psychological utility of horror claiming that, “these movies are like fairy tales and people work out their fantasies by screaming.” The racial dynamics at play in many horror films leads us to believe black spectators were “working out” a much different set of fantasies than their white

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333 Ibid.
334 Ibid.
335 Ibid.
counterparts, to say nothing of the atmosphere at many urban theaters, which may or may not have been conducive to the kind of therapeutic viewing Quarry describes. Certain actors’ ability to invoke the appropriate horror affect seems to have been an integral part of black engagement with the genre during the early seventies.

Christopher Lee served as just such a paragon of horror, exhibiting a commanding on-screen presence that drew the attention of the Defender in 1971. A fairly detailed account of his background appeared in an August edition and in contrast to the portrait of Quarry, whom the paper characterized mainly as a small town boy who learned his craft at “the school of hard knocks,”\textsuperscript{336} the feature on Lee emphasized his noble Italian lineage, high-class education, stage-acting background, and multilingual abilities.\textsuperscript{337} The article also rightly tied Lee’s success directly to his work in Hammer Films such as his current leading role in The Scars of Dracula (1970). Although he played a range of monstrous villains in various horror films – including several turns as Sax Rohmer’s infamous “yellow peril” incarnate, Dr. Fu Manchu – it was the sixth time that he had played the part of the archetypal gothic villain-hero Count Dracula.\textsuperscript{338} Hammer films did not reach the same level of popularity with black audiences as those from AIP, but it would have been easy enough to see Lee in other Hammer productions at an urban nabe theatre.\textsuperscript{339}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{336} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{337} “Christopher Lee Stars New ‘Dracula’ Role,” Chicago Defender (Chicago, IL), Aug. 14-20, 1971, 41.
\end{itemize}
Horror and [Anti]Heroism in Black and White

As with some of the other white horror film stars of the period, the Defender did a short feature on Dean Stockwell, who black audiences would have recognized from AIP films The Dunwich Horror and Psych-Out (1968). He was currently starring in The Loners (1971), “a story of three youths who wage a losing battle against contemporary society’s brutal establishment.” In addition to the broader countercultural message of the film, the article also drew attention to the fact that Stockwell was playing a half-Naajeo Indian man on the run from “vengeance-seeking law authorities.” His character sounded remarkably similar to other non-white, anti-establishment folk heroes that were popular with black audiences that year in films such as Tom Laughlin’s Billy Jack, Melvin Van Peebles’ Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song, and of course Gordon Parks’ Shaft. Ads for these films also appeared right alongside horror and other genre pictures in black newspapers. In fact, a short descriptive piece on Billy Jack as well as an ad for Shaft both appeared on the same aforementioned Amsterdam News page as the article that discussed Price’s turn as “The Abominable Dr. Phibes.”

Laughlin’s film was characterized as a “a contemporary drama about an Indian-American who puts the skills he developed in war to use in [sic] behalf of young

341 Ibid.
Americans in the Southeast.\textsuperscript{343} Plots about veterans (or other men with military training) that return to their neighborhoods to fight crime and political corruption became a familiar theme in other black-cast films of the early seventies, such as in Ossie Davis’ Gordon’s War (1973) and Ivan Dixon’s The Spook Who Sat by the Door (1973). Both films expressed overtly militant themes: Davis’ story involved a black Vietnam vet who, along with the help of his old unit, uses military tactics to get drugs out of Harlem while Spook concerned a fictional first black member of the CIA that takes his training to the streets of Chicago in order to recruit a black guerilla army. Both films also tried to distance themselves from blaxploitation: they utilized more somber visual aesthetics, avoided humor, sex scenes, and hip musical scores, and most importantly, deployed an overall sense of narrative seriousness. Unfortunately, neither received the kind of attention of other black-cast films of the period in part because of such dramatic production contrasts and perhaps even more significantly, because of the way they each prioritized collective action rather than the individual efforts of an exceptional black hero. Whether it was Richard Roundtree in Shaft, Ron O’Neal in Superfly (1972), Jim Brown in Slaughter (1972), Fred Williamson in Hammer (1972), Tamara Dobson in Cleopatra Jones (1973), Pam Grier in Coffy (1973), Issac Hayes in Truck Turner (1974), or Rudy Ray Moore in Dolemite (1975), the often cartoonish heroism of blaxploitation articulated itself predominantly as a matter of defiant individualism, brutishness, guile, and self-interest that sometimes had the ancillary benefit of helping the larger black communities. As Ed Guerrero has said of Shaft: “his position in the narrative is maintained as distinctly individualist, in keeping with Hollywood’s ongoing repression or

\textsuperscript{343} Ibid.
containment of the collective.”344 This is not to say that blaxploitation heroes or heroines only ever operated alone in their respective universes or were completely abstracted from black communities, but they were elevated above other black folks by what was usually an excessively expressed, distinctly black corporeality and singular brand of self-determination. Blaxploitation heroism therefore took its energy from what the films presented as exceptional individuals whose primary agency came from their own stubborn will. Contrarily, Gordon’s War and Spook insisted throughout their respective narratives that only collective action – in the form of full-on guerilla warfare – would be sufficient to secure black liberation. As Stephanie Dunn has pointed out, however, Spook did this at the expense of relegating black women to demeaning, secondary roles and perpetuating patriarchal sexual and gender oppression.345

Blaxploitation should not be unfairly criticized for its individualistic, masculine focus, however. Early seventies audiences of all stripes were no less enthralled by lone, white action heroes hell-bent on meting out their own personal brand of phallic justice in films like Dirty Harry (1971), Walking Tall (1973), and Death Wish (1974). That all of these films subsequently spawned their own franchises, imitations, and remakes testifies to the popularity of this proto-masculine figure. Unabashed in their appeal to conservative rhetoric, these films featured protagonists that were ironically no less frustrated with the limits of legal discourse than their blaxploitation counterparts despite

being mechanisms of that authority themselves. Clint Eastwood's iconic character Harry Callahan serves as the most readily identifiable cinematic model for the "shoot first and ask questions later" detective; Joe Don Baker's version of real-life sheriff Buford Pusser starts *Walking Tall* as an ex-professional wrestler with anti-establishment tendencies and uncharacteristically progressive views on race and labor, but he quickly becomes an authoritarian sheriff with a mighty big stick; and in *Death Wish*, Charles Bronson plays his character Paul Kersey as an unassuming family man (with a repressed sadistic streak) who only becomes a one man vigilante force after thugs murder his wife and sexually assault his daughter. While Kersey does not become a representative of law enforcement, the police deliberately enable his vigilantism in order to lower crime statistics and rather than arresting him, they allow him to go on to another city where he can continue his crusade in the sequels.

George Lipsitz has argued that these crime films of the early seventies reflected white anxiety about black assertions of subjectivity and autonomy and attempted to reassert white authoritarian heroes "as the only remedy for a disintegrating society." He argues additionally that these films were responding to a broader kind of "genre anxiety" during the period, what he defines as "an intrusion of social tremors into cinematic representations in such a way as to render traditional genre icons unsatisfying and incomplete." Guerrero makes a similar argument about what he problematically

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348 Ibid, 216.
calls “the white ‘vigilante’ films of the early 1970s,” narratives that articulated a conservative white audience’s longing to suppress black revolt as well as white liberal social and cultural movements of the previous decade.\textsuperscript{349}

In contrast to these white “lone wolf” protagonists, blaxploitation heroes embodied a more vexed status between white law and the criminal underworld. They might best be thought of as the natural descendants of the “badman” archetype that has manifested in various incarnations throughout black folklore, song, and literature in figures such as Stagger Lee and Bad-Lan Stone. In his history of the black badman, Jerry H. Bryant astutely describes the ambivalent functionality of such hypermasculine characters in the collective black imagination:

> his meaning for black culture lies precisely in his defiant individualism, in the fear that he strikes not only among blacks but among whites too. He is the pride of the black community (“You should see that dude operate: he is ba-ad!”); he is the despair of the black community (“We can get nothing constructive done with that man around!”). He is the violent outlet for anger and frustration, an example of fearlessness and autonomy. But he is a threat to communal stability and achievement.\textsuperscript{350}

Bryant’s description simultaneously captures the recalcitrant attitude of blaxploitation heroes and problematizes the white crime drama’s function as it is understood in both Guerrero and Lipsitz’s arguments. Many of the same symbolic functions ascribed to black badmen – especially the sense of defiant individualism, fearlessness, and self-mastery – could just as easily be applied to any of the leads in the white crime drama. And most black spectators at the time would have been hard pressed

\textsuperscript{349} Framing Blackness, 104-105. I question Guerrero’s use of “vigilante” because as I have already suggested, it assumes a much more fraught relationship between the lone enactor of vengeance and the state than was the case in any of these films.

\textsuperscript{350} Jerry H. Bryant, Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 4.
to deny that Dirty Harry was one “baadasssss dude.” What I would like to question then—and this kind of query is precisely what situating black newspapers at the center of this discussion helps illuminate—is whether the white frontier-style heroism embodied by Eastwood and others can be neatly distinguished from that of the “superspade,” or for that matter, from a supernatural figure like *Blacula* (1972).\(^{351}\) The answer is both yes and no in that while the cursed black vampire character does indeed incorporate key characteristics of the badman (a “cool” demeanor, anti-racist politics, hip clothes, an aggressive physical presence, the ability to manipulate women, etc.) he is also far more conflicted than either the vengeful white heroes or the emotionally unencumbered blaxploitation bucks.\(^{352}\) He more accurately fits the mold of that primary archetype of the American gothic tradition, the “villain-hero.” Fiedler used this term to describe that monstrous figure capable of summoning both fear and sympathy: “The villain-hero is indeed an invention of the gothic form, while his temptation and suffering, the beauty and terror of his bondage to evil are among its major themes.”\(^{353}\)

Ads and articles for the *Dirty Harry* films, the *Walking Tall* series, and the *Death Wish* films all appeared in black newspapers throughout the decade along with those for AIP’s blaxploitation action and horror films like *Blacula*, which suggests that black audiences did not have a problem with going to see Bronson or Eastwood do his thing.

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\(^{352}\) Leerom Modovoi argues that, “His elegant African name – Mamuwalde – his aristocratic speech, his emotional modulation, all serve to make the tall, handsome, deep-voiced Blacula an embodiment of male charisma associated with the pre-diasporic past.” See “Theorizing Historicity, or the Many Meanings of Blacula,” *Screen* 39, no. 1 (1998), 12.

\(^{353}\) *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 128.
one weekend while going to see Brown and Williamson do theirs the next.\footnote{For example, an ad for \textit{Death Wish} appeared on a November 2, 1974 \textit{Amsterdam News} page along with one for \textit{The Texas Chainsaw Massacre}. A listing for \textit{Walking Tall}, which was playing with the black cast drama \textit{Claudine} (1974) at the State Theatre in Chicago, appeared on a January 7,1975 \textit{Defender} page below an Earl Calloway review of \textit{Young Frankenstein} and a feature on John Ford’s ‘\textit{Tis Pity She’s a Whore.”}} For many black spectators, it is likely that the “baadassss” men of blaxploitation existed in the same imaginative space along a continuum \textit{with} the white authoritarian heroes rather than inhabiting some wholly separate and/or oppositional cinematic landscape. And if Bryant is right about the need to voice collective frustrations, we cannot rule out the possibility that some black spectators temporarily aligned themselves with a figure like Dirty Harry even as he drew his famous .44 Magnum on black men. Put in the most simplistic terms, black moviegoers – including those inhabiting the very same troubled urban spaces shown on screen – might have channeled their own ambivalence about the \textit{real} black badmen in their own neighborhoods through blaxploitation action and horror films and white crime dramas at one and the same time.

However silly the premise of \textit{Blacula} might have been, William Marshall’s surprisingly nuanced performance seemed to unite in a single body much of what black spectators were searching for in the early seventies, what Harry Benshoff describes as “a specifically black avenger who justifiably fights against the dominant order – which is often explicitly coded as racist.”\footnote{Harry Benshoff, “Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?” \textit{Cinema Journal} 39, no. 2 (2000): 37.} Benshoff goes on to say that blaxploitation horror films reappropriated old storylines by romanticizing and even valorizing the monster.\footnote{Ibid.} Although Benshoff overlooks the kind of ambivalence that has always surrounded horror movie monsters, a \textit{Defender} article (reprinted in both the \textit{Norfolk New Journal and Guide}}
and the *L.A. Sentinel*) did position Blacula in very sympathetic terms: "William Marshall’s role as Blacula shows him as a man of dignity who has tried to help his African nation but has been victimized by Count Dracula." Marshall’s pedigree as a "distinguished Shakespearean stage actor" as well as his direct influence when constructing the character also helped further legitimize both the idea of a black Dracula and the film itself. Marshall worked directly with the film’s writers during production to give the character a more regal air, resulting in the opening backstory that positions Blacula as African royalty. “Hollywood’s first black oriented thriller" needed a legitimizing figure like Marshall (and black director Bill Crain) in part because black audiences were already familiar with the low-budget quality of most AIP movies and expected more from such a direct appeal for their attention and dollars. Rather than alleviating this tension, *Blacula*’s subsequent box office success put the company under additional pressure to do more than just take money from black audiences and run, even prompting some to call for more investments in both on and off-camera black talent.

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358 Ibid.


When it came to evaluating the quality of the film itself, critics seemed to have had difficulty making sense of *Blacula*’s politics.\(^{362}\) Rossi S. Jackson’s review for the *Pittsburgh Courier* best captured this sense of ambivalence while simultaneously displaying an understanding of the horror genre’s unique representational challenges. He begins rather dismissively by taking a shot at AIP horror films, claiming that, “Like the other films of this kind made at AIP, this film is an abomination in all departments.”\(^{363}\) He goes on to argue more judiciously that, “Blacula is humorous, horrifying, harmless piece of junk, and it should be treated as such. To treat it as if it were something more would only prove to rob the film of its few unpretentious pressures.”\(^{364}\) Other elements of his review betray the idea that film carried no serious meaning, however. He describes an audience who actively participated in the film’s disruption of classic horror conventions and found much with which to engage. For example, Vonetta McGee’s performance as Blacula’s love interest (which Jackson reads as a self-consciously constructed display of camp) was apparently clever enough to deconstruct those of “all the other horror screen heroines that came before her” and even prompted the women in the audience to mimic her pastiche.\(^{365}\) Jackson was therefore able to identify some of the genre’s established gender politics as well as the film’s attempts to upend them. He also evidenced an intuitive understanding of how monstrosity and queerness frequently intersect in horror.

During his discussion of Blacula’s initial awakening scene, in which the vampire attacks

\(^{362}\) Some black critics lumped the film in with other blaxploitation fare while others suggested it was more sophisticated. Other critics both black and white seemed at a loss to make substantive value judgments. See Benhoff, “Blaxploitation Horror Films,” 34-36.


\(^{364}\) Ibid.

\(^{365}\) Ibid.
a gay interracial couple who unknowingly stumble upon his coffin, Jackson claims:

"These two, as if they weren’t queer enough, are bitten and transformed into vampires, but like all good monsters, they come back to haunt us in the latter part of the film."\textsuperscript{366}

Jackson takes for granted that the bite signifies a homoerotic penetration that exacerbates rather than establishing queerness. The title of his review, “One Strange Dude,” can then be read as implied understanding of vampirism as a kind of queerness.

Jackson’s most significant contribution to the critical discourse around \textit{Blacula} did not actually relate to the content of the film, but came in the form of a rough schematic that situated horror fans into four distinct categories including “the curious,” “the timid,” the “Wiz Kids,” and the “blood brothers and sisters to Blacula and Dracula.”\textsuperscript{367} The first two groups were self-explanatory, but the second two required more detail: He uses “Wiz Kids’ to refer to those seasoned horror viewers that shouted their predictions about key plot points aloud before they happened on screen. He does not say whether this exercise ruined or enhanced the spectatorial experience, but one assumes that it was a regular enough occurrence as not to be distinguished from other forms of “talking back” to the screen in predominantly black theaters. The final group, which he also referred to as the “Black Draculean Critics,” included bourgeois social censors and academics he felt were trying to sanitize black folk culture for mainstream consumption. He pulled no punches while sharing his apparent disdain for this group, arguing that, “If they were to completely have their way, they’d have ‘Superfly’ behind bars and ‘Sweetback’ castrated.”\textsuperscript{368} His heated rhetoric, coupled with an apparent sense of

\textsuperscript{366} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{367} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{368} Ibid.
vicarious emasculation, clearly calls into question his initial claim about *Blacula’s* supposedly “unpretentious pleasures” and suggests, quite to the contrary, that black popular pleasure-seeking did carry substantial meaning – even if that pleasure only extended as far as one’s theatre seat. More to the point, his indignation assigned special value to the fantasies of black empowerment embodied by blaxploitation heroes as well as to the broader need for an imaginative space that allowed black audiences fluid paths of identification. Benshoff characterizes the process of horror spectatorship as “oscillating between masochistic and sadistic poles, and highly dependent on the cultural and historical positioning of readers. Thus, identifying with monsters out to topple social institutions (that oppress both movie monsters and real life minorities) can be pleasurable and a potentially empowering act for many filmgoers.”

Jackson’s defense of blaxploitation stemmed from his affinity to its hypermasculine heroes, but black newspapers also featured ads and (less frequently) articles about action and horror films with strong black female leads too. One such article announced former “Laugh-In” television show star Teresa Graves’ debut in *Vampira* (a.k.a. *Old Drac* 1975). This piece, which first appeared in the *Atlanta Daily World* and was then reprinted in the *Defender*, the *Sentinel*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, referred to Graves as a “Sultry black American Actress” and called the film a “unique mixture of high comedy and horror.” Graves’ positioning amongst her blaxploitation kinsmen could be more clearly discerned when the piece appeared in the *Defender* surrounded by a slew of ads for films like *Gordon’s War, Cleopatra Jones, Dillinger* (1973), and the

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adult animated feature *Heavy Traffic* (1973) (Fig. 2.7). The largest ads on that page were reserved for horror movies and “Kung Fu flicks” such as the AIP-distributed double feature package, *Raw Meat* (1973) and *Cannibal Girls* (1973), as well as another pair that included *Duel of the Iron Fist* (1971) and *Kung Fu: The Invisible Fist* (1973). Ads for other martial arts films including *Lady Kung Fu* (a.k.a. *Hapkido* /1972) and *The Hong Kong Cat* (a.k.a. *Karado: The Kung Fu Flash* /1973) also appeared prominently on the page. Graves’ character in *Vampira* did not display any of the trademark martial arts skills that blaxploitation heroes or heroines were becoming known for, but the intersections between action, comedy, horror, and now the martial arts film, could be best observed on black newspaper pages like this one.

Graves was not the only black actress to receive attention for her work in a horror film during the period. The *Daily World* also did two stories on AIP’s Voodoo-themed zombie picture *Sugar Hill* starring Marki Bey. Coleman positions Bey’s character Diana “Sugar” Hill as an “enduring woman,” a black version of Carol J. Clover’s “final girl” archetype who unlike her white counterpart, openly uses her sexuality as a primary

tool of resistance. According to Coleman, enduring women take their motivation from a desire not simply to avenge personal violations or fight for individual survival, but to act on behalf of their communities as "soldiers in ongoing battles of discrimination, in which a total victory is elusive." If Sugar endures, it is because she acts less as a direct agent than as a facilitator of vengeance, allowing her zombie minions to carry out justice after a white gangster murders her boyfriend. Still, her less forceful role did not prevent her from being situated among other blaxploitation heroes and heroines, or even authoritarian white heroes of the period. Ads for films such as Black Belt Jones (1974), Willie Dynamite (1974), The Mack (1973), The Black Alleycats (1973), and McQ (1974) appeared on the same pages alongside the Daily World articles on Sugar Hill. The ad for the film itself, which mimicked that of Cleopatra Jones, pictured Bey sporting a full afro and revealing one-piece outfit beside the tagline: "She’s STIMULatin’, FASCINatin’ – but ASSASSINatin’ and the Mob never had it so BAAAAD!" Yet she did not appear with a gun in-hand in the ad, another indication that she represented a somewhat different brand of fantastic black empowerment than other blaxploitation heroes and heroines.

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376 Horror Noire, 132.
Figure 2.7 – The Intersection of Genre in the Early Seventies
Plans set for Jeff Awards
Teresa Graves makes debut in 'Vampira'

X-BAG opens season
with Perkins' play

Futrell earns place

G opens season
with Perkins' play

Source: Chicago Defender (Chicago, IL), Sept. 8, 1973, 18. Proquest Black Studies Center.

Turning Toward Apocalypse
AIP's blaxploitation action and horror movies dominated much of the discussion about film in black newspapers during the early seventies, but black audiences also recognized other shifts within the horror genre. More specifically, some critics have marked a turn in the early seventies toward apocalyptic horror narratives, a trend displayed most distinctly in films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Kendall Phillips argues that *The Exorcist* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* share a fundamental concern with the idea of apocalypse across three axes: with a broader struggle between good and evil for the fate of world, with the prospect of cataclysmic societal change, and finally with the dissolution of the veneer of civilization. Director Tobe Hooper acknowledged this apocalyptic tinge in a *Defender* article, or at least seemed to recognize that his twisted, tribal family spoke to a deeper cultural unease through their cannibalistic consumption: “It’s a film about meat, about people who have gone beyond dealing with animal meat... Crazy retarded people going beyond the line between animal and human.” The article also played up the film’s supposed verisimilitude, drawing particular attention to the gruesome set design: “Realism being the key note, interior sets are actually constructed of animal and human bones and a mask worn by one of the


killers (justifiably named ‘Leatherface’) was molded from human flesh.”380 Separating truth from fiction on what was a notoriously chaotic and stressful low-budget production has of course become a favorite pastime of horror fans, and Hooper has never shied away from his own mythmaking. But it was the hyperbolic claims of artistic realism and sadistic spectacle, along with the film’s oppressive, entropic atmosphere that seem to have successfully captured black spectators’ attention.381 It certainly could not have been the presence of black characters: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre is a starkly white film with the exception of the often-forgotten black truck driver who appears briefly during the final sequence. Although this “character” fails to save final girl Sally, he does manage to wound Leatherface before affecting his own escape, thus demonstrating a survivalist mentality that probably received cheers from black crowds.

Talk about horror in black newspapers tapered off to some degree during the mid-seventies, though ads, pictures, and listings for horror films playing at neighborhood theatres and drive-ins remained relatively consistent. Sporadic articles did appear that pointed to the continued struggle for black creative and financial control in the movie industry. The Daily World, for example, did a short article celebrating the financial backing of The House on Skull Mountain (1974) by six black businessmen in Atlanta, where they insisted that film be shot in order to provide work for those within the community.382 The following summer, the Defender featured a publicity still of Marlene

380 Ibid.
Clark, who played enduring woman “Ganja Meda” in the Cannes Film Festival favorite \textit{Ganja and Hess} (1973).\textsuperscript{383} That film, which was directed by black director Bill Gunn and made with art house sensibility, was currently playing at the Woods Theatre along with the 1971 interracial love drama, \textit{Honky}, starring Brenda Sykes.\textsuperscript{384} Despite these kinds of brief mentions about horror films, it was clear that as blaxploitation ran its course and AIP lost its foothold in the industry – the company was sold to Filmways in 1979\textsuperscript{385} – there were less direct appeals to black audiences in black newspapers as the decade went on. This did not stop a number of black critics from paying attention to the genre as the decade ended. They continued to engage with the horror genre through the black film surge of the early nineties and the second slasher film cycle initiated by Wes Craven’s \textit{Scream} in 1996. In the section that follows, I examine these critics’ responses in relation to white critics writing in major publications during the latter part of the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{383} For discussion about the film’s suppression by producers who were unwilling to support a black cast horror art film, see Manthia Diawara and Phyllis Klotman, “Ganja and Hess: Vampires, Sex, and Addictions,” \textit{Black American Literature Forum} 25.2 (1991): 299-314. For Coleman’s discussion of the film and Clark’s portrayal of the enduring woman, see \textit{Horror Noire}, 132-34.

\textsuperscript{384} “Untitled [photo standalone],” \textit{Chicago Defender} (Chicago, IL), July 26, 1975.

\textsuperscript{385} “AIP Bites Dust as Filmways Renames Studio,” \textit{Los Angeles Times} (Los Angeles, CA), Mar. 13, 1980.
They Talked Out Loud

In his oft-cited 1981 article “Why Movie Audiences Aren’t Safe Anymore,” Roger Ebert condemned director Meir Zarchi’s notorious rape-revenge film *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) for its “skeletal” plot, thin characterization, and singularly brutal depiction of sexual violence.\(^{386}\) Ebert also claimed that the film epitomized a broader trend in horror toward identification with the killer/monster (or in this case, rapists) as well as a backlash toward feminism. The allegedly misogynistic logic of these films revealed itself, at least according to Ebert, as much through their technical construction as their content: first-person point of view camera alignment forced the viewer to focus on the acts of the monsters rather than empathize with their victims. In her watershed 1992 study *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol J. Clover termed this formal mechanism that situates the viewer in the killer’s perspective the “I-camera.”\(^{387}\) Much of Clover’s study sought to problematize reactionary responses like Ebert’s by more carefully considering unstable modes of gender identification, unexpected patterns of genre cross-pollination, and the complex politics of reception surrounding mainstream (middlebrow/highbrow) versus more marginal (lowbrow) horror. As she argued about the moralistic posture taken by Ebert and other critics:

> there is something off here: something too shrill and too totalizing in the claim of misogyny, something dishonest in the critical rewritings and outright misrepresentations of the plot required to sustain that claim, something suspicious about the refusal to entertain even in passing the possibility of involvement with

\(^{386}\) *American Film* 6, no. 5 (1981): 55.

the victim’s part, something perverse about the unwillingness to engage with the manifestly feminist dimensions of [I Spit on Your Grave’s] script, and something dubious in the refusal to note its debt to Deliverance and the critical implications of that debt.\textsuperscript{388}

Since the publication of Clover’s study over two decades ago, many other scholars have returned to Ebert’s piece as well as his equally damning review of I Spit on Your Grave in order to challenge his simplistic assertions about the nature of spectatorial pleasure.\textsuperscript{389} Jacinda Read, for example, notes that most discussions of rape-revenge films feel compelled to engage Ebert’s attack of I Spit on Your Grave, often as a starting point of analysis.\textsuperscript{390} And because the rape-revenge film’s popularity has persisted and its politics have continually oscillated, Clover’s theorizations have also come under continued scrutiny.\textsuperscript{391}

I am less concerned with the rape-revenge film itself or even with the particular possibilities for viewer identification that I Spit on Your Grave enables than in the way

\textsuperscript{388} Ibid, 228.
\textsuperscript{390} Jacinda Read, The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and Rape-Revenge Cycle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 32. Read also considers how the rape-revenge theme extends to multiple genres beyond horror.
questions about race and horror spectatorship, which were central aspects of Ebert’s response, have gone unexamined. To borrow Clover’s phrasing, there is something off in the way she and other scholars have continually returned to Ebert’s discussions without addressing the racial demographics of the audiences he described, something peculiar in the desire to advocate for subversive reception practices while ignoring how black audiences have modeled those practices, something too convenient and neat in the impulse to segregate questions about racial subjectivity from those of gender and sexuality in discussions about spectatorship, and something historically negligent in the unwillingness to acknowledge that a considerable segment of the horror audience has been comprised of black spectators. Ebert’s responses to I Spit on Your Grave warrant further discussion because they betray an underlying concern not only with the film’s representational challenges but also with the politics of race as they relate to spectatorship broadly and horror spectatorship specifically.

Ebert bore witness to a spirited and even raucous viewing atmosphere, one wherein the audience participated actively in the creation of meaning and showed little restraint when vocalizing their pleasure or disapproval. A “white-haired middle-aged man” who sat next to him while mumbling misogynist affirmations like “She’s got that coming!” and “This’ll teach her” during the rape scenes further mediated the experience and confirmed for Ebert the film’s appeal to the lowest common denominator. Yet, as troubled as the critic was by the running commentary, he was even more disturbed by this man’s outward appearance of normalcy; Ebert seemed to realize for the first time that potential rapists could not be readily identified on sight: “I glanced at this man. He

looked totally respectable. He could have been a bank clerk, a hardware salesman; he could have been anyone. He was instinctively, unquestioningly voicing his support for the rape and violence on screen.”

Although this man’s voice remains the most prominent in Ebert’s imagination, he was similarly disturbed by another prominent voice from a woman in the audience who shouted her own chants of “You show him sister!” during the revenge sequences.”

In truth then, Ebert was really responding to a cacophony of conflicting voices: the white-haired woman-hater, the vociferant (black?) feminist, the bawdy crowd and its jumble of indiscriminate laughs and chatter, and his own internal dialogue of shock and disgust. What seems to go unmentioned in discussions of Ebert’s account, however, is that he screened the film twice:

I saw *I Spit on Your Grave* that first time with an audience that was mostly black (although my quiet neighbor was white). I saw it again, a week later, with an almost all white audience in the Adelphi Theatre on Chicago’s north side. The response was about the same. But in contrast to the mostly male downtown audience, the Adelphi crowd on that Friday night included a great many couples on dates; perhaps forty percent of the audience was female. They sat through it — willingly, I suppose.

By Ebert’s own admission, screening the film the first time with the mostly black, mostly male audience was one of the most “terrible” and even traumatic experiences he had undergone as a critic. So why should he have felt compelled to test whether that terrible experience would be replicated with a white audience? Why did he feel it necessary to clarify that his “quiet neighbor” was white unlike the rest of the crowd? And why refer to this white-haired man as “quiet” after already establishing how disgusting

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393 Ibid.
394 Ibid.
395 Ibid, 55.
396 Ibid, 54.
his audible comments were? Or, to put the case in the simplest possible terms, what did
the racial makeup of the two audiences or of any individual spectator have to do with
anything?

The disturbances in Ebert’s testimony seemed to stem from a set of unspoken
assumptions that racialized his entire framework for ethical spectatorship. His stance took
for granted that the mostly black male audience had responded inappropriately by not
demonstrating his same level of anger at seeing a white woman victimized on screen.
This is of course not to suggest that black audiences should not have been expected to
show compassion for a white rape victim, but rather that Ebert’s outrage cannot be neatly
cleaved from history and more precisely, from the protectionist rhetoric that has often
been used to defend the perceived virtue of white womanhood. The black audience’s
moral failure was only compounded then by their refusal to behave as proper, silent,
bourgeois spectators should, a breech in etiquette that becomes all the more evident in his
review of the film: “I do not often attribute motives to audience members, nor do I try to
read their minds, but the people who were sitting around me on Monday morning made it
easy for me to know what they were thinking. They talked out loud. [emphasis added]
And if they seriously believed the things they were saying, they were vicarious sex
criminals.”397 Ebert makes two assumptions here, both of which seem flawed. First, he
assumed that the spectators’ vocalizations reflected their real inner thoughts and feelings
rather an attempt to deal with those thoughts and feelings. As Marco Starr argues in his
more nuanced account, the tendency among men in the audience to make lewd jokes
during the rape sequences could also evidence their terror at “the realisation that one’s

397 Ebert, “I Spit on Your Grave (1980).”
fellow viewers are potential rapists” while simultaneously “relating to the experience of being raped.” Ebert also falsely presumed that the audience’s tacit approval of the events on screen would have been less offensive if never given voice. It may have been one thing to indulge internally in the vicious “economy of violence” offered by the rape-revenge film, but it was quite another to do so openly and in concert with other spectators. Perhaps the most problematic of all Ebert’s presuppositions was that the seemingly normal white man’s utterances were so offensive because they came from a seemingly “normal” white man. The utter shock Ebert displayed at this man’s behavior implied that while an audience of ill-trained black spectators might not have known better, a normal white man should have or, even worse, that the uncouth display of the mostly black audience corrupted what might have otherwise been a normal white man, encouraging him to give into his baser instincts. Ebert’s second trip to the Adelphi ends up feeling suspiciously like a failed attempt to redeem this “white-haired man,” and arguably himself too, as if they both needed rescuing from the monstrous black mass.

Ebert did not, however, find salvation with the white couples in the other theater either, which suggests that tensions embedded within the very narrative fabric of I Spit on Your Grave prompted the disquieting responses he observed. We might also consider that black audiences were already attuned to the spectatorial demands and interactive sensibilities of lowbrow exploitation films from years of training. Zarchi’s exploitation

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story would probably not have felt like a radical departure for black audiences who had been consuming a steady diet of similarly themed films since the late-1950s, including foreign art house and exploitation fare. Perhaps the only thing truly new about *I Spit on Your Grave* for black audiences would have been what Ebert described as “its brutal directness of style.” Rather than read the theatrical atmosphere of the predominantly black audience purely as an expression of encroaching nihilism and masculine backlash, we might better understand that theater as a space that allotted black spectators room for the exploration of dark fantasy and nourishment of discursive exchange both with each other and with the horrific. As Ebert feared that the horror film had cultivated a new brand of sadism threatening to leave spectators lost in darkness, black audiences recognized that they had never been safe at the hands of a white film industry and certainly not while watching horror movies. Indeed, black audiences like the one Ebert described were the product of a long-standing confrontational posture with horror narratives and with the very medium of film itself.

Ebert’s account as well as the silence that has surrounded the racial dynamics at play within it reveal a need to explore more thoroughly black critics’ responses to horror. This chapter considers horror criticism in black newspapers in comparison and contrast with white critic’s reviews (of the same films) from the early 1970s through the black film boom of the early and mid-1990s. I have chosen to focus on this period primarily because it is when long-form critical reviews of horror began to appear in black newspapers. While important work has already been done recognizing the significant inroads black filmmakers and actors made into mainstream American cinema during this

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400 “Why Movie Audiences Aren’t Safe Anymore,” 54.
period as well as attempts to create more independent black cinema and “third cinema” movements, less attention has been paid to black critical contributions. The comparative study included here begins to paint a picture of the late twentieth century discourse of black professional critics.

The period from the early-1970s to the mid-1990s also witnessed several significant transitions in industrial patterns of production, distribution, and exhibition, and within the horror genre itself. One of these transitions included new permissiveness of content that followed once the old Production Code was replaced with the current ratings system, a change without which films of horror auteurs like George Romero, Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, and John Carpenter would not have found an audience, black or otherwise. The rise of New Hollywood, high concept filmmaking, and the blockbuster system also helped to shift the larger terrain of cinema in which the horror film operated, as did the advent of the multiplex, home video technology, and cross-marketing and merchandising between horror films and other media. Other innovations in horror, specifically the improvement of special effects, enabled the genre to speak to a more extensive cultural fascination with somatic epistemology during the early 1980s – a

fascination that coincided with and perhaps even helped to promote the first slasher film cycle. Still, horror’s intensified concern with the body persisted in its various subgenres throughout the period and continues even now.

Viewed through a more racialized lens, this period is bookended by blaxploitation on one end and by the “hood film” cycle on the other. The horror genre intersected with both of these cycles, but black newspaper critics more often devoted their attention to horror films with predominantly white casts or to examining the racial representation in those films. In order to narrow the field to a reasonable sampling, this chapter focuses on black critics featured in the *Chicago Defender*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *L.A. Sentinel* and on white critics writing primarily in *The New York Times*. Most of the black critics discussed here did not garner the same following as their white contemporaries such as Ebert, Janet Maslin, or Vincent Canby, nor did they wield the same level of influence both because black newspapers had smaller circulations and because the period saw a broader decline in the prominence of black papers. And yet, these critics demonstrated a sophisticated and in some ways superior level of acuity both about the shifting politics of horror and major technical, economic, and thematic trends that shaped the genre’s development during the period. By placing black and white critics in conversation with each one another, I hope to illuminate the ways in which the former reflected popular critical discourses about horror as well as how they challenged them.

Black critics during the early and mid-seventies such as Earl Calloway and James P. Murray employed auteur criticism, which meant that they were operating within the

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402 For these reasons, I use “white” and “mainstream” interchangeably throughout most of the chapter.
same dominant framework as many white critics rather than in the more philosophical and autobiographical mode James Baldwin utilized in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). Nelson George filtered questions about racial representation through auteur analysis, social commentary, and examinations of industrial trends in his writing for the *Amsterdam News* between 1979 and 1980 while critics at the *Pittsburgh Courier* during roughly the same period expressed growing concern about excessive displays of gore and cheap audience manipulation tactics that they argued undermined good storytelling in horror; complaints about filmmakers' overreliance on special effects were never far behind. Perhaps most significantly, critics at the *Courier* maintained the same evaluative hierarchies as white critics when distinguishing between lowbrow exploitation horror films and more “serious” middlebrow thrillers. This conservative-bent raises questions about whether black critics could and should have pursued more radical analytical paradigms for approaching the horror genre. I consider some of the possibilities for a radical black critique of horror when discussing the work of *L.A. Sentinel* critic Alan Bell during the mid and late-eighties. In the early nineties, *Amsterdam News* critic Abiola Sinclair echoed some of Ebert’s moralist anxieties about the effect that violent horror was having on audiences and interpreted critics’ wide-sweeping praise of *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) as a sign of an increasingly desensitized culture. Expectedly, issues of black audiences’ power at the box office also made their way into black critics’ assessments of horror films and by the release of *Def by Temptation* (1990) and *Tales*

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from the Hood (1995), critics and filmmakers recognized that horror was missing an important opportunity to engage black audiences on their own terms.

Despite their varied sensibilities, black newspaper critics contended with horror on the same terms as most black spectators: with an ambivalent spirit of indulgence and a keen awareness that the genre possesses a unique capacity to capture individual and collective anxieties, and to project those anxieties back onto us. The horror film has never been just an exercise in escapism for black spectators, and for black critics writing during the late-twentieth century, interrogating it served as a vital aspect of their work. Each of the previous chapters has likewise explored the intersection of race, reception, and horror, but concentrating on black critics’ responses to horror films contributes to black studies, to spectatorship studies, and to horror studies in the following ways: by demonstrating black intellectual engagement with a persistently popular form of American culture; by providing insight into racial issues within horror cinema and American cinema in general; by illuminating how racial subjectivity informs ideas about the horrific or not; by showing how black critics responded to major shifts within the horror genre and how the rhetoric they used was shaped by larger social, cultural, and political forces; by expanding the history of film criticism during the late twentieth century to include more black voices; and by facilitating a better understanding of how black criticism operated in relation to mainstream criticism.
Beyond Blaxploitation

Substantive criticism of horror films in black newspapers began in earnest during the early seventies, most notably in Earl Calloway’s writing for the Defender as well as in Bill Lane and James P. Murray’s respective columns in the L.A. Sentinel and the Amsterdam News. Calloway did one of his lengthier reviews on Deliverance (1972), the film that Clover positions as the archetypal rape-revenge, “hillbilly horror” film. For Clover, Deliverance concretized the city vs. country conflict played out in The Last House on the Left (1972), The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), The Hills Have Eyes (1977), and later in Southern Comfort (1981) and Hunter’s Blood (1986). Calloway called Deliverance “a hair-raising tale of adventurous horror” and then went on to offer an even more imagistic description:

When the lens of the camera focus [sic] on towering cliffs and jagged rocks or moves in on the sharply slanting slopes against a carpet of fire trees lifting their needle sharp points to the heavens, one is brought into a hellish intimacy with danger and death.

This kind of poetic flourish was not characteristic of most film writing in black newspapers or even of Calloway’s usual tone and style. He appeared to be uniquely impressed by what he referred to as John Boorman’s “expert direction” of a “dynamite showcase of survival.” His review paralleled reviews by Ebert as well as legendary New York Times critic Vincent Canby; all three felt that Boorman’s creative vision, in

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404 Men, Women, and Chainsaws, 114-165.
405 “‘Deliverance’ is an Exciting and Explosive Film,” Cinema Happenings, Daily Defender (Chicago, IL), Oct. 19, 1972, 17.
406 Ibid.
407 Ibid.
combination with strong cinematography by Vilmos Zsigmond, elevated the narrative’s realism beyond the limits of James Dickey’s original novel or for that matter, his screenplay. Canby and Ebert were, however, much more cynical about whether the film ultimately did anything more than serve as a macho, albeit entertaining, adventure vehicle. Ebert raised some of the same moralist objections that he would later direct at *I Spit on Your Grave*, reproaching *Deliverance* for its unapologetic manipulation of the audience: “The scenes of violence and rape also work, it must be admitted, although in a disgusting way. The appeal to latent sadism is so crudely made that the audience is embarrassed.”

Unlike in his aforementioned account of seeing *I Spit on Your Grave*, here he seemed to be purely projecting his own responses onto his fellow spectators without much evidence. He went on to argue that, “It’s possible to consider civilized men in a confrontation with the wilderness without throwing in rapes, cowboy-and-Indian stunts and pure exploitative sensationalism.” Canby referred to the film somewhat dismissively as “action melodrama” and blamed Dickey’s faulty narrative framework for its shortcomings: “Dickey’s story is schematic and to make his points about the nature of man he had to deny the very realism that the film pretends to deal in.”

Calloway’s *Deliverance* review separates itself from both Ebert’s and Canby’s by utilizing more lyrical prose and avoiding the more sensationalistic aspects of the story,

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409 Ibid. Leslie Fiedler would of course argue the exact opposite, that the impulse to repeatedly tell this story of man cast into the harsh wilderness to encounter his primal self is precisely what makes much of American narrative both inherently gothic and American. See *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1966).

namely the infamous male-on-male rape scene. Whereas Ebert attacked outright the narrative’s dependence on this exploitative hook and Canby humorously referenced “sodomy-inclined hillbillies,” Calloway played coy saying only that, “When encountering the mountain people or the people who live in these remote communities, they receive strong reactions.”

His cryptic generality feels strategic in that by omitting the grittier details of the plot, he presented *Deliverance* as a more serious, highbrow (or at least middlebrow) film worthy of the flowery language he used to describe it. His review seemed interested simultaneously in demonstrating that a black critic could write with a strong evaluative voice and that he could do so by recognizing, appreciating, and discussing with some eloquence the technical elements of film as well as Boorman’s auteur influence. As Ebert said when attempting to differentiate John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) and Brian DePalma’s *Dressed to Kill* (1980) from *I Spit on Your Grave*: “There was artistry in those films, an inventive directorial point of view.”

To the extent that *Deliverance* exhibited a coherent directorial perspective while still delivering entertainment, it succeeded for Calloway.

James P. Murray adopted a similar concern for authorship and immersive narrative experience when discussing the Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie-led supernatural horror film *Don’t Look Now* (1973), claiming that “Director Nicholas Roeg has managed to…construct a reasonably telling horror film with an unexpected ending fully in keeping with the major theme of this often tension-filled tale.” After noting the impact of the film’s infamously steamy sex scene, he went on to praise it as “an amalgam

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of superior acting, often moody, atmospheric camerawork and a story that just about makes it to a credible level of genuine suspense.”

This was restrained praise when compared to Jay Cocks’ fawning review in Time, which served as an exemplar of auteur theory in practice: “Roeg’s insistence on the power of the image, his reliance on techniques of narrative that are peculiarly cinematic, remind us how undemanding and perfunctory so many movies still are. Roeg’s is one of the rare talents that can effect a new way of seeing.”

Cocks unsurprisingly suggested that this “new way of seeing” emerged from a desire to haunt rather than scare, the implication being that wanting to scare audiences constituted an inherently less noble artistic aim, if it could be called artistic at all. For him, the “eerie, dreadful power” of Don’t Look Now bore a closer resemblance to Henry James’ Turn of the Screw than to William Friedkin’s “scare show” The Exorcist.

By comparing Roeg’s film to a piece of classic gothic literary fiction, distancing it from Friedkin’s calculating theatrics, and downplaying Roeg’s own manipulation of viewers – via a surprise ending involving a murderous dwarf – Cocks performed the same kind of critical repackaging that Calloway attempted in his Deliverance review.

Calloway and Murray’s reviews stand out in part because the films in question do not appear to have been targeted at black audiences. Nor did either of the films feature black characters or necessarily exhibit the kind of thematic and ideological continuity that

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414 Ibid. Although Murray concentrated on the mechanics of how the scene was filmed - Roeg crosscut shots of the sex with the couple getting dressed afterwards - he was not alone in registering its visceral impact, which appears to have held up over time. The Independent Film Channel lists it at number one on its list of best sex scenes. See Alison Willmore, “The 50 Greatest Sex Scenes in Cinema,” IFC, July 25, 2007, http://www.ifc.com/fix/2007/07/the-50-greatest-sex-scenes-in.


416 Ibid.
could be found between blaxploitation and white crime dramas I discussed in the previous chapter. *Deliverance* and *Don't Look Now* were well-made, middlebrow horror films with suspenseful plots, high production values, marquee actors, and at least on the surface, less exploitative premises. *Don't Look Now* took on an art house flavor that softened its treatment of sex and violence and situated it aesthetically and thematically miles away from *Deliverance* and its imitators. That Calloway and Murray wrote reviews of these distinctly non-black films as blaxploitation began to boom suggests that black critics’ investment in horror was not restricted to questions of racial representation or even by the injection of racial subjectivity into their critiques. It appears instead, that many black newspaper critics chose to review horror films first because of their own interest and then consider issues of race within them.

Nelson George offered many such insights in his writing about horror movies for the *Amsterdam News*. He showed, for example, considerable affection for the first two entries in George Romero’s zombie series, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and also spoke about the director’s ability to add “a feeling for the horrific, a touch of social comment and the outrageous that raised [Night] above the bulk of low and big budget horror films.” George’s interest in Romero’s casting choices eventually trumped inquires about auteur style though, prompting him to spend much of the article discussing black male leads Duane Jones and Ken Foree (who appeared in *Night* and *Dawn* respectively). According to George, Jones’ character Ben displays “a rationality and coolness under pressure that leaves him alive when his white companions

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have already been consumed.”

Foree’s character Peter possessed similar personality traits while also displaying an extensive knowledge of weapons and military training. Romero’s decision to cast strong, black, and solidly masculine heroes at opposite ends of the Black Power Movement naturally prompted questions about their potential political significance, but when speaking with George, Foree resisted speculation about the director’s motivations, claiming that he “wouldn’t want to guess what was on Romero’s mind.” What Foree did argue was that black folks “could be symbols of survival” given the tumult in much of black experience in America, and that he was glad to not be playing “Harry the butler” because people inevitably read all black screen representations as “symbolic of something.”

Both George and Foree’s understanding of how race had typically been dealt with in horror and of the ways in which Romero’s protagonists challenged those conventions points toward their apparent awareness of the genre’s unique capacity to capture deeper social anxieties about race. Their comments also hinted at an even more controversial idea: that because of horror’s ability to put its finger on the pulse of racial angst spoken and unspoken, it served as a better metric of the progress of black representation in American cinema than many other genres.

The emphasis that George placed on racial issues in Romero’s films marked a significant departure from white critics’ responses. Janet Maslin, for instance, claimed in a rather snide New York Times piece to have been unable to stomach more than fifteen minutes of Dawn’s gory displays before she left the theatre. She only learned that the film might be making a more substantive comment on consumerism from another moviegoer.

418 Ibid.
419 Ibid.
420 Ibid.
she talked to in the lobby.\textsuperscript{421} Meanwhile, Ebert heaped bold praise on Romero's latest effort, proclaiming: "'Dawn of the Dead' is one of the best horror films ever made...It is gruesome, sickening, disgusting, violent, brutal and appalling. It is also...brilliantly crafted, funny, droll, and savagely merciless in its satiric view of the American consumer in society. Nobody ever said art had to be in good taste."\textsuperscript{422} On first glance, it would appear that Ebert was contradicting himself. He celebrated \textit{Dawn} for exhibiting many of the same qualities that he would condemn in \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} just two years later.\textsuperscript{423} More specifically, he applauded \textit{Dawn} for its unabashed rejection of good taste, and rather than understanding that sensibility as mere exploitation – the charge he leveled at Zarchi's film – he interpreted it as an essential part of Romero's satirical strategy: "Romero deliberately intends to go too far...He's dealing very consciously with the ways in which images can affect us."\textsuperscript{424}

Ebert's real critical duplicity lay not in adhering to his belief that a discernible auteur vision justified representational excess, but in how he approached horror by strategically playing the anti-censorship, civil libertarian champion of bad taste and the pro-censorship, pseudo-feminist arbiter of good taste at one and the same time. As Richard Nowell has argued, the crisis surrounding "women in danger" films proffered by Ebert and Gene Siskel, appears to have been largely manufactured in order advance their

\textsuperscript{423} He asserted that: “The lust to kill and rape becomes the true subject of the movies. And the lust is not placed on screen where it can be attached to the killer-character. It is placed in the audience.” See “Why Movie Audiences Aren’t Safe Anymore,” 56.
\textsuperscript{424} Ebert, “Dawn of the Dead.”
own profiles as critics.425 Rather than addressing individual films on their own merits, Siskel and Ebert lumped together what was in reality a more dynamic and diversified field of horror films often by omitting key details that contradicted their claims and by “exaggerat[ing] the extent to which depictions of violence against women had infiltrated the cinematic mainstream.”426 Nowhere in Ebert’s review of Dawn did he take up questions of racial representation and in his other frequently cited account of having screened Night during a “kiddie matinee,” he settled for describing Jones’ character simply as “the negro.”427 George’s piece on Dawn filled in this critical gap while expressing little if any concern with questions of taste, mostly likely because he didn’t care. His apathy in this regard was typical amongst black critics who often did express dissatisfaction about the quality of horror films and even raised concerns about their potentially negative impact on impressionable spectators, but rarely objected on the grounds of taste alone. Evaluating performances and other aspects of drama took precedence over the desire to be tastemakers for most black newspaper critics.

George’s special investment in black actors working in horror carried over into his review of The Shining (1980) as well, albeit filtered through an auteur approach. He began by describing Kubrick’s previous films as “cinematic events” before commending the director on his “exquisite cinematic technique, and his distinctive mix of satire, social commentary, and interpersonal observation.”428 In this sense, George was singing in

426 Ibid.
critical harmony with Maslin who despite being bothered by the film's many open-ended questions, generously lauded Kubrick for creating a film with "a breadth and extravagance no recent film [had] rivaled." George also shared Maslin's appreciation for Kubrick's slow-paced build-up, a welcome alternative to what he called "the wham and bam of most contemporary horror films." What distinguished the George and Maslin reviews was the attention paid to black actor Scatman Crothers. Although Crothers' character meets an unfortunate end and one could easily argue that his function in the narrative aligns him with the "magical negro" archetype, George was nevertheless pleased to see Crothers perform "in a role that called upon more than his signature smile." This last statement about Crothers' clearly indicated a deeper frustration with limited black roles in Hollywood and the persistence of racist mythology in the horror genre. Much of the core rhetoric of horror, namely the anti-miscegenation subtext that dominated during the civil rights era, had not changed radically in the transition toward more open-ended, postmodern horror film narratives. For example, an ad for Humanoids from the Deep (1980), which appeared on the same page as George's review of The Shining, featured a white woman in a skimpy bikini beneath a set.

430 George, "The Shining," 34.
431 Ibid. For more detailed discussion of the supporting black character whose only real narrative function is to assist white characters, often through use of magic or other supernatural forces, see Christopher John Farley, "That Old Black Magic," Time, May 27, 2000 and Heather J. Hicks, "Hoodoo Economics: White Men's Work and Black Men's Magic in Contemporary American Film," Camera Obscura 18, no. 32 (2003): 26-55.
432 George, "The Shining," 34.
of glaring eyes along with the following text: “They’re not human. But they hunt human women. Not for killing. For mating.” The obvious continuity between this rhetoric and that of earlier films like The Day the World Ended (1955) and Attack of the Giant Leeches (1959), which I discussed in the previous chapter, suggests that while the horror genre might have been undergoing shifts into a more postmodern textuality and opening up more interesting opportunities for black representation, many of the foundational racial mythologies of modern horror were still intact and perhaps even more reductive than in earlier iterations.⁴³⁴

George seemed less concerned with race questions when weighing in on some of the other major horror films of the period and to some extent, retained a sterner focus on auteur analysis. He did not write a proper review of John Carpenter’s Halloween (1978), for example, but argued that it garnered its power from the “claustrophobic atmosphere the director builds, creating paranoia both on the screen and in the audience.”⁴³⁵ This assertion of directorial power sounded remarkably similar to one made by Ebert, who contended that, “‘Halloween’ is a visceral experience – we aren’t seeing the movie, we’re having it happen to us. It’s frightening.”⁴³⁶ Ridley Scott’s Alien (1979) did not, however, leave the same powerful impression on George despite its much larger budget and an A-list cast. As he rightly observed, the middlebrow “creature feature” would have been a more modest affair produced by American International Pictures had it been released in

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the pre-\textit{Star Wars} era, but Twentieth Century Fox clearly hoped to duplicate its monumental success with one space adventure by backing another with more gothic roots.\textsuperscript{437} While George felt the film succeeded as a horror film, the unusually high ticket price exacerbated its weaknesses when compared to \textit{Dawn} and \textit{Halloween}, from which he felt \textit{Alien} was "light years away in terms of quality."\textsuperscript{438} In the end, he dismissed \textit{Alien} as merely "competent" entertainment without lasting impact, whereas the "imagery and creativity" of Romero and Carpenter's offerings lingered in his mind.\textsuperscript{439} Perhaps without intending to, George seemed to be advocating for horror films produced on the margins of Hollywood that could, because of their lower financial stakes, take more creative risks and offer black audiences richer stories. Both \textit{Dawn} and \textit{Halloween} were produced for mere fractions of \textit{Alien}'s $11 million budget and at least in George's mind, gave black audiences the more transcendent viewing experience.\textsuperscript{440} \textit{Alien} fell short of the mark for Maslin too. She bashed the film for "punishing" its audience with a single-minded desire to turn stomachs and for frankly, not being any fun.\textsuperscript{441} However popular \textit{Alien} remains today and however profound its impact both on horror scholarship and on the horror genre, George seemed to be on pace with mainstream critics who were unimpressed by it at the time of its release.

\textsuperscript{438} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{439} Ibid.
Dewey E. Chester at the *Pittsburgh Courier* echoed George’s complaints about rising ticket prices and what he saw as less-than-innovative storytelling in his review of the monster movie, *Prophecy* (1979): “The acting...is adequate, but [the] lines lack strong character development. But then in a monster movie the creature is supposed to steal the show with the intertwining human personalities only subsidiary vehicles moving the story along. Though with the price of today’s movie tickets, we should expect more.”\(^4\) Chester did not mention *Alien* as a basis for comparison even though it had already been playing in wide-release for over two months by the time *Prophecy* debuted in late August. The former film did feature a show-stealing monster (really three different ones) and believable (or at least interesting) characters, especially protagonist Ellen Ripley who was played by Sigourney Weaver in what would arguably become her career-defining role. Even George acknowledged that Weaver as well as Yaphet Kotto brought a certain kind of humanity to what would have otherwise been “cardboard characters.”\(^3\) Ridley Scott also proved the superior director by building cycles of tension and release that lead to a cathartic climax, whereas John Frankenheimer’s direction was according to Chester, “wrought with inconsistencies” that prevented *Prophecy* from sustaining “the intense level of terror promised by its advertising campaign.”\(^2\) George, Maslin, and Chester all seemed somewhat out of step with what audiences wanted to see and with what they would pay to see it. If *Alien* did indeed fail to carry the same kind of political resonance as Romero’s films, it was only because George did not recognize the groundbreaking importance of casting a female lead in a big budget sci-fi horror film.

And if *Alien* did indeed put its spectators through a torturous emotional gauntlet, audiences seemed all too willing run through it in order to see the female hero finally vanquish the formidable monster. *Alien*, like *The Exorcist* before it, represented one of the many moments in which critics black and white alike misunderstood the sensibilities of horror audiences.

Canby did not appear any more in tune with audience tastes when he discussed *Prophecy* and *Alien* in a piece on summer horror films. Canby argued that the job of a good horror movie was to “do justice either to our nightmares or to the worries that give rise to them,” a task at which he felt both films failed; each showed too much of the respective monster for Canby’s liking and he found Scott’s film too reliant on jump scares: “The shocks in ‘Alien’ have nothing to do with what the monster looks like or represents, but with its habit of jumping out from behind doors when the characters least expect it. But then almost anything – even a small child – can cause a momentary scare by jumping out from behind a door.”

Canby’s mildly contemptuous posture toward horror reflected a common sensibility amongst critics in the late-seventies and early-eighties. A growing feeling that the genre, with the exception of some select films from auteurs like Kubrick and Carpenter, had sacrificed real suspense and imagination for more simplistic, exploitative thrills permeated many reviews. As Maslin characterized the alleged trend in her aforementioned discussion of *Alien*, the horror film had become “just plain punishing.” Whether or not this was actually true, it seemed an attractive enough stance to appeal to critics from a variety of subject positions.

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446 Maslin, “Critic’s Notebook.”
Michael McQuown, in the Pittsburgh Courier, focused on the overwhelming and subsequently numbing effect that The Amityville Horror (1979) had on spectators: “The problem, however, lies in the psychological peculiarity of fear; if you scare somebody too often, he stops being afraid. This may be what is wrong with the film. The audience is subjected to too much too constantly.”\textsuperscript{447} But if The Amityville Horror was guilty of inundating its audience to the point of complacency, it was not because of Stuart Rosenberg’s failure as a director, but rather because “AIP didn’t seem sure which way they wanted to go.”\textsuperscript{448} In his use of “they,” McQuown took for granted that The Amityville Horror was first and foremost an AIP project, that is to say less a film text with a singular author and more precisely, an entertainment product that would succeed or fail because of a series of decisions made along a multifaceted chain of production. His was, in some ways, a theory of company as auteur. He ultimately gave the movie a lukewarm endorsement, calling it “a middling film not unlike ‘The House on Haunted Hill’ or ‘Hell House’.”\textsuperscript{449} While The Legend of Hell House (1973) was a relatively recent entry within the haunted house subgenre, McQuown’s reference to The House on Haunted Hill (1952) – a William Castle production that starred Vincent Prince – signaled a much deeper knowledge of genre conventions and standard bearers. Like many black spectators, McQuown probably grew up watching Castle and AIP films featuring Price

\textsuperscript{447} Michael McQuown, “Amityville Horror: Good Not Great Ghost Story,” Pittsburgh Courier (Pittsburgh, PA), Aug. 11, 1979, 4. This article appears to have been reprinted from the Philadelphia Tribune.\textsuperscript{448} Ibid.\textsuperscript{449} Ibid. Amsterdam News columnist Marie Moore also discussed Amityville, but only in order to highlight AIP’s decision to appoint a black “Public Relations entrepreneur” named Leonard Herring, Jr. to handle the film’s publicity. It appeared that by positioning a black face as the spokesman for its latest big ticket endeavor, AIP was at least trying to answer the call that many made earlier in the decade for a greater investment in black talent. “Marie Moore,” New York Amsterdam News (NY, New York), April 28, 1979, 24.
and could not help but use them as a measuring stick. Maslin also expressed fondness for older AIP films when she reviewed *Amityville*. She asserted that it lacked the sort of “inadvertent merriment” audiences had come to expect from an AIP film and was “too lifeless” to be included in the company’s pantheon of B-movie infamy.  

If AIP’s company name did not carry with it the same kind of notoriety as it had during its heyday, critics still expected an AIP film to deliver the B-movie goods.

In addition to Chester and McQuown, other critics at the *Pittsburgh Courier* made notable contributions on horror films of the late-seventies and early eighties as well. One unnamed writer did a feature story on Armand Mastroianni’s *He Knows You’re Alone* (1980) that discussed the young filmmaker’s background as well as his philosophy on how to make a horror film that was both frightening and which gave the audience “their money’s worth.” According Mastroianni, the key was to avoid clichéd locations like graveyards or haunted houses and, instead, to choose places that made the mundane seem menacing, or as he put it: “By making the scene of the crime an ordinary, everyday locale, the terror is magnified.” This desire to make an increasingly well-schooled audience still feel frightened prompted him to shoot on location in his native Staten Island where he was able to find several fitting set pieces. Mastroianni’s strategy was hardly an original one at this point. *Halloween* had surely done the work of imbuing mundane settings with new menace and had given both audiences as well as the film’s backers their money’s worth several times over. One also wonders if locations in Staten Island might not have presented a very different, more regionally specific sense of the

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452 Ibid.
mundane than Carpenter’s seemingly ubiquitous American suburb. His comment reads more like a poke at a throwback picture like *The Amityville Horror* in hopes of trying to distinguish his film in a crowded market.

Another *Courier* critic, Gerri B. Ransom, reviewed David Cronenberg’s *Scanners* (1981) and lamented what he called “A good, tough story with several twists and surprise revelations [that was] constantly upstaged by gratuitous violence and gore.”453 Ransom felt that the movie was too derivative of Brian De Palma’s *The Fury* (1978) and rejected Cronenberg’s latest excursion into the realm of body horror: “If you’d rather see some acting, and believe such bloodiness belongs in the slaughterhouse, ‘scan’ elsewhere.”454 One could have cut and pasted Ransom’s comments about being frustrated with the film’s emphasis on special effects into reviews by Canby and Ebert, the former of which called the effects “uproariously revolting.”455 Canby was not actually offended by the gory effects in and of themselves, however, only that the plot underlying them was so clumsily executed. In fact, he credited effects artists Dick Smith and Gary Zeller for the film’s “visual spectacle” and for their respective work on *The Exorcist* and *Altered States* (1980).456 Ebert, on the other hand, sounded much more like Ransom when he confessed that, “I never had the feeling during the film that it mattered much who won or lost, who lived or died, just so long as the special effects occurred on time and the movie’s look of

454 Ibid.
456 Ibid.
elegant chill was preserved.”\footnote{457} Perhaps more than anything else, it was the clinical detachment with which \textit{Scanners} addressed the audience, the way in which its bodily spectacles became the film’s primary subject that prevented it, in Ebert’s view, from offering a more meaningful time at the movies.

A fascination with the body and with the new possibilities granted by special effects was part of a larger trend in horror during the period that many critics felt was compromising good storytelling. Still, some films were managing to use special effects to their advantage. Ebert maintained that \textit{Altered States}, another special effects-heavy science-fiction horror film, more effectively grabbed its audience by involving its characters in believable action.\footnote{458} 

\textit{Courier} critic Philip Harrigan, who reviewed several horror films during the early eighties, also gave \textit{Altered States} a favorable review, calling it “a well-made, splendidly acted work...with good special effects and a great use of sound.”\footnote{459} Despite this positive overall assessment, however, he questioned the film’s optimistic conclusion: “The moral seems to be that life – in the past or the present – is justified solely by love; the transience of existence needs that one element to justify it. That cut and dried tack sounds great and, of course, love is to be valued – but, as the concluding point to the movie, it just doesn’t work.”\footnote{460} It makes sense that his commentary takes on a philosophical bent given that \textit{Altered States} concerned itself expressly with philosophical issues; the plot focused on a scientist who uses sensory deprivation and hallucinogenic drugs to tap into the collective unconscious. Even so,

\footnote{458}{Ibid.}
\footnote{459}{“‘Altered States’ Provocative: Conclusion Shaky,” \textit{Pittsburgh Courier} (Pittsburgh, PA), Feb. 14, 1981.}
\footnote{460}{Ibid.}
Harrigan's comments are interesting because he simultaneously evaluates the film's quality and grapples with the import of its philosophical underpinnings, thus conveying a level of sophistication beyond that demonstrated in Ebert's review. Maslin too, in part because of her weddedness to auteurism, seemed uninterested in dealing with the film's deeper philosophical implications and restricted her discussion to matters of narrative continuity and technical effectiveness.\(^{461}\) As in many of Harrigan's horror reviews, he expressed an interest in examining what kinds of subjects the horror genre could and could not address meaningfully. This same inquisitiveness is perhaps also what prompted him to come down so hard on what he identified as failed films. He said about the laughable low-budget pic *Blood Beach* (1980) that it was "a movie not deserving of [the audience's] time or [the audience's] money" and which had "the distinction of being one of the worst movies of all time – a Bloody Mess!"\(^{462}\) But while he dismissed the film itself, he tried to give black actor Otis Young the benefit of the doubt, contending that, "though Young tries his best to look as if he's acting, he's not very convincing. Maybe he [did not] read the whole script before he took the part."\(^{463}\)

Such sardonic wit did as much to energize Harrigan's horror reviews as his sophisticated critical approach. The former worked best when targeted at films that were suffering from weak direction or gratuitous violence, shortcomings he found even more offensive in a sequel like *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981). He contended that it "[did] nothing but take liberties with Biblical writings, and interject[ed] huge doses of violence

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\(^{463}\) Ibid.
and gore to make audiences react."464 He went on to say (in signature style) that "I guess producers would rather have viewers be disgusted than fall asleep, and taken on the basis of plot alone, 'The Final Conflict' works even better than Sleep-Eze."465 By substituting gore for more thoughtful plotting or richer characterization, the film became (for the audience) an exercise in "cruel and unusual punishment."466 He leveled a similar complaint at another sequel, *Halloween II* (1981), suggesting that like the majority of horror films being released at the time, it seemed interested only in "gore for the sake of goriness."467

As Linda Badley has observed, many other critics shared Harrigan’s feeling that the horror film had become too preoccupied with blood and guts.468 For Badley though, these critics were missing a larger, multimedia shift in which horror “became a spectacle offering not mere transcendence of the body, but through the body,” a transcendence that was achieved “through shock, transposition of the senses, intense feeling, and special effects.”469 Put another way, horror in the early eighties became concerned with bodily boundaries and excesses, that is, with the enlightening and terrifying possibilities that the body held within. The advent of ever more-innovative special effects meant that these possibilities could now be explored in new detail. We can therefore read horror’s violent repetition of bodily evisceration, transmogrification, and radical reconstruction as part of

465 Ibid.
466 Ibid.
469 Ibid.
a broader hermeneutic process, one through which Americans looked to the body to discover the truth about themselves.

Even confronted with this argument about the utility of horror’s obsession with gore, Harrigan would likely have remained unconvinced that there was any real power to be found in special effects showcases. In fact, he described John Landis’ *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) as “a vehicle for the special effects, with intelligent plot considerations relegated to a subordinate position.” In keeping with the short-sightedness of mainstream white critics, Harrigan seemed to misinterpret or miss altogether *American Werewolf*’s postmodern self-referentiality, not recognizing that film intended to deconstruct both the history of the werewolf movie and the mythology of the werewolf monster itself. Ebert and Maslin both read this self-reflexive aspect of the text simply as part of Landis’ inability to reconcile disparate elements of comedy and horror. Harrigan also argued that Landis’ film plagiarized both *Altered States* and Joe Dante’s *The Howling*, an ironic claim given the skepticism he expressed about the latter film before its release. He said in an earlier article about upcoming releases that “The Howling’ is another horror flick, like all the other horror films that have saturated the screen recently...We’ll have to see if this one surpasses the junk we’ve been subjected

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too lately.”

Although Harrigan cannot be blamed for praising a film about which he initially expressed reservations, his negative speculation does point to a larger contradiction in his horror reviews: he did not actually seem to like horror films very much and yet still watched and reviewed them regularly. It is almost as if behind all his cynicism about the genre’s failings, he was really just a desperate fan waiting for the film that could deliver on multiple levels.

Writer/director Frank LaLoggia’s Fear No Evil (1981) was not that film. In an article dismissively subtitled, “Overlook It,” Harrigan pointed to Fear No Evil as emblematic of almost everything that was wrong with horror at the start of the new decade: “There seems to be no way to combat the flood of sensationalistic (and silly) horror films that Hollywood sends our way with each succeeding month, every one proclaiming itself more frightening than the last. Of course none of these films is even remotely scary and ‘Fear No Evil’ is no exception.” Although Harrigan was right that horror did appear to be undergoing a resurgence, neither sensationalism nor silliness were new to the genre, and it would be difficult to make the case that the films of the early eighties evinced these qualities any more than their predecessors. Just the same, market saturation seems to have given Harrigan a case of critical fatigue. He went on to characterize Fear No Evil as an uninspired copy of Brian De Palma’s Carrie (1976) that prompted more laughter from the audience than scares.

Poltergeist (1982) seems to have finally given Harrigan everything he was looking for in a horror film. He claimed that it had “enough [chills] to fill most of the some-
called ‘horror’ movies that major studios [were] turning out” and that it was “proof positive that a movie need not be overly gory to pack a spine-tingling wallop!”475

*Poltergeist* therefore succeeded in all of the areas that Harrigan typically used to evaluate horror: the originality of the premise, the amount of gore (or lack thereof), the believability of the special effects, the veracity of the performances, and the director’s ability to maintain dramatic tension. His reference to major studio films as “so-called horror” can be read in two ways. On the one hand, he did not find many horror films scary and questioned whether or not any film could rightly be considered part of a genre if it failed to perform that genre’s most basic functions. On the other hand, Harrigan’s critical priorities reflect the way that critics often have and continue to create a class system for categorizing horror. Horror films that avoid gore and sexuality, that emphasize suspense over shock, and that reaffirm normative institutions, are often labeled as “thrillers,” while those that revel in gore and sexuality (or at least nudity), that exploit shock tactics, and that question the fidelity of normative institutions, are often described derogatively as mere horror films. Harrigan himself made this same distinction with the subtitle of his article, “A Superior Thriller,” and then again at the end of the piece:

Not since “The Exorcist” has there been a horror flick like “Poltergeist,” but this new film is even better: rather than elicit reactions through visual angles solely, “Poltergeist” works on our fear of the unknown to make it singularly chilling. It is the most stylish thriller since the early seventies release “The Mephisto Waltz,” and, in any category, a very fine and engrossing film.476

475 “‘Poltergeist’ A Superior Thriller,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (Pittsburgh, PA), June 19, 2982, 2.
476 Ibid.
My earlier discussion of James Baldwin’s response to *The Exorcist* in Chapter 2 obviously contradicts Harrigan’s assertion that its allure lay in the visuals alone.

Furthermore, Harrigan tries to make *Poltergeist* seem like a far more complex film than it really is; its effects are no less contrived and its premise no less hokey than Friedkin’s film. And as Maslin pointed out, *Poltergeist* typified a broader shift away from internal, mystical, erotic, and unknowable manifestations of horror in “fantasy films” during the previous decade to more external, rational, scientific, and identifiable forms in the early-80s.\^77

On the face of it, *Poltergeist* functions as an old-fashioned haunted house horror film and yet Harrigan’s desire to shift it into the more respectable realm of “supernatural thriller” bespeaks an undercurrent of conservatism that ran through many of his reviews. He and most other black newspaper critics to that point, with the notable exception of Nelson George, seem to have adhered to the categorical distinction between what might be called “softcore” (middlebrow/highbrow) and “hardcore” (lowbrow) horror despite an agitated history of black spectatorship in which audiences have often challenged bourgeois viewing conventions. This is especially evident in the review when Harrigan congratulated director Tobe Hooper for “emulat[ing] the directorial style of the film’s co-producer and co-writer, Steven Spielberg.”\^478

\^478 Ibid.
Aesthetically, *Poltergeist* evidenced a high-production polish as well as a sense of continuity that was a far cry from Hooper’s much grittier pallet.\(^{479}\) The film’s narrative also sought to preserve a normative American family whereas Hooper’s best-known work, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), portrayed the family as an incubus for the horrific, the very epicenter of American monstrosity.\(^{480}\) For these reasons as well as rumors that circulated about the intensity Spielberg’s involvement, many still question whether *Poltergeist* should be considered his film or Hooper’s.\(^{481}\)

Canby acknowledged the authorial conundrum surrounding *Poltergeist* in his review, noting that, “There’s some controversy about the individual contributions to the film... I’ve no way of telling who did what, though ‘Poltergeist’ seems much closer in spirit and sensibility to Mr. Spielberg’s best films than to Mr. Hooper’s.”\(^{482}\) Canby also trumpeted *Poltergeist* for playing like a “thoroughly enjoyable nightmare, one that you know that you can always wake up from, and one in which, at the end, no one has permanently been damaged.”\(^{483}\) It is not entirely clear whether Canby was referring to the characters or the audience when he said “no one,” but we can presume he meant both. He and Harrigan, as well as Ebert who called the film “an effective thriller,” favored horror

\(^{479}\) Ibid.
\(^{483}\) Ibid.
films that could take audiences on a ride without leaving them traumatized and moreover, ones that left the “normal” order established within the narrative intact. Even in a film like *Halloween*, in which the monster lives on as a symbol of the permanence of evil, the dominant order is merely disrupted by that repressed force rather than upended by it.

Both Ebert and Canby bestowed that film with the status of a first-class thriller in keeping with the tradition of Hitchcock. Harrigan appears to have bought into this pecking order, which did not make him a bad critic but also not a radical one – if such a thing existed during the Regan era and if we could decide on a definition of what radical black criticism might have looked like in that fraught cultural milieu. While Harrigan’s contributions should not be diminished simply because he approached horror on the same terms as mainstream white critics, the question remains of whether the black audiences he served might have benefitted from an ideological posture or even a prose style that destabilized the established hierarchies of horror rather than keeping them locked in place. At least part of this more subversive paradigm might have involved paying more attention to race issues in horror as George did or perhaps deploying a more provocative prose style as was the case for Alan Bell at the *Los Angeles Sentinel*.

Bell began his review of *Gothic* (1986) with overtly sexualized language in order to describe viewer pleasure: “Those of you who get off [emphasis added] on such things should put an ear to Ken Russell’s new film.” Based very loosely on the night when Mary Shelley began composing her classic, *Frankenstein*, *Gothic* failed to “satisfy” Bell and the sexual nature of his frustration manifested all too readily in his diction: “‘Gothic’

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is flaccid and devoid of basic dramatic shape. The horror isn’t scary, the sex scenes aren’t stimulating, and relationships between the characters are hard to follow.”486 The extent to which he essentially labels Gothic as impotent is far too obvious to even qualify as double entendre. Whereas Harrigan had often condemned films that appealed too directly to spectators’ desires for stimulation, Bell seemed to be upset that Gothic did not do a better job capitalizing on the “delicious mixture of horror and sex” implied in the premise.487 Bell had apparently seen a much tamer film than Canby, who claimed that director Ken Russell had taken an important footnote in literary history and “boiled it down to one frenzied night of sadomasochistic seductions, séances, fights, drug-taking, hallucinations, and spectacular special effects.”488 Now that film sounded like precisely the one Bell had hoped to see.

A similar sexual undercurrent ran through Bell’s review of Wes Craven’s The Serpent and the Rainbow (1988), which was based on Wade Davis’ controversial 1985 book of the same name. Like Gothic, Bell felt that Craven’s film was rooted in strong material “that should have made a better film.”489 Bell began by discussing zombie mythology and its roots in black diasporic culture and also by trying to demystify voodoo, calling it “a major religion in Haiti with beliefs and practices derived from West African tribal religions, combined with reliturgitated [sic] Catholicism.”490 He continued by discussing the film’s impressive, international slate of black actors as well as what he characterized as Craven’s mishandled efforts at depicting Haitian culture. Although Bell

486 Ibid.
487 Ibid.
490 Ibid.
recognized Craven’s earlier masterwork, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), as a “genre classic,” here he was critical of the director's uncharacteristic visual restraint. For Bell, the film’s biggest failure came from the director’s unwillingness to depict the horror of live burial: “the live burial...isn’t terrifying at all. And it’s cut off prematurely with a fade out like some sex scene from: the 40s.” Again, it is hard not to notice Bell’s sexualized rhetoric and his apparent frustration that the film failed to satiate his desires. He seemed to regularly conflate sex and horror in his reviews, and did so in this instance by comparing the spectator’s inability to experience masochistic identification with the burial victim to the sexual discretion of Golden Age Hollywood. He might just as well have called Craven a “tease.”

When situated beside Maslin’s review of *Serpent*, Bell’s analysis does perform something like what we might call a black radical critique. He cared not only about the film’s technical merits, directorial vision, and entertainment value, but also about how the film dealt with its black characters and the implications of mishandling an important aspect of black diasporic culture. Maslin’s review in contrast, did not historicize voodoo or question Craven’s ability to adequately capture Haitian culture, and in a bizarre moment, she referred to a black zombie woman as simply as having “hair like Whoopi Goldberg.” Dreadlocks were apparently beyond Maslin’s critical purview. Her discussion demonstrated some of the limits of an auteur approach for addressing questions of race in horror and perhaps the extent to which auteurism itself reflected white theories of authorship and white critical priorities. She read *Serpent* primarily as

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491 Ibid.
492 Ibid.
Craven's "crossover into the mainstream," but for Bell, the film had to be put in a larger context of black religious, political, and cultural history as well as black representation in film. Bell found that by including elements of horror, Fanaka was able to play to his strengths, specifically his mastery of "sleazy" atmosphere, his sense of timing, and his management of chiaroscuro lighting. Bell also freely admitted that the film's violence was excessive, but seemed willing to embrace it in a way that Harrigan would almost certainly have rejected. Bell was not so kind to Retribution (1987), a half-baked possession story that could not manage to provide even the most modest kind of titillation. He spoke poorly of that film while also demonstrating his awareness of gender politics in horror spectatorship: "This little stinkeroo of a horror film not only doesn't scare, it doesn't even have those wonderful moments that make the girls

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494 Ibid.
495 "A Nightmare on Penitentiary Street," Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles, CA), June 9, 1988, B8.
496 In the first film, Gordone is sent to prison when a fight with two johns over a prostitute results in homicide and the second film focuses on his dealings with a corrupt boxing promoter after being released.
497 Alan Bell, "A Nightmare on Penitentiary Street," B8.
scream and the guys pretend as though they didn’t jump (when in fact they did).” Bell described The Fly II (1989) as an uninspired sequel to David Cronenberg’s popular 1986 remake of the 1958 sci-fi classic and claimed that the film took only the most “sensational” aspects of Cronenberg’s film and added “a couple of dozen horror and monster movie clichés to come up with a forgettable film that will probably make a few bucks.” As amenable to sensationalism as Bell may have been – especially if it came in the form of sexualized violence – he would not suffer a lack of originality or ingenuity. Overall, Bell’s reviews suggest that he wanted a mix of dynamism, innovation, signature style, and for lack of a better term, muscularity in his horror films, which positioned him both politically and stylistically closer to George than Harrigan.

*Amsterdam News* “Media Watch” columnist Abiola Sinclair displayed mixed reactions to horror. He did not actually review many horror films – his media commentary usually involved making connections between current news stories and larger political/racial issues – but he did severely criticize how the genre dealt with violence. In a piece on violence in movies and television, he stated plainly that, “Most horror movies, in my opinion, should be rated X, as they have no socially redeeming value and little artistic merit.” Sinclair could be written off as a moralizing blowhard, but for the fact that he seemed genuinely interested in questions about the media’s effect not just on black audiences, but on American audiences in general. As he pensively asked later in the article: “Another question is have we, as Americans, grown to like our daily

498 “‘Retribution’ Holds No Scares,” Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles, CA), Nov. 3, 1988, B8.
499 “The Film ‘The Fly II’ Deserves to Be Swatted,” Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles, CA), March 9, 1989, B8.
dose of violence? Are we now addicted to it? At what point is TV following the taste for
sensation, and at what point is it creating a desire for it, exploiting it?" He addressed
these questions more directly in another article on media violence a few years later.
Careful not to propose a straightforward, causal link between violent imagery and real
life effects, he suggested instead a theory of saturation, one in which "the media did not
invent violence. But...exalted [it], worship[ped] it, create[d] an altar for it, and yes,
sacrificed the sensibilities of a whole culture to it." Because the article was written in
response to a widely publicized shooting at Jefferson High School in Brooklyn, Sinclair
targeted most of his ire toward the "righteous violence" of action films that, by his
reasoning, sent frightening messages about masculinity: "The media has said with a gun
you are a man, you have the power to right wrongs, settle grudges, take what you want
and be respected and protected." But horror films did not escape his critique of
violence in American culture either: he argued that the Academy's recent celebration of
Jonathan Demme's Silence of the Lambs (1991) was a clear sign of just how depraved
American society had become. He admitted that it was a "well-directed horror film," but
also suggested that it would have served as useful inspiration for real life serial killer
Jeffrey Daumer.

There has been so much written about Silence of the Lambs in both popular and
scholarly outlets, to say nothing of its sequels, prequels, and a spin-off television series
(now in its second season), that it would be counterproductive to do even a cursory

501 Ibid.
503 Ibid.
504 Ibid.
literature review here. It does seem appropriate, however, to affirm Sinclair’s observation about mainstream critics’ rush to embrace the film. Canby, for example, propped the film up by defaulting to the standard horror vs. thriller demarcation, referring to it as a “suspense thriller” and a “suspense melodrama” – anything but a horror film. 505 If these labels were not enough to insure his readers that Silence was sufficiently middlebrow enough so as not to make them feel unseemly while watching it, he added that, “the movie is clearly the work of adults. The dialogue is tough and sharp, literate without being literary.”506 Maslin did an interview with Demme tellingly titled, “How to Film a Gory Story With Restraint.”507 The piece served four important functions: solidifying Demme as a legitimate auteur crafting serious work, drawing attention to the characters’ depth and, subsequently, to the strength of the actors, justifying the film’s violence, and clearly distinguishing the film from its exploitative premise. Demme’s image also apparently needed some massaging if Silence was to be fully accepted by respectable critics. As Maslin argued: “If Mr. Demme has not made an exploitative film, that seems all the more remarkable in view of his professional beginnings.”508 These beginnings included Demme’s cult favorite “women-in-prison” film Caged Heat (1974) as well as his tutelage under B-movie king Roger Corman. Maslin made it a point to mention that Demme had “no mainstream plans” and intended to make his next project a documentary about Haiti.509 Other Times writers including Bruce Weber and Caryn James wrote pieces that tried to get to the bottom of America’s cultural fascination with violence generally

506 Ibid.
508 Ibid.
509 Ibid.
and serial killers specifically. Although they each took a different tack, both acted as apologists for *Silence*. All of these articles can be viewed as laying the groundwork for giving the film the New York Critics’ circle at year’s end. Important tastemakers had therefore not just accepted but championed a movie that prominently featured gruesome murder, torture, sadism, and cannibalism, all themes at home in the lowbrow, exploitation horror film. For long-time horror fans who had been listening to critics bemoan the genre’s decline for most the previous decade, *Silence’s* success must have felt like a secret coup but for Sinclair, it signaled that the culture had reached a new low.

Although the aforementioned articles make Sinclair seem like a staunch conservative on horror and screen violence, that picture is too simplistic. In fact, his own sexualized language might have been mistaken for Bell’s during a review of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Dracula* (1992). After a lengthy and questionable lesson on Romanian history – which he referred to as “truth telling” about Western Civilization – Sinclair complained about Coppola’s overuse of “gadgets and gizmos” as well as an underlying sense of “prudery” that, at least for him, “ruin[ed] every erotic scene.” He never explained just what qualified as a gadget or gizmo, though one assumes he might have been referring to the film’s almost hysterical tone and editing, both of which veer toward camp. Regardless of their forms, these mechanisms interfered with viewing pleasure, which he again

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sexualized by describing the film’s ending as “unsatisfying.” What this review ultimately showed was that Sinclair did not so much mind sex or violence in movies, just those depictions of either that he felt lacked purpose and power.

As the nineties went into full swing, black newspaper critics took notice of black cast horror films, which had become financially and culturally viable for the first time since the blaxploitation era. *Atlanta Daily World* critic Anthony Hutchins called James Bond III’s *Def by Temptation* (1990) “interesting filmmaking.” *Def* functioned as a throwback to Spencer Williams’ *The Blood of Jesus* (1941) as it told the story of a good Christian country boy who goes off to the big city only to find himself pursued by a demonic temptress. Critics like Robin Wood would undoubtedly have positioned the narrative on the conservative side of horror’s ideological spectrum, but that would ignore the fun that audiences seemed to have watching it. As Hutchins observed, the straightforward good vs. evil plot was somewhat simplistic, but the blend of sex, horror, and a solid R&B soundtrack kept the proceedings lively. Mel Tapley at the *Amsterdam News* also complimented *Def*, claiming that it had enough fright to have audiences “trying to buy holy water by the jug like Deer Park water to ward off evil spirits.” While Tapley clearly enjoyed the film, he tied that pleasure directly to the amount of black talent both behind and in front of the camera. Strong acting by Bond (who played the lead in addition to writing, producing, and directing) as well as solid performances

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513 Ibid.
514 “‘Def by Temptation’ is Interesting Filmmaking,” *Atlanta Daily World* (Atlanta, GA), May 20, 1990, 3.
516 Ibid.
from Kadeem Hardison, Minnie Gentry, Melba Moore, and Cynthia Bond (who played the satanic seductress) made the film in Tapley’s view. Like Hutchins, he also enjoyed the soundtrack, which included songs from black artists Freddie Jackson, Ashford and Simpson, Eric Gable, and Najee. But he saved some of his highest praise for cinematographer Ernest Dickerson, who had worked with Bond as well as co-stars Hardison and Bill Gunn on Spike Lee’s School Daze (1988). For Tapley, Dickerson’s photography “cast the proper cinematic spell” over the whole affair and raised Def to something beyond just another horror film. Unfortunately, Tapley’s prediction that Bond’s exciting first film would “be the start of his invasion of the ghost genre” did not come to pass, but black cast horror did later become part of the new black film wave.

Despite being targeted mainly to black audiences and its association with Troma, Inc. – the distributor of such famed low-budget exploitation staples as The Toxic Avenger (1984) and The Class of Nuke ’Em High (1986) – Def still got some attention from Maslin at the Times. She argued that the film seemed “tame” when compared with most of Troma’s other offerings and praised it for showing uncharacteristic tact in its handling of violence. Her continued critical commitment to auteurism seemed appropriate when evaluating Def given Bond’s involvement at multiple levels of production. In her view, Bond’s greatest authorial strength could be felt in the natural, improvised-sounding

518 Ibid.
519 Ibid.
520 At the time of this writing, The Internet Movie Database lists Bond with a handful of short film and television credits since 2009 as well as an announced acting credit on an upcoming zombie movie called Transit. “James Bond III,” The Internet Movie Database, Dec. 19, 2013, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0093875/?ref_=tt_ov_dr.
dialogue and in his ability to make the best of a shoestring budget. That Def made it onto Maslin’s radar at all suggested that the film had appeal beyond just black audiences even if it would be amongst those audiences where it would find its strongest proponents.

Malaika Brown wrote too very laudatory pieces for the Los Angeles Sentinel on another, more high-profile black cast horror film, Tales from the Hood (1995). Directed by Rusty Cundieff and co-written by Cundieff along with Menace II Society (1993) producer Darin Scott, Tales tried both to capitalize on the early-nineties "'hood film" boom while simultaneously deconstructing it using horror film tropes. As Scott said in an interview with Brown: “The thing about horror is that you want to go for the things that are scaring people. For our community it’s what’s really going on that’s scaring people.” Cundieff and Scott translated these “real” horrors into four highly polemical vignettes. The first concerned a black rookie cop who fails to stop his white partners from murdering a black civil rights activist only to have the activist come back from the dead for revenge; the second featured Cundieff as a teacher who tries to stop one of his students from being abused but then discovers that the boy has a unique ability to protect himself; the third dealt with a white politician and former Klansmen who gets his comeuppance from the ghosts of former slaves after moving onto an old plantation; and the final installment focused on a nihilistic and murderous gangbanger caught between life and death and struggling with salvation. The four narratives were woven together with a framing tale about three black youths who break into a funeral home to retrieve some misplaced drugs. Veteran actor Clarence Williams III, of Mod Squad (1968-1973) and Purple Rain (1984) fame, played the creepy mortician who spins the tales. Cundieff

and Scott’s commitment to making a black horror film with overt social messages represented a challenging endeavor and they worried both about regurgitating stereotypes or being condescending. Yet, they feared the possibility that the audience might miss the point even more and so the tone remains heavy-handed throughout.\textsuperscript{523} Indeed, little about the black horror anthology was subtle, but then horror is rarely recognized for its understatement. As \textit{Times} critic Stephen Holden somewhat despairingly stated: “‘Tales from the Hood’… is crudely written and acted, but crystal clear in what it has to say…it is a political cartoon for teen-agers cast in the visual language of the horror movie.”\textsuperscript{524}

Black horror was also by definition a niche market, which meant \textit{Tales} faced challenges that a white-cast horror film (even one with a similarly small budget) would not. Perhaps chief among these for Cundieff was bootlegging, which he argued was far more prevalent in black communities and had a much more detrimental effect on black films.\textsuperscript{525} Brown ended the article by citing Cundieff’s earnest plea to support black films at the box office proper.\textsuperscript{526} Even if the filmmakers could get black spectators to the theaters, however, they would still have to get them to look beyond their skepticism about whether black horror could work. The target market for \textit{Tales} would, after all, be made up predominantly of a younger audience too young to have seen blaxploitation horror films like \textit{Blacula} (1972), \textit{Sugar Hill} (1974), or \textit{J.D.’s Revenge} (1976). According to Brown, the film managed to blend “the contemporary horrors of black experience with the supernatural adding just the right dose of humor to make the movie a trailblazer in

\textsuperscript{523} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{525} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{526} Ibid.
black filmmaking.” \textsuperscript{527} Much of her review contained plot summary, but she did reiterate Cundieff’s point about the importance of box office sales toward the end of the piece. She hoped that “box office revenues (and not the bootleg profits that the filmmakers will never see) will convince Hollywood…that black folks do horror and they do it damn good.” \textsuperscript{528}

Brown’s enthusiasm was indicative of a broader desire to see black characters, black environments, and black issues addressed in horror films. And a number of horror films throughout the nineties did at least feature black actors in prominent roles. Some of the most notable performances came from Tony Todd in the \textit{Candyman} series, Jada Pinkett Smith and CCH Pounder in \textit{Tales from the Crypt: Demon Night} (1995), Morgan Freeman in \textit{Seven} (1995), Laurence Fishburne in \textit{Event Horizon} (1997), and the cast of \textit{Beloved} (1998). Rappers who crossed over into film during the nineties also made significant appearances in horror, such as Ice Cube in \textit{Anaconda} (1997), Mekhi Phifer and Brandy Norwood in \textit{I Still Know What You Did Last Summer} (1998) and Todd Smith a.k.a. L.L. Cool J in \textit{Halloween H2O: Twenty Years Later} (1998). Smith also appeared with Samuel L. Jackson in the killer-sharks-on-steroids film \textit{Deep Blue Sea} (1999).

Perhaps no other filmmaker during the nineties put black actors in more prominent horror roles than Wes Craven. When combined with \textit{Serpent in the Rainbow}, his films \textit{People Under the Stairs} (1991) and \textit{Vampire in Brooklyn} (1995) form a kind of trilogy of black

\textsuperscript{527} Malaika Brown, “‘Tales from the Hood’ Is a Must See,” \textit{Los Angeles Sentinel} (Los Angeles, CA), June 1, 1995, B5. Robin Coleman has drawn attention to some of the other “‘hood horror” films that were made in the wake of \textit{Tales}, mostly for the direct-to-DVD market. See \textit{Horror Noire}, 202-205
\textsuperscript{528} Brown, “‘Tales from the Hood’ Is a Must See.”
horror films.\textsuperscript{529} These films' achievements and shortcomings notwithstanding, \textit{Scream 2} (1997) was where Craven took on issues of racial representation in horror most directly and I will address my own experience of seeing that film in the conclusion that follows.

This survey of black critics' responses to horror is admittedly a limited one that does not include reviews from black critics writing outside of black newspapers. The contributions of critics such Armond White, Elvis Mitchell, and other black critics writing in different outlets could only further enhance and complicate the picture I have painted here, as would those of white critics writing outside the mainstream. Still, the focus on black newspaper critics serves as a necessary starting point in order to establish a definitive set of black voices writing for black audiences. The pleasures and difficulties that the horror film offered appear to have been significant enough to warrant the attention of these critics who felt some obligation to confront this genre and think through its greater significance. If the act of film criticism signals an investment in time, money, intellect, and expertise, then the work of critics in black newspapers signals a desire to put those investments to work for the benefit of larger communities of black spectators. More work still needs to be done to examine how black critics have responded to horror beyond black newspapers, whether in other black press sources or in publications targeted to a broader audience. My hope is that this discussion will serve as the beginning of a conversation about the need for black critics to continue responding to horror. The politics of the horror genre, racial and otherwise, are still just as complex as they have

\textsuperscript{529} Coleman distinguishes between "black in horror" films and "black horror films," with the later term being reserved for those films that include black participation behind as well as in front of the camera. \textit{See Horror Noire}, 5-7.
always been and its popularity among black audiences does not appear to have ebbed in the new millennium. And where black dollars flow, so should black critical gazes follow.
Conclusion: Screaming at the Turn of the Century

Given that this study began with reflections on some of my own personal history with the horror film, it seems fitting that it should end that way as well. I saw the first entry in Wes Craven’s *Scream* series (1996; 1997; 2000; 2011) during a sparsely attended matinee show at my local multiplex when I was sixteen. I went with my older sister, with whom I had seen many horror movies growing up, often while she babysat me. I still have surprisingly vivid recollections of seeing films like *Aliens* (1986), *The Fly* (1986), or *Poltergeist II* (1986) with her and her friends. Although what I really remember is seeing parts of those films – about as much as I could take before covering my eyes and just enough to give me nightmares. I might very well have been trying to relive some of those memories when I asked her to see *Scream* with me. She had gone off to college and this little outing was going to make, at least in my mind, for a solid sibling bonding moment. Suffice to say that she did not enjoy Craven’s postmodern interrogation of the slasher genre as much as I did. The film’s violence signaled, for her, a troubling new standard in its attempt to rouse audiences. It also carried disconcerting spiritual implications; she had since become a devout Christian and although the film focused on human depravity rather than occult or supernatural forces, it was without question the stuff of the secular world. For me, the film was exciting precisely because it meant that all of the familiar rules no longer applied. I had been reared on sequel after sequel from the “big three” horror franchises of the previous decade – *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Halloween* – and felt just as horror-savvy as the teenagers in
Craven’s film. Craven’s violation of the standard conventions added a new sense of contingency and legitimate unpredictability that left my peers and I rapt with anticipation for the sequel. We would go into the second film with no real assurances about which characters would live or die and be tasked with trying to discern the identity of the killer or killers. This whodunit aspect of the *Scream* films made us feel like sophisticated participants in their postmodern genre deconstruction rather than just another demographic to which the films tried to pander. Come opening night, anybody who was *down* was going to see *Scream 2* (1997). The idea that someone might not go because they didn’t like horror movies seemed both impossible and beside the point. Seeing the film had become a matter of belonging.

That the theatre was so empty for the first film now seems remarkable because the release of the second installment constituted nothing short of a cinematic event for my little community. My friends and I had to get tickets in advance for fear that it would sell out and the pandemonium on opening night was akin to that pictured during the metatextual “premiere” that Craven stages in the opening sequence. What I remember more than anything else about that night though, was not the danger represented on screen but off of it: the sense that my attempt at belonging would come with more risk than other spectators. I went with three other black male friends and while we were not the only black folks in the audience, we were definitely outnumbered. Never was this more apparent than during the aforementioned opening sequence, which features a young black couple, Maureen (Jada Pinkett Smith) and Phil (Omar Epps), who attend a screening of a movie called “Stab” based on the events of the first film. In a display of what Valerie Wee calls “hyperpostmodernism,” their conversation includes self-reflexive
commentary about limited black representation in horror amongst its other clichéd elements. As she remarks: “the horror genre is historical for excluding the African American element.” Unfortunately, Maureen’s horror movie knowledge does not save either of them. The killer quickly dispatches Phil while he is in the men’s room and then dons his jacket along with the same ghost mask costume that Phil jokingly frightened Maureen with earlier. The killer then pretends to be Phil and sits down beside Maureen in the theater before stabbing her multiple times, subsequently mimicking the victim’s death in “Stab” as it occurs on the screen.

This sequence draws its greatest power from shots that capture Maureen’s point of view: she looks out in horror on a crowd that fails to help her because they think its all “part of the show,” and we are encouraged to empathize with her sense of profound helplessness. As she literally crawls onto the stage in front of the screen and screams in agony, stunned silence overtakes the audience. Craven’s heavy-handed subtext could not be clearer: the viewer, just like the simultaneously too bloodthirsty and too passive audience on screen, is implicated in this murder as well as any that follow. That many of the other “Stab” moviegoers wear the same ghost mask costume as the killer only

Wee argues that the Scream films represent a larger cultural shift that intensifies postmodernism beyond what has been previously theorized. This “hyperpostmodernism” can be identified first, by self-reflexivity that transcends mere “tongue-in-cheek subtext, and emerges instead as the actual text of the films” and second, as a tendency toward multimedia intertextuality that cannot be confined to the realm of film. See Valerie Wee, “The Scream Trilogy: ‘Hyperpostmodernism,’ and the Late-Nineties Teen Slasher Film,” Journal of Film and Video 57, no. 3 (2005): 44-61. See also Wee’s “Resurrecting and Updating the Teen Slasher: The Case of Scream,” Journal of Popular Film and Television 34, no. 2 (2006): 50-61. For more on postmodernism and Scream see Andrew Syder, “Knowing the Rules: Postmodernism and The Horror Film,” Spectator 22, no. 2 (2002): 78-88 and Todd F. Tietchen, “Samplers and Copycats: The Cultural Implications of the Postmodern Slasher in Contemporary American Film,” Journal of Popular Film & Television 26, no. 3 (1998): 98-108.
reinforces their culpability (and ours), as does the rowdy atmosphere of the theatre, which
harkens back to a William Castle screening. Both elements allow the killer to commit the
crime and to escape without detection. *Scream 2* was hardly the first horror film to
implicate the viewer in its violence or to wink with a self-reflexive grin at its audience,
but this was the first time I could remember the implication feeling so personal.

Davinia Thomley has described the opening of *Scream 2* as “a fifteen-minute
lecture on the spectacle of mass-mediated killings and how much each of us is implicated
in the fetishization of murder.”531 While I would agree with this description, it was not
didacticism alone that raised the stakes of my spectatorship, but rather how the sequence
revealed underlying racial tensions already manifest in the *real life* audience as we
watched. More specifically, when Maureen’s character claimed that the horror genre
consisted of mostly of “dumb-ass white movie[s] about some dumb-ass white girls
getting their white asses cut the fuck up,” my friends and I burst into uproarious laughter
– and I assume some white audience members did as well?532 At least one white male
spectator did not see the humor however, and shouted, “So y’all think that shit’s funny
huh?” To which one of my friends defiantly remarked, “Hell yeah that shit’s funny.” Not
much else happened after this, in part because girls aligned with each group intervened
and would not suffer having the movie ruined by boys posturing for each other. But a
palpable tension nevertheless hung over the rest of the night and over the rest of the film.
My friends and I could not help but be aware that we were a bunch of black kids
watching a horror movie with a predominantly white audience, and what’s more, that our

2006, 140-147.
532 Quoted in Thornley, “The ‘Scream’ Reflex,” 145.
responses to it had the power to alter the reception experience for the whole theatre. In Althusserian terms, we had been aggressively hailed and our racial subjectivity, both within the ideological field of horror and the chain of production and consumption, emphatically affirmed.\textsuperscript{533}

In hindsight, \textit{Scream 2} attempted to appeal to black spectators on multiple levels, perhaps the most obvious of which included casting black actors like Pinkett Smith and Epps whose careers were heading into high gear. Both had become popular with black audiences during the new black film wave/'hood film cycle of the early 1990s: Pinkett Smith through a role on the television show \textit{A Different World} as well as supporting parts in \textit{Menace II Society} (1992), \textit{The Inkwell} (1994), \textit{Jason's Lyric} (1994), \textit{A Low Down Dirty Shame} (1994), and \textit{The Nutty Professor} (1996). She had also already established her ability to take the lead in relatively big-budget films such as \textit{Tales from the Crypt: Demon Night} (1995) and \textit{Set It Off} (1996). Epps' career trajectory reflected the masculine bias of early nineties black film in that he was able to jump directly into the lead during his first film role in Ernest Dickerson's \textit{Juice} (1992) – although most black audiences were probably more excited about the acting debut of rapper Tupac Shakur in that film. More leading roles for Epps followed in the sports drama \textit{The Program} (1993) and John Singleton's racially-charged \textit{Higher Learning} (1995). Pinkett-Smith and Epps also both benefitted from HBO's apparent commitment to black film and entertainment throughout the early and mid-nineties. As Catherine Squires asserts, "HBO Films...provided greater opportunity and access for black filmmakers than ever before in the twentieth

Epps grabbed a part in the made-for-HBO science-fiction movie *Daybreak* (1993) – which also starred ‘hood film alum, Cuba Gooding Jr., of *Boyz N the Hood* (1992) fame – as well as leading roles in *Deadly Voyage* (1997) and *First Time Felon* (1997), whereas Pinkett Smith appeared in *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996). By the release of *Scream 2*, both actors had an established and growing following with black audiences.

As a member of the black audience however, there was something quite unnerving about the way *Scream 2* used these black actors’ increasingly high profiles to attract spectators and to comment directly on the racial politics of the horror genre only to kill their characters right at the start of the narrative. The death of Pinkett Smith’s character proves an especially paradoxical case. On the one hand, killing her off affirmed her stardom by likening the shock of her death to that of Drew Barrymore’s character Casey in the opening of first film; this surprise would not have worked unless audiences believed that, like Barrymore, Pinkett Smith was too big a star to be killed so early. On the other hand, I cannot help but wonder how the complexion, both literal and figurative, of the *Scream* films might have been drastically shifted had she been allowed to survive and perhaps appear in the other sequels.

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535 Pinkett Smith, for example, received top billing along with the film’s white stars and appeared on promotional posters and other materials.
previously mentioned *Demon Night* is at least as formidable as that of Sydney Prescott (Neve Campbell), the heroine in all four *Scream* films. In fact, Smith’s *Demon Night* character Jeryline not only manages to outwit her supernatural foes, but also willingly becomes a warrior in an ongoing fight against evil as compared to Sydney who is always forcibly pulled into the fray. We can safely assume then that Pinkett Smith would have been up for a meatier and perhaps recurring role had there been one available. And if Wee is right that one of the main contributions of the *Scream* series is to alter the characterization of the final girl by casting aside her virginal purity and even including multiple female survivors – specifically the reporter Gail Weathers (Courtney Cox), with whom Sydney forms an uneasy partnership – then how much more progressive would those films have been if their construction of female solidarity included a woman of color?\(^5\)\(^3\)\(^6\) The real irony in Maureen’s self-reflexive commentary about black absence in the horror genre is that it is just as common for black characters to die first as it is for them to be completely absent. And for all its postmodernisms, the opening sequence did little to undermine that cliché.

Pinkett Smith and Epps’ speedy excision from the narrative would have felt like a far more offensive bait and switch for black spectators if not for the inclusion of some other black characters, including Hallie (Elise Neal), Sydney’s all-too-loyal roommate

\(^{536}\) See Wee, “Resurrecting and Updating the Teen Slasher,” 57-60. Much of Wee’s argument about the supposedly revolutionary qualities of the *Scream* series are formed in response to Sarah Trenceansky’s claim that the series represents a reactionary and regressive politics when compared to slasher films of eighties. See “Final Girls and Terrible Youth: Transgression in 1980s Slasher Horror,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29, no. 2 (2001): 63-73. For more on the implications of the *Scream* series for feminism, see Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, “*Scream*, Popular Culture, and Feminism’s Third Wave: ‘I’m Not My Mother,’” *Genders* 38 (2003), http://www.genders.org/g38/g38_rowe_karlyn.html.
and confidant, and Joel (Duane Martin), Gail Weathers’ reluctant cameraman. Like Pinkett Smith and Epps, both Neal and Martin were relatively young actors with flourishing careers. 1997 was Neal’s breakout year after appearances on television shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *Family Matters* as well as some smaller film roles including a bit part in Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992); she starred in *Rosewood, How to Be a Player*, and *Money Talks* the same year as *Scream 2*. Martin’s career more closely mirrored that of Epps in that his first major film role in *Above the Rim* (1994) also featured him starring opposite Tupac. Martin had also had a small part in *White Men Can’t Jump* (1992) and starred along with Pinkett Smith in *The Inkwell*.

As with their other quickly discharged black co-stars, Martin and Neal’s characters further complicated issues of representation in *Scream 2* for black spectators. Joel deliberately exits the narrative as the bodies start to stack up only to reemerge at the end ready to become Gail’s cameraman again once the danger has subsided. By exiting the narrative, Joel becomes for all intents and purposes, inconsequential to the story and Martin loses valued screen time. However, the idea that any reasonably intelligent black man would stick around for all of the white-on-white mayhem only to be murdered like Gail’s cameraman in the first film would have seemed wholly implausible to black audiences.\footnote{It makes very little sense, for instance, when the sole black character in the third installment, Tyson Fox (Deon Richmond), does stick around. Although he is playing an actor on “Stab 3” and jokingly observes: “You think serious black actors my age can just throw away jobs? It’s all a business now. They got Usher doing Pinter off-Broadway. LL Cool J’s Shakespearin’ in the park.” He was of course not wrong, as rappers like LL Cool J. (Todd Smith), Ice T, Ice Cube, Queen Latifah, and most prominently Will Smith, had already made the transition into leading roles more quickly than many traditionally trained black actors because their already established celebrity guaranteed crossover} Joshua Alston has recently echoed this sentiment, suggesting black
characters’ often early exits from horror narratives is actually central to its appeal for black spectators; the remaining narratives play as a “comedy of the oppressed” that demonstrate minstrelized versions of whiteness black folks can laugh at with detachment.  

Hallie, alternatively, seems committed to protecting Sydney throughout the film despite her full awareness of Sydney’s tragic past and pays dearly for her loyalty. Her strange and largely unaccounted for devotion to Sydney could be explained as an attempt to add another red herring to a story already rife with potential suspects, but Ellie never feels like a full-fledged threat. She more accurately fits into a pattern in which black characters willingly put themselves in harm’s way, thus allowing the white hero or heroine to survive.  

It also seems worth noting that Martin and Epps had become heartthrobs for many young black women and girls. Their casting probably had as much to do with trying to appeal to that demographic as it did with trying to counter the exclusion of black characters in horror. As Wee has argued, the Scream series made a concerted effort to appeal to a young female audience and make the slasher film relevant to them again. But I can only imagine that those black female spectators must have felt short-changed by the limited screen time the objects of their affection ultimately received.

appeal. Richmond had himself been something of a child star as “Bud” on the Cosby show, but had only experienced limited success as adult black actor.  


Charles S. Dutton’s character Dillon in Alien 3 (1992) is perhaps the best example of this; he quite literally sacrifices himself to save Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) even though it has already been established that her death is inevitable.  

“Resurrecting and Updating the Teen Slasher,” 59-60.
A more troubling prospect than limited black representation in *Scream 2* is that the resurgence of the slasher film may have helped stifle black film across the board. In an article for *The Observer* about the success of black “buppie films” like *The Best Man* (2000), Kaleem Aftab interviewed Urbanworld Film Festival-founder Stacy Spikes, who spoke about an abandoned Miramax project called “Miramax Flava” intended to be a subsidiary label producing “films specifically for the young, upwardly mobile black audience.” According to Spikes, Miramax changed direction after *Scream* became an unexpected blockbuster. This altered trajectory suggests that Miramax realized it would be able to capture a considerable portion of black audiences through horror films without having to create another separate umbrella expressly for black films. We can of course never know how well black audiences would have been served by Miramax Flava, but its abandonment suggests that we have only begun to understand how industrial patterns have shaped what kinds of movies black spectators get to see and how black audiences have influenced the development of the horror genre.

Wee’s claim that *Scream* signaled an advanced stage of the postmodernist impulse toward ceaseless reproduction is bolstered by the proliferation of sequels and remakes that have dominated the horror landscape in the twenty-first century. That there already seem to be too many retreads, recreations, and re-imaginings to keep track of just fourteen years into the new millennium suggests a seemingly endless spiral of reproduction and signification. Not only did Craven direct *Scream 4* in 2011, for example, but he also served as a producer on remakes of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) and

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542 Miramax released the film under its horror label Dimension.
The Last House on the Left (2009), the films that established him as a horror auteur. A Nightmare on Elm Street was also remade in 2010. Cataloging this kind of reproduction has perhaps never been easier given keyword searchable database technology, but making sense of the expanding archive has only gotten that much harder. How do we even begin to theorize meaning in a film like The Thing (2011), a remake of remake that itself anticipates its own sequel? In a thoroughly media saturated culture wherein copies of all versions of a film are readily available, is one obligated to consider the whole archive of pre-texts in order to understand how or what the most recent version signifies? The problem would seem to be less that the original might be forgotten – that we have only simulacra – but rather that we have the “original” and everything else too. Even many of the major trends that have emerged in the Post-9/11 world of horror cinema such as torture porn (e.g. the Saw and Hostel franchises), found-footage horror (e.g. Paranormal Activity [2007]; V/H/S [2012]) have already proliferated to near exhaustion, mutated, and hybridized with other sub-genres. Cloverfield (2008) for instance blends found footage with the classic Godzilla-style monster movie (itself a mix of monster movies, disaster film, and war drama), while Quarantine (2008) and The Last Exorcism (2010) use the found footage conceit to revisit the zombie film and demonic possession film respectively. This is to say nothing of prequels like Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning (2006) or Hannibal Rising (2007), deconstructionist horror films like You’re Next (2011) or Cabin in the Woods (2012), or throwback horror films like The House of the Devil (2009), Insidious (2010), and most recently The Conjuring (2013). The films in that last category exhibit a postmodern sensibility in their insistence on period settings,
deliberately retrograde aesthetics, and ironically enough, on a conscious desire to play the horror “straight.”

These are of course only some of the trends that have developed as horror has entered the twenty-first century, and the genre has continued to prove itself a rich field of examination in various collections and studies such as American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium, Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror, Horror Zone: The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror, Nightmare Movies: Horror on Screen Since the 1960s, and Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality. Yet a brief survey of these works suggests that the same absences that haunted horror scholarship in the previous century persist. There appears to be virtually no discussion of the implications of new millennium horror for black spectators or of how the industry has continued marketing to black audiences. I am inclined to wonder if black audiences for horror constitute their own category of the repressed within horror scholarship? That the distributor Lionsgate was simultaneously responsible for releasing the Saw films and most of Tyler Perry’s films — easily the most bankable black filmmaker of the twenty-first century — already points toward industrial connections that need to be further explored.

This project has begun grappling with the implications of what it means to be black and to engage with the horror film, sometimes on its own terms but more often, on the terms dictated by larger cultural, political, and socioeconomic conditions that shape black experiences in America. The autobiographical discussion in Chapter 1 provides an account of young, black, male spectatorship during the early 1980s. Watching Jackson’s Thriller was an important moment in my socialization and in my acculturation, and I
suspect it may have been for others as well. Horror functioned in Jackson’s video as a tool of bodily manipulation and mastery, of patriarchal control, and of narrative agency—that is, of using the body to tell one’s story. At the same time, the video suggested that when horror is placed in black hands and wielded as an instrument of collective expression, the historical encoding of horror in racial terms can be challenged and reappropriated, although perhaps not entirely undone or reversed.

Jackson’s video also appeared at what was arguably the moment when self-referentiality and other postmodern impulses began to take full sway over horror, subsequently revealing some of the postmodernist tendencies already present in much of black expressive culture, particularly the use of revisionist pastiche. While not discounting director John Landis’ influence, *Thriller*’s unique blend of horror, humor, rhythm, and movement on the one hand, and of ritualized performance, strategic masking, and verbal and visual trickery on the other, suggest that the text emerged primarily from the wellspring of black creative traditions. This intersection of black expressive culture and postmodern narrativity, or at least what has traditionally been described as such, demands more investigation as do other accounts of black spectators and their primal encounters with the horror film.

James Baldwin’s analysis of *The Exorcist* points to what is at once a troubling revelation and not really news at all: that for many, horror has been an essential and inescapable aspect of black experience and a defining characteristic of the American condition. The more intriguing prospect is that this familiarity with horror has necessitated alternative ideological responses and survival tactics that can and should be considered for their applicability to other communities and institutions. While Baldwin
serves as a paradigmatic example of what can happen when black subjectivity confronts horror, there are surely other similar examples with which his ideas should be brought into conversation. If the theory of the black gothic imagination is to be a useful means of understanding how some black folks have responded to horror, then it must be further refined, expanded, and where necessary, corrected in order to better speak to those experiences.

In their preoccupation with questions of captivity, possession, autonomy, and power, Roger Corman’s Poe adaptations retained the primary thematic focus of Poe’s original texts while also reconsidering the Africanist presence for a 1960s audience that was confronting dramatic shifts in the legal and experiential terms of citizenship. That these films found a black audience during the height of the civil rights movement can be explained in part by this Africanist presence and the way the cycle became increasingly invested in issues that were integral to black subjectivity with each subsequent film. One of the primary assertions of this study is that this dynamic helps to explain the horror film’s appeal for black audiences more generally. Questions about who has the power to make claims of ownership and who does not, about who has the right to possess property and the means by which that property is maintained or neglected as well as the lengths one is entitled to go in order to secure proprietorship, about having the autonomy to use horror to one’s own ends or to protect oneself from others’ attempts to do so, and about how such relations are transmuted through individual and collective historical legacies have been and remain central to the horror film. These questions as well as others that come into view when examining the horror film in the context of the American gothic
tradition continue to be productive ones that I hope will prompt more consideration from other scholars.

As the survey of black newspapers in Chapter 4 reveals, black spectators’ interest in the horror film cannot be easily mapped along any singular axis, but has instead manifested in other less predictable ways. During the period between the late 1950s and early 1970s, the horror film often managed (both in marketing materials and within the content of the films themselves) to distill racial and other codes into a readily digestible form, but black spectators also experienced the horror film as part of a larger constellation of films with similar thematic and representational commonalities. This phenomenon calls into question whether a paradigm dependent on a notion of discreet genres (or even hybrid ones) makes sense for discussing black horror spectatorship. Just as this study has operated on the assumption that the horror film is a real and legitimate categorization of a particular kind of film that can be identified, examining how black audiences have actually approached the larger film landscape and how they have been approached by the film industry demonstrates the limitations of such an approach.

Black newspaper critics’ examinations of horror during the late twentieth century similarly trouble many assumptions about black spectators’ viewing priorities. Those critics did indeed questioned how the genre treats blackness and black characters, but they were also just as concerned with auteurism, with the ethical implications of violent horror films on audiences, and with the genre’s own development in relation to its history. Their discourse about horror films both did and did not reflect that of white mainstream critics but nevertheless exhibited the same level of analytical acumen, awareness of industrial trends, and propensity for social commentary. Yet as print
newspapers on the whole have lost much of their cultural cache and relevance, we need to better understand how black criticism of horror migrated to other media in the twenty-first century.

Much more research needs to be done in order to tease out how black audiences have made use of horror and how the film industry has made use of black audiences to sell horror. More specifically, we need more first-hand, individual accounts from black horror spectators who discuss their relationship with the films. We need to examine black press and critics’ responses beyond black newspapers. We need to talk with black filmmakers, actors, and craftspeople that have worked consistently in horror about their experiences. We need to map black horror spectatorship in relation to larger trends in production, exhibition, and distribution. And perhaps most importantly, we need to understand how the rhetoric of gothic horror has changed (or not) in relation to shifting discourses of race and rights in the new millennium. For it is in these investigations that we will gain insight into why black audiences’ attraction to and frustration with the horror film has lingered, and what their spectatorship tells us about American experience in the broadest and most intimate possible ways.
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Selected Filmography


