

Because Horror is a collection of 13 essays (incl. one poem) that mixes critical writing and memoir to explore horror movies and how they haunt memory. Bringing the glee of fandom into cinema scholarship, *Because Horror* promiscuously sways through titles like *Messiah of Evil*, *Pulse*, *Mandy*, *Dante's Cove* and *Scre4m*, with prose that spreads sticky like louché gore over the history of a genre and its mutating sites of broadcast.

Dirty Looks / Semiotext(e)
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Because Horror

Johnny Ray Huston

Bradford Nordeen

Afterword by Hedi El Kholti





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Man is the warmest place to hide

JOHN CARPENTER'S

THE THING



Coming this Summer to a Theatre near you.

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This one's for G.B. Jones



Against the Walls of the Skull

“Let me die! Let me *die!*” a trembling voice begs as the screen stays blank.

One wonders what hideous torture might inspire such a sentiment. Perhaps life itself?

The Brain That Wouldn't Die knows the value of a riveting intro.

I was four. My family, in its final, pre-tragedy days of complete nuclear status, was vacationing briefly at a beachside rental in Atlantic City. We walked along the cold, misty shoreline; not exactly swimming or sunbathing weather. When we returned to the shack-like cottage, the attention of someone older than me—my brother? my sister? certainly not my parents—landed on a horror movie.

I watched as the angry hand of an unseen beast reached through a small square opening in a door to rip off the arm of a man attempting to feed him. The wounded man staggered and stumbled from one room to another, smearing the walls with his bloody stump, the blood a deep deathly black instead of red.

Minutes later, the hand reached through the same tiny square to gain a stranglehold on another victim, before ripping the door from its hinges, revealing a towering mutant. The behemoth bit into the man's neck, ripping out a chunk of flesh and spitting it onto the floor, where it lay there, useless and grotesque.

There are moments in early childhood when a sinister movie or song steps directly into your world like a living thing. You're not yet at the point where art and life are separate. You're decades away from adulthood, when horror movies intersect with your brain's shelf or library of traumatic experiences. Each fright is fresh. For instance, when T. Rex's “Bang a Gong” slithered out of a bright yellow Panasonic radio next to my pillow, I thought the devil was invading my bedroom.

Likewise, that chunk of flesh ripped from the man's neck in the movie might as well have landed on our beachside cottage's carpet. I was transfixed. The imagery was branded into my psyche.

The movie was *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*.

He's too big for the living room. As he lowers his head so it doesn't smash through the ceiling, he looks directly down at his ordinary-sized parents. Only his mother meets his gaze, appearing vaguely stunned by the titan she's birthed. He's the subject of Diane Arbus's famous photo "A Jewish giant at home with his parents, in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970," a 7'6" friend of Arbus's named Eddie Carmel.

Carmel plays The Thing Behind the Door in *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*.

The Thing Behind the Door is the movie's raging id. When he bites a chunk from the neck of Dr. Bill Cortner (Jason Evers) and spits it to the floor, the pre-Herschell Gordon Lewis gore makes a mockery of the egotistical doctor's attempts to meld body parts together through radical surgery.

The Brain What Wouldn't Die was filmed the same year—1959—as *Eyes Without a Face*, and the films share much more than a relatively similar title cadence. In both movies, a doctor haunted by an injury that he's accidentally inflicted on a loved one resorts to criminal acts and medical experiments in an attempt to repair the damage. But whereas the French *Eyes Without a Face* has all the cool hauteur of young Alida Valli on a foggy night in a patent leather trench coat, its American relative *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* is as gleefully tawdry as its titular swim cap, if not outright crass. A bit gauche for my suburban family.

An average lech would approve of rich Dr. Cortner's methods for finding a female body to attach to his decapitated girlfriend's head. He trolls sordid burlesque clubs and life study classes. Along the way, a butterfaced brunette and a blond strip show headliner with Jayne Mansfield-esque headlights have a catfight, and the doctor is invited to a Body Beautiful contest. Eventually he encounters a diminutively curvy Bettie Page type whose scarred visage has made her justifiably wary and weary. "I hate ALL men," she declares with an undercurrent of boredom, soon adding, "I'll do anything that'll help me get rid of this face!"

She was Stanley Kubrick's first muse—the star of his debut feature *Fear and Desire*. She was linked romantically to Marlon Brando, Frank Sinatra, James Dean and Richard Burton, before marriage made her the stepmother of Mary Harron.

I'm talking about Virginia Leith, the title star of *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*.

As Jan Compton, Leith mostly appears as a severed head. Her cranium, outfitted in a scientific swim cap of sorts and clamped with a metal apparatus, sits in a tray of life-giving serum that percolates through nearby tubes. Even during the early scenes, when Jan has a body, Leith commands the screen, gazing into her male co-stars' eyes with a liveliness missing from their line readings. But once she's rendered bodiless, reduced to face and voice, she's up to the task of being a B-movie Falconetti with a forked tongue.

It doesn't hurt that bodiless, seething Jan hisses almost all of the movie's most absurdly overwrought dialogue. "I count quantities of horror at its ultimate, and I am that," she tells the mad doctor's skittish assistant. But her best lines are ones of urgency, aimed at a being she can't even see, *The Thing Behind the Door*:

"Together we're both more than things. We're a power more hideous than our deformities. Together we'll wreak our revenge. I shall create power, and you will enforce it."

"I'm only a head, and you're whatever you are—but together, we're strong!"

It's noteworthy that when Jan first regains consciousness after the car accident that decapitated her, she isn't angry at her doctor boyfriend for his fatal reckless driving. No, rapt by the mind reading serum that pulses through her brain, she's furious at him for keeping her alive. A head without a body, a living symbol of Jean-Paul Sartre's being and nothingness, she's powered by the death drive. Two years before the filming of *Eyes Without a Face* and *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, Sartre penned works focusing on existentialism—by its very definition full-bodied—and human emotions. In contrast, *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* in particular renders the terror of being *not-quite* human.

I was nearing 40. My friend, the writer Stephen Beachy, reacquainted me with *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*. Thanks to the joy with which he said the movie's title, I was instantly sold. By this time in my life, hospitalized twice for paralyzing paranoia, I knew the agony of having a brain that wouldn't die. He knew too, and knew that I knew. He was in the middle of writing *Glory Hole*, a 512-page novel dedicated to me.

When I finally saw *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* in full, it was with Stephen and his boyfriend Jon, and Cedar, my boyfriend at the time. A bowl of popcorn cooked in hash oil intensified the movie's starkness, granting it magnetic power. It was like a deranged teleplay born from a morbid child's imagination. But the mad doctor and The Thing Behind the Door didn't matter so much. The movie was all about Jan and her white-hot existential fury at still being alive.

How boring *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* would be if the brain didn't belong to a once-woman! "Every time you touch me I go out of my mind," a full-bodied Jan tells the doctor early on, in a moment of foreshadowing. But once Jan's torso is but a phantom, discarded amongst auto wreckage, she becomes a tragic, wrathful diva. "I remember ... fire ... burn," are her first words as she regains consciousness. Her origin story is a disaster.

A brain can survive for almost six minutes after the heart stops. Jan's lives for rage-filled days.

The Brain That Wouldn't Die knows the value of a vivid finale.

"I told you to let me die," Jan says with satisfaction, as the laboratory flames around her.

When you're already in hell, to perish by fire is redundant.

Dead People

How does anyone get to the desert? You drive there.

I wasn't alive in the seventies, so this is pure fantasy:

I'm picturing a dimly-lighted restaurant, a supperclub, with circular leather booths. The sort you only see in Hollywood movies made before 1986. And I live in Los Angeles but I'm conjuring a Hollywood I never knew, from wafts of cinematic sequences and memoirs, like *Eve's Hollywood*. Let's say we're in Brentwood. I imagine one such night in 1970 and I set three tables. This is how the pictures got made, isn't it? In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion describes how nightly dinners became moments of mental repast, the sounding board for the ideas that she and her husband John Gregory Dunne had set in ink in their respective writing rooms by day.

My nightclub concerns three such scenes. Joan and John, who moved to California to feed off of the industry, are perched at one table. They penned a script for *Panic in Needle Park* which was well-enough received and they're keen to work on their next project; perhaps it will be an adaptation of Joan's new book, due to hit shelves any day—*Play It as It Lays*. They notice as a couple enters the room, which bays with the cadence of excitable industry chatter and dealmaking, the sound of eyes that dart. Frank and Eleanor Perry slip into a booth near the piano that no one is playing tonight. She is an Emmy award-winning screenwriter and feminist. He is a film director and Korean War veteran, whose latest existential feature *Last Summer* garnered awards attention. They're New Yorkers, in town taking meetings for their next picture. As is their custom, she penned the screenplay. They make an exemplary team, holding this new torch of what will be called New Hollywood. They work as a unit, they're Jewish and not much to look at, to be blunt. She's 16 years his senior and has short, bushy hair. He is of a heavyset build, mustachioed and his shoulders arch with the hubris of a Director. Two tables over George Lucas emphatically breaks down the picture he's about to enter pre-production on with his secret weapon, another couple, who are adept script doctors:

Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz. Like Eleanor, she is Jewish but younger. She looks a bit like the up-and-coming comedienne, Gilda Radner. His hair and beard are bushy. He looks a lot like Lucas.

This is not a picture of Silver Wells.

I always joke that my favorite horror movie, *Messiah of Evil* is a remake of *Play It as It Lays*, just shot at night. Like the Spanish-language *Dracula*. *Play* is a nihilist portrait of a post-modern woman; *Evil*, a stylishly saturated zombie flick. Structurally, the films echo one another: both begin and end with a long take of our female protagonist walking slowly down the hallway/grounds of a mental health facility. In both cases, her hair is long and really good. Both feature the use of a laconic voice-over, and through it, both depict dissociative behavior and its cause: existential loneliness. *Play It as It Lays* was released in 1972 and *Messiah*, 1973. Considering how our couples traveled within a similar Hollywood, it's likely that Willard and Gloria, who wrote and directed the *Messiah*, saw *Play*, made by Frank, in cinemas. Maybe they even went to its premiere.

These couples are my way in. They represent workers in the Industry of olde, how family units put bread on the table in the years before everything would spiral so dizzyingly into a world of digital marketing and global franchising. As a creative unit, Frank and Eleanor Perry made reflective art films, like *David and Lisa*, *The Swimmer* and Truman Capote's *Trilogy*. Joan and John will end up hating what is eventually made from her book. But they got to write the screenplay.

For a movie as morally inert as *Play It as It Lays*, it's in constant movement, briskly cutting from pool party, to freeway, to the scales of a rattlesnake in a matter of seconds. Atypical editing for 1972. Maria (rhymes with *Messiah*) Wyeth is suffering from a psychotic break from the system that surrounds her, which is Hollywood. She's a model, an independent film actress who is married to her director. She hasn't worked in a year. The cultural surface of the film is anemic. Maria plops a prawn into a flute of champagne when she wants to go home. Her child was born with a mental aberration and lives in a facility. She's pregnant once again, and her estranged husband provides a nameless

number for a doctor who can take care of “the problem.” She meets a large man wearing white polyester under the big T of a Thriftymart in the Valley who will drive her to the procedure. (It’s a year before *Roe v. Wade*.) Maria watches a friend overdose on sleeping pills and sings “You Belong to Me,” but she can’t remember the words. Tuesday Weld plays Maria, and she uses the role to aimlessly roam the freeways in a banana yellow corvette, her editorial take on glacial apathy finds its bedfellow in her husband’s producer, the “bisexual,” BZ (Anthony Perkins). On one drive, she gets a flat tire. We find her changing it by hand when a highway patrolman approaches and offers her assistance. “We just want to get you where you’re going,” he says. She smiles at him as the wind whips her hair. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The movie has never seen a home video release.

I know what’s hiding underneath that stucco skin.

Messiah of Evil is all scenery chewing. Mariana Hill plays Arletty, our lead. Elsewhere, she played a Corleone, and that makes sense because she’s pure giallo. A voluminous head of hair, a form-fitting red turtle-neck sweater, a tight and collected face. She looks like Lana Del Rey. She’s driving into the night to look after her father, who sounds like he’s losing it, holed up in the coastal town of Point Dune. Filmed in Techniscope, every hue has the rich, inky quality of a dream. A little girl slashes a grown man with a razor. A Black albino maneuvers a congregation of zombies around in the back of a pickup, where they gaze skyward, entranced by the moon. A release valve is pulled and a mechanic is foisted up by his heels into the air: painterly gore coats his face. There’s a story in here, but that’s not really the point.

Math doesn’t always work. Sometimes an object isn’t a sum of some parts. I press on *Messiah* (which was alternately titled *Dead People*) for answers and there’s lots to explore. Mariana Hill shares her leading credit with the actor Michael Greer, who plays a Portuguese swinger named Thom. His affectation is strange and aristocratic. Greer was, in life, an openly gay actor working in the industry at the height of the sexual revolution, not that that paved much road for him. He appeared as a swish landlord in the draft-dodging fagsploitation comedy, *The Gay*

Deceivers, and in drag as “Queenie” in the prison drama popularized by Sal Mineo, *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*. He’s a fop in *Messiah*, a perfect surrogate for Perkins’ BZ. *Messiah* is Greer’s last significant screen credit. The woman who plays one of his two buxom traveling companions has the greatest name ever—Joy Bang. Bang was a free-spirited tomboy who played a hippie or groupie in most of her screen credits, which include Woody Allen’s *Play It Again, Sam*; Roger Vadim’s *Pretty Maids All in a Row* and a rather unconvincing turn as a scientist, with top billing, in *Night of the Cobra Woman*. As with Greer, *Messiah* is her final screen credit. She would eventually move to Minnesota to become a nurse.

I can’t help admiring the way you reduce everything to its central element.

I relay to you these facts, but if the film is a question, are they answers? Because I can’t really relay the plot of *Messiah*. For a film made by writers it doesn’t make much sense. A spooky settler from the Donner Party finds a hunter and foretells of his reincarnation 100 years in the future, where he will emerge from the ocean as the moon turns blood red. His second-coming campaign begets a following of... zombies? The movie waits to lay all this out until the third act, so clearly it’s not the point. There are gothic ramblings in the diary that Arletty finds in her father’s house that offer further clues. But they’re all red herrings.

I haven’t told you about this house yet. It is *Messiah*’s main character, really. Arletty’s missing father is an artist; set decorator Jack Fisk (*Eraserhead*) and artist Joan Mocine fill his walls with paintings of realistic figures. An ascending-perspective, black-and-white row pay audience to Joy Bang’s bath. Illustrations of men and women haunt the shadows while Arletty curls up in a bed that hangs from the ceiling via chains. What appears to be an escalator in the recesses of a modest beach house is simply a relief, painted up the wall and leading nowhere. As a viewer, the house is awesome. Its humanoid frescos suggest a psychological interiority that our protagonists lack.

Such is the broken theorem that is *Messiah*. It’s an equation that never quite builds to unity, but erupts in bursts of compositional beauty, building tension through kill choreography in desolate, mundane locales like the grocery store or a beachfront town’s movie house. *Messiah* scares

not with action but alienation—it's captivating in its utter strangeness. The momentary flickers of violence don't strike me as any more affecting than the illusory and beguiling moments of idle that we spend in that bizarre beach house. There's so much Maria contained in a later scene, where Arletty self-diagnoses zombie symptoms observed in her father's manic diary, causing her to doubt her flesh and its sensations. She takes a hatpin and stabs it into the skin of her inner thigh. Attempting to arouse feeling. As with Maria's many acts of attention-grabbing, Arletty's self-abuse is the kind of havoc only a beautiful and privileged white nihilist could find release in.

The townspeople try to convince her that her father is dead. They plant a body underneath a sculpture he was constructing on the beach. But she knows that it's not him because the hands are the coarse hands of a laborer. And the sculpture is the kind of godawful '70s public art that brings me back into this room, back to our supper club. The ugly sculpture reminds me of a moment in the Industry where ideas were exchanged by adults at a dinner table. The result wasn't always pretty. But these two Jewish couples could become esteemed creative teams, harnessing feature film projects and Academy Award nominations. Both are now known for the bombs that ended their respective careers. Frank Perry made *Mommie Dearest*, a decade after divorcing Eleanor, while Huyck and Katz made *Howard the Duck*. Katz and Huyck would eventually help to shape the evil that would take their kind out of the game, completely, and with them the Michael Greers, the Joy Bangs and the Joan Mocines of the world, when they assist Lucas with the screenplays for movies like *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. They will give birth to the rise of Marvel age and movies like theirs will never be made by big studios again. No more playing as it lays, no more dead people. Neither of these movies worked in the way that they were supposed to, anyway. Filled with messy ideas, they were unruly. Their ambition, existential. But both work so well as scenarios passed between smart people.

I know what nothing means, but keep on playing

They're speculative horror films.

Mama's Boy, Murder's Son

Once upon a time, at a birthday celebration for Alley Cat Books in San Francisco, I quipped to Kevin Killian, "I think of Curtis Harrington as Glinda the Good Witch to Kenneth Anger's Wicked Witch of the West."

Skeptical, Kevin opined that I was overdoing it.

The title of Harrington's autobiography, *Nice Guys Don't Work in Hollywood*, scores one for Kevin. But producer and writer Dennis Bartok's introduction for the book begins, "Curtis Harrington was an astonishingly sweet man."

Directed and partly rewritten by Harrington, 1973's *The Killing Kind* is a mean little movie, anything but sweet. It's a misanthropist's gallery of unpleasant characters. The principals are overbearing, infantilizing Thelma (Ann Sothern) and her immature homicidal son Terry (John Savage). Rounding out the crew are a frigid nosy neighbor (Luana Anders), a clueless and grating aspiring model (Cindy Williams), an inept but rich lawyer (Ruth Roman) and a litigious slut (Sue Bernard). The sole exceptions are some pleasant old ladies who reside at Thelma's boardinghouse. With one exception, they are embodied by inhabitants of a nearby retirement home. "Appearing in a movie brought some excitement into their monotonous lives," Harrington observes in his memoir.

Then there are the murders. In the most flagrant action scene of Harrington's stately career, effectively cloaked in claustrophobic darkness, one victim is run off the road and her car explodes. Another is forced to drink to the point of alcohol poisoning, then set afire with her house. During perhaps the film's most disturbing scene, we see the sudden terror in someone's eyes upon realizing that she's face to face with a psychopath and about to be strangled.

In his autobiography, Harrington speaks of researching serial killers before making *The Killing Kind*, discovering that they share "a deep hatred of their mothers" as a trait. Troubled or troublesome mothers are a consistent Harrington motif, from the two moms of criminals in

1971's *What's the Matter With Helen?*, to the desperately maternal Roo in 1972's *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?*, to the controlling matriarch played by a game Gloria Swanson in 1974's *The Killer Bees*. (That TV movie's campiest moment finds Swanson, then 75, cooing lovingly to an actual swarm as it buzzes around her.) Sothern's smothering Thelma certainly fits the bill, doting over her adult son in roughly the same voice she uses with her pet cats, forever offering a glass of chocolate milk as a cure for life's problems.

As both Bartok and Harrington point out in *Nice Guys Don't Work in Hollywood*, Harrington was key in rescuing James Whale's masterful *The Old Dark House* from sure oblivion so it could be restored for new generations of admirers. While Harrington's *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* is set in an old dark house, *The Killing Kind* is set in an old bright house—Harrington identifies it as “a big old barn” of a homestead in LA's Hancock Park, complete with a staircase wheelchair lift.

I say old bright house because, for a suspense if not outright horror film, it's noteworthy how many of *The Killing Kind*'s scenes take place in broad, intentionally unflattering daylight. If chic clothing and interior decor existed in 1973, it isn't to be found in this movie. Critic and Harrington enthusiast Edward E. Crouse observes that the film's boardinghouse is a “slack, stifling, ultra-drab situation” and “Los Angeles itself seems worn-down, overripe.”

Overripe applies to Sothern's look, sort of a zaftig younger version of Mae West in Diane Arbus's unsentimental portrait shots of the star, who was at least 72 at the time. By this point, Harrington—always an actor's director—had become a specialist at working with autumn-year divas, and Sothern's performance has just the right tone of sustained ambiguity. One comical exception is when her disapproving gaze first falls upon Williams, a moment akin to Lee Grant's comic cameo in *Mulholland Drive*.

Another veteran star, Roman—so stiff and uninspired decades earlier in Alfred Hitchcock's *Stranger on a Train*—has a memorable supporting turn. A few thousand packs of cigarettes have led up to her husky yet placating line readings. The year 1973 was a memorable one for Roman, who smoked up the scenery in the deliriously deranged *The Baby* either just before or just after *The Killing Kind*. Harrington also discovers some fresh talent, as Savage and Williams had yet to appear in *The Deer*

Hunter and *American Graffiti* respectively. In a great flourish of bit casting, Bernard, the virginal bouncy bikini bunny in *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, plays a far more promiscuous type whose last name is Moore, as in more, more, more.

But my favorite performance in *The Killing Kind* comes from Roger Corman veteran Luana Anders, who has a role as Dennis Hopper's consolation prize in Harrington's beguiling 1961 debut feature *Night Tide*. A dozen years later, Anders sinks her teeth into the role of an uptight eavesdropper whose penchant for liquor uncorks her repressed desires. From a 21st-century vantage, her presence has something in common with Frances McDormand. She and Savage's Terry have a pair of vicious verbal poolside duels that showcase the film's best dialogue.

"Have you ever been so bored it actually makes you sick?" she asks him at the beginning of the first. "I work in a library, and I hate it. I have these hallucinations that are so real ... burning all the books. Sometimes I have this terrific urge to put ground glass in my father's food. I can almost hear his false teeth grinding on the glass." Terry eventually wins round one, but in the rematch she gouges him with an observation: "I hear you strumming that guitar all the time. *All the time*. But I've never actually heard you *play* an entire song on it. You say you write songs? Why didn't you play me one? Because you can't. And that thing that you hold so close to you, like a woman—you can't even play it."

Details such as Terry's affect as a '70s folk singer-songwriter reflect that *The Killing Kind* is one of the most contemporaneous of Harrington's films. But it's still steeped in nostalgia, from the politesse of the old ladies at the fringes of the action to the relentless looking back of Sothern's Thelma, to a time when Terry was the ideal child, before he was perhaps falsely convicted of rape. It's the latter that focuses Terry's lust for murder, but the movie makes a point of showing how repressed hostility and sexual tension between mother and son sparks it.

In the short 2008 documentary *House of Harrington*, the director observes that the commercial response to his movies suffered because they never have happy endings. *The Killing Kind* has a particularly bleak finale, though one with a unexpected flash of poignance. In the movie's last moments, Thelma is seen both sympathetically and as a cold-hearted collector of memories. There's tremendous black humor

in the use of Kodak arsenic as the material in what might either be a mercy killing or murder.

A student of Maya Deren, Harrington began as an experimental filmmaker whose early works pale next to his peer Anger. But by 1956, he wrote that experimental film was “too trifling, too in love with its petty effects, too introverted and most often ends as a victim.” It was likely this belief that led him to jettison the avant-garde for feature films, then TV movies of the week, and eventually episodes of popular television shows such as *Charlie’s Angels* (“They weren’t angels,” he remarks in *House of Harrington*) and *Dynasty*, where his affinity for actresses could still dominate.

According to the *Fortean Times*, when Harrington died in 2007, his friend—frenemy?—Anger heckled the designated speaker at a memorial service, loudly correcting him at every opportunity. A separate memorial service was held in which Anger wasn’t present. The fact that Edgar Allen Poe was to Harrington as Aleister Crowley is to Anger illustrates the differences in their sensibilities, with Harrington favoring romantic forms of horror while Anger works at his satanic majesty’s request.

So perhaps it’s time to end at the beginning, and a core distinction between Harrington and Anger.

No, Harrington wasn’t as sweet as Glinda the Good Witch. But regardless of what violent evil his eye might land on, he was always the gentleman.

Deathdream

“The corpses change but the party goes on forever.”
— Kevin Killian

The name “Bob Clark” sounds like it belongs to a used car salesman. And while Clark was an inventive huckster, his trade was filmmaking. His bizarre roster of genre-hopping feature films serves testament: there’s the seasonal mainstay, *A Christmas Story*; another seasonal first, *Black Christmas* (which also lays claim on the first slasher). He also helmed the most financially successful Canadian production of all time, *Porky’s*. Clark launched his forty-year film career with the *très* problematic black-and-white transploitation flick, *She Man: A Story of Fixation* (1967), but it was his 1972 follow-up that put him on the map. *Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things* is a singular and competent mélange of *Night of the Living Dead*-style zombie horror and dramaturgical, camp sensibilities (it’s literally about actors who get eaten). The film’s odd tone made it an instant fixture on the midnight movie circuit. In the following year, he would film *Black Christmas*, but not before he shot his third feature, a startling achievement in unsung cinema.

Deathdream (alternately titled *Dead of Night*) looks, at first glance, like your basic drive-in horror movie; perhaps knowingly, its climax even unfolds at one. Push below that surface, however, and you’ll find a film so subtle and strange in its chamber dramas. As a horror movie, it’s almost a flop. There’s a thinness to its set-up. It’s *The Monkey’s Paw* narrative, but that resurrection story is reworked for the homeland traumas and suburban stillness during the Vietnam War. Here’s where we find our seasoned character actors John Marley and Lynn Carlin, who previously appeared as a married couple in Cassavetes’ *Faces*. A husband and wife with a daughter at home while their son, Andy, serves his country, overseas. They sup one night with an uneasy stoicism. Smiling and passing around a bowl of potato salad; it’s been weeks since Andy’s last letter. Then a knock at the door. *The knock*.

Deathdream is not a flop, but as a creature feature I can't say it delivers. You can never really tell if you're watching a vampire movie, a zombie movie or what. A clue to read beyond the surface comes from the film's two warring performance styles. First, we have our parents: Pathos is their essence in the most American way. There's an exaggeration to Carlin's hysteria, the singsong way she bleats each of her maternal lines of dialogue, a symphony in denial. Marley's melodrama is the gristle of forlorn masculinity in the wake of the Freud-obsessed 1960s. He's every bit the gnarled patriarch, hands folded before him at the dinner table where he passively waits for news of his son, as powerless as the women facing him. His eyebrows bushy as the day is long. They seem a little old for the kids they've raised, like they aren't specifically parents to this family but the parents to loss, itself.

Andy is dead. Killed in combat. Carlin screams, wails and asks God to bring him back. And just like that, a big rig carrying cargo off somewhere along a dark stretch of road idles to pick up a hitchhiking soldier. It is, of course, Andy. And the scene sets into motion a tragedy of the highest order. Every histrionic parental crescendo is countered by Clark's once-in-a-lifetime casting find, first-time actor Richard Backus (Andy).

Backus is very handsome and, at first glance he looks like a perfunctory seventies B-movie lead. But the longer the camera lingers on his wan mug, in all of its affectless authority, that edifice curls to reveal a face of death. It's a chilling performance that creeps along, as time hangs languid in the fetid air. In the dead of night, a noise downstairs wakes the family to discover Andy and revelry fills the house. But Andy remains emotionally unresponsive, cold and hard. When nuclear unity is returned the dinner table the following night, father asks, "Pretty rough over there, son?" "Over where?" Mother presses, "they actually sent us a telegram telling us that you were killed!"

"I was," he replies flatly and, in a laconic voyage, his eyes trace across the table to register the reaction from every party. His glare moves detachedly to scour each relative, slowly, analyzing the manner in which his confession confounds their excitement and relief. After he's extracted the horror from mother, father and sis, the faintest, most ghostly twitch of a grin tugs at the corner of his mouth and a pained grimace pulls across his cheeks. He is just a body, imitating humor, and the family emphatically clings to this signals, chuckling and pawing at him, cursing

chance. In the cold mechanics of that smile, Andy becomes, for me, one of the most effective monsters horror has ever rendered. The languid preciseness of his choreography is, in a word, bloodcurdling.

Deathdream eventually sheds its share of gore and offers economically arranged feats of action, but this movie is far more successful as a family melodrama. I can't tell you if Richard Backus is a good actor, but he's an excellent cadaver. What Clark manages to reflect with that leaden face is as sweeping and devastating as the most robust of melodramas. Later on in the film, his body begins to decompose. Andy hides these surface fissures behind black leather gloves and sleek, silver aviator sunglasses. He's dressing for a reunion with the girlfriend he left behind, for a date sprung on them both by surprise and she awaits, giddily at the bottom of the stairs. He emerges to make his descent but there's no love, no lust, no soul left at all in this shell of a man. The image is devastating. The glasses snuff out the last breath of interiority.

Because of course this is about trauma. And of course this is about loss. This is a horror movie as allegory (barely), made *during* the Vietnam War and when Andy races a car that he's stolen through the quiet Floridian city in which filming took place and he careens through a gate, of course it's a cemetery. And his mother rushes towards him in her paisley blue nightgown, just so domestic and desperate. She's screaming, "don't go Andy! Don't go!" and he looks like a zombie now, his skin rotten, his eyes grey. Blood pools out of his mouth and he's etched a makeshift tombstone for himself, ready for release. She props him up and together they lurch his desiccated frame into the plot and he claws soil over it. "No! No! No!" she's screaming, and suddenly I'm crying at this no-budget exploitation film, because it grants tacit form to the overpowering sorrow that twisted a generation of families, and mom sees just then that she was selfish and her need for him to live overshadowed him, her unwillingness to grieve and let go made him a monster. Made a monster of her. But who is really the monster here? Andy desperately paws the soil over his frame and allows himself to die, and the mother screams and screams and starts to sprinkle him with soil, holding his hand and singing a bedtime lullaby as Clark's camera pans up into the black night's sky.

Secret Do's and Public Don'ts

Horror and suspense films dive into the forbidden. So when a movie's title begins with the word *Don't*, the real message of course is its opposite—*do* go to sleep, go in the house, look in the basement, etc. The promise of a *Don't* movie is that you are going to experience exactly what you aren't supposed to confront or encounter. Whatever that may turn out to be.

Don't movies are primarily associated with Times Square grind-houses or the era of the Video Nasty in the UK. But the *Don't* movie also had a small but potent life within the kiddie nightmare realm of the ABC Movie of the Week, most famously in the 1973 feature *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*. The film's story is a Pandora's box allegory for the Women's Lib era, with fatally curious Sally Farnham (squinty, bushy-haired Kim Darby) setting loose little hairy gnomes with walnut heads, who want to drag her down to their subterranean lair. These deadly imps are embodied by actors whose past and future roles include Cousin Itt and E.T.

A Lorimar production filmed at the Piru Mansion north of LA, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* offers its own twist on the haunted or possessed house theme that dominates many PG horrors of the time. That theme's apex is 1976's bleakly funny *Burnt Offerings*, a theatrical effort directed by *Dark Shadows* creator and TV stalwart Dan Curtis, shot at the same mansion—Oakland's Dunsmuir House—used for 1979's *Phantasm*. In both *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* and *Burnt Offerings*, the term housewife takes on a literal meaning—the female lead becomes her house's, not her husband's, wife.

Director John Newland helmed Joan Crawford's final filmed performance, an episode of the series *The Sixth Sense* entitled "Dear Joan: We're Going to Scare You to Death." He benefits from Andrew Jackson's cinematography, which finds all the colors of the dark within the nooks and long hallways of the Piru Mansion. In contrast, one standout exterior sequence is a long De Palma-style daytime stroll shared by Sally and best friend Joan (Barbara Anderson), in which they express frustration with their wifely roles.

A neurotic pressure to conform plagues *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark's* Sally and her husband. In 1982's *Don't Go to Sleep*, another Lorimar production, a vengeful spirit exploits the fissures in a seemingly happy suburban family unit. Grandparents are nuisances in these scenarios, so impudent Ruth Gordon quickly gets scared to death by an iguana in her bed. Soon to come: a rooftop fall, a bathtub electrocution and a pizza cutter assault on the house itself. Dennis Weaver and Valerie Harper's rangy, easygoing chemistry as a loving couple in the movie's early scenes gradually gives way to fighting and grief as the deaths pile up. Like *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, *Don't Go to Sleep* impacted kids of its era, and it's easy to see why—fanciful children are the movie's tricky agents of doom.

Academics such as D.A. Miller and Robin Wood have pointed out the countercultural assault on '70s-era American family norms perpetrated by *Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes*. But it should be noted that relatively tame made-for-television efforts such as *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* and *Don't Go to Sleep* also wage war on nuclear family conservatism, while reaching broader audiences through their medium. In fact, these ABC TV movies often sport gloomier endings than their R-rated theatrical counterparts, ones defined by death rather than triumph. A traumatized mother receives a shock scare at the close of *Don't Go to Sleep*. In *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, Sally's disappearance into a deep underground recess frees her from housewife constraints.

The same year that brought *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, 1973, also saw the release of *Don't Look Now*. Enough has justifiably been written in celebration of Nicolas Roeg's sublime nightmare, so stylish that it had Pauline Kael seeing Daphne du Maurier through the eyes of Jorge Luis Borges, that I'll steer clear of addressing it outside of the framework of other *Don't* movies. That framework is immediately rewarding, it turns out, because *Don't Look Now* has far more in common with an ABC TV Movie of the Week than any grindhouse shocker.

For a start, like both *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* and *Don't Go to Sleep*, *Don't Look Now* foregrounds marital tensions. In fact it merges the individual marital discord of each movie. Just as *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark's* Sally is shamed by her husband when she mentions mysterious creatures, *Don't Look Now's* Laura Baxter (the divine Julie Christie) is patronized by husband John (Donald Sutherland) for her belief in a blind woman's psychic powers. Moreover, like the married couple in *Don't Go to Sleep*, Laura

and John are reeling from the recent accidental death of a child. It might also be worth noting that in comparison to the sassy children in *Don't Go to Sleep*, Laura and John's two kids are mute dopes.

Perched on a perilous bridge between the grindhouse and the art-house, Lucio Fulci's 1972 giallo *Don't Torture a Duckling* possess the *Don't* subgenre's kookiest title, an early example of the *New York Ripper* director's fixation on literal quackery. A small, deeply religious Italian village in Southern Italy is beset by a child killer who targets little boys, and glamorous outsider Patrizia (Barbara Bouchet) aids in the investigation—that is, when she isn't nakedly teasing one ill-fated prepubescent scamp. Fulci's famous lust for graphic carnage only erupts twice—when the local witch is hunted by angry village men, and when the killer meets his fate, his priestly cranium repeatedly crashing against a cliffside.

If *Don't Look Now* and to a lesser degree *Don't Torture a Duckling* celebrate the power of feminine intuition, a quintessential grindhouse movie like 1980's *Don't Answer the Phone* is its polar opposite, a misogynist work that presents the rape and murder of women as a matter of course. Nicholas Worth, who plays the villain, is on record calling the movie “hideous,” and he's not wrong. Or if he is, it's in giving the film too much credit. Everything about it is drab. It's also racist. When the sole black character, a pimp, is accidentally shot and killed by a pair of bumbling cops, his death is treated as comedy. As for the phone, its role is largely tangential. The first victim brushes off a call from her mother before she is strangled. Worth makes phone calls to a therapist's radio show, but even when he kills someone while on the air, it's just another random moment of ugliness.

The chief moment of shocking ugliness in 1979's *Don't Go in the House* is anything but random. In fact, it's an iconic inspiration for Eli Roth's *Hostel* movies. After being bonked on the head with an ashtray, a woman awakens to find herself naked and chained to a ceiling in the cold gray gleam of a steel room; someone in a hazmat suit walks in, pours gasoline all over her as she gives in to hysteria, then blasts her with a flamethrower.

Aside from the eerily depopulated exteriors captured by *Honeymoon Killers* cinematographer Oliver Wood, everything else in *Don't Go in the House* is pallid in comparison to this sudden Sadean attack, a fragment of which is captured on the cover of Stephen Thrower's exhaustive exploitation tome *Nightmare USA*. Made one year before the bloodcurdling

Tom Savini extravaganza *Maniac*, *Don't Go in the House* is an undeniable influence on that superior film, which at least allows for blissfully charming Caroline Munro to arrive and turn its unapologetic woman-hating upside down. Both movies feature climaxes in which the protagonist is attacked by the women they have killed, however zombified.

While 1981's *Don't Go in the Woods* sports a higher murder count than *Don't Answer the Phone* and *Don't Go in the House* combined, it's infinitely more good-natured, in fact even hilarious at times in its amateurish zeal for mayhem. A killer who evokes the cartoon character Captain Caveman races around what might be the Rocky Mountains, knocking off more than a dozen people, including a homely couple spending their honeymoon in a van and a man in a wheelchair. The killings are almost uniformly so ineptly rendered that the movie's only shocks come if one lands correctly with a stylistic flourish, as when a swinging trap nails a fisherman smack in the forehead. A corpulent sheriff and long-limbed pretty boy deputy investigate the onslaught of death as if it were a case of shoplifting. Say what one will about *Don't Go in the Woods*, it's never boring.

There is a king of the *Don't* movies. The late Texas-based S.F. Brownrigg made not one but two: 1973's *Don't Look in the Basement* and 1974's *Don't Open the Door* (aka *Don't Hang Up*). Brownrigg's movies are no-budget affairs, but *Don't Open the Door* is a beautifully shot American answer to the giallo pictures of the time, packed with bright and beautiful colors, as well as a mammoth spiral staircase that lends itself to numerous stunning views. As a young woman fighting to hold on to a family inheritance, lead actress Susan Bracken has a riveting wild-eyed presence, but the narrative momentum is woefully slack, partly due to far too many obscene phone calls. This is the movie that should have been titled *Don't Answer the Phone*.

Don't Look in the Basement, however, is an absolute nutball gem. Brownrigg's approach conforms to genre more than John Waters' midnight movies of the time do, and he isn't as hip or obviously countercultural, but his ensemble of actors is just as inspired.

Set at Stephens Sanitarium, *Don't Look in the Basement* presents an array of unhinged misfits that makes Sam Fuller's *Shock Corridor* appear

tame. They include: a sweet-natured hulk who loves popsicles; a woman who ricochets silently from catatonia to cold-blooded knife attacks; another who rages when anyone steals her baby doll; a sergeant forever on the lookout for intruders; a judge who should not be trusted with an axe; an old lady prone to flights of poetic fantasy; and a very excitable nymphomaniac. That the hulk is Black and the only character to have suffered a lobotomy adds to the poignance of his confusedly heroic actions in the finale.

Overseeing this busy crew is Dr. Masters (Anne MacAdams). She's downright hostile when new nurse Charlotte Beale (Rosie Holotik) shows up one day for work: "Do you mind telling me again just who you are and exactly what you're doing here?" Without giving away too much of the plot, let's just say that Brownrigg's thriftiness is downright hilarious once you know the characters better. For example, as the mental ward's tyrannical Dr. Masters, lead actress MacAdams is superb—especially considering she's also the film's production manager. (That the poetic old lady is played by MacAdams' real-life mother Rhea is another source of mirth, considering the movie's chain of events.) Much like Jack Hill's *Spider Baby*, *Don't Look in the Basement* sports an eccentric spirit that generates sympathy for its societal outcasts. At heart though, it's a lovable one of a kind.

If you have another *Don't* movie to add to this survey, don't say a word—it's comprehensive, but by no means definitive. For better or worse, Fede Alvarez's 2016 *Don't Breathe* rates a coda because it's such an effective work of suspense, and because it's the *Don't* title with the greatest specificity: In its scenario, breathing too loud can bring death. When three young thieves break into the house of a blind Iraq vet in search for a massive stash of cash, Alvarez toys with sympathies so that viewers root for the criminals more than a blind man. Set in Detroit, *Don't Breathe* errs once early on by presenting a mansion interior that's pure California. From that point onward it's a suffocatingly intense duel, but unlike the rest of the movies discussed here, it's built like a machine.

Poster Child

Campfire stories work because they're just the seeds of a story that listeners can gnaw on to grow into their own private horrors. I was raised in the Midwest when the videocassette was still relatively new. There are a million eulogies for the death of the videomart, but did you know that at their peak they even sprung up in grocery stores? It proved an excellent form of childcare. Our local Schnucks carved out a large section in the front of the store where I would get lost in the stacks while mom glided her cart along the aisles. I guess my campfire stories weren't stories at all but images, the posters tacked above those grey particleboard display shelves. On our weekly trips I would make my way through that maze of plastic slipcases, picking out the perfect stack. On a good day there were specials and you could get two-for-one on tapes with the pink 99 cent sticker, so a tower would slowly build until it cleared my head.

Grocery store video shops were not a vestige for the cinephile. They were suburban enclaves that you could dip into to pick up *Batman* and bleach. Their tapes were popular, flashy or cheap. Depth snuck in sometimes, under the pretense of salacious packaging or by way of an inspired employee, but this isn't a story about depth. This is about the posters that lined the walls: mostly kids movies and horror films.

On the surface, posters are a straight-up marketing object. A glossy promotional item sent out by the studios to lure you into selecting their version of the current shelf-filling trend. But when you're a kid, you're furiously processing everything that hits your eyeballs and taking it at face value. I would move my fingers over the scratches in the clear plastic cases, gazing up at the imagery, feeling through the trenches of this war between graphic fantasy and industrial consumerism. These walls were Lascaux for me, telling of the perils and thrills that lay in waiting for my eventual adulthood. Okay, that's a hokey analogy, but in the kitten curiosity of prepubescence, the posters became imaginative portals. This was, after all, a land before online time.

I remember two kinds of posters that left an impression. There were the fuzzy ones, filled with warmth, golden hues and primary colors for

movies like *The Bear*, *The Land Before Time*, *An American Tail*. They were designed to occasion wonder, awe and comfort. They were composed to be instantly recognizable (branded, we now call it). They stretched from the ceiling to ensure that greasy hands would thrust upwards, towards their respective clamshell cases, so that parents would spend their money on the adventures of talking dinosaurs, cute bears or immigrant mice. The cases for kids tapes were bigger and white, but sometimes gold or yellow, I guess to make them feel more like toys. Or to protect the tapes inside from a child's vehemence.

What really stuck with me, however, were the horror movie posters. *Child's Play 2*: the killer doll Chucky leers out from the shadows, spreading wide a pair of glinting scissors to behead a grimacing jack-in-the-box. Wes Craven's *Shocker* features a death-row inmate strapped into an electric chair in an orange jumpsuit. His teeth are gritted in a menacing stare out of the frame, the moment voltage envelops his body. A white baby carriage faces the ocean on a tropical beach in the poster for *It's Alive III: Island of the Alive*. A black-and-yellow warning sign reads "Jarvis Baby on Board" and a claw emerges from the bassinet. A ghoulish figure peers out from the shreds made by his gnarled claws, and flickers of fluorescent purple and green light caress the shiny black fabric of John Carpenter's *Body Bags*. Or an actual green ghoul pops up from the toilet bowl, wearing red suspenders like a demented Dennis the Menace—*Ghoulies*: THEY'LL GET YOU IN THE END. These images were made to sell you on and approximate 90 minutes of movie. Their content was Restricted.

I was too young to take home the titles they hocked, but the creatures stalked from the other side of the store, laying siege on my subconscious. Often, the posters were produced by advertising agencies, the labor of photographers who had never set foot on the sets of these film studios. Their images, ultimately quite divergent from the way the movie actually looked. Later, I would find out that they were often even more arresting than the movie they sold. Back then, they became my illicit friends peering out from the frame. I did take them home, in my own way.

By the '90s this shifted slightly. The booming industry meant that titles could be made explicitly for this home video market, bypassing cinemas altogether. Alluring packaging might inspire the rental of a popular knockoff, the muddy tape resolution might cover up sliced

budgets, bad acting and cheap effects. *Carnosaur* was a favorite. The poster depicted a nasty green dinosaur, backlit with its jaws stretched open, lashing a blood-red tongue. The tape hit shelves weeks before Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* filled multiplexes. *Teenage Bonnie and Klepto Clyde* finds our home video namesake in a white convertible as it barrels down some desert stretch of highway. Bonnie preens at us, shooting a toothy smile over her shoulder—she's wearing a black cowboy hat, white Daisy Dukes, a red crop top with a semi-automatic pointed towards the pale blue sky.

LOVE BLEEDS. A supine damsel languishes atop a cement coffin, her body barely covered by a white, ceremonial dress. Three small golems stand guard above the words ON VIDEOCASSETTE while the architectural cheekbones of a vampire fill the top half of the frame. His eyes are sunken, the moon is blue. His mouth agape, exposing two slight fangs. His long hair spills towards our painted heroine. It was this bodice-ripping poster that made me fall in love with Charles Band's *Subspecies* series. Band has produced a phonebook's worth of straight-to-video (now VOD) franchises for his company Full Moon Features (*Puppet Master*, *Trancers*, *Demonic Toys*, *The Gingerdead Man*), but it was the gothic eroticism of *Subspecies* that hooked me. And I did eventually take one home on videocassette, not the first one, so the story just lurched onward, which was probably for the best. In marketing there is no beginning or end.

The scariest stories are the ones you color in yourself. My little wall-paper demons were mostly an advertising ploy, aware that the power of an image could be more expansive than the mass of narrative. The gothic romance that beguiled me in the poster for *Bloodlust: Subspecies III* doesn't really pan out in the video. *Subspecies* is a gratuitous mélange of vampire clichés shot in a castle in Romania. Even the names of their stars Anders Hove and Denise Duff tell you all you need to know. And yet I love them to this day. I love them as beacons at the intersection of imagination and means, consumerism and fantasy. I could watch all those '80s horror videos now, I've lived with their images long enough. But I know that I don't need to. The way I hold them now is so much scarier.

The Pit Stop That Time Forgot

I was but a kid, yet every Saturday afternoon, I had a date with him. The cemetery gate creaked open, a cat screeched, something unidentifiable howled, and he'd rise up from his coffin, welcoming "dear hearts" to the day's tale of tale of terror with a hearty "NYAH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!" I was a boy in Detroit and I loved Sir Graves Ghastly.

Looking back at Sir Graves' show through surviving clips on YouTube, I fondly remember The Glob, a singing upside-down mouth with magic marker or Maybelline eyes. But I'm struck by more subversive characters such as the homely Tilly Trollhouse, who lip-synced to recordings by Mrs. Miller and Florence Foster Jenkins, and Walter, a fey fellow fond of rooting for athletic teams in a swooning manner. All of these folks were created and embodied by an imaginative actor named Lawson J. Deming.

You can have your Ghoulardi—to this day, Sir Graves Ghastly is the one for me.

Through the magical programming of Sir Graves, I first encountered the ever-present dark-eyed zombie of Herk Harvey's *Carnival of Souls*, as he popped up next to the poor heroine's passenger window while she drove through blackest night. Other TV avenues such as Shock Theatre showcased the delights of *The Hypnotic Eye* and *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-up Zombies*. But it may have been Sir Graves that introduced me to the jumping brains of *Fiend Without a Face*, who'd wrap their lengthy stems around the necks of terrified victims and drain them of life.

I was scarred by such a vision, and for that I thank Sir Graves from the top and bottom of my horror-loving heart.

I was drawn to horror and true crime well before my teens. One influence was a night spent in an aunt and uncle's spare bedroom, where I found copies of *The Boston Strangler* and *Helter Skelter* on the bookshelves. Soon I was consuming novelizations of slashers such as *Halloween II*,

The Funhouse and obscurities such as *Final Exam*. I was even busted for shoplifting a luxe graphic novel version of *Creepshow* from my small town's drugstore.

Of course, I also feasted on Stephen King's books, their vivid covers second only to the glossy colors and trompe l'oeil trickery of V.C. Andrews' at captivating my imagination. King's nonfiction book *Danse Macabre* is where I first encountered the 1979 movie *Tourist Trap*. "The film wields an eerie, spooky power," he writes. "Wax figures begin to move and come to life ... there are a number of effective, atmospheric shots of the dummies' blank eyes and reaching hands."

I still remember the first time I heard Pino Donaggio's brilliant and borderline goofy title credit theme for the movie, its impish woodwinds punctuated by rattles, while alone in my family's living room. The same surprising PG rating that sentenced David Schmoeller's debut feature to box-office oblivion delivered it to television, where young viewers such as me could see a pipe pierce a man so deeply that blood slowly dripped from its other end, a woman take a thrown knife to the back of the head, and most upsettingly, another victim die of suffocation from a fresh and thick application of plaster to the face.

Originally set to be directed by John Carpenter, *Tourist Trap* was released by the same company, Compass International, that put out *Halloween*. Its plot concerns a group of road-tripping young people lured into the title zone, in this case a forgotten roadside attraction called Slausen's Lost Oasis, where dozens upon dozens of dummies and mannequins might come to murderous life at any moment, thanks to one character's telekinetic powers.

If the plot sounds like a mishmash of Italian giallo, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Carrie*, that's because it is—producer Charles Band insisted on the addition of telekinesis to the story. As for Schmoeller, he'd studied under Luis Buñuel and Alejandro Jodorowsky, and hails from the state where *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* takes place. While the dominant presence of mannequins brings Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* to mind, Schmoeller insists he'd seen no giallii; nevertheless, Donaggio's themes and motifs—including nervous high-femme "ah" sounds from the mannequin's mouths—possess a European (think Krzysztof Komeda's score for *Rosemary's Baby*) flavor.

Tourist Trap was made for the same budget—\$300,000—as *Halloween*, and Donaggio's efforts accounted for one-sixth of the sum. Like *Halloween*, the film is shot in Panavision, and the director of photography, Nicholas von Sternberg, is the son of none other than Josef. While understated in comparison to Dean Cundey's Panaglide maneuvers for *Halloween*, von Sternberg's cinematography still gracefully pans from one end of a macabre room to another, and in claustrophobic close-up, captures what King calls "the queer power that inanimate dummies, mannequins and human dummies can sometimes cast over us."

It's exactly this queer power that both attracted and scared the queer child that was me upon first viewing.

I'll admit that decades passed before my next obsessive encounter with *Tourist Trap*. It happened in the early 2000s. I found a DVD at Amoeba Records in the upper Haight. "GOOD LORD I'M A GREAT FILM!" some mischievous employee had written in the tiniest possible block lettering on a small white sticker placed next to the mouth of the mortifying mannequin that dominates the box art.

Then, in 2005, Warner Bros. released a remake of *House of Wax*, perhaps infamous for a supporting turn by Paris Hilton, who, interestingly, suffers a death by hurled pipe—hmm, where had I seen that before?—in a scene that caused audiences to erupt in hooting celebration at the time. (For her part, Hilton is perfectly adequate in the role of a supporting victim.)

For me, the surprise of Jaime Collett-Serra's movie was the discovery that it wasn't at all a tribute to the 1953 version of *House of Wax* starring Vincent Price, so much as an effective if mechanical homage to *Tourist Trap*. Instead of harping on the cynicism of a major studio Hollywood moneymaker cannibalizing a film that at that point was struggling to achieve cult status, I took Collett-Serra's pilfering of an abandoned town's wax museum setting and other elements as a compliment.

As it turns out, there is maybe a single degree of industry separation between Schmoeller's *Tourist Trap* and Collett-Serra's interpretation of *House of Wax*. One of the production companies behind Collett-Serra's





“remake” is Dark Castle Entertainment, cofounded by director Robert Zemeckis. *Tourist Trap*’s genesis began as a short film, *The Spider Will Kill You*, that Schmoeller wrote and directed before expanding it to feature length. *The Spider Will Kill You* was runner-up in a special jury category for Best Dramatic Film at the 1975 Student Academy Awards. The winner? Robert Zemeckis for *A Field of Honor*.

From short to feature to remake back to short again: In 2010, I was part of a small group of people, led by the artist and video maker Skye Thorstenson, who put together a 13-minute no-budget update of *Tourist Trap*. The inspiration behind this lark was a song of the same name by me and Nathan Berlinguette. Nathan and I had set out to write and record a series of songs based off of ’70s horror movies, and our initial two efforts were created from movies of Schmoeller’s.

The first wasn’t sourced from Schmoeller’s successful *Puppetmaster* series, but from *Crawlspace*, a perverse 1986 thriller in which Klaus Kinski plays an evil landlord who spies on tenants from the titular space, sometimes murdering them. A filmmaker and artist, David Enos, had translated the movie into a comic book, and in turn, I transformed his captions into lyrics. To this day, the result makes me laugh. Thanks to Nathan’s four-track prowess, the track sounds like a fusion of Right Said Fred and Cerrone, with Beat Happening’s Calvin Johnson hitting sepulchral notes over the dance beat.

Tourist Trap is more of a dirge, with prosaic lyrics that emphasize the film’s melancholic undercurrent: “You’re a long way from the new highway” goes the refrain. In the closing instrumental passage, Nathan takes elements of the Donaggio score and slows and sustains them to the point that they become glacial. To illustrate the song, Skye looked to a video of an off-camera teen arsonist laughing maniacally about his crime for inspiration. The movie itself featured mannequin-masked satanists kidnapping me for a ritual that causes me to disappear. “I like to party,” one them says.

By the time that our *Tourist Trap* won an award at the San Francisco International Film Festival, the three of us were scarcely speaking to each other. I was going through a period of feeling freaked out about being ritually sacrificed, further intensified by a

sense of shame that assumed my addiction issues were being mocked. We three have since moved on and become friends again, but I learned a hard lesson from the collaboration—be careful how much meaning you attach to things.

Be careful how much meaning you attach to things. That's the lesson I also take from the true feature-length original of *Tourist Trap*. As a kid I was drawn by the childlike imagination of the movie, the way it took a recognizable American realm and made it a place where a man could move objects with a steely glance, and where mannequins could come to life with the aim to commit murder. This is the stuff of an elementary schooler's play-acting.

As an adult I look at *Tourist Trap* with the same kind of fondness I have for Sir Graves Ghastly—namely, an understanding that something deeper is going on beneath the surface. That something is played out in the relationship between the two main characters, the roadside stand owner Mr. Slausen (Chuck Connors) and final girl Molly (Jocelyn Jones). Molly's friends include scantily-clad Becky (a gorgeous pre-*Charlie's Angels* Tanya Roberts), but Molly arrives at Slausen's Lost Oasis in a sundress and matching hat that's pure Sunday best of the past.

Slausen takes an immediate liking to Molly, the only girl who he addresses by name, and Molly responds with a warm sense of fascination that's strong enough to reduce her friends to distraction. Molly is young though, and she fails to recognize the sense of menace that lurks within the literal attractions of the Lost Oasis. It's here that *Tourist Trap* distinguishes itself from films with similar lost-highway themes like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, not to mention the dozens of derivative, more contemporary films that have arrived in *Tourist Trap*'s fading wake.

Namely, instead of presenting Slausen's Lost Oasis as purely a place of menace, both Molly's perspective and Donaggio's poignant love theme for the movie convey a sense of sympathy for Mr. Slausen as an ambassador of a lost, abandoned American life. In fact the movie's love theme does double duty, applying to him and Molly and to his relationship with his late wife. For a horror film, *Tourist Trap* conveys a surprising amount of sentiment—up to a point.

In its own way, however influential, *Tourist Trap* has likewise become quaint, but in a manner that's endearing. Aided by Connors' underrated performance, a scene in which a pair of dummies share some soup is high comedy. With its strange mix of commercial influences overridden by a personality all its own, this is an oddball film, as strange as all its mannequins come to life. Lore has it that Compass International's Irwin Yablans deplored Donaggio's score in relation to the modern synth sounds John Carpenter concocted for *Halloween*, believing it played a role in its meager box-office returns. That may be true—with its complicated affection for Americana, *Tourist Trap* is *Halloween*'s spinster sister—but its undertow of sadness also makes it one of the composer's most memorable works.

Memory is a funny and cruel thing. The horror of *Tourist Trap* takes place in a doomed nostalgic realm, and that's precisely why it is fondly remembered today. By me anyway. A long way from the new highway indeed.

Meat Movie

The most I can hope for in taking a chance on an unknown horror title on today's streaming platforms is that I be *shook*. Now, shook takes many forms. Shook can be the scaredy-cat jostling that I still pleasurablely engage in from time to time, like when my hands darted over my eyes during the recent *Shudder*-produced *Host*, which takes place entirely on Zoom and was shot during lockdown. But there's a deeper shook, a kind of awe and excitement in finding something that rattles you to your very core—a camp rarity, a topsy-turvy genre cuckold, a feminist auteur you'd never before encountered. The other night, I followed Hulu's algorithmic guidance and pressed “Play” on the 1987 cult jewel *Blood Diner*. I was about to embrace *all* these shooks, and then some.

Blood Diner was written to be a sequel to Herschell Gordon Lewis's o.g. video nasty, *Blood Feast*. The latter was shot in 1963 and made use of a variety of animal parts to land it in the history books for its unprecedented depiction of gore. I find it rather wooden by today's standards, but its lineage is permanent and it even pops up in films like John Waters' *Serial Mom*. *Blood Feast* tells the story of a suburban Miami housewife who commissions a local grocer to prepare an “authentic” Egyptian feast at a party held for her daughter, an anthropology student. That clerk happens to be a descendant of Ramses, and he slinks about town sacrificially dismembering women and harvesting their organs in order to raise the goddess Ishtar. By 1987, production company Vestron Pictures didn't equate its cult status with commercial appeal, enough to warrant the hefty sum that Lewis requested to return as director, anyway. So they turned to a 24-year-old Asian American female filmmaker named Jackie Kong.

Kong had directed the low-budget slapstick comedy *Night Patrol* for the company, and its home video rentals broke some kind of record. When approached to direct the otherwise-sober horror screenplay, retitled *Blood Diner*, she carried her prior production's tone into her new project. Genre films tend to follow pretty static formulas to ensure success and horror has perhaps the most notoriously rigid audiences.

Thanks to movies just like *Blood Feast*, the male-dominated viewership feels as if “they’ve seen it all.” From the first beat of *Blood Diner*, I was hooked; I had never seen *anything* like it! Kong’s film is *wild*, with a gleefully excessive tone that’s one part New Wave, one part *Looney Tunes*. Her handle on the genre is masterful and she still delivers the bounty of horror scenes and gimmicks that her audience craves, but on her own terms.

TUTMAN is a thriving vegetarian restaurant on Hollywood Boulevard run by two very hot brothers. Foodies are lining up around the block to savor what they’re whipping up, which, of course, is human remains. They’re disciples of the black magick rites taught to them by their uncle Anwar. Only Anwar was killed in a police shoot-out 20 years prior. The Anwar that directs the boys through their most gruesome chores is the excavated brain with eyes still attached that bubbles its thickly-accented directives out of a jar. There’s a Nazi wrestler. There’s a topless aerobics class that the brothers shoot up and dismember while wearing Nancy and Ronald Reagan masks. A woman gets decapitated after having her head smeared in dough and dumped in a fryer—a human hushpuppy with earrings still attached. The MPAA refused to rate the film, on the grounds that it possessed no moral value.

Blood Diner was made for \$300,000 and everything described above should play out, as I’m sure it sounds on paper, like a cheap-looking schlock fest: tawdry frames filled with tits and gory money-shots. But Kong was a born cinephile—she received her first 16mm camera from Marlon Brando as a gift for her 18th birthday. You catch wind of that real fast—*Blood Diner* has a startlingly opulent (and technically competent) *mise en scène*; I’ve sat through a million low-budget films—I can tell when someone knows their shit. These frames are carefully composed, with theatrical lighting, dynamic set design and professional cinematography. Dolly tracking shots and crane takes, an impeccable depth of field... in a movie called *Blood Diner*? What is this!? Look closer and you see that the menus for the diner are the scratch-and-sniff “Odorama” cards from John Waters’ *Polyester*. Filling this wild and unruly farce are knowing winks from its auteur, which allow for Kong to push its giddy camp to a near-breaking point, beyond basic gallows humor. That balance is absurdly difficult to get right. And Kong nails it.

Streaming this thing, I was slack-jawed. One threshold arrives when Kong pushes her world into the beyond by casting a scripted character as a bulging-eyed dummy, a crude little stuffed mass in a cowboy hat, who delivers his lines through ventriloquist voice-throwing as he's questioned by our glamorous beat cop, Sheba Jackson (LaNette La France), who resembles a young Janet Jackson (and was, by trade, Janet's actual hairdresser). A confident Black female detective in the middle of this white horror scenario? Did I mention that Kong's production crew was almost exclusively female?

The food piles up in gross heaps of fried fingers and eyeballs in olive bowls. An obese diner named Vitamin projectile vomits onto adjacent customers and turns back to refill his mouth from a new dish in front of him, puke still collecting down the front of his Hawaiian shirt. My mind drifted to similarly spasmodic scenes of food grotesquery, like the Viennese Actionists in Dusan Makavajev's *Sweet Movie*, or the rancid concoctions prepared by Jayne County in Rosa von Praunheim's *City of Lost Souls*. The kinship with this latter title really set me on a course and led me to realize I was watching a punk movie! Digging deeper, I discovered that the budget restricted that the cast be exclusively non-actor. Kong found her performers in local punk bands! Which is why I mistook the movie as a New York feature in its first act, until an establishing shot landed us on Hollywood Boulevard. Los Angeles punk is horribly underrepresented, at least where narrative cinema is concerned.

The brothers are building a female Frankenstein in order to resurrect an Egyptian goddess named Sheetar, who will commence her reign of matronly terror. She's gold and, of course, has great breasts. And this absolutely bonkers film reaches its climax in a punk club, where a virgin sacrifice takes place in plain view of a crowd, busy moshing to a performance by a band fronted by a singer with a massive pompadour. His backing instrumentalists are dressed like Hitler, with nooses swinging around their necks. The music cuts to Wagner. Sheetar has risen!

Because of her gold-painted skin and a massive vagina dentata tracing from breasts to genitals, I dizzyingly lose myself in an ürtexual screen fantasy and start to read Sheetar as the Los Angeles punk performance artist Johanna Went, who would perform in similar venues with elaborately cartoonish sets, power tools and animal entrails. Sheetar's outfit does closely resemble one of Went's costumes, recently exhibited at the

Los Angeles gallery The Box. I don't think Went ever actually performed at the East Village hot spot The Pyramid Club, but I rewrite this scene as that inevitable moment—when West Coast Art Punk invades East. The man crooning in the pompadour is John Sex, obviously. A Pyramid Club staple, who wore a natural blonde bouffant that towers just as high as our film performer. In addition to his Hitler band, he performs on stage with some blue-bobbed female dancers, who could well be Sex's back-up dancers, who were known as The Bodacious Ta Ta's. My Sheetar/Went roars to life and bolts of lightning blast through her fingers and Sex's head explodes. Johanna Went was too much for the boys of The Pyramid. The crowd becomes a teeming mess of zombies, devouring one another. And L.A. assumes its place of rule on the cinematic punk throne. It took a deliriously trashy piece of work like *Blood Diner* to do it, but I really do appreciate Hulu, and Vestron before them, and the sensationally underrecognized efforts of trailblazer Jackie Kong for finally setting the record straight. And so I became, in my coastal parlance, hella shook.

Welcome to the Internet

ghosting

1. *the appearance of a ghost or secondary image on a television or other display screen.*
2. *the practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly and without explanation withdrawing from all communication.*

“Would you like to meet a ghost?” a computer asks Kawashima (Haruhiko Kato) a few minutes into Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s *Pulse*. Kurosawa’s movie was made before the second definition of ghosting above became common parlance. Part of its haunting genius is the way in which it conflates both definitions.

This is just one of many ways *Pulse*—aka *Kairo*, or “circuit” in Japanese—is prescient. I first saw the film on September 10, 2001 in a crowded theatre at the Toronto International Film Festival. I was shook by one of its climactic visions, of a plane hurtling into a city and exploding, partly because it was the first macro moment in a movie where humanity disappears person by person.

The vision took on psychic properties the next day, as real-life versions of it multiplied in infinite replay through television circuitry. As for TV’s near-endless listing of casualties, there it was in *Pulse* as well.

More recently, the enforced solitude of the COVID-19 pandemic keeps reminding me of *Pulse*. When I board a near-empty bus or subway train, I think of Michi (Kumiko Aso) completely alone on public transit. When I air-hug a friend after we’ve spent time with one another, I think of Harue (Koyuki) mistaking her own surveilled image for company and giving it an empty embrace. Kurosawa’s apocalyptic vision owes a proud debt to Don Siegel’s version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but there’s an eerie sense of prophecy to its barren urban zones.

As I write this, a virus keeps humans from getting too close to each other, and we venture ever more desperately and blindly into technology in search of connection.

During the first few years after *Pulse* and 9/11, I had an opportunity to ask Kurosawa about that crashing plane. He spoke of stratagems that lurk just beyond the point of understanding. I wish I could repeat his words verbatim. At one point they were on the internet. Now they're not.

If *Pulse* were a mood, it would be melancholy.

If *Pulse* were a state of being, it would be eternal loneliness.

The horror of *Pulse* is the realization that one is utterly alone.

The genius of Kurosawa's movie, helped considerably by the tragic tones of Takefumi Haketa's Bernard Hermann-caliber score, is that it *is* those things. Kurosawa begins with a mood, with a state of being, and he builds an audiovisual and word-based world from them. Not only that, he interrogates it philosophically, with plainspoken rigor.

A key scene happens just past the midway mark. As the population around them is vanishing, Harue's despondent existentialism collides with Kawashima's hopeful humanism. Haketa's music mournfully underlines parts of the conversation.

"I always wondered what it was like to die, from when I was very little," she says. "Then in high school it dawned on me. You might be alone after death, too. The idea was so terrifying, I couldn't even bear it. That nothing changes with death ... In fact, ghosts and people are the same, whether they're dead or alive."

"But I do know that I'm definitely alive and so are you, Harue," he protests. "Just maybe, in 10 years ... they'll invent a drug that prevents death. Then we could live forever and ever."

"You want to live forever?" she asks, her voice a little mocking, a lot forlorn. "That sounds like fun?"

I'm not much of a repeat viewer, but I've watched *Pulse* around a half-dozen times.

People have their reasons for returning to a movie. Cinephile considerations figure in mine. I'm fascinated by *Pulse's* richness as a genre work—Kurosawa knows the history of the American horror film more deeply than its homegrown practitioners do, and there's a brilliance to how he unites Japanese Kaidan ghosts with zombie and vampire motives

and mythos. I'm impressed by his powerful use of a small budget, and imaginative sound design, traits shared by *Harmful Insect*, a brilliant and far too obscure film from the same year by Kurosawa's student Akihiko Shiota. I'm attracted to *Pulse's* philosophical inquiry into questions of existence.

But really, I'm drawn to *Pulse* because of its empathetic sadness. I'd have to go back to 1995 and Todd Haynes' *Safe* for a film that approaches the way it immerses the viewer within that emotion. It's also not afraid to tap into sadness's darker relative. "This movie contains the most accurate depiction of clinical depression I've ever seen," someone wrote in a YouTube comment on the internet.

The afternoon California air, already prone to fatal danger, is filled with ash. I stay inside, fighting off loneliness as a matter of course, texting friends willy-nilly in an attempt to bond. Gabe has just finished an editing project for *Gay Shame*. Vanessa has photographed a smog rainbow. Derek is out hiking. Amanda is across the Bay, where the air is even worse than in San Francisco. Marty has finished a dance routine. Rio shares a Magritte image, *The Lovers II*, of a man and a woman, cloth over their heads, attempting to kiss. Corina is holding a Halloween party for her sister's kids, in August.

I know so much about them, but I'm not with them. We're together in the wireless abyss.

Something's wrong. Michi's coworkers at the nursery are going missing. She approaches her boss when another one begins acting strangely.

"Words said in friendship with the best intentions always end up hurting your friends deeply and then you wind up being hurt," he observes, an eerie smile frozen on his face. "Who needs friends like that?"

Pulse is the only one of Kurosawa's forty-some feature films that he's since adapted as a novel.

The movie braids together two plot threads. In the first, a haunted disk leads Michi's coworkers at a nursery to their deaths in "The Forbidden Room," a ghost zone found behind a door marked with red electrical tape. In the second, technologically clueless Kawashima enrolls the help of lab instructor Harue when his computer begins to dial him up to present disturbing imagery.

There are streaks of black comedy within these scenarios. Michi and her doomed, endlessly distracted comrades work at a place called Sunny Plant Sales. Guileless and dopey hero Kawashima is like a Japanese cousin of Keanu Reeves' iconic Ted character; when Harue unexpectedly visits his apartment, he tries to subtly correct its disarray as she focuses on his computer.

At her job, describing a program in which dots mimic the closeness and distance of human relations, Harue remarks, "Only the grad student who developed it understands it."

Later, Kawashima runs into Harue at the library. "I don't really use the library much," he admits to her. "Couldn't find my way out." In contrast, Kurosawa's establishing shot and subsequent camera placements make knowing maximal use of the library's layout. A ghost lurks within its rows, always just out of reach, then finally out of sight.

The dial-up of a modem merges with the white noise of the ocean.

A duplicate of a computer image exists within a computer image, in infinite repetition.

Glitches are cracks that allow the spirit world to seep into the material world.

Things happen in abandoned spaces in *Pulse*. The apocalypse's origin story is sourced to a storage unit in a prefecture's shipyard, and later Kawashima, Michi and a haunted Harue congregate in an empty factory.

With the exception of Harue, who occupies a higher economic strata, the characters in the movie live alone in tiny grim apartments, if you can call that living. Michi's is the tidiest. Even though her apartment is larger, brighter and shinier, Harue has no housemate.

Kurosawa stages scenes so that characters are constantly looking in different directions, more preoccupied with what they are doing than what anyone else is saying. Even on the rare occasions that two people speak face to face, one of them is soon interrupted by a meaningless everyday task.

We all know the horror film cliché where one character separates from another, walking haplessly straight into their doom. In *Pulse*, Kurosawa tweaks the cliché, so that such actions register as emotional or even absolute abandonment. There are times when it quietly devastates.

Racing from oblivion, Kawashima and Harue ride the underground until they reach the literal end of the line. In a panic, she runs away from him, vanishing into isolation.

Bereft people who've faced ghosts up close turn into smudges on walls. Others pull black bags off of their heads then shoot themselves.

A novelist friend once told me amusedly about Kurosawa carrying a portable ashtray in his pocket during their interview. I wonder if he still smokes today.

Hello Again, Sydney

Drug writing is so banal, but...

I watched *Scre4m* during the COVID-19 pandemic on ketamine, months into lockdown. So, already, much felt lost. The mere selection of *Scre4m* is, itself, a sign.

Ketamine forms a dull kind of hollow that migrates from sensation to subject with ease.

Wikipedia informs me that it's the franchise first to use CGI to enhance its kills. But that strikes me as the least remarkable surface shift in this stalled reboot.

Ketamine seems to stretch time, but not really. You're actually very present for its apex. Hovering in a state of disassociation, temporary sedation—a space grows between you and your environment. Dosed lightly, it's not hallucinatory, but it does break down a visual into its elemental parts. Like an expensive flat screen on which your friend keeps the motion control pumped up to full hilt. So that everything looks like porn.

Drug writing is boring for the reader because the thesis is dubious; observations come off as either quack visions or some heady transmogrification that's lost on the undosed.

Regardless, *Scre4m* is an ugly movie.

Under the numbed thrum of the drug, I was immediately struck by the muddy surface of *Scre4m*. It's all dull peach and black. But not shiny black, bad exposure black. This is some grim camerawork. The peach is the tanned, Caucasian flesh of our seasoned franchise originals as well as that of the newcomers. And the golden wood of their kitchens. It's 2011—the peak of the Kardashian—so everyone's hair is long, shiny, flat and brown.

Ketamine stretches the perceived distance between the “bottom” and “top” which I think hewed depth into *Scre4m*. But no one is a winner. It's Wes Craven's final film. And apparently it went through development hell. The script was rended from original screenwriter Kevin Williamson and sent through the ringer. I suppose that shows in

the thinness of the final product, but just what new spin this had to begin with is lost on me. *Scream* was a shocking and twisted event film, a final, worthy cry for postmodernism. I saw it in theaters twice.

This ugly fourth one limps through the gate, offering up Anna Paquin and Kristen Bell as first blood. They're blondes—the old breed. The shock of Drew Barrymore's blonde-bobbed death in the opening scene of *Scream* was a Marion Crane moment that you can't rekindle, though I guess the writers saw it as a structural touchstone for the franchise. It feels real flaccid a fourth time round. The blonde duo is quickly revealed as the stars of a movie onscreen, the sixth sequel in the *Scream* universe's *Stab*. Other opening kills from subsequent *Stabs* follow in an unfurling loop of opening sequences, like the *Scream 2* Heather Graham appearance of our first diegetic *Stab*. Kardashian-styled girls are watching *Stab 7* in the *Scre4m* world. Though, *Scre4m* never successfully musters a world that isn't metatextual for a second. Tax breaks don't have an aesthetic but if they did it would be this.

The threat of taking lots of ketamine and really having a hard look is that the slightest downward curl of a lip can balloon into a scowl. It's transformative, but subtle too. And you're sitting there plucked, peering deep into this thing. SEEING IT. Which, you're not. But you're not not.

Scream was like a mirror to a culture swallowing its own tail. And each successive sequel pushed deeper, deeper into that gulp, like the film within a film conceit, until Courteney Cox's Gale Weathers is watching her screen surrogate Jennifer Jolie, played by Parker Posey, get murdered behind a two-way mirror. I guess *Scre4m* is meant to comment on social media, but even now this 9-year-old slasher looks quaint for the screen culture that's ensued.

Sequels suck. What's my point here? Maybe my foregrounded disclaimers surrounding drug writing are anxious distractions from the actual difficulty of drug writing. There are certain experiences you can't recreate. They're a dance between your brain chemistry and the spectacle. You can't go back.

My intention here is to capture that morbid, symphonic chord that's hit each time *Scre4m* reveals our franchise ingénues: Neve Campbell and Courteney Cox. It's how the apathy of everyone involved, that sadness, became a visual texture in my heightened state.

Scream was wicked fresh when it hit screens, however hardened it was by its own cynicism. There are no glimmers in *Scre4m* to suggest that this was anything but perfunctory.

As many sequels do, this one takes its time before rolling out the familiar faces. But the camera eventually finds its way to Gale as she squints behind a computer screen, attempting to imagine a story beyond the Woodsboro killings that brought her fame. But this interior grants no space beyond that maiming. Her house is clean, white and luxe. Long gone are the wisps of highlight that once followed her up-do. Gone are the neon-hued '90s newscaster suits. Courteney looks good but the molded contour of her face, amber and pinched, all but erases Gale. Courteney has spent years on the sitcom *Cougartown* in her break from *Screams* and that lifestyle ebbs from her pores into the cinematic world around her like a balmy vapor. She adjusts the sweater on her shoulders. She could be Demi Moore. I know I'm high, but this is, I believe, Freud's uncanny. A physiognomic forfeiture. It's startling. Deep. I feel like I'm watching it in 3-D.

Courteney is a brand; she was on *Friends*. Her fixity is unsurprising. Neve's entrance, like her persona, is slightly different. Campbell blossomed into an unlikely sex symbol as a teen on the sitcom *Party of Five*. Sensitivity is her virtue, but sexual violence is a constant in nearly all of her mainstream roles, giving her the alt edge required of a '90s starlet but troubling the throes of visual pleasure that typically activate sexual objectification. Even *Wild Things* complicates her famous swimsuit sequence by showing her toothless relatives. By *Scre4m*, Campbell and Cox must be sharing a hairstylist, because it's all chestnut. Sidney Prescott has bangs, which allow her mane to fall forward into a framing shield. She's always braced for something. The caged face has been similarly sculpted, tanned, dulling its definition. She could be Liv Tyler. Sidney steps back into Woodsboro (and onto the screen) for a book launch. Her book launch. She's penned a trauma memoir, returning to the scene of the crime with the conviction of a Whole Foods run. The felt distance between actor and her most famous recurring role is stunning. And that torpor is a contagion, infecting everything she touches. Which means Gale and a new disposable aunt character (also chestnut coiffed). The women all seem to have stepped out of a different movie entirely. A reality television show. Or wine country. There's no

heart here and that spreads thick like paste. You can see it in the tawny air of the film.

I harp on the qualities of the drug, because I think it's the ingredient that brought brevity to what might have otherwise been forgettable. It breathed a life into the churning industrial object and the connecting tissue it traced over *Scre4m*'s interiority felt more humane than any performance rendered there.

Under that spell I unmasked the killer of *Scre4m*: it's the emptiness that eats up everything around it.

The cultural demand of women to maintain a certain unblemished quality smears every frame in the most inert way. I'm aware that plastic surgery can't literally make lighting murky, but with the right dissociative state, compositional elements and cultural shifts can blend like gouache. Real whorled. There are other, new starlets in *Scre4m*, but they don't matter. They look exactly the same, under the hazy amber hue of Craven's lustless lens. The film was shot in Michigan, but it's an L.A. story. About mortgages, survival and femininity. Marketing departments and Harvey Weinstein. From *Dawson's Creek* to *Gossip Girl*. A place just ever-so out of the spotlight.

American Drug Trips and Death Cults

He'd stabbed me a little, in the heart. Here, there, for the most part unintentionally? For a few weeks I endured it. Then one night, after a phone call that hurt in a way only I could feel and understand, I broke. In a matter of minutes some stranger was on my hotel bed, sweaty and urging me to take one hit after another.

It had been a few years since I'd smoked methamphetamine. It would take more than a few for me to truly stop again.

I fucked more than I can quantify. I told myself that I was putting experiential distance between myself and that moment when I couldn't handle the pain. I, I, I... I became increasingly selfish.

I raced forward in a tearful rage. I dealt out targeted anger as fast as my dealer was supplying to me. I piled up everyday disaster. I look back now and am both shell-shocked and chagrinned. Awed, slightly. I'm still here.

Mandy is about many things, and one of those is drugs; the derangement of drugs; the entwinement of amphetamine with pain and vengeance; the telepathy of LSD.

Mandy is also not just about drugs, it is like drugs. The heavy haze in the first hour of the movie is predominantly weed. It seeps like a forest mist through the ambience. It's so ever-present you forget it's even there. In the Pacific Northwest, when you smoke out, deep in the dark woods, it's an ill vibe. *Mandy* captures it.

Then *Mandy* whiplashes from weed to speed. During its second half, a fingertip's worth of some gray glop rips open the mind of the hero, Red Miller, like a cosmic shotgun blast. He's already shoveled a massive snowdrift of coke into his face while marauding through a monstrous low-life crew's disgusting house, looking to murder them. But that split-second moment when curiosity compels him to sample the speed-laced acid that turned his enemies into subhuman mutants, well, it isn't just blindingly cinematic, it's pivotal—Red's mind is blown, perhaps permanently.

I was sober, albeit in a manic phase, the first time I saw *Mandy*. I went into the theatre with the cynical belief that it would be mannered and ponderous. I left rattled by its grimness and ecstatic at its audacity.

Mandy is a fetishist's film and it's filled with fetishes, from Mandy and Red's jersey T-shirts to the heavy metal—in more ways than one—weaponry that Red finds or forges. It's a film that cages a giant tiger, only to set it free. Sounds and visions evocative of *Silence of the Lambs*, *Blue Velvet*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Hellraiser*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Apocalypse Now*, Damon Packard's *The Early '70s Horror Trailer* and more materialize and vanish through the movie's two halves.

Mandy embraces genre and gender binaries. The first half is feminine horror alluringly pitched at the brink of the supernatural, while the second is turbocharged masculine action that both parodies and pays homage to the output of director Panos Cosmatos' father, George P. Cosmatos, who helmed *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. The whole shebang takes place under the signs of Jupiter and Saturn.

Also, if only in this viewer's eyes, Luca Guadagnino is the Cheddar Goblin.

Allow me to explain. An inspired “intermission” moment within *Mandy* finds Red reentering his forest home after experiencing the epitome of trauma. Already circumstance has placed him in that subjective position where the everyday and familiar seem alien, but the experience is magnified by a commercial on the television, for a product called Cheddar Goblin. A silent, sinister goblin vomits a stream of macaroni and cheese onto the heads of two ecstatically happy children, then slowly rises from a pile of the processed orange muck. Though it occupies its own world, the commercial, like *Mandy*, is both funny and horrifying.

How does pompous Guadagnino figure in all of this? His callow, unnecessary 2018 remake of *Suspiria* arrived in theaters at roughly the same time as *Mandy*. No work of cinematic art, it had the empty quality of a commercial stunt, strictly designed to gobble cheddar (i.e., money).

If a remake need bear next to no resemblance to an original, as Guadagnino claims, then let's agree that *Mandy* is the real *Suspiria* reboot, or at least an inspired tribute. Like Argento's eye, Benjamin Loeb's cinematography constantly sees luscious shades of red, though

dappled by beautiful but disorienting refractions of light. The late Jóhann Jóhannsson's majestic and melancholy score, realized with the help of Sun O))), captures the director's more operatic dark metal spirit.

Mandy is a cult (as in midnight) movie, and one of its cults is the cult of Cage. As Red, Nicolas Cage's performance is wild even by his standards, but far superior to what even fans may expect. His features are soft in the early scenes when Red and Mandy are quietly affectionate towards one another. The movie holds his face in close-up for an extended sequence in which Red suffers physically while the worst possible nightmare unfolds before his eyes.

But it's in Red's reaction to tragedy, loss and trauma that Cage's performance hits a primal note. Sober up until this point, he's in the bathroom of his and Mandy's violated home. As he guzzles liquor straight from an enormous bottle, he shifts from hyperventilating groans to roars of anguish to broken sobs. The closest comparison I can make in terms of physical and emotional demands is Isabelle Adjani's convulsive tunnel stroll in Andrzej Zulawski's *Possession*. It's the kind of scene that could lay out an actor for days afterward. But because this is a movie, Red hurtles ahead creating carnage, as Cage channels Kane Hodder's fan-favorite incarnation of Jason Voorhees.

If Cage's performance is overwhelmingly physical and emotional, Andrea Riseborough is almost spectral as Mandy Bloom. In a head-smacking example of literalism, a board of feminist film critics called out *Mandy* for the age difference between Cage and Riseborough. In fact, Riseborough is unrecognizable from her offscreen self, with long dark hair, a ghostly complexion and gaunt features that severely narrow the age gap between the two actors. Imagine: She may not have been cast for her youth, but for her chameleon-like skills.

Though horror films almost never receive establishment award nominations, the best sometimes require acting abilities beyond those displayed in typical Oscar fodder, and *Mandy* is no exception. Early in the movie, Riseborough delivers a monologue that is both a memory and a moment of great foreboding, and her half-stunned cadence maximizes its haunting impact.

Mandy isn't just a cult movie, it's a film about a cult—a death cult, in particular. and in that sense it has an overt political undercurrent. While it's set in 1983 instead of the present day, Cosmatos makes a point of including Ronald Reagan's creepy, moralizing folksiness on the radio to bring across an atmosphere of broader conservatism and oppression from which loners Red and Mandy, with their cabin in the deep woods, have hidden.

This same atmosphere cloaks the Children of the New Dawn, led by stringy-haired Jeremiah Sand (Linus Roache, best known for playing a priest early in his career), a middle-aged wannabe Jesus with a manipulative pansexuality and a murderous streak. Cosmatos and his actors superbly draw the members of Sand's small sect with definitive and subtle strokes, from witchy and vindictive Mother Marlene (Olwen Fouéré), to closeted eager-to-please Brother Swan (Ned Dennehy) to wordless types such as Sand's deer-in-headlights sex slave Sister Lucy (Line Pillet).

With his dirty blond tresses, troubled bi- leanings and quick-trigger temper, Sand somewhat reminds me of a volcanic friend I first met during a meth binge. This younger fellow, born and raised near mystic Big Sur, used to violently shake the metal front gate of my apartment on a busy commercial street, bellowing "Johnny! You CUNT!" loud enough to be heard from blocks away. Speed does magnify a bad temper.

I was trained by the pop cult est (Erhard Seminars Training) as an adolescent in the early '80s, and have vivid memories of its misogyny—a woman whose personal history included rape was berated in front of hundreds of people for thinking of herself as a victim, for example. Cults and mind control also have a personal resonance for Cosmatos. His debut feature *Beyond the Black Rainbow* is set within a sterile New Age research facility that makes the one in *The Brood* seem friendly. In *Mandy*, the Children of the New Dawn, while rough-hewn, are similarly cloistered, allowing Jeremiah Sand's gaslighting to become all the more depraved.

After Sand first sees Mandy on a twisting foggy road, he decides he must possess her. Soon, in a scene of uncanny terror, Mother Marlene drugs Mandy's eyeballs and administers what she calls "the cherry on

top”—a Tarantula Hawk’s sting to the neck. (In actuality, this giant black wasp’s sting doesn’t administer fatal poison, but it does produce enough pain to inspire up to five minutes of anguished screaming.)

Sand’s attempt to seduce a doped Mandy, which takes place in front of his acolytes, does not go as he intended. As he delivers a delusional soliloquy to her, their faces morph in a hallucinatory vision. “Do you like the Carpenters?” he asks, not waiting for an answer. “I think they’re sensational, *but this is even better.*” He puts his solo album on the turntable, and as its Celtic flute melody frolics with lyrics about how great he is, he loosens a ludicrous ceremonial robe to lightly touch his breasts and expose his flaccid penis.

Mandy’s response is to laugh in his face, with increasingly vicious fury. The female gaze has looked closely at this vainglorious man and found him severely wanting. How often does this happen in movies?

Of course, Mandy must be punished for such a transgression. A contemporary version of the most brutal moment in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Day of Wrath* follows. This extended, painful scene, defined by fatal fire, is the finale of the film’s first half.

It’s also where *Mandy* takes on a contemporary societal and political resonance. Make no mistake, fire is a David Lynch motif, but in Cosmatos’ movie, attached to the Children of the New Dawn, it evokes tragedies that range from regional to national in scope. When the movie came out the Ghost Ship inferno was less than two years in the past; the leader behind the Ghost Ship, no stranger to speed or to cult leader machinations, was more concerned about the destruction of his beloved site than the loss of lives within it.

Mandy also hit theaters as climate-change wildfires raged across Northern California and the Pacific Northwest, leaving choking smoke in their wake. These events keep repeating with increased severity. Here is where the movie’s death cult subject matter takes on its most ominous quality, because what is America today but a mad hatter’s mortality machine?

It’s September 2020 and I’ll end with this note—type “death cult” into Google and you’ll get 211,000,000 results, led by headlines such as “How the Republican Party Became a Death Cult,” “The Death Cult of

Trumpism,” and “Cult Experts Warn That Trumpism Is Starting to Look Awfully Familiar.”

Mandy was made during the forty-fifth president’s first term. Ronald Reagan’s voice, slithering out of the radio in Red Miller’s car, almost seems twee.

Witch Baby

after Tim Dlugos

To feel safe during lockdown, I downloaded the audiobook of the gay Vampire softcore novel that I used to secretly read in junior high study hall, *Lost Souls*. The closer I got to the end of my time with the recording, which I played in the bath or while taking walks, I would shorten my sessions, wanting it all to last.

Sometimes, things appear when you need them and Hulu had *Dante's Cove* one day when I did. The horror soap was made by Here!, a failed gay TV station. I remember when the show came out I couldn't get past the ad art. It was 2005 in gay male desire: a square-jaw blonde white tee, cruising you his left arm braced, flashing bicep and the dark haired hunk to his right triangulates the gaze. I didn't see myself in there at all but soaps use drama to draw you into a community while keeping you at arm's length. Cues came from *Queer as Folk*—where I was Justin when I needed to be seen in Missouri and stores still sustained themselves on woven, rainbow bracelets.

But now I gulped down *Dante*, which was directed by a man named Sam Irvin, every single episode—only twelve but spread over three seasons. He also wrote its theme song. I was hooked from the very first thump of its tribal beat, “Dying to Be with You.” As the wind roared through Tracy Scoggins' hair, her black lips pulled back and her teeth bare, all the tenets of Gothic melodrama, all the chintz of soap opera, all the primed fitness of millennial gays and an expanse of quarantine time stretched wide before me where I needed this thing (entertainment) to keep me safe with its intrigue and peril. With these impossible bodies that didn't appeal. My friend asked, “which one is your type?” “None.”

An early sex scene: the camera frames a sweat-pearled ass under blue lighting and we take our time here, then the ass begins to jiggle, inexplicably, a self-aware twerk in this mechanism.

And it's soap so they kill folks off or recast and it's soap so the setting shifts between seasons; and the frame switches from film to video.

My thrill at this discovery, of falling head over heels for the thing I rejected as crass 15 years ago and realizing its kinship with the trash lit I cherished 10 before that is accepting the difference between being the subject and the target. And finding warmth there.

The most immersive soaps never end so I was wary to watch the climax of *Dante's Cove*. Cancellation meant there was never going to be a season 4 and I too had to cancel my free subscription to yet another streaming platform which, in and of itself, is a vessel but this weird thing happened and the conclusion of the story felt so perfect. In soaps, satisfaction isn't meant to be a goal, but a temporary relief from the tumult. "Kevin" fucks Bro while Toby and Adam watch trapped in the mirror realm and Grace is carrying a witch baby and if I want to make that a metaphor for how this show lives in me now

I can.



Afterword: Hotel Horror

Things I want to leave behind this year: drugs, horror movies, pop music. I am listening to Jo Lemaire's "Shades of Night" and I can't shake this feeling—how this sound has run its usefulness. I do a bump just because I am bored with myself and maybe this will shake something, or maybe the new wave programmed drum patterns triggered it—the aesthetically right gesture. The smell of the powder reminds me of my uncle. He gave me my first bag when I was a teenager after I ran into him in a club.

This is something I wrote in my diary at least 10 years ago and still I long to watch horror films, alone in my bed, in secret. It's hard for me to articulate my fascination with them. The genre has been virulently dismissed by mainstream film criticism and its audience has been vilified as perverted or emotionally stunted adolescents. I often have to close my eyes because I can't watch the violence on the screen. The political metaphors of wars, class struggle, the Holocaust, the confluence of pornography and torture in Abu Ghraib are the fodder used by defenders of the genre—and while seemingly valid—these interpretations are for me an afterthought to my interest. Their gender politics have been discussed ad nauseum in academic papers, illuminating but unhelpful in understanding the longing these films summons in me. They don't mirror my own experience of the world through a process of identification. Nor is watching horror a nostalgic visitation of my childhood viewing pleasures. It is rather remembering an annunciation from a suspended place awaiting for my arrival, a wound in the space-time continuum, where some truths about myself were crystalized, but still inaccessible. The dread of recognition, in hindsight, of what they had revealed about my own nature.

I start reading Jean Louis Scheffer's *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* hoping to find something useful to articulate my desire for a genre towards which I feel a lot of ambivalence, a desire I should have outgrown. He writes in his introduction:

“The illusion proper to the cinema is that this experience and this memory are solitary, hidden, secretly individual, since they make an immediate pact (story, pictures, affective colors) with a part of ourselves that lives without expression; a part given over to silence and to a relative aphasia as if it were the ultimate secret of our lives—while perhaps it really constitutes our ultimate subjecthood. It seems that in this artificial solitude a part of us is porous to the effects of meaning without ever being able to be born into signification through language.”

I must have been 7 when my father took me to see what I found out later was a Dario Argento movie, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*. We left the theater midway through the film. I am not sure if he realized that it was inappropriate for me, or if he plainly didn't like the movie. I am revisiting the scene of the crime. The 1971 movie has all the moves that will become trademarks of Dario Argento: a twisted sense of humor, elaborate murder scenes, modernist architecture, Italian '70s furniture design, Freudian references inherited from Hitchcock, and “a materialistic vision of the world” displayed during a phone conversation in which the camera travels from one interlocutor to the next, through the labyrinthian architecture of cables, concrete corridors, switchboards... I'm trying to recall at what moment we left the theater. I remember the mask of the killer, the acrylic necklace where the four flies are embedded. When the gay private investigator shows up halfway through the movie, it all becomes clear. I remember that my father was frequently compared to the French actor who plays that part, Jean-Pierre Marielle. The resemblance is striking. As I watch the movie now at the age of my father, then, and his onscreen doppelgänger, I can see how I morphed into both of them. It must have been unnerving for him to be identified with a failed, effeminate loser.

Watching horror movies is somehow connected to the dreams I never remember having. A few years ago, it became a ritual. I watched all my favorite horror movies again under the influence of drugs in an attempt to reclaim a pleasure that had vanished. They had lost their power to enchant, they had faded, and I needed to activate them again. It actually

worked. Argento's *Suspiria* became magical again. The saturated colors, from the last batches of three-strip Technicolor film stocks that he was able to get hold of started pulsating again. And they did long after the movie was over, when my eyes were closed. I lay in bed in total darkness, with these radiating colors entering my retina as if I were under a chromatic strobe light. I would open my eyes to make sure that the colors weren't leaking out into the world. It's that scary moment when I am afraid that I won't wake up. I hate when something takes hold of me.

During the same period, two of the movies that I watched often were *Wrong Turn* (2003) and the remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006). They belong to the Hillbilly sub-genre, which finds its origin in the frontier Western genre, and more recently in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1962). *There's a killer on the road*. Leaving your familiar environment and entering a strange and wondrous territory. *Wrong Turn* is literally a degraded version of *Deliverance*. The mountains, the fairytale-like woods, the enchanted waterfalls are also characters ... civilization confronted by the Other, the enemy usually set in a typically gorgeous landscape. Unredeemable poverty stripped of dignity, in need of colonization or extermination. *The Hills Have Eyes* was shot in Ouarzazate, at the threshold of the Moroccan desert, standing in for New Mexico. The film is written and directed by Alexandre Aja, the son of famed French filmmaker Alexandre Arcady, whose first autobiographical movie from 1977, *Le Coup de Sirocco*, recounts their family's forced exile from Algeria. Is Aja unconsciously channeling the legacy of his historical family trauma, the stories of the murder and raped colons that he must have heard in his childhood? Is he also commenting on the violence inflicted to the indigenous population by the French Army during a violent and long war, which took place in a similar landscape as the one he chose to film in?

The scenes I tend to gravitate towards are the ones where the protagonists slowly realize the predicament they're in; the shock of the reveal, at which point things accelerate in an implacable linearity. In *Wrong Turn*, the clues that lead to the moment of revelation are disseminated when a group of young urban adventurers, stranded after a car crash in the middle of the Virginia woods, stumble across a house of cannibal killers. The tension is built on whether the characters will be

able to decipher the signs that are laid out in front of them. Inside the cabin everything is decayed and decomposed, following the genre's dominant aesthetic of green and orange hues. Rusted plates, rotten wood, and fragments of unidentifiable animal remains on the table. The character played by Eliza Dushku picks up a pair of entangled car keys from a bowl. The BMW logo is instantly recognizable. The associations that the brand triggers contrast sharply with the derelict decor. The motif is amplified when a storage room is found, displaying an accumulation of objects: a bright blue shiny plastic paddle, a pile of camcorders, a stack of sunglasses, a prom queen tiara... *The garage sale from hell*. Endless variations on this theme litter every movie of the genre. In the remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*, the clues that the hero frustratingly insists on ignoring while walking through rows of cars abandoned inside a meteor crater, are cleverly shown to the audience—bloody handprints on car doors, barbed wires jammed in tires... Stacks of snuff videos that the protagonist watches in *Vacancy* (2007), thinking at first that they're bad horror movies, not realizing that they were shot in the very room he rented... A drawer full of American passports in the jungle mansion in *Turistas* (2006)... The list is endless and the effect produced by this excess of merchandise seems not unlike Christian Boltanski's installations of thrift shop objects and clothes. Traces of previous victims, their essence still lingering around their banal possessions. Except that in the case of *Wrong Turn* something is reversed: the objects don't seem decayed or used, they're not displayed in the white clinical space of the museum. Placed inside a corrupted and degraded house, their uncontaminated newness doesn't elicit pathos but instead fulfills the promise of eternity offered by commodity consumption. The sound produced by a crib mobile, and later in the scene by a musical box, is the enchanting spell of that dream as it has fully realized.

The other movie that exerted much fascination on me was *Hostel* (2005). The movie is a vague variation on *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932) made by Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper, the co-directors of *King Kong*. In *Hostel* the prey are humans, but the hunters don't hunt their prey—the victims are provided and the pleasure is the kill. The movie starts with what seems to be a common rite of passage:

two American college students' summer journey through Europe. Josh and Paxton and their creepy Icelandic counterpart, Oli, are walking the streets of Amsterdam. Josh, the "sensitive" blond character wants to add some cultural activities to the predetermined agenda, which consists of smoking pot and trying to get laid. He is shunned by his friends. There is something inherently sad in these coming of age rituals that dominated the cultural landscape (*Spring Break, The Jersey Shore...*). They become an anthropological display of the shared poverty of our adventures, a reduction, which doesn't seem to be judged by the filmmaker, Eli Roth, who has a cameo in the coffee shop as yet another American tourist (wearing a Red Sox t-shirt).

A club scene, techno beats. Purple and green laser beams lacerate the frame: Paxton belittles Josh after his lack of savvy puts off two girls he was trying to pick up. Josh was wearing a fanny pack, the ultimate sign of an uncool tourist. What's at stake here is a state of uncertainty fueled by the anguish of having to constantly assert one's heterosexuality in the social amphitheater. *This is the way, step inside*. Paxton always puts Josh's masculinity in question. The word "fag" is thrown in often in the club as a threat, as a curse, as a joke, as an incantation. Heterosexuality is a fragile condition, in flux, that needs to be stated, and it can only be bestowed and sanctioned by your friends. Boys amongst themselves, not yet men. The girls are the currency in that exchange. Oli snaps a cell-phone photo of a girl he's fucking in the bathroom and emails it to his friends. The girls are a trophy and later on they'll be the bait.

Red light district. Outside: female bodies in vitrines, caged holograms derealized by a single black light. *Everything's gone purple*. Inside the brothel: an expressionist game of shadows, a shared ritual of consumption. Oli and Paxton are fucking the same girl. They perform a fist bump. *Respect*. A gesture that cements an implicit alliance against Josh and signals his exclusion. Josh stands uncomfortable in a corridor, a threshold that leads to a series of doors. The scene is washed in sleazy blues guitar riffs and heavy bass. Josh has a hard time interpreting the voices that leak from behind the doors. Are they moans of pleasure, or screams of pain? Paxton bullies him into participating, "*Do you want to be a fucking writer? How about some life experience, right there, in that room...*" and pushes him towards the bedroom he just exited. We see the prostitute backlit, a dark silhouette boxed within the frame, all black

and blue stripes converging towards her. The music shifts to something more understated and romantic. Josh is standing by the door. The girl has a soft voice and makes a joke about Paxton and Oli. She turns around to take off her bra but Josh has bowed out and left the room. As the three friends are walking back to the hostel, Paxton asks Josh how the sex was. Josh lies but remains vague. The innocuous lie emphasizes his weak nature. His capitulation will lead to his death in the third act.

On the train to Slovakia, the train cabin is partitioned into two camps. The sequence consists of a succession of shot/reverse shot between Paxton and Oli on one side, Josh on the other. A middle aged Dutch businessman, who will be revealed later as Josh's torturer and murderer, enters the cabin and sits next to him. He shows a picture of his young daughter to the boys. *The banality of evil*. Later he eats a chicken salad with concupiscence. Close-up of fingers greedily carrying fragments of meat to a mouth. Paxton tells him that he is a vegetarian. The man claims that eating meat is part of human nature, turns to Josh, and asks him teasingly, "What is your nature?" laying his hand on Josh's thigh. Josh yells, "Wow, don't fucking touch me." *Homosexual panic*. Did he make a pass at Josh? What did he recognize in Josh that made him believe that he could be toyed with? *Strangers on a Train*. The man stands up, grabs his suitcase and leaves the cabin.

Maybe the scene that I found the most intriguing is when Josh and the Dutch businessman meet again later on the streets of Bratislava, and Josh invites him to have a drink at a local disco. As they enter the bar and sit down, Josh is greeted by Oli and Paxton who are dancing with girls at a distance. They also get insulted. The utterance, "faggots," coming from outside the frame serves as a motif to color the conversation that's about to take place between them. Josh apologizes about the way he reacted in the train, and lays his hand on the Dutch businessman's thigh. The gesture is tentative and ambiguous. Is it a mark of Josh's latent homosexual desire, or is it a way to annul the significance, to cancel the violence of his earlier act, by displacing it into the realm of friendship and normalizing it as a token of intimacy? The Dutch man is puzzled, and offers Josh some advice, "I would have done the same thing at your age... It's not easy, but choosing to have a family was the right choice for me. Now I have my little girl... But you should do what's right for you?" This is of course interpreted as the stereotypical discourse

of men that come out of the closet late in life, after they had children, or men that are still in the closet and maintain a family. It's problematic (and symptomatic of Eli Roth's homophobia) that the filmmaker uses a familiar and loaded discourse because the impulses the Dutchman conceals are not homosexual but murderous. The scene ends with a question, and although it is based on a misunderstanding, what is created here is a space for self-reflection, a possibility for Josh to unburden all his sexual anxiety in the safety of the Dutch man's affection. It provides a respite from his friends' frenetic, nihilistic hedonism. And maybe what resonates here with me, what feels equally sadistic as the torture displayed in the third act, is how a yearning is exposed, only to be later betrayed.

Videography

- Irving Pichel + Ernest B. Schoedsack, *The Most Dangerous Game*, 35mm, 63mins., 1932
- Merian C. Cooper + Ernest B. Schoedsack, *King Kong*, 35mm, 110mins., 1933
- Carl Theodor Dreyer, *Vredens dag (Day of Wrath)*, 35mm, 110mins., 1943
- Alfred Hitchcock, *Strangers on a Train*, 35mm, 101mins., 1951
- Stanley Kubrick, *Fear and Desire*, 35mm, 62mins., 1953
- Georges Franju *Les yeux sans visage (Eyes Without a Face)*, 35mm, 90mins., 1960
- Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho*, 35mm, 109mins., 1960
- Joseph Green, *The Brain that Wouldn't Die*, 35mm, 82mins., 1962
- Herk Harvey, *Carnival of Souls*, 35mm, 84mins., 1962
- Mario Bava, *6 donne per l'assassino (Blood and Black Lace)*, 35mm, 88mins., 1964
- Bob Clark, *She-Man: A Story of Fixation*, 35mm, 68mins., 1967
- Dario Argento, *4 mosche di velluto grigio (4 Flies on Grey Velvet)*, 35mm, 104mins., 1971
- John Boorman, *Deliverance*, 35mm, 104mins., 1972
- Bob Clark, *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things*, 35mm, 87mins., 1972
- John Newland, "Dear Joan: We're Going to Scare You To Death" (*The Sixth Sense*, S02 E02), 35mm, 75mins., 1972
- Frank Perry, *Play It as It Lays*, 35mm, 99mins., 1972
- S.F. Brownrigg, *Don't Go In the Basement* (aka *The Forgotten*), 35mm, 89mins., 1973
- John Newland, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, 35mm, 74mins., 1973
- Nicholas Roeg, *Don't Look Now*, 35mm, 110mins., 1973
- Willard Huyck, *Messiah of Evil* (aka *Dead People*), 35mm, 90mins., 1973
- S.F. Brownrigg, *Don't Open the Door* (aka *Don't Hang Up*), 35mm, 90mins., 1974
- Bob Clark, *Black Christmas*, 35mm, 98mins., 1974
- Bob Clark, *Dead of Night* (aka *Deathdream*), 35mm, 88mins., 1974
- Dan Curtis, *Burnt Offerings*, 35mm, 116mins., 1976
- Dario Argento, *Suspiria*, 35mm, 92mins., 1977
- John Carpenter, *Halloween*, 35mm, 91mins., 1978
- Alexandre Arcady, *Le Coup de Sirocco*, 35mm, 102mins., 1979
- David Schmoeller, *Tourist Trap*, 35mm, 90mins., 1979

Joseph Ellison, *Don't Go in the House*, 35mm 82mins., 1980
 Robert Hammer, *Don't Answer the Phone!*, 35mm, 94mins., 1980
 James Bryan, *Don't Go in the Woods*, 35mm, 82mins., 1981
 Bob Clark, *Porky's*, 35mm, 94mins., 1981
 John Waters, *Polyester*, 35mm, 86mins., 1981
 Richard Lang, *Don't Go to Sleep*, 35mm, 93mins., 1982
 Luca Bercovici, *Ghoulies*, 35mm, 81mins., 1984
 Jackie Kong, *Night Patrol*, 35mm, 85mins., 1984
 Larry Cohen, *It's Alive III: Island of the Alive*, 35mm, 95mins., 1987
 Jackie Kong, *Blood Diner*, 35mm, 88mins., 1987
 Wes Craven, *Shocker*, 35mm, 109mins., 1989
 John Lafia, *Child's Play 2*, 35mm, 84mins., 1990
 John Carpenter, Tobe Hooper + Larry Sulkis, *Body Bags*, 35mm, 91mins., 1993
 John Shepphird, *Teenage Bonnie and Klepto Clyde*, 35mm, 90mins., 1993
 Ted Nicolau, *Bloodlust: Subspecies III*, 35mm, 83mins., 1994
 John Waters, *Serial Mom*, 35mm, 95mins., 1994
 Wes Craven, *Scream*, 35mm, 111mins., 1996
 John McNaughton, *Wild Things*, 35mm, 98mins., 1998
 Kiyoshi Kurosawa, *Kairo (Pulse)*, 35mm, 119mins., 2001
 Rob Schmidt, *Wrong Turn*, 35mm, 84mins., 2003
 Sam Irvin, *Dante's Cove*, 35mm & HD video, 686mins., 2004–2007
 Jaume Collet-Serra, *House of Wax*, 35mm, 113mins., 2005
 Eli Roth, *Hostel*, super 35, 94mins., 2005
 Alexandre Aja, *The Hills Have Eyes*, 35mm, 107mins., 2006
 John Stockwell, *Turistas*, super 35, 93mins., 2006
 Nomród Antal, *Vacancy*, super 35, 85mins., 2007
 Anthony Beltempo, SallyAnn Salsano (creators), *Jersey Shore*, video, 40mins.,
 2009—2012
 Wes Craven, *Scream 4* (aka *Scre4m*), 35mm, 111mins., 2011
 Fede Alvarez, *Don't Breathe*, HD video, 88mins., 2016
 Panos Cosmatos, *Mandy*, DCP, 121mins., 2018
 Rob Savage, *Host*, HD video, 57mins., 2020

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