Philosophy, Film, and the Dark Side of Interdependence

Edited by Jonathan Beever

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Finally, I dedicate that clarity and creativity found in this volume to the memory of my friend and esteemed biosemiotician Wendy Wheeler, who passed away quite unexpectedly on June 25, 2020. Professor Wheeler was scheduled to contribute to this volume but had to step away. Wendy's work and mentorship of my work has left a meaningful impression on me. The last thing she wrote to me was "all will pass eventually"—a phrase that was, perhaps, darker and sadder than I first imagined.

Foreword

Fear of Film: Cinema and Affective Entanglements

Kendall R. Phillips

The 2019 release of *Joker*, a psychological profile of the classic DC Comics villain directed by Todd Phillips, provoked a remarkable level of public anxiety. A heavy police presence accompanied its opening weekend in many theaters and several theater chains banned the wearing of costumes, masks, or make-up by patrons (Zeitchik 2019). Some critics feared that the film would encourage violence and there were several who called for the film to not be released at all (e.g., Rozca 2019; Scribner 2019). While concerns about individuals perpetrating gun violence in America is warranted by the striking number of mass shootings in the country, the public scrutiny of this single film is intriguing. The film was certainly not alone in crafting a narrative of villainy derived from popular comic books. Comic book movies had dominated global screens since at least the release of *Batman Begins* in 2005. Indeed, the Russo Brothers' box office record-breaking *Avengers: Endgame*, also released in 2019, focused on the malevolent villain Thanos who effectively murdered half of all living beings in the universe. Yet, in spite of the massive body count, Marvel's blockbuster did not stir any public anxieties, nor did other action films of 2019 like *Rambo: Last Blood*, which featured dozens of graphic deaths, many by gunshots.

There were, of course, reasons for the public to be concerned about *Joker*. In addition to the regularity of violent acts by lone white gunmen, the film seemed to echo the mass shooting in a theater in Aurora, Colorado, in 2012 during the opening weekend of *The Dark Knight Rises*, another film derived from the Batman comics. Initial reports suggested that the shooter had dressed as the Joker character and, while these reports were later debunked, the association between the real-world violence and the fictional supervillain remained (Desta 2019). Indeed, among those questioning the decision

by Warner Brothers to produce the film were the families of victims of the Aurora mass shooting. In a letter to the studio, some of the families noted "When we learned that Warner Bros. was releasing a movie called *Joker* that presents the character as a protagonist with a sympathetic origin story, it gave us pause" and called on the studio to work to combat gun violence (Lang 2019).

While the interconnections between Todd Phillips's supervillain film and the complex cultural landscape in which it premiered is worthy of considerable attention, I want to pause and note that *Joker* was far from the first film to provoke anxiety, let alone the first to be accused of inspiring acts of violence. The fear that violent acts onscreen might inspire violent acts in the real-world dates back at least as far as Edison Studios' *The Great Train Robbery*, which was claimed to inspire an actual crime in 1912. The gangster films of the 1930s were charged with inspiring gun violence as were the action films of the 1990s (Prince 2003). And fear of copycat violence is far from the only charge leveled against popular films, which have also been charged with inspiring sexual deviance, racial strife, and any number of moral transgressions (Phillips 2008). There is a reason that motion pictures have been among the most restricted and regulated form of public art. To put it simply, we fear film.

We have feared film since its earliest days and even more so as the projection of moving images settled into the cultural entity known as cinema. Culturally, we have imbued the moving picture, especially those shown in movie theaters, with an almost mystical power that is simultaneously enticing and terrifying. Often, we frame this anxiety around motion pictures in relation to their potential to influence our behavior, as in fears of copycat violence, or in terms of the regulatory mechanisms designed to protect society from them, official censorship or nongovernmental regulatory bodies like the Production Code Administration (Black 1994). Scholarly investigations of this fear often attend to individual films or genres that provoke anxiety or to the specific histories of those institutions charged with protecting society from these dangerous films. But, in this foreword, I would like to step back and think about the ways this fear of film became attached to the notion of cinema. I would like to, in other words, sketch out a brief genealogy of our fear of film with particular attention to the way this fear became infused into the very notion of cinema.

In order to pursue this genealogical sketch, I begin by inquiring into the nature of cinema as a concept with particular focus on the way it exists as a complex constellation of interdependent objects, spaces, and practices. Following this definitional move, I consider some of the historical developments in early cinema and the ways these elements provoked public anxiety before considering the way these anxieties were channeled into popular film as a means of containing and exploiting these public fears.

CINEMA AS AFFECTIVE ENTANGLEMENT

What is cinema? Here, I do not intend to dive into the morass of theoretical works on the nature of film or its relationship to reality, ideology, psychology, neurosis, or anything else (see Colman 2014). Rather, I want to ask a simpler version of the question, "When we talk about 'cinema' what are we talking about?" Some might answer this question by saying we mean motion pictures, others might attend to the industries that underlie the production of these motion pictures, still others might focus on the audience experience. And, in a way, all these are correct. When we talk about cinema, we usually mean the complex constellation of objects, individuals, spaces, practices, and cultural processes that come together to create the production and exhibition of motion pictures as well as the ways various people engage these pictures. Such a definition entails the technology of the camera, the chemistry of the celluloid (or the code of the digital files), the projector, the marketing, the distribution network, the individual movie theater, the audience who gathers in that theater, and even the spirited conversations those audience members have about the picture after they leave. All of these, and other, elements come together to constitute the entity that we call cinema.

Thinking about cinema in this way, as a complex constellation, is to acknowledge that cinema is a decidedly interdependent concept. Kriti Sharma proposes we think of interdependence not as the relationship between a group of independent objects but, instead, as the way that entities are constituted by their mutual dependence on other entities. In this, as she calls it, contingent existence, we recognize that any given entity is not separate from other entities nor is it even separate from our observation of it (Sharma 2015). As Jonathan Beever and Nicolae Morar articulate it, interdependence means exploring "the ways in which wholes cannot be merely reduced to intrinsic properties but have to be understood holistically, as integrating and as being constituted by a complex array of relations within their environments" (2019, 190). For my purposes, this perspective draws our attention to the ways that the various objects, spaces, practices, and so on, that make up our understanding of cinema are interdependent on each other and while we may, at times, attend to one or more of these elements—say in studying changes in industrial conditions or shifts in genre—we cannot entirely separate these elements from the others that depend upon each other to constitute the cultural entity we know as cinema.

Historically, André Gaudreault argues that the various elements that would form our conception of cinema cohered around 1910. Projected moving pictures, of course, had been publicly exhibited since December of 1895 and the projection of images (in the form of magic lanterns and other devices) and exhibition of moving images (in the form of Kinetoscopes) had been around

for years prior. But, for Gaudreault, it was around 1910 when the various elements of the production, distribution, and exhibition of moving pictures would become formalized or, as he puts it, "institutionalized" (Gaudreault 2011). This institutionalization resulted from the development of formal sets of relations as well as from implicit cultural patterns that emerged around the creation and exhibition of moving pictures. Some of these were technical, such as the establishment of particular norms for the production of celluloid strips. Some of these were industrial, the establishment of formal rental exchanges that allowed individual theater owners to secure copies of films with regularity. Narrative films, as opposed to trick films or scenic views, began dominating the public screens. There were also important changes to the location of these screens through the establishment of the motion picture theater as a cultural location around 1905. Prior to this, most people viewing moving pictures did so in locations ranging from county fairs to vaudeville theaters. The emergence of the storefront nickelodeon theater in 1905 led to the movie theater and, eventually, to the movie palaces of the 1920s and the multiplexes of our current age.

Between 1905 and 1910, there were dramatic shifts in the nature of publicly projected moving images that would come to constitute what we now understand as cinema. During this transition, there was also a growing public concern about this new cultural entity. The "nickelodeon boom" that saw the rapid proliferation of relatively cheap theaters exclusively exhibiting moving pictures was met with a moral outcry about the potential dangers to American culture. Many historians who have examined this period note the ways that these anxieties were often tied to the broad perception that early nickelodeon audiences were made up of immigrants, children, and the working classes (Hahner 2018). As Lee Grieveson puts it, "The conception of the audience as working class and foreign tapped into the fears of social dislocation and disorder central to widespread anxieties about class cleavage and the establishment and maintenance of national identity" (Grieveson 2004, 17). These anxieties, as Grieveson and others recount, led to the development of legal and industrial forms of censorship, a push toward more uplifting topics for moving pictures, and the establishment of more respectable movie theaters, later palaces, that were more in line with middle-class values.

Much of the attention to this transitional period and the emergence of cinema as a meaningful cultural category focuses on the way public anxieties shaped the kinds of films made and the mechanisms of censorship and regulation that arose around them. But, the anxiety around cinema came from a more diverse set of sources than just the narrative content. While there would be a great deal of concern about the content of the images projected onto the screen, there were also concerns surrounding the technologies of projection and the space of the theater. It is interesting to note that one of the first major

public pushes against the emerging nickelodeon theater came in 1908 in New York City; but its focus was not immediately on the films being shown. As Miriam Hansen notes, the first attack on the emerging cinema "did not resort to confiscating reels of film but to closing theaters, denying the physical space of a social and cultural formation that eluded hegemonic control" (Hansen 1991, 95). It was, in other words, not just the content of those reels that provoked anxiety but also the physical space of the theater and the objects within it.

Returning to the earlier definitional discussion, we might note that the emerging category of cinema was constituted through a complex set of interdependent relationships between physical and cultural elements that, to borrow from Karen Barad, became entangled together at a particular moment in cultural history (Barad 2007). In these early years, cinema can be thought of as coming into being and my focus here is to think about how this coming together happened and the various ways in which fear became associated with cinema. My focus here is, as Sharma puts it, "to carefully detail the processes by which objects come into being as objects" (2015, 14). Part of this coming together entails an ontological aspect by which cinema came to be in the world but this coming into being also entailed other dimensions including cultural praxis and affect.

For present purposes, affect becomes a crucial element in the coming to being of cinema as an understandable and relatable cultural object. It is not just that we know what cinema is or how we engage it but, importantly, also that we know how to feel about it. Sara Ahmed's conception of stickiness is useful here. As she explains, "Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (Ahmed 2010). Objects become meaningful in part through the way they become attached, or stuck, to other values and feelings. The interdependence of objects means that these feelings and values are often associated through spatial proximity and temporal contexts. Ahmed notes, "To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to 'whatever' is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival" (Ahmed 2010, 33). Thought of in this way, affective relations will often be complex and likely contradictory but one way to investigate such relations is by attending to their point of emergence.

My purpose in the remainder of this foreword is to explore the ways in which fear and anxiety became stuck to cinema. Of course, fear was not the only affect attached to cinema nor was it ever or always the dominant affect. But underlying much of the history of cinema is an undertone of fear and anxiety. The recent controversy over the release of *Joker* demonstrates the persistence of this fear that the moving picture poses a particular kind of cultural danger. Discussions of these controversies, moments when the

underlying anxiety emerges into public discourse, often focus on the content of the film, but, in what remains I want to explore the multiple sources of anxiety surrounding the emergence of cinema as a cultural object. These anxieties were deeply infused within the complex relationship between the elements that would come to constitute cinema and, as Ahmed notes, "anxiety is sticky; rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up whatever comes near." Thus, I want to briefly explore the various ways in which fear and anxiety become stuck to the idea of cinema during the years of its emergence before considering the ongoing legacy of these affective relations.

FIRES, DARKNESS, AND PSYCHIC FORCES

While the content of the films received a great deal of attention, the material conditions of the cinema were also sources of danger. As Gary Rhodes notes in his excellent history of theater disasters *The Perils of Moviegoing in America: 1896–1950*, even if audiences did not have to face the real villain on the screen, "they did face an array of perils that could cause damage and destruction, perils that could even claim lives. On those days, another kind of darkness enshrouded the audience" (Rhodes 2012, xv). In what follows I briefly review some of these sources of danger in an effort to demonstrate the numerous points at which the affect of fear came to stick to the concept of cinema.

Arguably the most wildly ballyhooed concern about the early moving picture theaters was the fear of fire. The tragedy in Boyertown, Pennsylvania, was emblematic and would be widely cited throughout the country for years to come. During a Sunday School performance of the "Scottish Reformation" on January 13, 1908, a kerosene lamp was overturned and the Rhodes Opera House was engulfed in flames. The tragedy left more than 150 people dead and scores more injured and in the widespread national reporting that followed the presence of a moving picture projector was cited as involved in the disaster. The *Reno Evening Gazette* (Nevada) called it the "Boyertown Horror" and reported that "toward the end of the performance, the man in charge of the moving picture machine was trying his apparatus and it gave forth a hissing sound. This caused a stir in the audience and somebody lifted the curtain. . . . The curtain tilted the tank [of kerosene] over and started the fire" (*Reno* 1908, 1). Similarly, the *Columbia Republican* (Hudson, New York) called the event "A terrible holocaust" and also associated the fire with "a moving picture machine [that] was recently installed in the Opera House" (*Columbia* 1908, 1).

The fact that the fire was actually caused by a kerosene lamp and not by the motion picture projector was not lost on defenders of the emerging

industry. *Moving Picture World*, the first magazine dedicated exclusively to moving pictures, observed "The Boyertown disaster, although not caused by moving picture films, has nevertheless done the business incalculable injury. The daily press of the country has falsified and garbled the reports and published editorials condemning moving picture shows without sense or reason" (*Moving* 1908, 77). Still, some anxiety around fire safety was not entirely unwarranted given the flammable nature of celluloid filmstrips. Indeed, Rhodes estimates there were thousands of film-related fires between 1897 and 1950. So common were moving picture theater fires that trade magazines routinely published reports on fires on a state-by-state basis. In a 1909 article by early film champion Charles F. Morris in the October 1909 edition of *The Nickelodeon*, there were fire reports for each major city including Detroit, which had "No fire with serious results," and Schenectady, New York, which reported "One fire; no loss of life" (Morris 1909, 121). Still, for the popular press, the association of nickelodeon theaters with the potential for fire and panic remained a popular story. In 1910, a *Moving Picture World* editorialist bemoaned the sensationalizing of theater fires noting the way that even during small routine fires, "audiences have passed out quietly only to read the next morning that they fought each other to escape incineration, trampling down women and children in the mad rush for the doors" (*Moving* 1910, 37). Whatever the reality of fire safety in early moving picture theaters, there was a clear public perception that the flammable celluloid and crowded theater posed a real danger.

This perceived risk had a direct impact on the development of the industry in several ways. There were numerous patented devices designed to contain the flammable celluloid. U.S. Patent 945,178, for instance, was for a "Magazine for Picture Films," which created a "double fire wall for the protection of the film" (Hulfish 1910, 37) and by October of 1908, there were already reports that George Eastman was developing a new "non-inflammable film stock" that would eliminate concerns of celluloid combustion, a development that would not be realized until the 1950s. Beyond changes to the composition of the film strip and projection technology, there were also widespread regulations of the theater space. Various localities passed laws about the location and specifications for the projection booth and fire concerns also led to a higher degree of professionalization in projectionists, who were the first line of defense against fire (Bowser 1994, 13). Laws were also established regarding the operation of exits, which led to a whole new set of innovations focused on theater doors. In a 1910 article, John M. Bradlet observed that "in most every case of fire, any loss of life is due, primarily, to the fact that the exit doors refuse to operate at the crucial moment" and heralded the new "Van Duprin Self-Releasing Fire Exit Latch" as a foolproof way to guarantee audiences could safely escape (Bradlet 1910, 1464).

While the basics of fire may strike the contemporary reader as a logical and needed conversation, it is noteworthy the way that the public discourse surrounding theater fires became equated with viewing moving pictures in a broader sense. When George McLellan, the mayor of New York City, moved to close all moving picture theaters in December of 1908, his argument began with fire safety but concluded with a call for curbing the immorality on the screen. In his public statement about this bold action, McLellan cited his own experience visiting the dingy and run-down moving picture theaters and the affidavit of the chief of the fire department as to the flammability of the films. McLellan argued, "I feel personally responsible for the safety and lives of the patrons, and take this action on personal knowledge of existing conditions and the firm conviction that I am averting a public calamity." But in the final paragraphs of his statement, McLellan expanded beyond the physical safety of these patrons to insist that moving picture theaters would not be allowed to operate on Sundays and that he would "revoke any of these moving-picture show licenses on evidence that pictures have been exhibited by the licensees which tend to degrade or injure the morals of the community" (*New York* 1908, 1). While McLellan's ban would not be successful, the rhetorical equation of the physical danger of fire with the potential moral danger of narrative content would remain a feature of public discussions about cinema during the years of its emergence. An editorial in the trade publication *Safety Engineering* in 1913 forwarded the same rhetorical logic. The tragedy of these fires, the editorialist argued, "taught that those who provide amusements do not provide for the physical safety of their patrons voluntarily, nor even moral safety" (*Safety* 1913, 1).

In addition to containing the potentially flammable celluloid and maintaining safe egresses, there were also calls to abandon the practice of dimming the lights during exhibition of films. An article supporting a new type of screen, the Simpson's Solar Screen, argued that "In New York and other large cities where the fire regulations are strict the full illumination of the room is an important consideration" (*Moving* 1909, 275). The crusade against "dark houses" would go beyond issues of fire safety to highlight another potential source of danger as commentators raised concerns about what kinds of things were going on in darkened theaters while the images flickered across the screen.

Concerns about darkened theaters included fire safety as well as combating eye strain. As one editorialist for *Film Index* argued, "Few people can look at pictures for any length of time without experiencing irritation of the eyes. This is caused by the strong contrast between the dark room and the glare of light on the screen" (*Film* 1910, 30). But these concerns for the potential physical impacts of darkened theaters were also connected to a concern for the moral health of patrons. Another editorial from *Film Index*, a publication

that led the charge against "dark houses," contended: "For many reasons 'dark' theaters are objectionable. In the first place they are injurious to the eyes and, in the second place, it is alleged that they are injurious to the morals of the young." The editorial cited a demand in Indianapolis that lights be periodically turned on during the show to stop teenagers from "spooning" (*Film* 1910b, 2). It was this moral dimension of the "daylight projection" effort that seemed to gain the most traction and suggests the ways in which the physical conditions of the motion picture theater were seen as interrelated to the messages embedded into cinema as a cultural site.

In a 1910 exposé for the women's magazine, *Pictorial Review*, Anna Steese Richardson listed a series of crimes allegedly committed in darkened theater, largely against women and children. She contended, "Evil has always lurked in dark corners, and in the darkness of the moving picture theater to-day, moral degeneracy, with red-rimmed eye and loose-hanging lip, lies in wait for youth and innocence" (Richardson 1910, 70). Richardson's concerns were amplified by *Film Index*, which argued: "No respectable manager of a picture theatre wants it said that young girls have been misled and debauched in his house, but, every theater manager who persists in keeping his auditorium dark is in daily danger of having just such crimes as those mentioned in the *Pictorial Review* charged up to his negligence" (*Film* 1910, 2). Reports of criminal and immoral behavior occurring within moving picture theaters were publicized widely by numerous cultural elites. Michael Marks Davis, for example, condemned the contemporary motion picture theater in 1911 as "a place of darkness, physical and moral," and it was this equation of physical and moral darkness that would energize the campaign against dark houses in the early teens (Davis 1911, 34).

The campaign was, at least initially, successful. In cities like Chicago and New York, specific regulations requiring illumination were adopted and in other places, there was growing industry pressure to move away from darkened theaters. As Jan Olsson notes, "As daylight exhibition was voluntarily adopted as a keystone for responsible house management—or by legal requirement—dark auditoriums became associated with the primitiveness of the storefront shows as a remnant only in metropolitan nickel vestiges" (Olsson 2009, 235). In this way, advocacy for lighted theaters fit in with the movement to what became known as the "uplift" cinema movement, a public crusade to use moving pictures as a form of education and cultural enrichment often associated with Jane Addams. Indeed, Addams established a movie theater in her Hull House in a demonstration that wholesome and educational pictures could attract an audience. While the effort failed, Addams remained committed to the idea that moving pictures would in time be used for "all purposes of education and entertainment" (qtd. in Cunningham 1908, 451). This connection between physical and moral darkness was seized upon

by those proposing daylight projection. Simpson's Solar Screen quoted the *Pictorial Review* endorsement in its advertisement: "There is a remedy for the dark show, a way to make the moving picture show what it should be, A WHOLESOME, EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION to furnish entertainment for the masses, the poor man's theater, where he can send his children IN PERFECT SAFETY. It is LIGHT" (Film 1910c, 27).

These debates over illuminating moving picture theaters were tied in not only with the uplift cinema movement but also with an effort to differentiate the moving picture theater from the vaudeville theater and even from the early version of the nickelodeons. As cinema became formalized and institutionalized, the theater was conceived as a more middle-class form of entertainment and illumination was advocated as part of this effort. In their report on a new theater in Spencer, Massachusetts, *Moving Picture World* commented on the brightness of the theater and noted, "The class of people who frequent this theater shows that the prevailing brightness is appreciated" (*Moving* 1909c, 718). Appealing to a "higher class" of patrons would mean seeking to remove some of the potential dangers that might be lurking in the corners of dark houses.

In his examination of the crusade for lighted theaters, Martin Johnson argues that the efforts were not so much about lighting conditions as they were about a growing cultural desire to regulate the practice of moviegoing and the messages being distributed. As Johnson argues, these efforts were about "addressing fears of dark theaters, unseen films and unknown audience members [was] part of a mostly failed attempt to regulate an experience that, due to the variability of film programming and exhibition, proved to resist direct regulation" (Johnson 2014, 201). The physical space of the moving picture theater was a site of potential danger, a combustible space shrouded in darkness. But what made these spaces even more frightening was the unregulated flow of images and the power these images were thought to have.

Early commentaries were quick to herald the power of moving pictures to impact the emotions in a manner different from other media. A writer in 1908 noted that when seeing a dramatic scene of violence on stage, "your senses tell you all the time 'this is but representation.' But when you see a real ruffian take a real child and drag him over real rocks through real water—real because photographed from live—you live that scene, and your emotions are correspondingly greater" (*Moving* 1908b, 299). There was a widespread and persistent belief that moving pictures held an almost magical capacity to influence viewers. A *Moving Picture World* editorial described this as "the unique psychic force of the moving picture" and argued that "the moving picture acts upon the mind and soul (the psyche) of man more directly, more strongly and with more lasting effect than any other agent for impressing the senses." This influence was attributed to the directness of the

visual presentation of the moving picture, which "summon the imagination not to any sort of labor, but to immediate delight, it gives the greatest return of enjoyment for the least possible effort." Moreover, the pleasure of visual stimulation was seen as crafting a powerful and lasting impact on the mind and soul of the viewer. "The memory of the eye," the writer contends, "lasts longer and keeps its impression clearer than the memory of either ear or the imagination" (*Moving* 1911, 1). As this and other commentators noted, this psychic power of film placed great responsibility on the makers and exhibitors of films to curb its potential for evil.

This fear of film's innate capacity to influence was particularly acute in relation to the lower and undereducated classes. Indeed, many of the reform efforts were designed to curb the more prurient interests related to film and, instead, use the new medium to uplift the spirit and mentality of the nation. Contemporary psychologist Hugo Münsterburg understood moving pictures to work in a way similar to mesmerism or hypnosis. This was particularly true, given "the high degree of suggestibility during those hours in the dark house" of the moving picture theater. While the "powerful spell of the performances on the screen" posed great potential for danger, there was also hope that "the photo play [could] have an incomparable power for the remolding and upbuilding of the national soul" (Münsterberg 1916, 155). While much of the public debate around film's potential impact on the culture focused on issues of content, what should be censored versus what should be promoted, all of these debates were predicated on a more fundamental fear, the uniquely persuasive power of the moving image. Indeed, this fear was instantiated into U.S. jurisprudence in the Supreme Court's 1915 decision in *Mutual V. Ohio*, which reasoned that censorship was necessary because moving pictures were "vivid, useful, and entertaining, no doubt, but, as we have said, capable of evil, having power for it, the greater because of their attractiveness and manner of exhibition" (*Mutual* 1915, 238). Thus, a fear of film's innate power became the basis for the entire structure of legal censorship that would exist until the Court reversed its decision in 1952.

Examining the various rhetorics of fear and danger that circulated around moving pictures, it becomes clear that there was a blurring of the boundaries between these real-world concerns and the filmic narratives audiences enjoyed. For example, the early years of moving pictures produced numerous popular films focused on fires and, especially firefighters. Edwin Porter's 1903 *Life of an American Fireman* has been one of the most celebrated but, as Charles Musser notes, "almost every producer had a selection of fire films" (Musser 1990, 291). This trend continued into the early years of the moving picture theater with film titles ranging from *Modern Weapons for Fighting Fires*, a 1912 Edison educational film, to Selig's 1913 *The Firefighter's Love*, which promised "a whole row of shops ablaze, not just smoke, but real flames

towering up to the sky" (*Cinema* 1913, 4–5). Some sense of the confluence of dangerous elements in these films can be discerned in the 1908 Pathé Frères film, *Fire! Fire!*, which focused on a young girl who is preparing for bed when her oil lamp starts a fire. "She tries heroically to extinguish the fire, but it is spreading so rapidly that she is compelled to retreat and grope her way around to the window to call for help." Fortunately, the horse drawn fire engines come to the rescue and "a splendid site greets the spectator's eyes, as the magnificent animals, three abreast, dash out of the wide-open doors of the engine house and race madly down the street" (*Views* 1908, 9). In the end, the blaze is contained and the girl saved. This short film interweaves several of the sources of real-world anxiety—fire, darkness, young women—into a narrative that sees these dangers portrayed and then vanquished.

Similarly, just a few years after Anna Steese Richardson's report on spooning and scandals in darkened movie theaters, movies dramatizing such behaviors emerged. The year 1913 saw the release of *Traffic in Souls*, a film about "white slavery," a euphemism for forced prostitution. The public concerns about young women being "misled and debauched" was now dramatized upon the screen. In his column for *The Moving Picture News*, William Lord Wright observed the prospect for similar films and objected that "There is no place on the moving picture screen, popular with women and children, for playlets dealing with 'White Slavery' topics" (Wright 1913, 20). In spite of these objections, the success of *Traffic in Souls* opened a floodgate of similarly themed titles released to growing public outrage and calls for more stringent forms of censorship. These fictional depictions of the dangers facing young women in public places resonated with the real public concerns about these crimes and scandals. As Shelley Stamp notes, "With lurid titles like *The Inside of the White Slave Traffic* (1913), *Smashing the Vice Trust* (1914), *House of Bondage* (1914) and *Is Any Girl Safe?* (1916), the films fueled an already raging nationwide panic" about the safety of young women in public places (Lindsey 1996, 1).

This period was also replete with films focused on the perceived dangers of mesmerism and any number of melodramas employed a mesmerist, or hypnotist, as their main villain, including: *Love and Hypnosis* (1912); *The Dead Secret* (1913); and, *The Duel in the Dark* (1915). Just as popular critics were debating the psychic influence of moving pictures, the motion pictures were dramatizing these mysterious powers and their potential ill effects. Films depicting mysterious powers, whether supernatural or hoaxes, would eventually coalesce into a coherent genre that would, after some permutations, become the horror films of the 1930s. While I will return to the formal genre of fear at the end of this chapter, it is worth noting how many of the early films focused on frightening elements utilized the theater as a setting like, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) or *The Last Warning* (1928).

These and other films helped dramatize the interdependence of cinema as an entity and, more to the current point, the way this interdependence became infused with an affect of fear. To go to the moving picture show was to enter a potentially flammable building, to sit in the dark with strangers, and to submit oneself to the mysterious influence of films made by mysterious others, often from different parts of the world. All these potential forms of risk occurred prior to the actual story unfolding upon the screen and those involved in the emergence of cinema were acutely aware of these complex sets of anxieties. A report on the National Censorship Board, established in New York in 1909, observed the various points of concern such a board should engage: "There is lots of room and a just demand for local Censorship Boards that will deal with the conditions of the theaters in which pictures are shown. Ventilation, lighting, safety and sanitation are far more important right now than the pictures" (*Moving* 1909b, 631). During the formative years in which cinema emerged as a cultural object, there were anxieties associated with numerous elements that would come to constitute it—the technology, the material objects, the physical spaces, the ephemeral flickering images, and, also, the narratives being projected. Cinema is, as noted earlier, a complex entanglement of these (and other) materials, and as it became an understood cultural object the individuality of these elements faded into the whole of this new concept. The individual elements lost their particularity as we became accustomed to the idea of cinema as an amalgamation of material, industrial, and cultural objects. Many of these individual elements, as I've tried to demonstrate, were viewed with apprehension during the period in which cinema came into being and these various fears became stuck to the concept of cinema to this very day.

CONCLUSION

Fear is, of course, not the only affect that became stuck to cinema. And patrons no longer have the same set of concerns about flammable film strips or negligent projectionists or unsavory characters seated in the dark or the psychic influence the images might have on the lower classes. But, as my opening example of the controversies surrounding the release of *Joker* suggests, we still have anxieties about cinema. My goal has been to trace out the genealogical relationships through which this fear of film emerged and became stuck to our understanding of cinema. While we tend to associate fear primarily with the contents of film narratives, a focus on the interdependence of film has demonstrated that there were many sources of fear during the emergence of cinema. Indeed, if conceiving cinema as a complex affective entanglement has any advantage, it may be in opening new avenues for

thinking about the way various sentiments and feelings became attached to cinema during its formative years and beyond.

Film producers and exhibitors would eventually see the potential for profit in the lingering affect of fear. While producers were reluctant to embrace the idea that a film focused on fear could be profitable, they would eventually embrace the idea. Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) was a surprise hit for Universal and much of the surprise related to its unrelentingly dark motif and that, as contemporary critic Doral Albert put it, "it is full of horror" (Albert 1931, 77). Earlier dalliances with the horrific had been reluctant to embrace the affect of fear so explicitly and in films prior to *Dracula*, the horror was usually contained by humor and the monster revealed to be just a normal person masquerading as something horrific. But, with *Dracula*, Hollywood found a way to capitalize on fear and, in a way, to contain this fear within a narrative structure, giving the sensations of fear and anxiety a generic home in which to dwell.

But the container of genre has not contained the fear related to film. We still view the complex constellation of elements and relationships with some trepidation. Even 110 years after the constitution of cinema as a cultural and institutional entity, we continue to fear film. We fear that the relations will not hold, that the theatrical space will not only be a place for dreams but also one of nightmares. Perhaps at the root of this fear is the recognition that as we sit in the darkened theater and watch the flickering images we become part of this interdependent entity, we become absorbed into the material, physical, and symbolic space of cinema and, at least in part, release ourselves to it. Our safety—physical, psychological, and cultural—in this space is contingent upon a complex set of objects and relations that we assume but cannot verify.

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Introduction

The Horror of Relations

Jonathan Beever

Specters of interdependence are all around us. They result from the explosive growth of "ecological thinking" broadly construed, from epistemology and scientific inquiry to spiritual thought to questions of health and information. Scientific ecology has a century-long history of empirically unpacking the idea of interrelations (see Morar 2019). Feminist epistemology supports the idea that the very development of personhood or individuality requires relations of interpersonal dependency (e.g., see Baier 1981). Spiritual thinking, both from Judeo-Christian and indigenous traditions, also emphasizes this idea of relatedness, whether the world has its origins in a single transcendent entity or whether spirit infuses all life and connects it as family (see Beever 2015). Ongoing work in bioethics and public health takes up ecological thought in considering the role of microbial communities and the intersections of nonhuman animal, human, and environmental health (Atlas et al. 2010; Beever & Morar 2016). And even around questions of the digital, computational metaphors like "the stack" (Bratton 2016) or "the inforg" (Floridi 2013) build on this very same ecological thinking. Whether in social, spiritual, environmental, microbial, or informational, interconnection lurks behind every corner. Indeed, here in the Anthropocene, it has become almost impossible to avoid the idea that we are all connected through networks of ecological relations—and that these relations *matter* both epistemologically and ethically.

At the heart of such ideas is the view that, in some important way, we are all connected—to each other, to other organisms, and to our environments both analog and digital. And implicit here is the heavy ethically-laden idea that this connectedness is a good and beautiful thing. Being connected *well* makes us stronger, healthier, more engaged, and more thoughtful; and, being connected *poorly* makes us weaker, sicker, isolated, and apathetic. I think that

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the normative positive view of interconnection is encouraged by and bound up in a western imaginary of the individual built out of the Enlightenment and modernity. The human animal stands alone at the apex of civilization, reason, and biology itself. We individuals, as we have been taught to understand ourselves, are richly and beautifully *interconnected*, but at the same time unique, distinct, and autonomous.

Yet the more I work on this topic, the more strongly I feel that being even beautifully *interconnected* is not the same as being vitally *interdependent* (Beever & Morar 2018). We should not take for granted that the beauty of interconnection translates so readily to the beauty of interdependence. Indeed, this is just the concern that biologist Kriti Sharma takes up in her sharp and succinct *Interdependence* (2015), published with Fordham University Press. Sharma believes understanding interdependence requires distinct shifts in imaginary "from considering things in isolation to considering things in interaction . . . [to] considering things in interaction to considering things as *mutually constituted*, that is, viewing things as existing at all only due to their dependence on other things" (Sharma 2015: 2). The first shift is easy because "it does not actually require a change in the many habits and assumptions that usually commit us to viewing *things* as fundamentally independent" (Sharma 2015: 2). The second shift, however, is not easy. Interdependence is a view of the "thoroughly *contingent* existence of things" (Sharma 2015: 99). Viewing things as interdependent requires us to answer: how can it be that a thing's existence and identity is contingent on constitutive relationships, inside and out? It might just be that contingency is the nature of the world and that the individual—you and I each—are *merely* contingent. No unique snowflakes, just water.

That conceptual difference between interconnection and interdependence lifts the veil of the positive view of interconnection to reveal a suggestive darker specter—the view that being interdependent is existentially horrifying. Being connected to others in that ontologically strong sense of being *interdependent* with others threatens the very nature of what it is to be a self, and what it is to be an individual. If what we are, at our roots, is truly dependent on our relations, then how do we maintain a view of the unyielding, unchanging, freely autonomous self? Why should we? That threat to individuality, and thus to the autonomous self, lurks in the closet of our subconscious like a specter, haunting us without us even being aware of the root cause. We have to look no further than the contemporary moment of viral pandemic, social unrest, and environmental catastrophe to see implications of this as haunting.

In my previous work, my colleague and I have argued that conflation of these two ideas is not just intellectually but also practically problematic. "The metaphysics of interconnectedness," we wrote, "stands in the way of the metaphysics of interdependence especially since it fails to capture the

ways in which wholes cannot be merely reduced to intrinsic properties but have to be understood holistically, as integrating and as being constituted by a complex array of relations within their environments" (Beever & Morar 2018). What we were beginning to get at is not merely some abstract philosophical problem, but a problem with how we relate to the world and to others experiencing it with us. Yet, clearly defining the implications for our lived experience was then a difficult project. Reviewers of our work called us out for remaining too much in the abstract, and for not calling out those practical implications more clearly. Of course, the reason for the difficulty is our own embeddedness in a particular worldview which continues to privilege individuality at the expense of ecology, or interconnectivity at the expense of interdependency. Our embeddedness denies us access to a world that might be.

How, then, do we get access to such a world, since we think it represents the right view both empirically and ethically? How might we give voice to the implications of true interdependence? How can we shade our eyes from the light to see those dark specters in the shadows?

This project proposes that the answer to my questions is, "through film." To think beyond the deep-rooted implicit assumptions about the beauty and goodness of ecological thinking, it sets out to examine interdependence as a problem. Through the work my colleagues and I do in this volume, I seek to turn on the light and reveal that specter for what it is: the dark side of interdependence.

Film can shake up the imaginaries of our values through the realization of fictional/hypothetical worlds. Even the film industry itself enables this moral exploration. Recall that rhetorical theorist and film scholar Kendall Phillips makes this point explicitly in his preface to this volume. There, he evidences that "to go to the moving picture show was to enter a potentially flammable building, to sit in the dark with strangers, and to submit oneself to the mysterious influence of films made by mysterious others, often from different parts of the world" (Phillips 2020: xxi). The experience of film can offer access to philosophical perspectives in ways other media cannot. The philosophical potential of film has been the subject of recent work, including Katherine Thomson-Jones's 2016 book, which focuses on the relations between art and technology of film and whether films can philosophize via thought-experiments. Similarly, Nathan Andersen's 2018 book, focused on the film-through-philosophy / philosophy-through-film interface, argues that the medium of film can get us to pay attention to the nature of reality, or the fundamental problems of philosophical inquiry. I, too, have explored this basic idea of film-as-philosophy in an earlier work on philosopher-turned-director Terrence Malick's exploration of nature and grace in his *The Tree of Life* (Beever & Cisney 2016). There, Malick gave voice and image to

Heidegger's notoriously complex concept of *world*, pulling his viewers out of their comfortable imaginaries and positing grand ontological "what-ifs" important to explore. Highly intellectual films like Malick's can do this work well, but so too can popular culture movies: the ongoing success of superhero movies and apocalyptic genres is evidence of the ways in which alternative worldviews—including the dark and horrible—can be given expression in unique and accessible ways.

In many film genres, particularly perhaps in the genres of science fiction and horror, implicit assumptions have a way of becoming seen. The ongoing success of television series like *The Walking Dead*, reboots of the *Alien* series, and the blockbuster movies like *Interstellar* and *Avengers* evidence how films can help make the implicit salient, bringing us uniquely face-to-face with our dark specters and alternative futures. Film also privileges *engagement* and *access*, taking the problems and concepts of philosophy from the academy to the public. This volume is designed around that idea that popular film can give voice in novel ways to implicit problems like interdependence. Doing the work of philosophy through the medium of film provides engaging access to a wide audience.

Each chapter in this book is designed to target a specific problem through a specific film, giving the reader multiple and diverse points of contact with the problem of interdependence. I have organized the main chapters of this book around three major themes: familial relations, the social-political, and the techno-ecological. There is important overlap between these themes, of course—further evidence of just how dependent we are on these spheres of relations. While my colleagues and I explore an incredibly diverse array of contemporary films, you will see these overlaps creep in around the edges of our methods and the problems we address. The forward and the coda of this book offer some broader context to the dependencies between the projects of film and philosophy to offer some broader context to our work.

In his foreword, film and rhetorical theorist Kendall Phillips drew on his work on horror films as rhetorical artifacts to situate the importance of the volume in the context of the history and philosophy of film. Drawing on the history of cinema, he argued that film and its cinematic apparatus has direct—and dark—implications for questions of interdependence.

In the first section, Lee, Baumeister, and Cisney examine familial relations in diverse ways. Lee focuses on dark intimacies in the mother and child dyadic relationship in the South Korean film *In the Name of the Mother*. Baumeister takes these dark intimacies a step further in his look at *The Night of the Hunter*, arguing that family conflicts are analogous to the predator/prey relationship in the contexts of the hunt. This predatory logic exposes a horrible new dimension of human interdependence. Cisney draws on *First*

Reformed to push forward the idea of a resolution to the horror of interdependence at the level of the familial. Shifting the burden of proof from the individual to the collective, Cisney argues that the film imagines how love can be remade as a viable personal vaccine against the existential horror of decaying interdependence in the Anthropocene.

In the second section, my colleagues examine interdependence at the level of the social-political. Rogers and Corrigan complement Cisney's read of *First Reformed* in arguing that interpersonal love is not only personal but also a more general salve to the stifling of our ability to relate to others by the intensity of social, political, and environmental conditions. Lane then helps the reader understand the root of these interpersonal horrors in her examination of the violating sense of helpless interdependency made visible in the genre of psychological horror. Through films like *The Lobster* and *Killing of the Sacred Deer*, Lane works through the traumatic uncanniness of unprocessed desire and fear resurrected by the challenges to homogenize ontologically, politically, and ethically in Anthropocene discourse. In his contribution, Grant Young then expands loving relationships to personal relationships more broadly. He examines horrors of the body-politic through the film *It Comes at Night*, exposing contemporary political anxieties concerning doing politics relationally and the ethics of interdependence that process entails. Finally, Elmore and Elmore contextualize the cases of this section, reminding the reader that interdependence might not be an all-or-nothing condition. They see the interdependence of the Anthropocene for what it is: one form among others that while no doubt powerful and important is neither entirely benign nor all determining.

Contributions to the third section reflect horrors of the interplay between the technological and the ecological. Godoy looks at the *Jurassic Park* films to reveal a deep horror of the unknown, reminding us that we do not understand biology let alone our interdependencies within it. Drawing from the work of ecosocialist thinkers, Godoy shows how the films' superficial warnings about technology both rely upon and reinforce ecological horrors, dooming us to repeat our mistakes. Next, Onishi argues that plant relations of the sort fictionalized in *The Happening* uncover transformative potentials latent within what he calls "weird" horrors that rely on an increasing awareness of our own anxieties. In my own contribution, I then explore the dark side of interdependence using the *Resident Evil* science-fiction horror films to outline one type of unprocessed implicit horror in the Anthropocene; namely, the shifting challenge of technology to the very nature of being and its relations. Finally, Favela presents one specific such challenge: technological interfaces with human consciousness. There is horror here. Such technologies may make extinct one's consciousness, and therefore one's self. He examines integrated information theory by drawing on examples from popular

television series *Rick and Morty*, *The Strain*, and the *Star Trek* film franchises to support his case.

In my brief conclusion, I draw together the diverse views offered by my colleagues to think through the dark side of interdependence as a horror of relations. Philosopher and film scholar Robert Sinnerbrink then offers a code to this project, drawing on his work on ethical implications of the cinematic experience (2016) and on the long history of philosophical thought as it relates to the dynamic between Self and Other. He argues that film's power to act either as an innocent or corrupting force of philosophizing means it can think critically about not only dark sides of interdependence-as-intersubjectivity but also more optimistic perspectives.

The thinking we do in these chapters complements an ongoing conversation about interdependence. Condeluci's *Interdependence* (1995[1991]) takes up the concept, but in the context of the political. Condeluci uses the term "in a number of ways" (xviii) but each emphasizing an approach in which "people are connected" (xviii). In a larger context, interdependence is, he argues, "a term that implies an interconnection, or an interrelationship between two entities. In geopolitical terms, interdependence suggests a connection or partnership between countries in an effort to maximize potential of both countries" (87). Condeluci indicates that, on his review of the literature, the vast majority of work on the concept has been related to economic or political affairs (ibid). This reading is a good instance of what I see as a conflation between interconnection and interdependence, using the term to uphold the individual self even while speaking to the important ways it is connected to others. Ionescu's 2018[1991] work pushes on this concept in a slightly larger domain even while remaining within the political sphere. In that work, Ionescu defines interdependence as "the outcome of the micro-electric and the communication information revolutions of the twentieth-century (location 486)" such that human affairs are linked "so closely that they become, by synergy, a circumambience superior to, and different from, their sum total" (location 501). This sum-is-greater-than-its-parts approach to interdependence links the interpersonal and the informational. Yet, it offers no critical conceptual analysis about that concept's implications: our informational selves are extended by information technologies, but not necessarily challenged in any fundamental way. Indeed, most uses of the term in the existing literature emphasize this political connotation without what I see as fundamentally important conceptual analysis.

This volume looks at interdependence as a metaphysical rather than merely a political term. It follows the path set forth by Sharma's 2015 work on interdependence, which distinguishes interdependence from interconnectedness through the lens of biology and the biological sciences. Through her analysis Sharma draws out philosophical implications of this distinction, arguing that

the phenomena of the natural world are true contingencies arising as objects of subjects only dependent on conditions of experience—"wonderful, amazing, and astonishing" (104) experiences of contingency. Yet the practical question of what an interdependent world looks like remains largely open. Our work that follows picks up that question critically, proposing answers through the lenses of film that point to not only wonder but also an alternative, darker response.

I hope that you will see patterns within our analyses. The stories each of us explore pull at the same seams of the physical, epistemic, and ethical conditions of our experiences, normally sewn tightly together as a mask of interconnection. Horror creeps in as shadows cast by the separation between those seams, allowing us to see what's beneath that mask: a contingency of existence interdependent with those relations.

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FAMILIAL RELATIONS

Love and Horror

In Bong Joon-Ho's Mother *and Lee Chang-Dong's* Poetry

Eunah Lee

A single mother who lives with her mentally disabled son learns that her son is a prime suspect for the murder of a young girl. She firmly believes that the son is an innocent victim and takes it into her own hands to clear his name. A middle-aged care worker who lives with her grandson finds out her grandson's involvement in a gang rape of a schoolgirl and the victim's subsequent suicide. While the parents of other boys and the school conspire to silence the victim's family and to cover up the incident, her mind is caught up between the conflicting feelings for her grandson and the dead girl. The stories in these movies bring us face-to-face with the primal human relationship: the maternal relation.

Among human relations, which is more profound and tenacious than a mother-child relationship? The love and care of mothers provides the enabling conditions for human infants to grow up and develop throughout life. Feminist epistemologists emphasize the relation of human dependency as the foundation of individuality and personhood (Baier 1995). Care ethicists stress good caring as a necessary component for a flourishing human life (Kittay 1998). Against the mainstream western philosophy that has praised human autonomy and self-sufficiency as the central element of personhood as well as crucial criteria of a good life, contemporary feminist thinkers have argued that this dominant conception of human person is too narrow. We inevitably depend on others, and more heavily in some periods of our life. Human dependency is a fundamental fact of human life. When we refuse to acknowledge the dependency as a fundamental condition of human life and relegate it merely as abnormal and unfavorable conditions, we fail to see the genuine value of the caring relationship. By assuming independent and

self-sufficient individuals, we would end up with an unjustifiably limited scope of our moral life. Such a parochial understanding of human persons would also leave some individuals out of our moral purview, and fail to do justice not only to the people who are dependent on others, but also to the people who take care of others (Kittay 1998).

Care is a relational virtue that we have *toward* others. Giving good care means doing the physical labor that the dependent person requires, but it also means having the appropriate attitude toward the person (Kittay 2001). The labor can be done without the appropriate attitude; yet, good caring often comes through affective bonds and investment in the well-being of the person. Since attentive responsiveness is essential to understanding what another person needs, the physical labor without the appropriate emotion is hard to become good care. Frequently, good care is elicited when we are in an affectionate relationship with another. This strong bond allows the person who takes care of the dependent to maintain care, even when it is difficult and disadvantageous for the caretaker to do so. As such, care is not only a personal disposition we need to manifest in our relationship but also a social virtue we need to cultivate collectively.

Given the need for the emotional bond as a prerequisite of good caring, the relationship between mother and child seems to have undeniable benefits among various human relationships.[1] Often maternal love flows naturally, almost like a primal force. The strong ties between mother and child are what we generally find in our society so that when mothers feel estranged from or even hostile to their child, their case is considered pathological. Indeed, a deep connection to one's child is a beautiful thing that may even allow a sense of transcendence. We praise maternal care as a paradigm of genuine caring. However, precisely because of the strong ties, mothers are often expected to carry the burden of caring more than others do. While some feminists congratulate mothers for being able to care better than others (Gilligan 1982), others lament that sometimes they have to endure more to care and even risk their own moral goodness (Tessman 2005).

A mother and her child are not just connected to one another, but often define each other. Such interdependency, as an ontological condition, creates particularly complex moral challenges.[2] The deep interdependency in the maternal relationship contests the boundaries of the self, often reshapes them in a more rigid form, paralyzing her abilities to relate to others beyond her extended self. For example, what if a mother's love becomes unconditional to the extent that it blinds her moral sense? What ought she to do when her call for care conflicts with the demand of social justice?[3] These questions are tricky, for our unselfish attitude toward and self-sacrificing acts for our loved ones do not seem to be immune to utter cruelties to others. Her selfless love may quickly turn into egoistic favoritism or collective egoism. If so, mothers'

heroic devotion would ironically become a gesture of solipsism, the expansion of herself, crippling shackles of the mind.

This chapter will focus on two South Korean films, Bong Joon-Ho's *Mother* (2009) and Lee Chang-Dong's *Poetry* (2011), that each explore this difficult task of balancing love and justice. These two movies are probably less-known works of these film directors who are critically acclaimed and commercially successful. Although Lee and Bong have different cinematic styles, the directors in these movies commonly follow a woman who learns about horrific crimes that her loved one committed. Maternal care is protective of young human beings against the unfavorable conditions of their lives as well as the corrosive influence of society. In the name of the mother, a woman does it all—be it fighting deep-rooted prejudices against mental disabilities or even offering her sex to procure the settlement money to prevent legal charges. Nevertheless, what happens when love and justice require the mother to do morally conflicting things? Both these movies challenge us to critically examine the implicit belief about the beauty of maternal love by portraying the internal landscape of mothers who struggle to deal with the immoral acts of their beloved ones.

The movies are set in the cultural landscape of Korea, where family ties are notoriously strong, and where mothers often hover over their children well beyond their nonage in the name of love and care. The faces and the words are Korean; nevertheless, the actions of the characters and the emotions they generate in the viewers may be quite familiar. If the disturbing emotions these movies allow us to experience are not at all foreign, perhaps it is because the movies capture the tension universally found in strong bonds, namely, the tension between the beauty and the horror of thick relations.[4]

By analyzing these films, I suggest that our strong emotions from the thick relationship may numb our moral senses and thus distort our moral vision. Human empathy is a possible antidote to the blinding forces of the sentiments; however, sympathy to others, which we hold up as essential in overcoming our parochial self, is frighteningly weak and fragile. Sympathy can be quickly eclipsed and often entirely extinguished by the pulls of strong ties. Often we allow ourselves to be intoxicated by our love and let the strongest sentiment dictate our actions without critically thinking about our feelings. The extinction of compassion to others is a deep horror we can commit in the name of love. If sympathy is a vital yet precarious ingredient to keep us sober, then where does it find nourishments to grow as a moral sentiment? In the last section of this essay, by focusing on the different endings of these two movies, I suggest that memory can serve a crucial role in maintaining the right dose of sympathy and the health of our moral life. Borrowing the framework of Avishai Margalit (2002), I maintain that preserving certain memories may, though not necessarily, augment our emphatic abilities.

BONG JOON-HO AND *MOTHER*

Bong Joon-Ho's *Mother* is a unique blend of black comedy and mystery thriller that depicts the monstrosity in the mother's love. In an intriguing way, the movie questions our naïve belief that our loved ones are not capable of committing horrific crimes. The titular "Mother" lives in a cramped house adjoining her tiny apothecary with her twenty-seven-year-old son, Do-Joon. Mother also practices acupuncture to eke out her living, although it is illegal to do so without a license. Do-Joon is beautiful and gentle, but perhaps also intellectually disabled. Do-Joon easily forgets things. Mother instructs him how to massage both sides of his head, or what she calls "the temple of doom," to stimulate his memory. Do-Joon is also slow and absent-minded. He barely escapes a car running toward him. Instead, Mother is vigilant and on the constant lookout for any danger that may approach her son.

From the beginning of the movie, Do-Joon appears to be Mother's reason for existence. One of the opening scenes from Mother's apothecary, where we look at Do-Joon from Mother's vantage point, visually captures this idea. Mother is chopping off herbs with a straw cutter in her dark apothecary while casting glances at Do-Joon as he plays with a dog outside. The viewers feel uneasy as they watch the busy movements of her fingers between the big blades. Mother is paying attention to her son, not focusing on the blade or herself. The son playing across the street on a bright day makes a vivid contrast to Mother, who is busy working in the dark shop. The darkness of the interior accentuates the brightness of the exterior and, eventually, the son's body. From Mother's point of view, Do-Joon is at the center of the frame, as if he is the center of the universe. As Manohla Dargis eloquently interprets this scene, "he is the only thing that Mother really sees" (2010).

One night, Do-Joon follows a schoolgirl, Ah-Jung, into a dark alley. The scene is abruptly cut and jumps to when Do-Joon returns home later that night in a confused state. The next morning, the girl is found dead, and her body was left on a house roof like "laundry" as one neighbor puts it. The police take in Do-Joon for questioning and arrest him. The only evidence they have is a golf ball found at the crime scene with his name and a few witnesses who saw him following her. However, the police easily trick him into saying that he is guilty. Mother is smitten with grief and anger. She firmly believes that her loved one is mistakenly accused, and the faulty police work is rendering her son a scapegoat. She makes pleas, but to no avail. As the police and the lawyers remain passive, Mother takes it into her own hands to find the real culprit.

Her relationship with her son seems obsessive and insane in some ways, but also understandable. In the earlier parts of the movie, Do-Joon is involved in a hit and run. His friend, Jin-Tae, becomes enraged and goes to find the

perpetrators. Together they break the mirror of the perpetrators' Mercedes-Benz and beat them. The two are in jail, and Mother comes to get them. However, Jin-Tae blames the broken mirror on Do-Joon so that Mother pays for it, when in fact, it was not Do-Joon's doing. Mother is overprotective of her son, but considering his mental condition, it seems fair. Perhaps Do-Joon has been bullied all his life for his childlike manners. Mother is determined to survive and protect him.

Mother begs her jailed son to give her a clue to prove his innocence. Nevertheless, Do-Joon just can't exactly remember what happened that night. Mother desperately cries, "Just try harder to remember." However, her despair prohibits her from seeing what is obvious to others. She sneaks into Jin-Tae's house and steals his golf club erroneously believing a lipstick mark as a bloodstain. Mother is so engrossed in her concern about her son that she even mistakes her own blood to be her son's when she has a cut on her fingers from the chopping blades. The movie shows in a horrific-funny way how intensive care of a mother could be intoxicating and blinding.

Ironically, while massaging his "temple of doom," Do-Joon comes to hoist a memory from his childhood that he had forgotten. He yells, "Now I remember it! You tried to poison me when I was five!" At this, Mother screams that he has to be the first in her plan to kill herself. She says, "I was so desperate. You and I are one!" This episode hints at the possibility that Do-Joon might have become mentally challenged due to the poisoning, and Mother's intense care is due to her guilty feelings. Although the movie does not offer more clues, at any rate, the viewers have to review their relationship with the new information about Mother's failed attempt at killing him. Mother does not regret, but rather, says if only she used a stronger herbicide, the two would not have to endure the sufferings as they do now. The failed attempt at the murder-suicide alarms us to how caring may blur the boundary between the person caring and the person taken care of. Often, caring, when unmediated by critical reflection, plays out at the expense of another person's autonomy. Furthermore, as much as excessive caring may damage the autonomy of the one cared for, it diminishes the autonomy of the one caring—in the sense that it hinders her from doing what is right regardless of what her feelings incline her to do.

Eventually, in her own investigation to get her son off a murder charge, Mother finds out that her son is the actual killer of the girl, Ah-Jung. The schoolgirl provokes him by calling him "*pabo* (retard)," which is the last thing Do-Joon wants to hear. Do-Joon throws a rock at her, accidentally hitting her head and causing her to lose consciousness. Disconcerted, Do-Joon puts out her bleeding body on a roof to make her visible so that someone else could bring her to the hospital. Although it was not Do-Joon's intention to harm the girl, he ended up killing Ah-Jung. With the shocking revelation, one

crime culminates into another crime. Upon learning about this truth, Mother brutally kills the junk collector, the only witness of her son's crime.

With the critical evidence buried for good, Do-Joon is released as another mentally disabled boy is taken in and convicted. The police quickly conclude the case. The policemen in *Mother* are incompetent and irresponsible as in other Bong Joon-Ho's movies.[5] The films satirize the inability and crudeness of the police in South Korea. However, more importantly, it serves to signal the moral insensitivity and obtuseness of the society. In *Mother*, the satirical portrayal of the police suggests the deep-rooted prejudice toward and harsh treatment of the mentally disabled people in jurisprudence as well as in broader contexts.

Christina Klein, in an article published in 2008, says that Bong's films are organized around "a logic of parallel crimes"—a term that Carlo Rotella formulates in his analysis of American crime stories (Klein 2008). According to this analysis, "a surface crime" launches the story and motivates the action as a narrative device. However, the process of investigating the surface crime often reveals "a deep crime," which is harder to detect but surely more pervasive. Whereas the surface crime is a deviant act committed by an individual, the deep crime is a structural and even profoundly entrenched injustice of the society which characters are living in. This logic of parallel crime between the surface crime and the deep crime is also applicable to *Mother*. In *Mother*, the surface crime is Do-Joon's murder of the schoolgirl; and it gives way to a deep crime, which is the abusive and oppressive treatment of mentally disabled people. Yet, there is another layer of parallel crimes. Seen from a different angle, we realize Mother's murder of the junk collector as a surface crime leads us to another crime at a deeper level: the numbing of moral senses in the name of love, or the horror of loving relations, as I call it.

Seen in this light, although neither Do-Joon's nor Mother's crime can be justified, in a way, they are victims themselves. Do-Joon acts out of self-defense against the humiliations often projected at him. Mother acts against society, which victimizes her disabled son again and again. Following Mother's investigation about the dead girl, we also get to know more about the character, Ah-Jung. Abandoned by her parents, Ah-Jung was the only person who took care of her alcoholic grandmother. As a minor herself, she was prostituting herself to support herself and her grandmother. Based on the photos that Ah-Jung secretly saved on her mobile, we can conjecture that she was at the crime scene to meet one of her "clients." Without the adequate layers of social protection and support, Ah-Jung became unfairly burdened as a caretaker and further oppressed in a society that commodifies her sex. In this way, the surface crimes of Do-Joon and Mother slowly reveal the deep crimes including the abuse of mentally disabled individuals, the unfair burden on the shoulders of caregivers, and the widespread

carelessness toward other fellow human beings, which may not be the unique social malaise of South Korea.

Throughout the movie, Mother's fiery love for her son comes in stark contrast with her cold indifference to other people. Even when Mother visits the dead girl's funeral, she was there to claim her son's innocence, not to mourn for the deceased or to show respect for the family. Mother's case may be extreme, but it is true that when we care, we care about the particular needs of significant persons or groups of persons. Generally, we do not care about the other fellow human being, the faceless others. What do we need to do to overcome this natural indifference to others?

For this reason, the scene where Mother cries for the other mentally ill boy who was arrested instead of Do-Joon is remarkable. In tears, she asks the boy, "Don't you have parents? Don't you even have a mother?" If the boy had a mother who could defend him and try to prove his innocence, probably he would not have fallen a victim. Nevertheless, the truism that we all are a child of a mother cannot be an excuse for our partial considerations in certain situations. Mother feels bad toward this boy, who now has to pay for someone else's crime. Yet, she does nothing about it. Mother has sympathy for the boy, but the feelings do not make her do what is right. Her guilty conscience toward the equally unfortunate boy is smothered by even stronger feelings toward her son. She weeps but does not allow this feeling to be the motivating force. For her, her son is the priority. Her strong maternal instinct nips off her sympathy to other human beings, and she remains in the wrong. The scene gives a sobering realization that moral feelings can be powerful, but they do not effectively generate actions on their own. Human empathy is weak and fragile.

LEE CHANG-DONG AND *POETRY*

Lee Chang-Dong's *Poetry* (2011) is a somber gaze at living a life with meaning and genuinely seeing all that is around you. Although Lee's films have been staples at various international film festivals over the past two decades, his works may not be as accessible to American viewers as other modernist Korean filmmakers such as Bong Joon-Ho's. In a much more realistic style, however, Lee tells a touching story about an old woman searching for her purpose of life and love as she cares about her disengaged grandson.[6]

Poetry begins with the discovery of a teenage girl's corpse in the river. Young children on the riverbank spot something floating on the water and cluster around the body, not knowing what it is. When the camera closes up, the viewers see the gruesome image of the dead girl with her long disheveled hair floating on the water. Next to this horrific image, the title of the movie,

"*shi* (poetry)," becomes slowly clear. With this symbolic image, the film seems to be asking the question of whether it is still possible to write poetry in this cruel era where humanity is lost.

The scene readily reminds us of Adorno's dictum, "Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 1967). However, the director hesitates to agree with the idea. Instead, the movie seems to claim that we can only be saved from barbarity and inhumanity through poetry, the pursuit of true beauty. The film delivers the message that the search for beauty and the efforts to conserve it is perhaps what keeps our minds from their mindless inertia, or as Adorno might call it, the reification of consciousness. A brief synopsis will not do justice to the film's richness and complexity in its message. For the present purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the film's portrayal of the tension between love and horror in a caring relationship and finally think about a possible way out from this dyad through the actions of its protagonist, Mija, in contrast to those of Bong's Mother we have examined so far.

In *Poetry*, Mija is a sixty-six-year-old lady who resides in a shabby apartment with her grandson Jong-wook or simply Wook as she calls him. Wook's mother left him behind after a divorce and now lives in another city. So Mija is the primary caretaker of Wook and acts as a "proxy" mother. Wook seems to be an ungrateful and insolent teenager. Still, the best thing in the world for Mija is "the food going in Wook's throat," as she has Wook recite over the dinner table. She supports herself as a part-time care worker for the elderly, but she herself is struggling with her decreasing memory. She dresses tidily in a white hat and a silky scarf, but as a neighbor ridicules, she lives off her social security. Mija appears to go through her daily life with little joy. Later in the movie, the doctor tells her that her forgetfulness is, in fact, the sign of Alzheimer's disease and that the symptoms will only get worse. She loses nouns now, verbs later, and eventually, much more. The diagnosis devastates Mija, but she bottles it up without telling it to Wook or her daughter with whom she often chats on the phone.

Mija enrolls in an adult poetry class in a local cultural center to help her memory. In the first poetry class, the teacher holds up an apple in front of his older students and talks about the importance of "seeing" in writing poetry. He says, "up until now, you haven't seen an apple for real," and further explains, "to really know what an apple is, to be interested in it, to understand it." As Manohla Dargis points out, the apple in the poetry teacher's lesson can be easily substituted for "woman—or life" (Dargis 2011). The teacher then gives his students an assignment to write a poem by the end of the course. Mija struggles to find poetic inspirations, and it is hard to write a poem.

On her way from the doctor's office, Mija encounters a woman wailing over her daughter's corpse. Mija feels pity for the woman's pain of losing her daughter, but still, it is unrelated to her. That evening, Mija asks Wook about

the girl's death because they are from the same school. Wook dismisses her question saying, "I don't know her well." One night, Wook has his friends over—all male—and they cramp in a room discussing something. Very soon, Mija learns that it was none other than the boys, including her grandson, who have raped the girl for months, leading her to commit suicide.

The father of one of the other boys who committed the gang rape reaches out to Mija, and together they have a meeting at a restaurant to discuss the issue. The parents of the other boys decide to pay settlement money to the dead girl's single mother to silence her. One father says, "I am sorry for the dead girl, but now is the time for us to worry about our boys." Even the school officials encourage the parents to settle this case as quickly as possible before the news spreads to the media. They propose that each of the six families equally contributes five million *won* to come up with the total sum of thirty million (approximately equivalent to three million U.S. dollars). The cruelty of the boys is echoed by the callousness of their parents, and further by the indifference of the school officials. As they all together try to cover up the victim's death, the dead girl's life is now diminished into a thing that has a price tag.

Mija is shocked by her grandson's horrific crime and remains speechless throughout the meeting. The other rapists' parents even send Mija off to the dead girl's mother to persuade her to accept their settlement money. They argue that Mija could talk to the mother as "woman to woman." However, when Mija encounters the dead girl's mother, she has a great conversation without bringing up the settlement issue. She simply had forgotten why she was there. Instead, she talks about the weather and the apricots she found on her way. She tells her, in almost childlike innocence, "The apricots crush themselves to the ground for the new life to come!" After realizing the reason why she was there, and the person she has been chatting with was the mother of the victim, Mija leaves the scene in a hurry. She feels shame and guilt to have mentioned the beauty of "apricots" as if she found a profound truth to someone who is enduring the excruciating pain of losing her child and still continues with her life.

At one point, Mija seems to have made up her mind to do whatever she can to prevent her grandson from being legally charged. In order to procure the large sum of cash, Mija goes to the palsied old man she takes care of, who asked for sex the other day. In return for sex, she demands the money from the old man and eventually turns her share of the money in. In a sense, by turning herself into a victim of a male-dominant society that is oppressive to women, Mija shares the pain of the young girl. By putting herself in a similar situation, Mija regains sympathy for the dead girl. Unlike other parents who just want to get this case over with, Mija does not feel that paying the money is truly "the end" of it. Mija cares not only about her grandson but also about the dead girl.

Indeed, Mija is the only one in this film who tries to understand the life and the pain of the girl, Heejin, and mourns her absence. Mija visits the requiem mass for Heejin, where she takes a picture of her and learns that Agnes is the girl's christening name. Mija also visits Wook's school and peeps into the dark science lab, where the boys repeatedly raped the girl. Mija even takes a bus to the bridge where Heejin once stood to jump into the water. Through tracing Heejin's memories in her house, at her funeral, then at the site of crime and suicide, Mija slowly builds a strong connection to Heejin.

Mija's suffering sheds a contrasting light on Wook's mindless indifference. Mija continually tries to remind Wook of the dead girl, but her efforts are futile. When Mija puts the portrait of Heejin on the dinner table, Wook gives a nonchalant look and quickly turns away. He unaffectedly says to her, "I am hungry. Please give me dinner." It is hard to read Wook's mind from his facial expressions that are void of emotions. "Why did you do it? Why!" she persists, shaking Wook's body lying in bed. Nevertheless, Wook simply pulls the blanket over his face evading her question. It is frustrating for Mija to see her son's utter disregard for others' pain.

One day, Mija takes Wook to a restaurant, feeds him pizza, his favorite food, and carefully cuts his toenails. That night, Wook is taken away by a police officer whom Mija acquainted herself with at her weekly poetry readings. Without making it overly explicit but clearly enough, the film suggests Mija's disclosure to the police. From Mija's glance at her grandson as if she was already expecting Wook's arrest, we get the sense that Mija is the one who turned her grandson in to the authorities to make him responsible for his crime. Her disclosure of her own grandson may look contrary to all the care she gave to Wook, leading to this moment. Nevertheless, I argue that having him pay for his crime and his subsequent moral failure is another way of caring for her beloved one, perhaps to a higher degree.

In his discussion of our duty for one's moral perfection, Immanuel Kant says, "it is a contradiction for me to make another's *perfection* my end and consider myself under obligation to promote this. For the *perfection* of another human being, as a person, consists just in this: that he *himself* is able to set his end in accordance with his own concepts of duty; and it is self-contradictory to require that I do (make it my duty to do) something that only the other himself can do" (Kant 1797, 6: 386). I would like to point out that Mija's action displayed in this movie can be a counterexample to Kant's position. Strictly speaking, we would never force someone else to adopt the goal of being a morally good person no matter what we do. It is entirely the moral agent's free choice. Still, one can be concerned about the moral life of the loved one and act accordingly to promote their well-being. True care does not cease to satisfy the needs and wants of the loved one, but goes as far as to seek the loved one's moral perfection or, as in Plato, the goodness

of the soul. It is in this sense that we can say that we are obliged to promote the moral perfection of the one whom we care about even if the goal remains unapproachable.

The film concludes with an ambiguous ending, as Mija is nowhere to be found. Mija does not appear in the last poetry class but has left a poem. Indeed Mija is the only student who could write a poem. Through Mija's painful endeavors to understand Heejin's life and death—"to really see her"—Heejin finally becomes Mija's poetic inspiration. As Mija recites her poem "Agnes' Song" in a voiceover, the camera follows an image of rushing water. It is the water where Heejin's body was found at the beginning of the film. Consequently, as Heejin takes over the last part of the poem, the camera stares at the back of Heejin standing on the bridge. Without any adorning sonic background, this long-take finishes as Heejin turns around to gaze at the viewers.

In *Poetry*, Lee Chang-Dong examines the perils of close ties, in particular, that of a parental relationship. This movie, too, shows the horrors we can commit in the name of love. Nevertheless, in contrast to Bong's *Mother*, Lee's *Poetry* also illustrates the possibility of being able to break free from the blinding forces through imaginative sympathy. However, as noted earlier, sympathy to others who are unrelated to me is too fragile compared to the tenacious love toward the one who is significant to me. If so, how do we rely on such precarious ability as a foundational force? In the face of the puzzling difficulty, what grounds does Lee have to remain hopeful? In the next section, I argue that in order to have an adequate dose of sympathy for others and to be able to summon such feelings to be the motivating forces of our actions, we ought to *remember*. I maintain that, in particular, the different endings of *Mother* and *Poetry* can serve as a vivid illustration of the importance of remembering in our moral life.[7]

CARING, MEMORY, AND MORALITY

"Memory is a curious thing," says Lisa Graff in a children's book (1996, 51). Some memories stick in our mind "like peanut butter on crackers" no matter how hard you try to forget; other memories surprisingly fade with time even if you try hard not to forget. Some say ignorance is bliss; others say ignorance is sin. In a sense, memory seems to be a function of our mind whose operation is independent of our will. However, at other times, lack of memory seems to be a moral blunder. When we inflict harm to others, forgetting the harm is especially unacceptable. In these cases, forgetting one's crime adds insults to injury. Had the oblivion been intentional, the wrong is more serious. Accordingly, even when we admit that remembering and forgetting are not

entirely within our power, it is undeniable that memory plays a crucial role in our moral life.

Indeed, many have debated whether we have a duty to remember others, especially when the memories are painful. Psychologists have shown that memories of pain misrepresent the actual experience and further impede good decision-making. They argue that letting go of the traumatic past and starting anew is the right thing to do. On the other hand, others argue that there is a duty to remember, and a failure to remember would constitute a moral wrong under certain conditions (Margarlit 2002). I would like to argue that the two movies at hand confirm the idea that memory is an essential ingredient for our moral life. Under certain circumstances, I admit that we have a duty to remember regardless of the effects of preserving those memories. Nevertheless, it seems that remembrance strengthens our otherwise weak empathic ability and thus motivates us to care about those we usually do not care about.

In Bong's movie, Mother wants to know more about the dead girl and insists on seeing the face of the other mentally disabled boy who is wrongly convicted. These scenes are significant, for they show that Mother is not entirely insensitive to others' pain. She has sympathy for the victims. However, instead of acting upon her sympathy, Mother chooses to forget about what had happened. In the final scene, Mother puts in a huge acupuncture needle into her thigh, the "meridian point" for releasing stress and tension. Mother had mentioned in the earlier parts of the movie that there is a point only she knows about and stimulating it would remove harrowing memories. Mother had to numb her senses so that it is easier to turn a blind eye to others' pain. This scene of Mother administering the needle to herself is a graphic symbol for Mother's voluntary amnesia. It is through her active forgetting that she gains emotional release over customary guilt, and peace of mind over pangs of conscience.

This interpretation also helps us to understand the opening of *Mother* better. The opening of *Mother* is a wide-angle shot of a field on an autumn day with stalks of brown grasses.[8] Mother slowly begins to dance against this barren landscape when there is no one else watching her. There is something uncanny in this scene, but the viewers cannot readily catch the source of the eerie feelings. Only at the end of the movie, which brings the audience back to its very beginning, do the viewers understand that Mother's dance is post-murder, and her graceful gesture suggests her willful oblivion of her crime. The contrast between her poised dance and her brutal murder in this grotesque scene accentuates the paradox that her maternal love turned her into a monster.

In a different ending, Lee's *Poetry* sheds light on the importance of remembering in our moral life. It is ironic that throughout the movie, Mija has

Alzheimer's disease, but she remembers more than others do in a way. She writes down her feelings and thinks about them. When other parents are busy talking about the settlement money, Mija looks at the flower outside the restaurant and writes down in her notebook, "a flower as red as blood." Despite her memory loss, or precisely because of that, Mija starts to observe things more attentively—whether it be flowers, trees, or a sunset. At one point, she also takes delight in the camellias in the doctor's office, and yet, she was told that the flowers are fake. At this, she is reminded of the gap between the beauty that is seen and unseen. This realization helps Mija begin to see things differently and find the hidden meaning of what she sees. Eventually, Mija's efforts to remember the victim was a way for her to find meaning from the girl's tragic death.

In her case, remembering does not take place effortlessly. She strives to know more. She keeps the picture—the face of the victim. She then visits the sites of crime. She eventually writes a poem dedicated to her name. All these efforts connect Mija to Heejin, thereby building a relationship. The reward of remembering is a truthful understanding of the world that surrounds her, and perhaps a better judgment. Therefore, the movie seems to make a parallel claim about the aesthetic realm and the moral realm. Just as Mija finds transcendence from her quotidian life in her pursuit of beauty, she finds redemption from ugly crimes in her pursuit of truth. *Poetry* speaks of the power of art, not because art covers up ugly reality, but because it helps us pay attention to it and eventually see through the ugliness.

In a sense, the film itself is a dedication to the memory of the victim. In an interview, Lee Chang-Dong says that this movie is based on a real story,[9] which took place in the city where he was filming his previous movie, *Secret Sunshine*.[10] Perhaps it is a coincidence that *Secret Sunshine* depicts a mother who loses her child to a cruel crime and, for that reason, struggles with God who allows this loss. As *Secret Sunshine* is based on a novel,[11] Lee notes it was shocking to learn about a tragic incident in reality while he was filming a fiction. In *Poetry,* the director continues to ask the meaning of mourning and the possibility of forgiveness. However, instead of directly posing a transcendental Being, he asks what human beings can do to each other as we cope with such cruelties. Lee follows in *Poetry* a mother (in the broader sense) who cares for the offender of a crime, as a mirror image of *Secret Sunshine*.

The most striking difference between the endings of *Mother* and *Poetry* is the absence and presence of mourning. The grotesqueness of Bong's *Mother* lies in her inability to mourn. Sigmund Freud says that both mourning and melancholia can be the regular psychological reaction to a loss, but he also makes an important distinction between them (Freud 2011).[12] Freud explains that one mourns when one knows what is genuinely lost in the world with a loss while one falls in melancholia because one "cannot see clearly what it is

that has been lost." As such, melancholia is a deficit concept. The mourner sees the *world* that has become poor and empty with the loss of the other, while the melancholic only sees her *ego* that has become poor and empty. In this light, the absence of grief in Bong's Mother is because she is still caught up in the claustrophobic spheres of ego. If love and care are a precondition for mourning, we would never be able to mourn for the deceased with whom we do not have any connections. Remembering the faces, thus recalling the loss, is a way to open up the self to expand our caring beyond the strength of ties of families, classes, or perhaps, nations.

CONCLUSION

I now want to return to the question raised at the beginning. When Mother's love and the demand of justice make conflicting commands, what ought she to do? In both *Mother* and *Poetry*, mothers' loving care protects the young, but their devotion and sacrifice hint at the horrible paradox of love. These films have shown that the rigid boundary we draw between our loved ones and others may narrow the scope of our moral thinking, becoming crippling shackles of the mind. Our loving and unselfish attitudes do not seem to secure us against utter cruelties to others, but rather may bolster them. When it happens, our selflessness quickly turns to collective egoism. Against this danger, I argue that a mother who genuinely cares for her child ought also to wish for his moral perfection, not merely for his happiness. To this aim, she must break the rigid boundary of her stretched ego, and strive to do what is morally right. In this arduous process, her remembering of others' pain can serve as a vehicle in expanding her empathy beyond the narrow circle of caring.

Watching Bong Joon-Ho's *Mother*, as the director artfully set up for this effect, it is uneasy to see Mother's attitude and decision regarding her son. Considering her sacrifice and her son's mental condition, we can understand her overprotectiveness and obsession. However, we also see the way she treats her son involves a kind of harm to him and to herself. Confining him forever in the state of dependency, she denies her son the possibility to act as an autonomous moral person. At the same time, Mother's unmediated ties to her son also lead to her exploitation of the self, the misfortune she brought to herself, and finally, the destruction of her moral self. More importantly, by being determined to see only her beloved one, Mother ignores the other human beings and the world she shares with them. By committing her crime and then forgetting about them, she inflicts harm to them not once, but twice.

Lee Chang-Dong's *Poetry* begins at a similar place where a woman is confused as to what to do with her loved one's horrible crime. Mija initially tries to take part in the efforts to cover up the crime, going as far as prostituting

herself, yet in the end, she turns in her grandson. This transition is undoubtedly painful but still made possible by remembering the dead girl, the victim of her loved one's crime. In this way, the film suggests that we could overcome the obtrusive parochialism with the right amount of sympathy, which can be sustained by our active remembering. In addition, Mija's actions, although seemingly contrary to the conventional notion of caring, are genuine caring because they acknowledge her grandson's moral agency and his duty to take responsibility for his own actions. In this sense, I have argued that Mija's actions illustrate better caring, which aims to promote not only the happiness but also the moral perfection of her loved one.

Overall, I have emphasized the importance of remembering as a means of extending care beyond the circles of strong ties. Human sympathy is too weak compared to the tenacity of blood. The power of sympathy wears thinner when it extends beyond thick relationships. It is interesting to see that both movies show glimpses of human empathy and its fragility. In Bong's *Mother*, Mother has sympathy, but it is quenched by her active forgetting. On the other hand, Lee's *Poetry* shows that Mija's sympathy leads to her actions in life by her active remembering. The films illustrate that remembering the faces and names of others can anchor down our sympathy—the otherwise merely free-floating sentiments—toward them. In the end, a failure to remember constitutes something wrong. The wrong is done not only to the people who are forgotten, but also to the people who have forgotten.

NOTES

1. Feminist thinkers have modeled the contemporary ethics of care after the logics of maternal relationships, although it does not exclusively deal with a mother-child relationship. See Sara Ruddick (1989).

2. For a more fruitful discussion of the conceptual difference between interconnection and interdependence, and the ethical connotations such difference may entail, see Jonathan Beever's "Resident Evil, the Zomborg, and the Dark Side of Interdependence," chapter 10 in this volume.

3. See Friedman (1993), Walker (1991), and Jaggar (1995) on the conflict between the two commitments of morality: the justice perspective and care perspective.

4. As I revise this chapter in February 2020, Bong Joon-Ho is awarded the Best Picture at the year's Academy Awards for his recent film, *Parasite* (2019), as the first non-English film to win the Oscar. The award perhaps serves as the proof of the universal appeal of the films discussed in this chapter despite its local production.

5. See Bong Joon-Ho's *Memories of Murder* (2003), *The Host* (2006), and recently, *Parasite* (2019).

6. Stylistically, Lee Chang-Dong's *Poetry* may well belong to Paul Schrader's category of "Slow Cinema" in its meticulous description of everyday living with

liberal use of long take and minimal use of sound. For an insightful discussion of "Slow Cinema" and Schrader's analysis of the transcendental style, see Vernon W. Cisney, "Will God Forgive Us? Interdependence and Self-Transcendence in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*," chapter 3 in this volume.

7. The question of memory is a recurring theme in the outpouring of Korean films. Lee's films, in particular, continue to treat this theme as a central problem (Chung and Diffrient 2007).

8. To the fans of Bong Joon-Ho, this scene immediately reminds of the opening scene of his earlier movie, *Memories of Murder*. For more on the depiction of landscapes in Bong's cinematography, see Kyung Hyun Kim (2011), ch.1. "Virtual Landscapes."

9. Based on Bor Beekman's interview with Lee Chang-Dong at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (2011). For a brief English version of the interview, see "Lee Chang-Dong Talks 'Poetry,' How 'Avatar' Affected Him, an 'Oasis' Remake & More" in *IndieWire*, Feb. 2011 (indiewire.com, retrieved in Feb. 2020).

10. The English title of this movie, *Secret Sunshine*, is the literal meaning of *Miryang*, which is the name of the city and the Korean title of the movie.

11. The original story is from a modernist Korean novelist, Lee Chung-Joon's "Story of a Worm."

12. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" In *The Standard Edition* (14:243). Quoted in Kyung Hyun Kim (2011), ch. 6. "Virtual Trauma: Lee Chang Dong's *Oasis* and *Secret Sunshine*." Here the term "happiness" is used in a narrow sense, not in a broad sense, as in Aristotelian *eudaimonia*.

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Predatory Masculinity and Domestic Violence in Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter*

David Baumeister

This chapter sketches a new account of domestic violence that takes as its point of departure the interdependence of humans upon one another as *animal beings*. Modifying the trope of the "sexual predator," I propose that many forms of domestic violence (whether of a sexual or nonsexual nature) can productively be approached as intra-specific *domestic predation*. Just as not all sexual violence is the work of sexual predators, not all domestic violence is the work of domestic predators. Nonetheless, as I aim to show, domestic predation is a uniquely pernicious type of domestic violence, and so warrants attention in its own right. As with sexual predation, domestic predation need not be fatal in effect or intent, as the bio-ecological sense of predation usually entails. Rather, domestic predation denotes a certain predatory *mode of action* on the part of the domestic predator vis-à-vis their victims (domestic prey). To denote this predatory mode of action, I use the terms *predatory logic* or *logic of predation*. While predatory logic underlies a wide range of intra- and inter-specific human relationships not examined as such in this chapter (including the hunting of nonhuman animals and the capture, enslavement, or extermination of human beings), it plays an especially strong role in many cases of domestic violence.

To illustrate the idea of predatory logic and the thesis of domestic violence as domestic predation, this chapter relies on the classic 1955 noir-thriller *The Night of the Hunter*, in which the central antagonist, Harry Powell, exhibits predatory logic in intense ways. While developing an account of domestic

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violence on the basis of a work of fiction involves undeniable dangers (above all that the fictional work might in fact have little to do with "the real world"), such an approach has great advantages. For in a work of fiction like *The Night of the Hunter*, which is widely considered one of the greatest achievements within twentieth-century cinema, the thick substance of lived human experience is crystalized into a sort of mythologized and therefore more readily discernable form. Although extrapolating from the fictional space back to the realm of lived experience requires caution and the insertion of numerous qualifications, the benefits of staking out one's account within a compact fictional space arguably justifies the risk.

Since domestic violence is frequently, though by no means exclusively, perpetrated by adult men against women and children, and since the situation presented in *The Night of the Hunter* involves adult male domestic violence against women and children, the account of domestic predation presented here is also at its heart a critique of *predatory masculinity*. To flesh out this dimension of the account, I refer to analyses of the connection between masculinity and predatory violence in the work of feminist philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and, to a lesser extent, Carol Adams. On my reading of these thinkers, currently dominant forms of masculinity embody predatory logic, or a logic that can erupt into predatory violence in domestic relationships. Though a fuller account would have to consider what variations exist as regards domestic predation and predatory masculinity within transgender, homosexual, queer, and other non-cisnormative or non-heteronormative domestic contexts, the present chapter limits its focus to cisgender heterosexual contexts where the domestic predators are cismen.[1]

The aim of what follows is not to *naturalize* domestic violence in the sense of *justifying* it by virtue of its supposed naturalness to human beings or of its flowing in a causally determinative manner out of human nature. For just as applying the label sexual predator does not justify or excuse sexual violence on the part of the sexual predator, the label of domestic predator does not justify or excuse domestic violence on the part of the domestic predator. Instead, the aim of this chapter is to open a new perspective onto domestic violence that takes seriously the traditionally neglected or denied continuity between domestic and ecological life.[2] On this account, domestic violence is nothing exclusively cultural (i.e., nothing qualitatively apart or insulated from nonhuman nature), but rather a historically emergent natural-cultural phenomenon consisting of the specifically human manifestation of practices of predation held in common with many other animals. Theorizing domestic violence as domestic predation and in terms of predatory masculinity conjures a disturbing image of the nature of interdependence among *human animals*—one rooted in prehistory and reaching into the present day.

HARRY POWELL AND THE LOGIC
OF DOMESTIC PREDATION

The Night of the Hunter is today widely regarded as a masterpiece of twentieth-century cinema. The first and only film directed by actor-turn-auteur Charles Laughton, it straddles the genres of film noir, thriller, children's adventure story, neo-expressionism, and religious parable. Based upon the 1953 debut novel of the same name by David Grubb, it was a critical and commercial failure upon release in 1955. By the early twenty-first century, its reputation had rebounded dramatically, as evidenced by the fact that, in 2008, the influential French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* ranked *The Night of the Hunter* number 2 on its list of the 100 greatest films ever made, second only to *Citizen Kane* (Philippe 2008).[3] While a great deal could said about this film more broadly (its merits, its novelty, its legacy, etc.), for present purposes what is of central interest is the way it lays bare the predatory logic that can inhabit domestic violence. I shall therefore restrict myself over what follows only to those elements of the film that relate to this theme, leaving readers to investigate further according to their interest.[4] Certain aspects of the film's plot, imagery, and portrayal of key characters will be highlighted, while much else will be passed over.

The Night of the Hunter tracks the lives of two children, Jon and Pearl Harper, in a small 1930s West Virginia town. John and Pearl witness their father, Ben Harper, forcefully taken into custody by police. Ben is soon convicted and then executed by electric chair for the murder of two men during a bank robbery. Prior to his arrest, Ben had sewn the $10,000 taken from the bank into Pearl's doll and had made his children swear they would never reveal where the money is hidden. As if all of this was not traumatic enough, the children's lives are soon once again upended by the appearance of the film's central antagonist (and its most enduring character), Harry Powell. Powell enters town as a traveling preacher, the words "LOVE" and "HATE" tattooed across the knuckles of his right and left hands. Smooth-talking, self-righteous, and handsome (played by Robert Mitchum), in a short, unspecified stretch of time, Powell wins the adoration of the townspeople and courts, and then marries Jon and Pearl's widowed mother, Willa, and so becomes the children's stepfather. Powell explains that he was motivated to visit the town after having met Ben during the latter's final days of imprisonment, Powell reportedly having had a tenure as a preacher to the condemned. Unknown to everyone in the town, but known to the film's audience, Powell had actually shared a cell with Ben in the lead up to his execution, and had learned from Ben of the stolen $10,000, though not of its exact location. Imprisoned for theft of a car, Powell had in fact (again, unknown to everyone except Powell and the film's audience) just recently murdered a woman whom he had

married and financially depleted. His pattern of serial infiltration and killing is misogynistic, avaricious, and grounded in a self-righteous spiritualism casting opportunistic murder as God's work.

Powell is a domestic predator. He targets the vulnerable, striking selectively and deliberately. He is disciplined, clever, perceptive, and quick to exploit opportunities to his benefit. He kills without mercy, using a switchblade knife. He almost always speaks calmly, slowly, and clearly, mimicking scriptural cadence. His goal is not the infliction of suffering or death. His motive force is equal parts self-preservation, self-enrichment, and principled conviction. Invoking God, he appears to take no pleasure when he kills. Significantly for present purposes, Powell is a sexual predator only secondarily to being a domestic predator. He cons women into marrying him, and in this sexual dominance plays a role. He may be counted a sexual predator in this sense. But, as far as is revealed to us in *The Night of the Hunter*, he does not engage in sexual activity of any kind. His preacher persona is sexually repressed, and he imposes his repressed abstinence on others, including Willa, who is rebuked for sinful lustfulness on the night of their marriage. His religiosity permits, perhaps even demands, murderous violence. But it precludes sexual gratification or expression.

Powell's embodiment of predatory logic can be further illustrated by attending to a key sequence from the film and its source novel: Powell's predatory hunting of the Harper children when they flee their usurped home.[5] Having installed himself in the children's lives as a stern and moralizing stepfather, Powell exerts more and more control, psychological and physical, over their mother. Driven by his search for the hidden money, he isolates Willa from her neighbors, frequently reminding her of her sinfulness, weakness, and inadequacy. Willa becomes wholly dependent on Powell's will and judgment, losing agency of her own. When Powell ultimately learns that Willa is unaware of the money's whereabouts, he begins to manipulatively interrogate the children. Willa overhears Powell threaten Pearl and, knowing that Willa might soon learn of his true identity, Powell kills Willa with his switchblade knife. He disposes of her body in the Ohio river late at night, roping the corpse into the seat of his car. Powell leads the townspeople to believe that Willa has abandoned her family and taken to the road, reverting to her earlier "sinful ways." The children, though powerless to object to this narrative, are skeptical, though beholden to Powell's legal and socially sanctioned authority over them. When one night Powell threatens to kill them if they do not reveal the location of the money, they are narrowly able to escape, John leading Pearl in tow, eventually onto a canoe floating down the same river that, unbeknownst to them, envelops their mother's waterlogged corpse.

The flight and pursuit sequence is among the most discussed, and most surreal, in *The Night of the Hunter*. Pearl sings sweetly to her doll. Spiders,

frogs, turtles, rabbits, and sheep flank the riverbank. The children beg for potatoes and scraps along the way, floating further and further downstream. Powell pursues them atop a stolen horse. The children sense Powell on their trail, haunted by his apparition. The source novel on which the film is based describes the atmosphere well:

> On both sides of them the land unfolded like the leafing pages of a book and when John turned his eyes to the West Virginia shore he thought: I will be glad when it is dark because he is somewhere over on that shore, in one of those towns, along that winding road somewhere, and when it is dark he can't see us. Because he is still hunting and there is only the river between us and those hands. (Grubb 1977, 166)

Powell is incessant, seemingly indefatigable. When one night John observes Powell's passing silhouette, tellingly announced by the barking of dogs, he murmurs to himself, "Don't you never sleep?" The children remain on the run for an unspecified amount of time, perhaps as much as a week, Powell never far behind. More than any other, this sequence brings out the gravity and loaded meaning of the title *The Night of the Hunter*. While Powell's status as domestic predator is apparent to the film's audience, from his first appearance in the town and in the children's lives, in this sequence of flee and pursuit, the predatory logic that animates his actions becomes clearly apparent to the children themselves. They apprehend that their vulnerability is not just a function of their being disempowered minors subject to the machinations of the legal system (which claimed their father), paternal right (which displaced their mother and gave Powell institutional power over them), and the depressed economy (which frames the hold that hunger has over them at many points in the film). Rather, they are vulnerable in the way that prey are vulnerable to predators—vulnerable like lambs or rabbits are, to cite the film's scenic imagery. Powell has been predatory all along, his infiltration of the Harper family leveraging domestic violence of the predatory sort. His hunting the children along the banks of the river is no act of desperation, but a logical extension of this violence.

THE PREHISTORY OF PREDATORY MASCULINITY

In order to further define the ideas of domestic predation and the predatory logic that underlies it, both of which are embodied by Harry Powell in *The Night of the Hunter*, it is helpful to step back in time. Far back in time—to human prehistory, where predation, in the form of the hunting and fishing of nonhuman animals, first entered the scene of human action.

There is great disagreement among paleoanthropologists concerning exactly when and for what reasons prehistoric ancestors of modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) turned to predating other animals as a means of sustenance. There is likewise disagreement about the consequences of this turn for cognitive, linguistic, and social development within the genus *Homo*, including for gender and familial relations. There is broad consensus, however, that the becoming-predatory of early members of the genus *Homo* had significant and long-lasting implications, both for proto- and modern humans themselves, and for all nonhuman inhabitants of the earth.[6]

For present purposes, the paleoanthropological science of the emergence of human predation can be set to the side. Since our goal is to explore the sense in which modern-day domestic violence exhibits predatory logic, it is enough for us to approach the historical (or prehistorical) confluence of human predation and human domestic violence in a more speculative way. That is, regardless of just how, why, and to what end predation *actually* emerged in human prehistory (questions we can leave to the paleoanthropologists), there remains value in thinking this emergence as a vehicle for understanding human social relations *today*. Eschewing deference to "the way things actually were" means that we are not entitled to make empirical claims about concrete historical or prehistorical events and their causal influence upon more recent times. Though such a concrete and empirical approach might have great relevance and explanatory power, it has no monopoly on how we might productively relate to the past in theoretical terms. For even an imagined, wholly unsubstantiated, wholly fictional version of the past can serve as basis for reflection upon the present. So much is demonstrated by the fact that countless works of imaginative fiction have, throughout history, played a decisive role in sparking or fueling transformative social, moral, and political movements. Hence, by attending to the emergence of human predation in the imagined past, we open a new perspective, however speculative, upon the logic of human predation in the present—whether that present is our own or, indeed, a fictionalized present, such as that of *The Night of the Hunter*.

An excellent entry-point for this endeavor is the twentieth-century French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, who touches on this very subject in her seminal work of feminist theory, *The Second Sex*. In the first chapter of the part of this book concerning "History," Beauvoir links the appearance of predation in human prehistory to the rise of the sexual division of labor, to near-universal patriarchy in human societies, and to the fusion of masculine power with predatory violence.

For Beauvoir, biological differences between the male and the female sexes open different paths for men and women beginning in prehistory. Whereas the biological processes of pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding mean that prehistoric woman is effectively "condemned to domestic labor,

which locks her into repetition and immanence," prehistoric man is "radically different" insofar as his biology allows him contribute to the life of the group "by acts that transcend his animal condition" (Beauvoir 2011, 73). The sorts of predominantly male acts that Beauvoir points to include crafting tools to knock fruit from trees or to "slaughter animals," and constructing canoes to "conquer the seas" before catching fish in them. "Through such actions," she explains, "he tests his own power; he posits ends and projects paths to them: he realizes himself as existent" (73). Fishing and hunting, the two principle forms of human predation directed to the nonhuman world, are especially important examples. "This is the reason fishing and hunting expeditions have a sacred quality," she continues, "their success is greeted by celebration and triumph; man recognizes his humanity in them" (73). This sacred quality rests not just on the element of project-completion, but on the perceived danger and risk involved in such endeavors: "The hunter is not a butcher: he runs risks in the struggle against wild animals" (73).[7] Beauvoir has here put her finger on what we have called predatory logic, whereby predatory activity is not simply connected to the acquisition of prey (as a means of sustenance), but also to more intangible, but no less constitutive, processes of social recognition, identity formation, and status achievement.

Though woman is of course physically capable of crafting tools and risking her life in predatory acts (Beauvoir recognizes evidence to this effect), biological restrictions prevent prehistoric woman from enjoying the social, symbolic, and existential benefits that accompany them—benefits enjoyed by prehistoric man. Predatory logic involves cognizance and valuation of these intangible benefits. It is on the basis of these intangible benefits that predatory logic derives its prestige and its currency, its ability to motivate human action even when fatal predation of nonhuman animals is no longer taking place. The prehistoric discrepancy between predatory men and non-predatory women set in place a power differential that, for Beauvoir, has persisted across history and continues to operate today. Beauvoir writes, "The worst curse on woman is her exclusion from warrior expeditions [which includes both hunting and intra-specific warfare]; it is not in giving life but in risking his life that man raises himself above the animal; this is why throughout humanity, superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth but to the one that kills" (74). A great deal spins off from this curse, where men and men alone are awarded special esteem for predatory killing. In this curse lies the "key to the whole mystery" of woman's subordination to man throughout human history (74). Summarizing her argument in this chapter, Beauvoir remarks,

> Thus an existential perspective has enabled us to understand how the biological and economic situation of primitive hordes led to male supremacy. The female, more than the male, is prey to the species; humanity has always tried to escape

from its species' destiny; with the invention of the tool, maintenance of life became activity and project for man, while motherhood left woman riveted to her body like the animal. (75)

Male supremacy, patriarchy, and androcentrism, along with the strains of misogyny and anti-female violence that so-often accompany these, can, following Beauvoir, be traced back to the prehistoric divergence of men and women along radically different destinies, each underwritten by biological differences. We see in this divergence the appearance of predatory logic, and with it a division of the species into, in a manner of speaking, predators and prey.

Beauvoir's vision of human prehistory is wildly speculative by contemporary paleo-anthropological standards. Even so, it remains instructive. For even if, as a matter of concrete historical reality, human prehistory did not in fact play out as she describes it, as an account of sexual relations in recorded history and in the present day Beauvoir's linkage of patriarchy with predatory logic has explanatory value. And though Beauvoir's account of prehistoric sexual divergence does not address domestic violence in particular, it helps us envision how certain situations of domestic violence (e.g., that within *The Night of the Hunter*) manifest predatory logic. For if, following Beauvoir, we see in the history of relations between women and men deeply ingrained associations of masculinity with predatory behavior (whether in hunting, fishing, or warfare) and of femininity with animalized subordination, then it is not implausible to propose that predatory masculinity plays a role in at least some cases of male domestic violence against women. Many cases of domestic violence against children (regardless of sex or gender) can be thought along similar lines insofar as, on Beauvoir's picture, preadolescent children are also excluded from the all-adult-male "warrior expeditions" and so occupy an animal-like position parallel to that of adult women. Domestic violence takes place in *domestic* space, within families or among intimate partners. Domestic predators prey upon their victims within this space, channeling a predatory logic as old as humanity itself.

It is worth noting that a connection between oppressive forms of masculinity (including male-perpetrated domestic violence) and the logic of predation has also been drawn by more recent thinkers, though without Beauvoir's reference to an imagined prehistory. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, for instance, Carol Adams argues that the obsession with meat and meat eating in contemporary Western culture is in fact a vehicle for misogyny and for the male dominance of women. "Carnivorous animals provide a paradigm for male behavior," Adams writes, "through symbolism based on killing animals, we encounter politically laden images of absorption, control, domain, and the necessity of violence. This message of male dominance is conveyed through

meat eating—both in its symbolism and reality" (Adams 2015, 244). A man need not kill any nonhuman animals himself in order to enact this carnivorous and domineering bearing. He need not even himself eat meat. The violence is in the background, built into the culture, functioning symbolically, supplying motivation and context for action.[8] Accordingly, to dismantle predatory masculinity, including its role within domestic predation, requires disruption at this cultural and symbolic level. It requires, among other acts of resistance, envisioning alternate forms of masculinity, alternate relations between the sexes, and alternate modes of cohabitation among humans and other animals—alternatives loosened from the ancient grip of predatory logic.[9]

CONTESTING DOMESTIC PREDATION

We circle back to *The Night of the Hunter* and to Harry Powell, the domestic predator epitomized. Of course, one might object that Powell's case is not especially instructive for a broader account of domestic violence on grounds of his being so extreme and exceptional a human specimen. Powell is a serial killer with apparent psychopathy: might the predatory dimension of his behavior best be attributed to these rarified aspects of his identity, rather than to any more communal substrate of predatory masculinity such as that which Beauvoir and Adams describe? Might domestic predation be a legitimate concept only in the case of outliers like Powell, but illegitimate for approaching more "run of the mill" perpetrators of domestic violence? While dispensing with this concern in a thorough way would take more space than is available here (and the consideration of numerous situations of domestic violence apart from those staged in *The Night of the Hunter*), I believe that our detour through prehistory, and through the critiques of predatory masculinity offered by Beauvoir and Adams, provides basis for a strong, if provisional, response. Powell's domestic predation of Willa, John, and Pearl Harper is not, we are now in position to contend, a historical aberration. The predatory logic we see in Powell is continuous with the predatory logic embedded within the history of dominant masculinity itself. Powell is certainly an extreme figure, but the fact that he so successfully infiltrated the town and the Harper family— quickly garnering trust and spiritual admiration, effortlessly inhabiting the patriarchal triplet of husband, father, and preacher, and wielding authority from these positions—shows that his mode of action rests upon a socially dispersed, commonplace foundation. Powell instantiates domestic predation in an especially brutal form, but the predatory logic underlying his actions is all too quotidian.

By way of closing, I would like to explicate two additional moments from *The Night of the Hunter*. These moments, both late in the film, serve not so

much to help characterize Powell's enaction of domestic predation (as do the moments treated above), but rather to aid in sketching out two different paths for contesting domestic predation. The first of these is the path of the mob, the second the path of the protector. Both are given expression in the film, and both evoke long-standing technologies of confronting nonhuman animal predators (e.g., wolves, sharks, lions, foxes, or bears) within human history. Attending to these paths of contestation as they appear in the film is one means of probing the limits of domestic predation and of establishing that, however entrenched and powerful the logic of predation may be, there are still other logics at play powerful enough, at least at times, to counteract it.

When the townspeople eventually discover that Powell is not the religious and moral exemplar they have taken him to be, but instead is an opportunistic and fraudulent itinerant womanslayer, their response is explosive. Feeling betrayed, and perhaps mortified at having been so thoroughly deceived, they coagulate into a vengeful mob, torches and broken-off table legs in hand as they stampede down main street. Leading the mob is the merchant Walter Spoon with a knotted noose in hand. "Lynch him! Lynch him," the merchant's wife, Icey Spoon, had shouted earlier in the courtroom during Powell's trail. The Spoons are the most vocal, wrathful, and agitated members of the mob. They had also been the most fully convinced and won over by Powell's preacher persona, quickly heaping upon him the utmost trust and admiration. The lynch mob is in fact itself a technology of intra-specific human predation with a long and terrible history (Chamayou 2012, 99–108). The path of the mob is therefore the contestation of domestic predation through predation of another kind. It is a continuation of predatory violence on a new level, its social sublimation into communal anger, and a thirst for extrajudicial retribution.

Contrasting with this mob mentality that erupts at the film's end, *The Night of the Hunter* also models a second path for the contestation of domestic predation. This is what can be called the path of the protector, and is embodied by the character Rachel Cooper, a self-sufficient older woman who feeds, bathes, and puts to work runaway children at her farm along the riverside. Cooper delivers the film's first lines, dubbed over an aerial shot of children playing in a field below. Among them is an apropos passage from the Bible, which the film shows Cooper reading from to an assembled group of anonymous children (all shown in disembodied form with a cosmic star-scape looming behind them): "beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matthew 7:15 KJV). The film invites us from the beginning to comprehend Powell's domestic predation in these biblical terms, and to approach the character of Cooper, who appears again only in the film's final third, as the embodiment of the *beware* in the scriptural line. The film is nowhere more a religious allegory

than in the character of Cooper who (consummately compassionate toward lamblike child outcasts, dressing mostly in white, and quoting the Bible) is the saintly shepherd-antidote to Powell's predatory and demonic (though outwardly pious) wolf.

John and Pearl take refuge at Cooper's farm at the end of their flight from home, their canoe stranding itself overnight in the reeds at the farm's edge and leaving the children sleepily unaware, not unlike baby Moses. Cooper seems able to read the trauma in the children's faces, sensing a grain of truth in their guarded claim to have no parents to speak of. She takes them in, weaving them in alongside the three other orphaned children already living with her. When Powell discovers (through subterfuge) where the children are, he calls at the Cooper farm. His smooth speech and righteous presentation is ultimately ineffective against Cooper, who uses the insinuating barrel of a shotgun to run Powell off of her property just as he had at knifepoint cornered John, and the sought-after-doll, beneath the porch steps. Powell vows to return that night and indeed does, singing as he arrives the hymn "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," a sort of running leitmotif of his character throughout the film. An owl is shown pouncing upon a rabbit, whose dying cry occasions Cooper to say to herself, "it's hard world for little things." Cooper's response to Powell's predatory behavior is as levelheaded and calculating as the mob's response is enraged and erratic. When Powell after some time enters the house, calmly but firmly demanding that the children be turned over ("I want them kids"), Cooper again wields her rifle and, when Powell persists, she shoots, apparently hitting Powell in the arm. Powell shrieks animalistically and staggers off to hide in the barn. Cooper calls for state troopers, explaining not that she has shot a human invader, but that "I got something trapped in my barn."

Cooper relates to Powell as the predator that he is, but not with the hateful, embittered derision of the mob. Concerned above all with the protection of the children (her flock), she sees Powell as a threat to be contained and dispensed with. When Powell is taken into custody, in a scene paralleling the apprehension of Ben Harper at the film's beginning, Cooper is not consumed by resentment and a lust for vengeance, but resumes a life of joy, relief, and gratitude, sweeping the children into this spirit along with her. While the mob reproduces the logic of predation on a different register—as the predatory logic of lynching, of the extrajudicial hunting of the (whether rightly or wrongly) condemned—Cooper, the protector, represents the possibility of stopping this logic in its tracks.

The human animal, like all other natural organisms, is indissolubly bound to countless other organisms (human and otherwise), processes, systems, individuals, and collectives large and small (Sharma 2015). The quality of this interdependence varies widely across different scales and

contexts, transforming relative to the perspective one adopts. This chapter's account of domestic violence as domestic predation reveals an arena in which it can be truly horrifying. As domestic creatures, we humans are in large part constituted by the power that other human beings wield in relation to us (above us, below us, or beside us). Domestic predation is an exploitation of this constitutive interdependence at the expense of those whose long histories of domination, violence, and exclusion have rendered prey. Provisional though the preceding account has been, at least one key point can in the end be put forth as non-provisionally true: predatory logic, along with the predatory masculinity it often accompanies, has limits and can be dismantled. Rachel Cooper's ultimately successful dispatching of Harry Powell establishes as much. Through certain acts of resistance, defiance, and empowerment, it is possible to forestall, rather than perpetuate, the logic of predation. However prevalent and entrenched it may be across human history and today, predation is not the undisputed essence of the (interdependent) human being.

NOTES

1. It is also important to state at the outset that, by theorizing domestic violence as domestic predation, this chapter does not claim to exhaust the meaning of all cases of domestic violence. The concrete lived experience of domestic violence is sufficiently varied to prevent any total generalization. The account presented here is provisional and does not attempt to offer a comprehensive treatment of domestic violence of all kinds at all times in all places. Accordingly, though a fuller account would certainly have to do so, this chapter does not attempt to situate its account of domestic predation alongside the many extant theories of domestic violence that have been developed within numerous disciplines. This chapter is a piece of speculative philosophy, and is not intended to stand in for or compete with any other approach to the subject, be it social scientific or philosophical. The chapter neither considers concrete instances of domestic violence apart from those fictional instances depicted in *The Night of the Hunter*, nor does it entertain or respond to conceivable objections that might be raised against the account it develops. The pages that follow sketch this account in broad, exploratory strokes, leaving these crucial scholarly matters to be addressed on another occasion.

2. Eric Godoy's chapter in the present volume offers a compelling complementary demonstration of the necessity of our acknowledging, with humility, the identity and interdependence of the human and nonhuman natural domains (particularly, in Godoy's case, of the human and the non-avian dinosaur domains). As we both argue, albeit with reference to different cinematic-cultural artifacts, human beings neglect this interdependence at their peril.

3. This list was compiled from a survey of seventy-eight directors, film critics, and film historians.

4. Apart from watching the film itself, an excellent and wide-ranging critical assessment of the film, its source novel, and the adaptation of the one to the other, is Couchman (2009). For a more straightforward but highly detailed description of the film and its production, see Callow (2000).

5. For a treatment of the history and philosophy of the "manhunt," which provides excellent background for understanding Powell's domestic predation of the Harper children, see Chamayou (2012).

6. A critical overview of these debates can be found in Speth (2010); also Clark and Speth (2013). For a helpful general account of the place of hunting in human prehistory as well as in historical times, see Cartmill (1993).

7. Kelly Oliver makes a similar point as regards more recent social attitudes toward hunting: "Hunting is associated with masculinity because it is a way of providing for the family, and because it is a blood sport that confirms man's position at the top of the food chain" (2016, 19).

8. Bates (2013) offers a complementary analysis of the formation of masculinity vis-à-vis the rhetoric and metaphorics of hunting, with special focus on sixteenth-century European literature.

9. As Adams puts it in her preface to the twentieth-anniversary edition of her text, "we imagine the end of the transformation of living beings into *objects*. We imagine the end of predatory consumption. We imagine equality" (2015, 7).

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Will God Forgive Us?

Interdependence and Self-Transcendence in Paul Schrader's First Reformed[1]

Vernon W. Cisney

Through the blackness and overlaid intermittently with the film's opening credits in a white calligraphic script, an absolute stillness subtly and almost imperceptibly gives way to the distant and barely audible sounds of the natural world—a gentle breeze, the singing of insects, the quiet beating of avian wings, the cawing of crows. Slowly emerging from the opacity and peering through the waning darkness before dawn, the silhouettes of trees begin to emerge. We become steadily aware of the gradual, ground-level panning of the cinematic eye toward a structure—a church, unmistakable for its architectural style, particularly its steeple, which from our perspective seems to double the overall height of the building, atop which sits a small cross that seems almost to shimmer in the breaking light of morning. We are being invited into the world of Paul Schrader, into the transcendental film about which he had long ago theorized, but that, until 2017, he had never himself created. This invitation is itself emblematic of Schrader's entire approach—his film *requires* the viewer to, in a sense, leave one world and enter another, in this case the world of *First Reformed*.

After this peaceful invitation comes the first interjections of *human* activity into the film, the journalistic meditations of Reverend Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke): "I have decided to keep a journal. Not in a word program or digital file, but in longhand. Writing every word out so that every inflection of penmanship, every word chosen, scratched out, revised,

is recorded. To set down all my thoughts and the simple events of my day factually, and without hiding anything. When writing about oneself, one should show no mercy." This austere emphasis on mercilessly honest introspection, unfolding in a space illuminated only by a desk lamp, contrasts with the calm stirring of interactions of the outside world just moments prior.

Toller's journalistic endeavor and its interior excavation is, as Toller claims, "a form of prayer." And as we are invited into the film, we are invited also into the prayer, into the pursuit of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that Rudolf Otto famously characterized as the "wholly other" (Otto 1923, 27), and Mircea Eliade describes as *hierophany* (Eliade 1957, 11). Schrader's film attempts to draw the viewer into Toller's interiority, in order to escort "the respondent to another level of consciousness, a Wholly Other world" (Schrader 2018, 22–23), to express, as he says, "the Holy itself" (Schrader 2018, 39).

This chapter attempts to follow the film's movement. Schrader's film is unique among the films of ministerial despair to which it gives obvious homage, such as Bergman's *Winter Light* (1963), in that *First Reformed* does not rest within that hellishly isolated interiority. *First Reformed* compels a movement of transcendence, but a fully *immanent* one: the transcendence of selfhood that shatters the psychological boundaries by which we attempt to keep out *the other*. Toller's moment of rebirth arrives in his rejection of the Lutheran soteriological view of individual salvation or damnation—it abides in the realization that we are redeemed, if at all, just as we are damned, *together*. The film thus heralds a radical interdependence (Sharma 2015), one that subverts the famous Sartrean dictum, suggesting that *Hell is other people* (Sartre 1989, 45) only insofar as we refuse or ignore our interdependence. The hell-on-earth of impending climate catastrophe[2] humanity is facing has made indisputably clear the interdependence of our politics and our economics with our cultural religiosity and the monstrous hybridization of all of these into the ethical valuation system of neoliberalism that structures our every activity, as Adam Kotsko writes, "a complete way of life and a holistic worldview" (Kotsko 2018, 6). It has made clear that the biological habitability of the planet does not abide by the boundaries of politics, geography, race, or species. It doesn't care about the national "rankings" in terms of carbon output into the atmosphere, and one's individual life choices will not save them from the imminent catastrophe. We are saved, or we are damned—together.

I shall begin by outlining the triune structure of what Schrader identifies as the "transcendental style" in film, before turning to the film itself, to show how this structure makes way for the expression of the wholly other, which is, I argue, founded in love.

TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE

A famous Zen kōan reads:

> Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters. (Watts 1957, 126)[3]

Beginning from the position of banal naivety, where things *are* (in the substantive sense) just as they appear to be, the Zen practitioner eventually arrives at the "truth of Sunyata" (Suzuki 1956, 190), the doctrine of emptiness. This consists in the realization that there *is* no substantiality at the core of things, that all apparent "things" are temporary configurations of matter and energy, and that even "entities" as seemingly eternal and unchanging as mountains are transient. Mountains *are not* (they lack the enduring substantiality of) mountains.

Once the truth of Sunyata is realized by the practitioner, emptiness accompanies our every perception, allowing a sense of "thisness" to return to things. The mountain is then encountered *as* a mountain—a temporary crystallization of the geological history of the world, an expression of the stirrings of Earth, the cooling of lava, the flows of water and wind, and so forth. The mountain is met in its transience, in its openness to and interactions with its surroundings; it is encountered exactly as it is and as nothing more. The world is transfigured, but from within its everydayness.

This progression, from mundanity to a radical estrangement, back to the transfigured mundane, is the basic structure of Schrader's transcendental style. It is marked, according to Schrader, by three characteristic moments: the everyday, disparity, and stasis. The first, the moment of the everyday, Schrader describes as "*a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living*" (Schrader 2018, 67). This phase shares many traits with what Schrader terms "Slow Cinema": "plotlessness, wordlessness, slowness, and alienation" (Schrader 2018, 10).[4] It employs a directorially minimalist approach, eschewing cinema's tendencies to manipulate and heighten emotion, in order to provide a flattened and sterilized picture of everyday life. Some of its strategies include the use of the static frame or the largely immobile camera; minimal coverage (the various angles used to capture a scene); a privilege of images over dialogue; liberal use of the "long take"; limited use of music; heightened sound effects; a flattening of the

image (not exploiting the possibilities of foregrounding and *mise-en-scène*); and limited movement and action of the actors.

In one way, these devices lend themselves to a more "realistic" depiction of everyday life. Stripped of the wide array of artistic interjections that the director often uses—manipulated colors, emotionally charged music, flawless execution of dialogue—slow cinema presents a far less organically unified and saturated rendering of everyday life, in many ways far closer to the repetitive, often tedious patterns with which our worlds are actually structured. But in another way, it is not realistic at all, because *real* life actually *does* include moments of heightened excitement, "of genuine theater and melodrama" (Schrader 2018, 67), and slow cinema drains the vibrancy and variability from these as well.

The result is that slow cinema tends to be more conventionally "boring" than standard Hollywood films.[5] But this boredom serves at least two purposes, particularly where Schrader's transcendental style is concerned. First, it *requires* participation by the viewer. That little is "given" in the way of sensory stimulation demands a heightened level of engagement. The viewer is literally participating in the creation of the experience. As Schrader writes, "A new movie is being created. A simultaneous movie. The spectator's movie. . . . The two films overlap: the director's tableau and the spectator's meditations on that tableau" (Schrader 2018, 19). Secondly, the flattening of the everyday into a near-caricature of banality serves to amplify the disparity that the transcendental director will soon introduce into the film. It creates a dry, seemingly dull world into which the insertion of estrangement between the individual and their world can be more keenly felt: "As part of the transcendental style, the everyday is clearly a prelude to the moment of redemption, when ordinary reality is transcended" (Schrader 2018, 70).

The second moment of the transcendental structure is "*Disparity: an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action*" (Schrader 2018, 70). Into the everyday emerge the rumblings of "a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality" (Schrader 2018, 70), fault lines that start to chip away at the apparent emotionless immobility that the director has worked so hard to create. An emotional tension begins to grow—a disharmony between the subject and the world around them, developing gradually into an unbearability. "This boundless compassion is more than any human can bear and more than any human can receive. This compassion is marked by solemnity and suffering; it is an extension of the holy agony" (Schrader 2018, 71). Eventually, this disparity culminates in what Schrader calls the "decisive action," the point at which the internal intensity of the subject becomes so irreconcilable that it *must* be expressed in *some* way, "a nonobjective, emotional event within a factual, emotionless environment" (Schrader 2018, 74).[6]

Finally, the phase of "stasis is the end product of transcendental style, a quiescent view of life in which the mountain is again a mountain" (Schrader 2018, 75). With stasis, the disparity is not resolved; it is transcended. We should not think of this transcendence in the mode of a Hegelian *aufhebung*, which reconciles the terms of any given opposition by simultaneously *preserving*, *canceling*, and *resolving* its essential paradox through the mediating alterations of its terms;[7] rather, the stasis of the transcendental style *transcends* the paradox by maintaining the paradox *as* paradox, freezing "it into a stasis" (Schrader 2018, 76). Crystallizing, rather than *mediating*, the oppositionality of life. This *truth of the paradox* is what Schrader has in mind when he characterizes it as an "expression of the Transcendent" (Schrader 2018, 76). The paradox is irreconcilable in accordance with any logic, including the dialectical logic of Hegel.[8]

A helpful example can be pulled from a passage of life familiar to almost all of us: the development of the person into the adult they will be, by way of the progressive "deaths" of the child that they were. The sadness that accompanies these little "deaths" is never reconciled or canceled, nor is it transfigured into the joy of watching the child grow up. It is a permanent and irreconcilable fact of older adult life. It is perhaps for this reason that one of Schrader's paradigmatic examples of this transcendent moment of stasis is found in the much-analyzed "vase" shot from Ozu's *Late Spring*:[9]

> The father and daughter are preparing to spend their last night under the same roof; she will soon be married. They calmly talk about what a nice day they had, as if it were any other day. The room is dark; the daughter asks a question of the father, but gets no answer. There is a shot of the father asleep, a shot of the daughter looking at him, a shot of the vase in the alcove and over it the sound of the father snoring. Then there is a shot of the daughter half-smiling, then a lengthy, ten-second shot of the vase again, and a return to the daughter now almost in tears, and a final return to the vase. The vase is stasis, a form which can accept deep, contradictory emotion and transform it into an expression of something unified, permanent, transcendent. (Schrader 2018, 77)

The vase in this shot is the object of the daughter's focus. A vase is as "permanent" an everyday material object as we are likely to imagine, an aesthetic object that occupies a particular place in one's home throughout the passage of time. As an object of relevant permanence in the daughter's life—something she has likely seen every evening for years as she has retired for bed— the vase expresses a lifetime's worth of the attendant nightly emotions: joy, pain, anger, longing, and now, finality and the passage across a threshold of life, all contained in the encounter with this unchanging vase. This is stasis: pain is not resolved; it is transcended in the truth of its irreconcilability. "Man

is again one with nature, although not without sadness" (Schrader 2018, 76). The everyday, disparity, and stasis: this is the structure of transcendental style. Let us now turn to *First Reformed* to see how this transcendental structure operates in the film, isolating the interdependence that emerges as the film's transcendent reality.

VISUAL FLATNESS: THE WORLD
OF *FIRST REFORMED*

The "plot" of *First Reformed* is fairly straightforward. Reverend Ernst Toller is the minister of the First Reformed Church, located outside of Albany, New York in the fictional town of Snowbridge. Through the course of the film, we discover that Toller, a former military chaplain, had encouraged his son, Joseph, to enlist and serve in Iraq, in a war "that had no moral justification," in the words of Toller (Schrader 2017). When Joseph was killed in Iraq, Ernst's wife divorced him. Toller then left the military and met Joel Jeffers (Cedric Kyles), pastor of the Albany evangelical megachurch, Abundant Life, the parent church that owns First Reformed; it is Jeffers who has given Toller his job at the woefully under-attended First Reformed. Toller struggles with severe health problems, potential stomach cancer and excruciating urination accompanied by tinges of blood in his urine, along with frequent insomnia. Emotionally, he attempts to navigate a tumultuous, once-sexual, now-Platonic relationship with the choir director at Abundant Life. It is at this phase of his life that we meet Toller, just as he is beginning his yearlong project of journalistic meditation:

> These thoughts and recollections are not so different from those I confide to God every morning; when it is possible; when he is listening. This journal is a form of speaking, of communication, from one to the other; a communication which can be achieved simply, and in repose without prostration or abnegation. It is a form of prayer. (Schrader 2017)

This epistolary prayer accompanies an ongoing battle with despair in which Toller is embroiled when we are introduced to him, a battle that will only intensify through the course of the film.

Into this crisis of faith walks the young Mensana couple: the husband Michael (Philip Ettinger) and his pregnant wife, appropriately named—after the mother of Jesus—Mary (Amanda Seyfried). Following the Sunday service, Mary approaches Toller to seek his counsel on behalf of her husband. A member of a radical environmental activist group, Michael, convinced of the inevitable uninhabitability of the earth due to the effects

of climate change, despairingly believes that it is immoral to bring a child into the world, and he is thus attempting to persuade Mary to terminate her pregnancy. Toller reluctantly agrees to talk with Michael and visits the Mensanas in their home the following day for what would ultimately be a defining conversation for Toller, one that would eventually open the film to the movement of disparity.

This early phase of the film is Schrader's formal moment of the "everyday," giving the viewer very little in terms of visual and auditory stimulation. It is immediately evident in Schrader's choice of aspect ratio for the film, 1.37:1, known as the Academy Ratio, only slightly wider than the standard television ratio of 4:3.[10] This narrow framing limits the horizontal extent of the image, keeping a great deal of the filmic world out of the reach of the cinematic eye. This choice is coupled with his limited mobility of the camera. The camera moves slowly, when at all, often framing an immobile landscape into and out of which human beings move. For example, early in the film, we are given a long take of the façade of the Mensana home. From the left enters a person walking a dog, slowly crossing the frame and exiting to the right. Seconds later, Toller's car enters the frame from the right and parks in front of the home. All the while the camera remains perfectly still. This strategy is used repeatedly throughout the film.

Cinematographically, we can also point to the use of lighting in the film. Interior shots are very often illuminated by natural light, as in the church service, in the Mensana home, and in Pastor Jeffers' office. After sunset, they are lit by very dim lamps as we often see during Toller's moments of journalistic reflection, or by the screen of a computer, as when Toller is researching Mensana's obsession. The exterior shots are very rarely sunnily lit; more often the sky is gray, whether because of clouds or because of the time of day. This use of lighting, in combination with the primarily gray color palette— (the blacks and grays of the clothes, the earthy tones of interior furniture and décor, etc.) gives an overall muted visual impression.

With respect to characters, we can point to Schrader's use of frontality to capture dialogue. This tactic, commonly used by Yasujiro Ozu, subverts the standard Hollywood formula of over-the-shoulder shot/reverse-shot that is commonly used to capture dialogue, instead framing the faces almost directly and very often in close-up. This technique has the tendency to "flatten" the appearance of the face, making it look even more two-dimensional, what Schrader calls "*a visual flatness*" (Schrader 2018, 14); this, combined with the predominantly nonexpressive looks on the characters' faces, not only accomplishes the desired goal of "giving" the viewer less visual stimulation—it also hearkens back to a long tradition of religious iconographic style, particularly Byzantine style.[11] We see frontality used in a number of the film's conversations.

Likewise, drama is understated rather than heightened. The most obvious example of this "*non-acting*" (Schrader 2018, 16) is apparent in events surrounding the suicide of Michael Mensana. It begins with a cemetery scene in which Mary Mensana phones Toller. This opens on a long shot between two rows of headstones, at the opposite end of which stands Toller. After picking up a fallen headstone, he begins walking slowly in the direction of the camera when Mary calls, imploring him to meet her at her home. This scene, and the immobility of the camera, occupies forty-one seconds. When Toller arrives at the Mensana home, Mary escorts him to the garage, revealing a wooden crate in which is hidden a suicide vest. The degree of expressivity on the part of Toller and Mary is remarkably subdued, given the danger this discovery suggests.

The next day, Toller receives a text from Michael, establishing a meeting point for the two of them at a park. When Toller arrives, the shot is once more framed as a long shot opposite the mouth of the trail, such that we see Toller enter the path from a distance and begin walking slowly toward the camera, until, looking past the camera, we see his attention grabbed by something to the left of the camera's perspective. He pauses momentarily, distraught, and begins advancing again, with more apparent trepidation. Then we are shown the prostrate body of Michael Mensana, the top of his head blown off, with a shotgun lying next to him. Moments later, we are given a long, two shot of Toller and Mary on opposite ends of her living room sofa, discussing the death, as well as the agreement to keep quiet the discovery of Michael's suicide vest. Through all of this, uncomfortably little emotion is demonstrated. As Schrader writes, "The 'reality' of everyday is so thoroughly stylized that it is unreceptive to the sort of empathy which naturally follows a sense of comprehensible environment" (Schrader 2018, 179).

WILL GOD FORGIVE US?
THE MOMENT OF DISPARITY

The seeds for the disparity are planted during the intense philosophical conversation between Toller and Mensana. The discussion quickly turns to the primary issue—despair. Michael notes that, according to climate scientists, the year 2015 was the point beyond which irreparable climate collapse would become inevitable. He points out that, besides the ecological disasters this would bring—rising sea levels, loss of land mass, drastic crop reduction, and so forth—there would also be the concomitant social catastrophes, such as the growth of opportunistic diseases, famine, climate refugees, anarchy, martial law, and so on: a veritable hell on earth. This chaos unavoidable, Michael predicts, his child would one day grow up, look him in the eye, and say, "You

knew this all along, didn't you?" (Schrader 2017). And he cannot sanction bringing a child into this nightmarish hellscape.

Toller responds that Mensana's hopelessness is spiritual, rather than scientific, that while Michael may *think* of this as a contemporary problem, it is in fact the most recent version of a problem as old as humankind itself, framed now in the modern vernacular of science and rationality as opposed to the older, religious-political framing:

> Look, this is not about your baby; it's not about Mary; it's about you, and your despair, your lack of hope. Look, people have, throughout history, have woken up in the dead of the night confronted by blackness. The sense that our lives are without meaning, the sickness unto death. [. . .] Man's great achievements have brought him to the place where life as we know it may cease in the foreseeable future, yes, that's new. But the blackness [. . .] that's not. [. . .] And if humankind can't overcome its immediate interests enough to ensure its own survival, then you're right; the only rational response is despair. [. . .] Courage is the solution to despair. Reason provides no answers. We can't know what the future will bring; we have to choose despite uncertainty. Wisdom is holding two contradictory truths in our mind, simultaneously: hope and despair. A life without despair is a life without hope. Holding these two ideas in our head is life itself. (Schrader 2017)

Despair finds us amid the everyday, when we are awakened in the "night" of our tedium, by the dark visage of meaninglessness. The word "despair" comes from the Latin *sperare*, meaning, "to hope," and it is hope that provides us with a sense of the future. *De*-spair itself *is*, as Toller says, the loss of hope, a reasoned conviction of the absence of a future, the certainty of oblivion. As Toller later says, in his meditative reflections, "Despair is a development of pride so great that it chooses one's certitude rather than admit God is more creative than we are" (Schrader 2017).[12] It would therefore cursorily seem as though *despair* and *hope* occupy two poles of an exclusive disjunction—one may have *either* hope *or* despair, but never both simultaneously.

However, Toller suggests, paradoxically, that hope can only subsist *in the face of* despair. Hope is the existential state of being rationally convinced of the human impossibility of the future, but nevertheless, *open* to the possibility of a future that was, a priori, unpredictable and beyond our rational projections. Hope means *seeing* no light at the end of the tunnel, but pressing on through the darkness[13] in the belief that, "with God, all things are possible."[14] As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "For in hope we have been saved, but a hope seen is not hope; for why hope for what one sees? But, if we hope for what we do not see, we anticipate by perseverance."[15] This presents an interesting paradox, in that despair means the absence of hope, at the

limit of which is, simply put, death; but nevertheless, hope *requires* despair
in that the absence of a future is the chasm across which hope must leap, and
this ongoing perseverance—leaping in the face of oblivion—is synonymous
with life itself.

According to Toller, to be truly *alive* requires hope: "A life without despair
is a life without hope. Holding these two ideas in our head is life itself."
This brings us to an interesting etymological connection. According to Mary
Fenton, the Latin *sperare*, "to hope," is etymologically connected to the Latin
word *spirare*, meaning "to breathe."[16,17] If she is correct, then there is, at bot-
tom, a link between *hoping* and *breathing*, which would ground a conceptual
connection between hope and life, as Toller suggests. So to put a point on this
paradox: despair is the sickness unto death, but despair is necessary for hope,
and hope is necessary for life. We can here cite Kierkegaard, who writes
that one comes to know that he "exists before this God, which infinite gain
is never come by except through despair" (Kierkegaard 1989, 57). Likewise,
Thomas Merton (one of Toller's inspirations), writes, "And in this area I have
learned that one cannot truly know hope unless he has found out how like
despair hope is" (Shannon and Bochen 2008, 166).[18]

We can thus see resonances of the paradoxical structure of Schrader's
transcendental style. The everyday, we said, allows the disparity to emerge;
what we are now calling spiritual "despair" is, in *First Reformed*, the dispar-
ity—it is the abyss of hopelessness, realizing that one's future in this world
is, from a human perspective, an impossibility. At its terminus, this disparity
entails either death, or a decisive action of some sort. The moment of stasis,
wherein that rupture is transcended, is what is here referred to as "hope."
It is that moment when one is able to look despair honestly in the face, and
hope beyond it nevertheless. It is also crucial to note that the site on which
this battle plays out in this film is Mary's pregnancy, the very embodiment
of futurity. The entire problem of the film is framed according to whether
or not Michael can affirm the openness of the future for Mary's (and his)
child, and in the wake of Michael's suicide, that problem is adopted by
Toller himself.

Let us now return to the film itself, in order to trace the movement by
which the rupture emerges in Toller. The beginnings of this rupture are
exposed in the conversation between Toller and Michael Mensana, where, it
is clear, Toller is in fact arguing with himself. It is his own despair that Toller
is trying, aggressively but ultimately unsuccessfully, to combat. Through a
voiceover, Toller narrativizes for the viewer his own state of mind during
this conversation: "I felt like I was Jacob wrestling all night long with the
angel, fighting in the grasp. Every sentence, every question, every response
a mortal struggle. It was exhilarating" (Schrader 2017).[19] Later that evening,
we see Toller sitting in his dimly lit study, drinking liquor, reflecting on the

Mensana conversation, and particularly on the meaning of despair: "'I know that nothing can change, and I know there is no hope.' Thomas Merton wrote this."[20]

Mensana's framing of the inevitability of climate collapse provides the footing on which Toller's already evident despair begins to gain ground, the fulcrum that begins to split wide the rupture in his soul. Mensana provides two key components that will continue to plague Toller throughout the film. The first is that Mensana draws explicit parallels between the sufferings of climate activists and the martyrs of early church history, both characterized by meaningful self-sacrifice. Secondly, Mensana asks Toller, connecting the stewardship of the earth *directly* to the service of God, "Can God forgive us . . . for what we've done to this world?" (Schrader 2017). Thus is planted the seed suggesting that to die for the environment is to die for God. This seed is nurtured the following evening when Mary reveals to Toller her discovery of Michael's suicide vest, which Toller takes into his possession, agreeing to dispose of it for Mary.

The next crack in the edifice is set when Michael's text arrives, leading Toller to discover Michael's body in the park. While visiting Mary afterward, she and Toller decide to keep quiet Michael's apocalyptic obsession. To that end, Toller agrees, as he had with the suicide vest, to dispose of Michael's laptop, on which were contained all the articles and data pertaining to Michael's environmental activism. In lifting the laptop, Toller discovers an envelope, addressed to him, containing Michael's last wishes for his funerary services, a memorial to be held at a site called Hanstown Kill. This prompts Toller to later begin looking into Mensana's laptop for information, where he discovers that Hanstown Kill was a local body of water that had, until recently, been a dumping ground for toxic waste. It was here that Michael wanted his service to be performed, accompanied by the Abundant Life choir singing Neil Young's "Who's Gonna Stand Up?" and here that he wanted his ashes spread. Michael's death and commemoration had assumed the symbolic status of martyrdom in the mind of Toller.

The events of the next few days would intensify this symbolism and deepen the disparity. First, Toller has a breakfast meeting with Pastor Jeffers and Ed Balq (Michael Gaston), local industrialist and philanthropist whose monetary contributions have helped underwrite the continued existence of the First Reformed Church (along with its upcoming Sestercentennial Reconsecration, the topic of the breakfast conference). Balq presents, with concern, an article documenting Mensana's memorial service and Toller's part in it, and a debate escalates between Balq and Toller surrounding the issue of climate change, during which Balq forcefully insists that Toller keep politics out of the Reconsecration service. This unprompted pressure, and the financial power that Balq brandishes in asserting it, clearly disturbs Toller, who sees it as a

monetary-political interference into a moral-spiritual issue which *should* be, in his eyes, the jurisdiction of the church.

Next, Toller agrees to help Mary donate and discard Michael's things. Among Michael's possessions are his collection of environmentally related materials—numerous photographs of ecological catastrophe and environmental martyrs, in addition to countless printouts of articles documenting the effects of climate change. Perusing these materials, we hear the first occurrences of an ominous combination of sound effects—a low, steady, tonal drone accompanied intermittently by the sound of winds. This discomfiting sound will intensify through the course of the film as Toller's despair deepens. His exploration of Mensana's effects then compels Toller to dive more deeply into Mensana's laptop, where Toller discovers that BALQ Industries, Balq's corporation, is the fifth-largest corporate polluter in the world, and, moreover, that of all the charitable contributions that BALQ Industries has made to various organizations, their donations to the Abundant Life church totaled more than twice the rest of their charitable contributions combined.

Suddenly, a comprehensive picture begins to crystallize—a picture of the inextricable entanglement, the interdependence of the forces of the world—capitalism, political power, ecological devastation, and so on—bound up with the work of the church, which is, ideally, to be the work of God, caring for "the least of these."[21] Balq's money (and hence his power) pervades the Abundant Life church, which, again, is a *mega*-church, a massive corporate entity that from the exterior resembles more closely a commercial office building or entertainment arena, standing several stories tall with amphitheatric seating that holds five thousand people. It is an altar that looks more like a concert stage than a holy site, with a wide array of top-of-the-line audio-visual equipment, several full-time staff members, and so on. In a scene from the church's interior, we see Jeffers recording a devotional message through the eye of a camera, from within an elaborate recording studio that bears upon its wall, "BALQ Industries Media Center." The fact that we *only* see Jeffers through the camera's eye in this scene reinforces Jeffers's "made-for-TV" celebrity persona. (He *is*, after all, Cedric the Entertainer.)

The *contents* of Jeffers's sermon are insidious. Jeffers says to the camera, "We tend to think that anxiety and worry are simply an indication of how wise we are. Yet it is a much better indication of how wicked we are. Fretting arises from our determination to have our own way. Our Lord *never* worried" (Schrader 2017). From his revered status as a six-figure-salary-earning megachurch pastor, Jeffers advises his listeners that it is *sinful* of them to worry about their finances, their jobs, their health, their bills, and so on. By implication, it is sinful for them to worry about whether or not the distribution of resources in the world is unjust, or if their consumptive practices

may be predicated upon American militarism and hastening ecological collapse. His brand of flashy religiosity encourages ongoing acquiescence to the exploitative system that is rapidly destroying the earth in return for massive payouts going primarily to the most elite members of the global community, while drastically increasing the immense disparities of wealth throughout the world, including in the industrialized, democratic world; the very same system that underwrites Jeffers's salary. In their final conversation, Jeffers reproves Toller that he doesn't "live in the real world," implying that the *real world* requires compromises, that doing *God's work* (by which Jeffers means, exclusively, running a church) requires tremendous resources, and those resources require appeasement of the corporate masters. In that same conversation, Jeffers refuses to concede that it is in any way a Christian duty to be stewards of the earth, going so far as to speculate that perhaps God *wants* us to destroy his creation so that he can restore it. This pragmatic, acrobatic logic is not unlike the rationale that has, for decades, fostered an alliance between American Christian evangelicals and economic conservatives, whose project since Roosevelt's New Deal has been to undo the social safety net it put in place. It is the same concessionary logic that led to Donald Trump—a notoriously greedy and lecherous real estate mogul, thrice-married adulterer, and confessed sexual assailant—soaring into the American presidency in 2016 with the highest-ever support for a presidential candidate among evangelical voters, and with the enthusiastic backing of virtually all of the major American televangelists. One of the horrors of our interdependence is that the church has been turned into a "robbers' den,"[22] one that all too often serves the interests of the absolute worst elements of human nature and reinforces an exploitative power structure. Toller realizes that his entire identity is wrapped up in the service to God through the medium of a church that is kept afloat by the forces of worldly corruption, that modern religiosity is no longer a prophetic critic of worldly power but rather, its obsequious handmaiden. Interdependence, as Toller experiences it, is hell.

This is made clear in a key scene where we are shown contrasting views of interdependence through the lenses of hope and despair. Mary arrives unannounced at the parsonage one night, distraught and afraid. Overtaken by a sudden wave of mourning, she had found herself unable to sleep. She describes to Toller an activity that she and Michael used to do together, called the "Magical Mystery Tour": "We would share a joint, and lay on top of each other, fully clothed. We would try to get as much body-to-body contact as possible. We'd have our hands out, and we would just look straight into each other's eyes, and move them in unison, like right, left, right, left, and then, we would breathe in rhythm" (Schrader 2017). The idea of this activity is to cancel as much as possible of our solipsistic isolation, maximizing touch, and

temporarily transcending the limits of selfhood, losing ourselves in harmony with another human being and with the cosmos—to kenotically[23] empty the self of the self. Toller and Mary then resolve to go on the "Magical Mystery Tour" together. Then, in the first sequence to break with the rules of slow cinema, the pair begins to levitate off the floor, as the room slowly gives way to their experiences of interdependence, shown to the viewer. The walls fade to black, as the pair floats through space, then an overhead, tracking shot of pure snowy mountains, giving way to a lush, green canyon, then crystal clear water flowing over rocky terrain before moving over a vibrant, green forest. This is Mary's experience. Then Toller sweeps aside Mary's hair from his face such that we see his eyes, and we transition now to Toller's experience of interdependence: dense traffic, a sea of discarded tires, a smog-riddled industrial landscape, a barren wasteland once a forest, an ocean of garbage flooding an abandoned neighborhood, a scorched earth, and finally, Hanstown Kill. The contrast could not be clearer. Mary experiences interdependence as cosmic oneness; Toller, on the other hand, experiences it as ugliness and hopelessness.

The crystallization of this picture solidifies the moment of disparity in Toller, pushing him to the "decisive action." Just after discovering the extent of connection between Balq and the churches, Toller changes the letters on the church sign, replacing the 250th anniversary announcement with Mensana's question: "Will God Forgive Us?" We are later shown a long take within his bedroom, his closet door open in the background, its interior illuminated, and the ominous sound effects beginning to stir. After slowly pacing in and out of the frame a few times, looking anxiously into the closet, Toller finally turns, approaches the closet, and takes from it what has held his attention—Mensana's suicide vest, which only now we learn he has not, in fact, discarded. He unwraps the object, and creeps toward it almost reverentially. We then see him before Mensana's laptop again, this time searching the web for YouTube videos of actual suicide bombings, which he watches, repeatedly. His destiny becoming clearer, he later drives to Hanstown Kill, passing the entire night, reaching the epiphanic realization that "every act of preservation is an act of creation. Everything preserved renews creation. It's how we participate in creation. I have found another form of prayer." We know what his final "prayer" will be, because we have already seen him insist to Mary that he does not want her present for the Reconsecration. His preservation will be to suicide bomb the Reconsecration service, destroying First Reformed, and with it, Balq, Jeffers, Esther, the governor of New York, and hundreds of other people. His decisive action will be to disentangle the web of interdependence binding together Abundant Life with Balq Industries, the web in which he himself is complicit.

LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING
ARMS: THE MOMENT OF STASIS

The morning of the Reconsecration, Toller's alarm wakes him and the ominous tones begin to sound. The camera shows the banner above the doors of First Reformed, announcing the Reconsecration service and displaying in huge, bold letters the BALQ Industries logo, proudly proclaiming the event's corporate sponsorship. Pastor Jeffers emerges from the backseat of his chauffeured SUV, and enters the church smiling for the camera that is simulcasting to the congregation at Abundant Life. Toller dons his priestly garments, and, soldierly, ceremoniously, fastens the suicide vest over it. Balq and his family are ushered into the church, to the front where their reserved seats are located. Toller writes his final entry in his journal (the first not narrated by him in voiceover), and crosses the floor to watch people file into the church. Suddenly, he sees Mary entering the church, defying his insistence that she keep away from the service. As if to make clear Mary's symbolic significance in this moment, she turns her face toward Toller's window, and with her hood pulled loosely atop her head, Mary looks not unlike traditional representations of the mother of Christ, her head adorned in her prayer veil. Toller's plan is derailed. Whether because he cares too deeply for her, or because of her significance as the image of hope, is ambiguous; but the one person whom Toller absolutely cannot harm is Mary. However, the disparity has ruptured him so completely that he cannot simply abort the mission; he must instead redirect his decisive action.[24]

Through the next few moments, we see Toller frantically stripping down to his bare chest, girding himself tightly in barbed wire that pierces his body all over, creating an aesthetic not unlike the crown of thorns atop the head of Christ. Toller dons his white priestly robe, which sets in stark relief the blood streaming from his body. He then empties his liquor glass onto the floor, and fills it with drain cleaner—Toller will die by a toxic sludge not unlike the sludge that pollutes the waters of Hanstown Kill.

Toller lifts the glass toward his mouth, and suddenly notices that Mary has entered, and is standing in the living room which, due to the open door, for the first time in the film is illuminated, like a heavenly antechamber. He turns his head in her direction, and for the first time, we hear his first name: "Ernst," she says. Toller drops the glass to the floor, hurries to her, and embraces her. Then, they kiss passionately, caressing each other's heads and faces in the film's first expressions of deep feeling. The camera, in this moment, again breaks the formula of slow cinema and tracks circularly around Toller and Mary as they embrace, and as the voice of Esther sings the hymn, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." Suddenly, the screen goes black, and the music

stops. This is the moment of stasis. It is not clear whether Mary interrupted Toller's suicide and he was saved by love, or whether he drank the drain cleaner, and was undergoing an ecstatic experience while dying.[25] Either way, Toller's transcendence is signified through the kiss; hope lies in his losing himself completely to another person.

LUTHER AND THE HELL OF INTERDEPENDENCE

To make sense of this, we must reflect upon what provoked the disparity within Toller in the first place. While Toller had been struggling with despair through the entire film, the unbearable rupture was awakened in the face of his realization of the interdependence of the forces of worldly capital and political power with the forces of the church, and thus, the complicity of the church and himself in the acceleration of climate catastrophe. To paraphrase the Sartrean dictum, for Toller, *Hell is interdependence.* There is a complex dynamic in play here, one that has a long genealogy in the history of the church, extending at least as far back as the reforms of Martin Luther (whom Pastor Jeffers mentions early on).

The role of Martin Luther in the history of Christianity is extraordinarily complicated. However, there are a few interesting developments that come from the Lutheran Reformation of which Toller himself is the inheritor, and the rupture that Toller experiences is an expression of a tension at the heart of Protestantism that reaches to its origins. Luther is most famous for his nailing of the "Ninety-Five Theses" to the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg in 1517.[26] This event begins the splintering of the Western church. The soil was already fertile for revolution by Luther's time, as the church had, for some time, come under criticism for its increasing opulence and its corrupt political entanglements. However, the practice of indulgences, whereby one could secure remission from Purgatorial punishment in exchange for financial contributions to the church, was particularly controversial.[27] Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses" were largely inspired as a response against these practices.

Luther, not unlike Toller himself, "was haunted by an unendurable feeling of unworthiness and guilt," and he would ultimately overcome these feelings through his realization that "it is not by works, but by faith, that one is justified" (Hart 2009, 253–254). The substance of Luther's revolution against the church consisted of "'the priesthood of all believers,' the complete dependency of the soul on God's grace, [. . .] the 'freedom of the Christian,' salvation by faith and not by works, and the uselessness of such Catholic forms of 'works righteousness' as penance, the 'sacrifice of the mass' and clerical celibacy" (Hart 2009, 259). In place of "mechanical Christianity," Luther

emphasized "the stress on private prayer" (Johnson 1976, 282) (praying for several hours at a time), and the conviction that the hierarchical structure of the church was secondary to the individual's faith in God, which through the Holy Spirit, gives each individual believer a one-to-one relationship with God. In place of the communitarian soteriological view of the Catholic Church, Luther emphasized an individualistic soteriology by which one is redeemed by God's grace alone, through sincere repentance of the heart and faith in Christ. Without putting too fine a point on it, we can say that, with his religious revolution, Luther established (in a theological vein) the basic principles that would later undergird the foundations of classical liberalism in the political-economic sphere, as found in the writings of John Locke and Adam Smith.[28] We needn't look too far to see the analogues between the principle that every believer is a priest, and the idea that every individual is a rational, self-governing agent. Luther "democratized" faith in the same way that Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and others would soon democratize the principle of sovereignty.

However, this brings with it a dark side. Most saliently, the path of robust individualism is a lonesome path. Toller's hellish isolation is rooted in the very same sense of worthlessness and interior self-laceration that shaped Luther's own worldview. But moreover, it is also a *false*, unsustainable path. As we saw in the film, Toller is awakened to this reality when he sees the political and financial inextricability of BALQ Industries and Abundant Life. This speaks to a larger point, that we are all of us complicit in the system that is rapidly deteriorating the inhabitability of the planet, destroying ecosystems, wiping out species at unprecedented rates, and so forth. And one's *individual* life choices will not save them from this hell.

Likewise, we are (in the developed world, at least) complicit in the system of political and economic exploitation, whether it is through benefiting from the labor of undocumented immigrants whose lives are upended by anti-immigrant political sentiment every day, or by turning a blind eye to the horrors of America's imperialism, to the internment of children in prison camps at the borders, or to the homeless, the sick, and so on. This brings me to my next point: the narrative of robust individualism has, for decades, been used intentionally in the service of the powerful, fracturing the multitude of humanity from one another in order to make them more easily controlled and dominated, encouraging individuals to seek first their own interests so that, when others *are* being exploited, they are less likely to concern themselves with it because they have been conditioned to think that, so long as *their* needs are met, the system is more or less working. It deludes those at the bottom—heralding a false sense of empowerment—into supporting policies that contravene their own interests. We saw Pastor Jeffers preaching that we are to accept our sufferings, no matter how great. Likewise, above, we

alluded to the ways in which, for the past forty years, multimillionaire tel-evangelists have, through their influence over other pastors and their Sunday sermons, spread the message to their followers that lower taxes, a weaker social structure, and austerity measures are the will of God, when in point of fact, the polices they espouse end up hurting the vast majority of the people who support them, while simultaneously enriching those televangelists and their corporate sponsors.

This political complexity, too, finds its seeds in Luther. Having placed him-self in a confrontational relation to the powerful Catholic Church, Luther's very life was at stake. He thus *needed* political leverage, and he found it in the Germanic princes keen to exercise their own power in the face of the Church. Paul Johnson writes, "the power of the State was visibly growing through all Europe; to displace clerical authority and entrust the headship of the Church, and the arbitration of doctrine, to secular rulers was massively to enforce a process already fraught with peril to other elements in society. It meant, too, a degree of dependence on the princes which implied a blind endorsement of the social order they represented—a social order as much in need of change and reform as the clerical one" (Johnson 1976, 282–283). Luther's placing himself in the service of the nobility would soon require shameful moral com-promises. When the Germanic peasants, inspired by Luther's individualistic revolution, launched a revolt against their lords, Luther sided, mercilessly, with the princes, urging them "to 'brandish their swords, to free, save, help and pity the poor people forced to join the peasants—hit the wicked, stab smite, and slay all you can'" (Green 1996, 131). We thus see, at the origins of Luther's revolution, the very same paradox expressed in Toller—the yearning for a radical, personal relationship with God, stymied by one's own complici-ty in the corrupt political forces of the world. For Luther, as for Toller, *Hell is interdependence*.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude by framing what happens in those final moments of *First Reformed*. The whole of Toller's life has been lived in pursuit of an indi-vidualistic, self-sacrificing glory—whether his insistence on the military, his ascetic lifestyle, his preaching at an austere church attended by almost no one, his interiorly hellish journalistic reflection, or his ultimate embrace of Mensana's obsession with ecological martyrdom. Each of these pursuits, in their own way, betray a self-sacrificial hubris and the conviction that one must labor, intensively and constantly, on oneself in order to give one's life purpose, that somehow one's *life* is given significance primarily by way of one's *death* (which can take many forms), and so, one must embrace one's

death in spectacular fashion.[29] It is this dourness that feeds the sterile depiction of every day in the early phases of the film.

The disparity in Toller comes to the fore when, in the wake of Mensana's suicide, Toller comes to understand just how entangled, how interdependent, are the forces of the church and the forces of the world. Jeffers, the very embodiment of the celebrity minister persona, is consciously complicit in this entanglement, but Toller, too, is a beneficiary. His pursuit of an isolationist relationship with and service to God is untenable, because the very church by which he serves God is also in the employ of BALQ Industries, and one "cannot be a slave both to God and to Mammon."[30] Moreover, his Lutheran individualism no longer saves him, because today, when the very habitability of the earth is imperiled, we are saved or damned together.

But interdependence is hell only so long as we deny it. The only way to overcome this hell imposed by our interdependence is to actively resist the worldly narrative by which we denied our interdependence to begin with, to break down the boundaries by which we isolate ourselves slavishly within our own subjectivity, and to recognize that my own fate is not separable from the fate of the "least of these." For it is the denial of our interdependence that keeps us mired in our self-destructive patterns. This realization is the experience of transcendence that Toller reaches in the film's conclusion, an experience of transcendence that is radically immanent in that it does not require departure from or projection beyond the earth, but rather, the dissolution of the boundaries by which we endeavor to keep out the *other*; it requires us to see the face of God in the face of the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, and the refugee. Our only hope is love.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Professor Jonathan Beever for accepting my piece for this work. I would also like to thank my friend, Dennis Frank, for turning me on to Schrader's work.

2. It is altogether fitting that I am writing this while isolated in my home in the midst of the global pandemic of COVID-19, a pandemic that reminds us once more of just how interdependent we all are.

3. This kōan is attributed to Ch'ing-yüan.

4. Schrader cites Harry Tuttle, "(Technical) Minimum Profile," *Unspoken Cinema* (blog), January 18, 2007, http://unspokencinema.blogspot.co.uk/2007/01/minimum-profile.html (accessed April 04, 2020).

5. Schrader himself, funnily enough, characterizes slow cinema as "boring" (Schrader 2018, 20).

6. In *Taxi Driver*, for instance (written by Schrader, directed by Scorsese), Travis Bickle's inability to reconcile himself to the social order through his infatuation

with Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) eventually culminates in his attempt to assassinate presidential candidate, Charles Palantine (Leonard Harris), his failure to do so being the breaking point that drives him to the apartment brothel of Sport (Harvey Keitel), where Bickle murders Sport and his entire crew, being wounded (perhaps fatally) in the process.

7. For Hegel, for instance, *Becoming* allows us to think both *Being* and *Nonbeing*, by way of their *mediation through* the concept of Becoming. See Hegel 2010, 50–54. Here we should note that *any* time in contemporary philosophy that one begins to philosophize on any topic having to do with contradiction, opposition, or disparity and their *transcendence*, the name "Hegel" unavoidably comes to mind. However, the distinction between Hegel's thinking and that of Schrader when it comes to the notion of "paradox" seems to me to be irreconcilable. For Hegel, opposition is sublated within a higher, homeostatic unity; for Schrader, it is maintained in its oppositional relation, and the transcendence involves the stasis of this relation. I think it is not accidental that the name "Hegel" does not appear once in Schrader's book.

8. For a piece that, contrary to my own assertions, casts a Hegelian web over Schrader's work, see Vighi 2018, 5–31. Vighi's piece, however, focuses on Schrader's works prior to *First Reformed,* and hence, insofar as Schrader himself characterizes *First Reformed* as his own first attempt at a transcendental film, it would seem to operate under a different structure. For instance, Vighi's entire piece is predicated upon the notion that "as a rule Schrader explicitly immerses his characters in an atmosphere of existential despair that they are unable to transcend" (Vighi 2018, 11), whereas transcendence is an essential component of what Schrader characterizes as the transcendental style, and hence, it is an essential element of *First Reformed*. Vighi's reading of Schrader's work, that is, cannot be applied to *First Reformed*.

9. The vase shot is extremely important for Gilles Deleuze as well. See Deleuze 2018, 16–17.

10. Most films today use the much wider ratios of 1.85:1 and 2.39:1. See https://filmschoolrejects.com/visual-austerity-of-first-reformed/ (accessed on May 07, 2020].

11. See Schrader 2018, 122–127.

12. Toller is here paraphrasing Thomas Merton: "Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves." Merton 1949, 102.

13. In a journal entry dated March 15, 1959, Thomas Merton writes, "The cross is a sign of liberation. To this hope I cling blindly. There is no hope of freedom in myself alone or in simple conformity to what is said and done here. Freedom means battle and faith and darkness and a new creation out of darkness" Merton (1999, 137).

14. See Matthew 19:26.

15. Romans 8:24–25. All New Testament citations are from the David Bentley Hart (2017) translation of the New Testament.

16. This is the origin of such words as *inspire*, *aspire*, *expire*, *conspire*, and *respire*.

17. See Fenton 2006, 7n17. In this note she cites Pokorny 1959, 786; 983.

18. This letter is to Dom Francis Decroix, August 21, 1967.

19. Toller refers here to the biblical story of Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. Genesis 32 recounts a story where, en route back to Canaan, Jacob sets up camp along the river and is confronted by a nameless man with whom he physically wrestles all night long. Neither one ultimately wins the bout, but Jacob ultimately refuses to let the man go until the man "blesses" him (suggesting that this "man" is something other than a man). The man then blesses Jacob with the name "Israel," which means, "one who wrestles with God." "Israel" then becomes the name of Jacob's descendants—they are the nation of Israel. See Genesis 32:22–32.

20. I have not been able to locate a passage like this in the writings of Merton. In an interview, Schrader almost seems to cite Camus for this aspect of hopelessness: "We have entered a time in human history where you must choose hope, even if you have no reason to. There's no hope lying around—you have to manufacture your own. I like that quote from Camus, where he said, 'I don't believe, I choose to believe.' And maybe that's where we are in human history. You have to choose, because there isn't much reason to hope." https://www.clashmusic.com/features/in-conversation -paul-schrader (accessed May 13, 2020).

21. See Matthew 25:40.

22. See Matthew 21:13. Of course, to say that it has been *turned into* such is a stretch, as the church has, since Constantine, been inseparable from worldly politics and economics.

23. "Kenosis" as an ethos stems from the Greek word meaning "emptying," and is typified in Christian theology by the image of the death and resurrection of Christ, which is imitated in the ongoing self-emptying and rebirth of the believer, as celebrated in the sacrament of baptism. The emphasis stems from the book of Philippians, chapter 2, verses 5-8: "Be of that mind in yourselves that was also in the Anointed One Jesus, Who, subsisting in God's form, did not deem being on equal terms with God a thing to be grasped, But instead emptied himself, taking a slave's form, coming to be in a likeness of human beings; and, being found as a human being in shape, He reduced himself, becoming obedient all the way to death, and a death by a cross." See also Cronin 1992, and Lounibos 2011.

24. Again, it is interesting to note here the parallels with *Taxi Driver*, as Bickle, unable to reach Palantine when he is noticed by the secret service, leaves the site, and ultimately goes instead to the brothel of Sport.

25. This ambiguity is intentional on Schrader's part: "I don't have the answer. Both answers are correct. On one level, it's a miracle. Grace descends and he's saved from his suicidal ways. On the other hand, there he is in Gethsemane with the cup in his hand and he's saying, 'Lord, please let this cup pass from me.' But he doesn't, and he drinks it, and now he's on all fours, purging out his stomach. And God, who hasn't talked to him for the whole film, now comes over to him and says, 'Rev. Toller, would you like to see what heaven looks like? I'm going to show it to you, right now. I'm going to open the gates. It looks like one long kiss.' And that's the last thing he sees." https://slate.com/culture/2018/06/first-reformeds-ending -paul-schrader-explains-why-its-designed-to-be-ambiguous.html (accessed May 16, 2020).

26. According to Diarmaid MacCulloch, this event, though controversial, "probably did happen." MacCulloch 2009, 604.

27. See Hart 2009, 254.

28. It is also interesting to note that, in *The Freedom of the Christian*, Luther compares the believer's relationship to Christ with the relationship of the husband and wife in marriage. This, in itself, is not surprising, given that the bible itself makes this connection. However, in fleshing out what this looks like, Luther explicitly connects this relation to property rights. "For if Christ is a bridegroom he must take upon himself that which are his bride's, and he in turn bestows upon her all that is his." Lull and Russell 2012, 409.

29. For a feminist critique of this Western ethos of death, see Jantzen 1999, 128–55.

30. Matthew 6:24.

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SOCIAL-POLITICAL RELATIONS

The Dark Night of Ecological Despair

Awaiting Reconsecration in Paul Schrader's First Reformed

Chandler Rogers and Tober Corrigan

After wrapping himself in barbed wire and covering himself with a bloodied vestment robe, Reverend Ernst Toller pours drain cleaner into an empty glass. He readies himself to drink the poison and end his life in a brutal and violent way, when a young woman appears in his peripheral vision. She comes to him like a guardian angel, calling him by name without moving, no sound beforehand to acknowledge if she had slipped in through the door or merely arrived. Toller lets the glass slip from his hand and walks with longing to the pregnant, cherubic woman before him. He embraces her, then draws her into a long, passionate kiss. A haunting solo vocalist singing "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" provides the soundtrack for the scene, heightening the drama and lending cathartic significance to this impulsive, carnal act. Cut to black.

Described before is the final scene from writer-director Paul Schrader's film *First Reformed* (2018). It's a climactic moment that's hard to interpret, even for those who have taken the full journey and watched the film in its entirety. Yet, as with so much of Schrader's work, the *chaos* of this ending is very much by intention. Schrader has admitted in interviews about the film that its ending is "designed to be ambiguous" (Cortellessa 2018). The final scene as it now exists was, after all, adapted deep into the eleventh hour of the postproduction process. Schrader made continual editing tweaks to the scene we have just outlined in detail, always in hopes of reaching a "50/50-ish split" on the audience's answer to the question of whether Mary's appearance was real or imagined.

Whether Toller is really seeing Mary or just imagining her is an interesting question, but an even more distressing one—deep beneath the mere diegesis

of the film—remains for the viewer. It is the questions each audience member must ultimately face for themselves as the credits roll: How do we live, even thrive, in a world where every person, act of nature, and outside force appears to be conspiring to hasten the end of life on earth? How do we press on once we become existentially aware of the horrors of interdependence, when seemingly autonomous human actions added together inevitably lead to drastic ecological consequences? If Toller's final moments onscreen are unresolved merely for the sake of ambiguity, many will walk away with only heightened anxiety and confusion. For those who commiserate in Toller's inner darkness, the despair may be taken to heart too literally. Yet a third reading of the film's ending does exist, and can be accessed with the help of an elucidating framework.

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's work on religion and the hermeneutics of suspicion, we argue that *First Reformed* and its ending actually provides an implicit way forward, a glimmer of hope amid the overwhelming darkness of seemingly inevitable environmental trauma. With Ricoeur's essay "Religion, Atheism, and Faith" as our guide, we maintain that Toller's final hope must rest in openness to transcendence—which in Toller's case arrives in the face of the Other, incarnate. His fate stands or falls with a receptivity to the Other that has passed from an abstract, otherworldly belief in resigned interconnectedness, through the dark night of ecological despair, wherein he recognizes the dark underbelly of self-interested, otherworldly concerns in their corporate effects upon all species, and finally to embrace the carnal, the mundane, and the *this*-worldly. By charting *First Reformed* loosely on Ricoeur's design in this way, we hope to demonstrate the film's philosophical weight, emphasizing its timeliness in highlighting a veiled response to the heightened environmental, political, and cultural climates of our time, and the way these stifle our own ability to relate to one another in authentically positive ways.

To briefly outline the film's plot, *First Reformed* follows the aforementioned Toller, pastor of a dying Dutch Reformed church, who, in meeting an environmental activist, Michael, and his wife, Mary, becomes attuned to the realities of rapid, anthropogenic climate change. At their fateful first meeting, Toller attempts to comfort Michael's distress at what he believes to be the end of the world by relying on abstracted notions of "courage" and "grace" in the face of the unknown. At this point in the film, it is understood that Toller has resigned the enjoyment of worldly pleasures, conceiving of his religious community as a loosely connected conglomerate in this life whose real cohesion will only blossom in the next. In contrasting the extreme solipsism of Toller's actions with the inherent role of his vocation as luminous comforter, we come to understand the belief system that he *actually lives out* to reflect a world made of interconnected, autonomous agents leading loosely related, but ultimately separate lives.

Yet when Michael commits suicide two days later, arranging for Toller to be the first to find his corpse, the Reverend becomes doubly horrified, both by the image of the corpse and by his sudden existential implication in the larger ecological drama which first prompted Michael's own despair. As the script unfolds, Toller stumbles down a path marked by increasingly dark discoveries. He finds that environmental destruction is inextricably intertwined with corporate greed, hypocritical religious institutions, apathetic attitudes, and gross self-interest. The more he aspires to make a positive change and to involve himself with matters in the here-and-now, the more he experiences palpable resistance from the very leaders of the religious and business world that have assumed fiscal responsibility for his atrophying country church. As a result, Toller comes to reckon with his own powerlessness to effect change on his own, turning his once-thin conception of the world as interconnected—necessarily interacting, but with agents largely left to their own devices and potentials—on its head and revealing the darkness of interdependent living that's been present all along. The truth, he must now recognize with much terror and despair, is that we necessarily depend on one another's actions for our own existence and flourishing.

This discovery and other factors lead him to identify fully with Michael as he gives himself over to despair after multiple failed attempts to help others see the light. He eventually becomes convinced that ending his life, and taking a few perpetrators out with him, is the only redemptive move still available to him. Yet in the film's ending scene it is Mary who, either as a vision from God or as one who happens to be in the right place at the right time, breaks in radically from without to save Toller from himself. Her unforeseen entrance compels Toller to choose love against all odds—not just as an idea or as a religious rite but also as a vulnerable and pre-conceptual act of the body.

WHERE *FIRST REFORMED* AND PHILOSOPHY MEET

The thematic arc of *First Reformed* and the argumentation of "Religion, Atheism, and Faith" share common ground in part because of their similar cultural contexts. Both writer-director Paul Schrader and philosopher Paul Ricoeur attempt in these works to bear witness to sincere religious exploration in an otherwise post-religious age. After over a half century of writing and directing films known for their controversial characters (e.g., the disturbed Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*) and taboo alterations to sacred subject matter (e.g., the unorthodox depiction of Jesus Christ in *The Last Temptation of Christ*), Schrader finally chooses, in *First Reformed*, to make an austere and slow-moving religious drama, removing the stylistic punches for which

his fans and critics had largely come to know him. Unlike the explosive *Taxi Driver* or the anachronistic *Last Temptation*, Schrader mostly plays *First Reformed* straight, at least until the eruptive ending, keeping the camera direction, performances, soundtrack, and *mise-en-scène* withdrawn and cerebral for the majority of the film's running time.

However, Schrader's link to religious, or spiritual, cinema actually reaches back to his only book-length study of filmic style, *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972). In it, Schrader traces the transcendental through film history with extended readings on the works of such hallmark international filmmakers as Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu, and Carl Theodor Dreyer. Besides their shared style, each director also shared an intense interest in spiritual themes, exploring them deeply and without irony. Until *First Reformed*, Schrader had never tried to make a film even remotely similar to Bresson, Ozu, or Dreyer.[1] In an interview with *Vulture* magazine, Schrader admitted to often feeling too "intoxicated with action, empathy, sex and violence," and other aspects of film that weren't "in the transcendental tool kit" (Lincoln 2018). It wasn't until after a conversation with the Polish director Pawel Pawlikowski, whose 2013 *Ida* Schrader considered to be a contemporary exemplar of transcendental style, that he finally felt ready to take on the type of sincere religious exploration he'd watched with an academic rigor for so many decades.

Similarly, Ricoeur moves with caution before embarking on his own religious project. He knows he can only broach the subject of religion by first framing his "Religion, Atheism, and Faith" as a deep and probing response to the religious disenchantment wrought upon Western civilization by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. From the first line of the essay, Ricoeur admits to the reckless ambition of his pursuit: "The subject of this essay compels me to take up a radical challenge" (Ricoeur 1974, 440). He presses on, at peace with the risk of "failing to reach the goal," of articulating a vision of a post-religious "faith" (Ricoeur 1974, 441). Ricoeur argues that true religious belief, or faith, comes only on the other side of a dark night: that of atheism. Toller's journey, as written and directed by Schrader, bears this journey out in cinematic form. Such a night radically calls into question the originary psychical and cultural functions of "religion," namely accusation and protection: "I thus understand religion as a primitive structure of life which must always be overcome by faith and which is grounded in the fear of punishment and the desire for protection."

DISILLUSIONMENT WITH AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

First Reformed opens with Toller already deep into the night of Ricoeur's "atheism." By this we mean that the process of purgation, or of burning

away the chaff of religious observances carried out solely on the basis of the primitive psychical functions Ricoeur describes, has begun. Toller is first introduced by way of voiceover narration, explaining that he is conducting an "experiment," which consists of writing out his thoughts in a journal and refusing to edit or alter a single word. At the end of one year, he vows to destroy the materials in that journal twice over: "shredded, then burnt." This twist on religious meditation is his particularized form of prayer. However, his definition—"a communication . . . achieved simply . . . without prostration or abnegation"—absolves him of the bodily vulnerabilities typically associated with the act.

Toller's dispassionate, measured, and un-inflected tone adds to the rational, ordered, and even lifeless persona first presented onscreen. His personality finds visual corroboration in static establishing shots of his bedroom: church pamphlets; an encased Union flag; a single painting. The spartan accommodations lack any hint of a personal touch. Everything in the room looks tidy, proportional, and preserved, as if in a museum. We later learn that the church over which Toller presides, First Reformed, functions less as a place of worship than as a site of historical significance. Toller's life, like his church, is undefiled, solipsistic, isolated. This abstracted way of interacting with the world puts him in tension with the role of religious comforter and guide that he is meant to assume, and which still holds some semblance of power over him, even if just symbolic. He eventually admits, again over voiceover, his inability to speak-pray. Instead he confines the act to scribbles and movements of the hands, limiting his body's role in spiritual expression.

Despite living out the critique of Nietzsche and Freud subliminally, Toller retains a warped optimism about the consequences of interconnectedness on this side of paradise. Toller often projects positive generalities onto others even when they may not deserve such distinction. In another early voiceover narration, Toller observes that youth attendees of Abundant Life, the megachurch supporting and funding First Reformed's operational costs, were "so excited and so full of life" in his last visit to their midweek meeting. He particularly notes the way "they were open" and how "they welcomed communion." When the film later shows us this youth group, we learn that Toller's observations couldn't be further from the truth. The young adults are divisive and self-centered, succumbing to political platitudes and other prejudices passed down by unquestioning parents. How can Toller so thoroughly misunderstand his own surroundings? The strongest answer rests with his abstracted and resigned position, having seemingly removed himself from the chain of interdependence and reliance upon others in his larger community.

Toller's own progression from solipsistic clergyman to radically unconventional martyr expresses the heightening of the tensions within the second phase of the journey which Ricoeur depicts as a necessary purgative for the

person of classical religion living in a post-religious age. Implied in our analysis of *First Reformed*, and in Ricoeur's essay, is the assumption that a religion based merely in slavish obedience to a pre-established code of ethics, and guilt-ridden punishment for disobedience, cannot possibly console us in these confusing contemporary times. This very fact is represented in the character of Michael, Mary's husband and a now-radicalized environmental activist.

The central drama of the film begins when Toller meets Michael and becomes attuned to the realities of rapid, anthropogenic climate change through him. After rattling off several distressing scientific predictions about cataclysmic degenerations likely to take effect before 2050, Michael confesses his exhaustion: "I thought things could change, you know? I thought people would listen." Far from acknowledging the peril of the situation Michael has described, Toller asks, "Do you have thoughts of harming yourself?" Characteristically, Toller's responses hardly address the ecological content Michael keeps attempting to shift to the forefront of their conversation. Refusals to fully engage with these facts are propelled by the unquestioning, unyielding belief that the world will, somehow, keep spinning.

As Michael brings Toller to face harder and harder questions, Toller begins to discern the deeper, spiritual problem at hand: despair, or hopelessness, in the face of a vast and overpowering crisis that his religious convictions have no direct answer for. Toller's final answer—"Who can know the mind of God?"—to a particularly piercing question from Michael—"Will God forgive us?"—is ultimately an act of concession, and not just to Michael's way of thinking, but also to the hermeneutics of suspicion that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud set into motion, whereby the God of morality and order ultimately exists in an "ideal realm," which in fact may "not exist" despite a religious person's devotion to it (Ricoeur 1974, 443). Though not yet convinced that this particular idea of God, and this particular form of religion, have been exposed or critiqued, Toller has been convicted by the possibility that he is wrestling with a new, higher power: despair in the face of interdependent ruin and abandon. All of this is found and personified in Michael. In retrospect, Toller speaks of feeling as though in their dialogue he was as Jacob wrestling the angel, engaged in a struggle that was ultimately "exhilarating."

Yet no matter how far Toller's perspective has shifted in the direction of ascetic individualism, his own struggles with despair did not, we eventually learn, materialize *ex nihilo*. Bearing witness to the despair in his own past, Toller explains that despite his ex-wife's insistence to the contrary, as a former military chaplain he had persuaded his son to join the armed forces. "I talked my son into a war that had no moral justification," he confesses, referring to the war in Iraq. After his son's death and his own subsequent divorce, Toller feels he can speak to this would-be father from experience: "And

Michael, I can promise you, whatever despair you feel about bringing a child into this world cannot equal the despair of taking a child from it." Having lost both son and wife, and having faced such darkness, Toller was somehow able to maintain *hope*—even if that hope serves merely as a coping mechanism, marred by isolation and the undefiled purity of an abstract religiosity.[2]

When Toller finds Michael's mutilated corpse two days later, Michael's convictions no longer merely elicit religious reservations from the reverend; the very tangible act of suicide moves Toller into a physical state of revulsion. The darkness of despair, which Toller believed could be found in each one of us, is no longer only a concept or an idea. Death has manifested itself in flesh and blood. As Toller becomes the first human witness to this carnage, he feels a complicity in the act that causes immediate shame. The corpse is also the exemplar of a psychoanalytic phenomenon coined by philosopher Julia Kristeva, that of abjection:

> In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its border: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. (Kristeva 1982, 4)

Kristeva expresses in abjection the way in which a nihilistic loss of self-identity need not come through disillusionment concerning the state of society, nor through the loss of certain ideals; it need only begin in the gut, or the gag reflex. The sad, logical conclusion of Michael's pessimism has become quite tangible in the physical realities of buckshot and blood spatter. Yet in death, Michael's life takes on a higher, symbolic meaning. His mangled body snares Toller and drags him headlong into the larger ecological drama already unfolding, to which the Reverend had been blind. Toller's intuitions break down in contact with the real. He simply cannot forget or ignore the call to action, which now bears association to the revulsive pull, the sight, and smells, of the rotting corpse.

INTERDEPENDENCE TURNS DARK

Little does Toller know that the very act of following through with Michael's request for a memorial service at a local toxic waste dump places him in contentious political opposition to the larger community of which he finds himself apart. Yet when he *does* realize this fact, he only feels greater license to take a stand in deed rather than just in word. As the teen choir from the

Abundant Life megachurch sings Neil Young's "Who's Gonna Stand Up?" during Michael's memorial service, the camera cuts to a momentary close-up of Toller, looking weighed down and convicted. In a tense breakfast meeting with Pastor Jeffers, the head of Abundant Life, and key congregation member Edward Balq, the prime benefactor for First Reformed's reconsecration service and chief executive officer (CEO) of an egregiously polluting, multibillion-dollar corporation, Toller is accused of misrepresenting the church with this politically tinged "protest memorial." Rather than silently acquiescing with a forced apology, Toller fights back in words, posing Michael's recurring haunting question: "*Will God forgive us?*"

Toller's past prescriptions for living, that of rejecting all worldly pleasures *and* all worldly responsibilities, can no longer hold. In fact, Toller's own identity as an estranged clergyman, wrought of his own volition after the fallout from his son's death, and divorce from his wife, is contingent upon the oppositional understanding of the Pastor Jefferses and Edward Balqs of the world. This too necessarily includes whatever unethical measures these leaders keep in place regarding the environment to ensure the status quo remains unchanged. In equal turn, those with the greatest power and reach in Toller's immediate religious circles are themselves dependent on the perceived value of religion as a communal force for justification to carry out their politically motivated agendas. Toller's post has become less a symbol of the service of genuine spiritual endeavor, and more a symbol for the pomp and circumstance that keep religion "historically important" as well as culturally profitable, catering to the constituents of a particular sociopolitical context. But what about (environmental) justice?

As Toller argues this very point with Jeffers and Balq, a voiceover from a later journal entry layers over the scene: "The man who says nothing always seems more intelligent." As if against his will, the deeper convictions of a once-silent Toller are now coerced into the light. Either from panic or uncertainty, Toller doubles down on his new, self-righteous moral agenda from this point on, whereby he breaks the silence and takes a stand against injustice. However, he quickly comes to face the effects that the darker implications of interdependent thinking can have on a human psyche. When no one is the sole cause or sole moral arbiter of anything, and when no one feels particularly responsible for the compounded effects of millions of individualized actions—when the conservative religious community from which Toller has emerged does not recognize the horrors of globalized *interdependence*, which an unquestioned modern emphasis on radical individualism only compounds—despair can only heighten, approaching a breaking point.

A pivotal scene between Toller and Mary following Michael's death is perhaps the most purely cinematic representation in the film of this very conundrum. In this scene, Mary comes to Toller's room behind the church

out of a fear she can't explain. "I'm frightened, I'm frightened of everything," she admits as she walks in. Mary recounts the litany of vivid experiences that have begotten her unseated anxiety. Explaining her deepening depression, she alludes to "the roof falling down," also proclaiming that a "dark curtain just fell." As an antidote to these anxieties, present even before Michael's death, she and her late husband used to perform a calming, meditative act, which they called "the Magical Mystery Tour." As she describes it, the two would lay on top of each other "to get as much body-to-body contact as possible," looking deeply into one other's eyes. They would move their eyes in unison and begin to breathe in rhythm, becoming one in body and in soul. The Magical Mystery Tour is an initial means to stave off the despair and dread. The act, in essence, is expressive of an idealized interconnectedness.

As if hoping that this can alleviate his own despair, compounded by the crescendo of recent events, Toller invites Mary to join him in performing the Magical Mystery Tour. Mary lays on top of him, and they clasp hands and breathe together. After an elongated moment of stillness in the frame, something magical indeed does happen. Becoming one, they begin to levitate. The act is never explained within the confines of the film, but the consequences are clear: Toller and Mary have found a connection that transcends the weight of the concerns of this world. In an equally stunning move, Schrader fades out the drab and dimly light backdrop of Toller's room to fade in images of the bright and wondrous cosmos, seen from above. Now Toller and Mary are floating in space, and light, ethereal music plays to further communicate the sense of wonder and enchantment that comes from being swept up in and entranced by visions of the harmonious interconnectedness of the universe.

The scene shifts to show snow-capped mountains, ocean waves and other idyllic images, a montage that feels straight out of a nature documentary. Through this series of images, the film communicates the visual idea that a fundamental interconnection is possible between us, and that "considering things in interaction" yields positive, even Edenic possibilities (Sharma 2015, 2). The most notable aspect of these backdrops, however, is that all human presence is absent. The prehuman harmony assumes a lack of interference, exposing the assumption that humanity is no longer woven into the fabric of a natural, cosmic harmony.

As the camera moves in closer to focus on Toller's face, we discover that he is no longer looking into Mary's eyes. He parts her hair away and looks into the void of images, with fear in his eyes, for he realizes only too well the interdependent workings of humanity and the effects of their actions upon earth's ecological relations. Next, the background gives way to equally massive landscapes, only the open land has become transformed by lanes of idling, honking cars, and miles of landfill waste. Bright and uplifting music now becomes dark and foreboding, while the camera pans further

up, removing Toller and Mary entirely from the scene, so that only an eerie collection of smokestacks and fiery wastelands remain. With this strange but powerful overall sequence, Schrader invites the audience to experience for themselves first the phenomenology of interconnectedness and its naive separation of human and nonhuman actors, then the realities of ecological interdependence and its darker underbelly.

A RADICAL RESPONSE
(AND A DIVINE INTERRUPTION)

As a result of growing despair, increasingly embodying his implicit recognition of the darker horrors behind the fundamentally interdependent state of all beings on earth, Toller turns to bitterness and resentment. The more evidence of earth's destruction he sees on Michael's internet search history and the more dismayed he becomes in response to the sheer ignorance of those around him—concerning their own complicity in this ecological nightmare— the more Toller draws battle lines between ecological friends and ecological enemies. In a move toward extremism, Toller recovers the suicide jacket Michael had built in his garage and begins to toy with the idea of using it to blow up First Reformed during its coming reconsecration service. The next several voiceovers from Toller employ violent and apocalyptic Biblical language, quoting Matthew 12:37 and Revelation 11:18. The latter verse was not Schrader's original choice for this scene, as he divulges in the DVD commentary (Schrader 2018). However, he felt going to Revelation was necessary in order to truly telegraph to the audience Toller's transition into Jihadism before he is actually seen putting on the suicide bomber jacket and thereafter occupying the role of terrorist-martyr.

This move toward extremism largely stems from Toller's own solitude in a sea of ignorance, and disillusionment regarding the lack of a single clear cause driving the evil he has finally come to see clearly. Though he confides in Mary alone about his inner transformation, he chooses to restrict himself to speaking to her in veiled parables and cryptic lines; for instance, "I believe Michael was standing on holy ground that day"—the day of his suicide. Schrader highlights the increasingly extreme, increasingly isolating paradox of being an individual in the age of the internet: it becomes all too easy to shut oneself up behind closed doors and read only material that reinforces one's already entrenched views and beliefs, to pull away from society and retreat to a fringe group, and to acquiesce to politically motivated, ideological binaries that villainize all opposing viewpoints.

Such enclosure inevitably gives way to Nietzschean madness. For all of his leveling of religious hypocrisy, ultimately Nietzsche could not live up to his own ideal: "His aggression against Christianity remains caught up in the

attitude of resentment . . . fall[ing] short of a pure affirmation of life" (Ricoeur 1974, 447). In a similar way, at this point in the film, Toller is ill-equipped to embody the type of person who sees clearly the thickly interwoven webs of overconsumption, corruption, and ecological degradation, and is able to withstand the draw toward *ressentiment* that occurs in the process. Much like the Nietzsche who bemoans the permeation of such nihilistic tendencies, for the duration of the film Toller's body literally suffers the effects of increasing material degradation.

The first time we see Toller preside over a church service he is coughing, presumably with a cold or fever. However, we quickly learn that he is nursing a much deeper illness, which, we eventually discover, is cancer. We see him retch, wince in pain as he urinates, and produce bloody stool. The more *aware* Toller believes he is becoming about the world, the less he takes care of his body, allowing its disintegration. The increase in despair at the particular level therefore corresponds to an increase in material degradation at the corporate level. Once again he rejects the bodily, this time in the belief that he is withdrawing from a frighteningly interdependent community rather than an arbitrarily interconnected one.

With Toller preparing to carry out his suicide mission, we return to the film's final scene. As the reconsecration service begins, Toller prepares his vest. But when Mary shows up to the service, he's forced to change his plans. He wraps himself in barbed wire and prepares to drink the hemlock. But Mary, suddenly appearing, calls the Reverend by his first name: Ernst. It is a name no one else calls him in the film, her usage connoting intimacy and familiarity. She says it softly, warmly, yet without moving. With this invocation, she transcends the dichotomy between clergyman and layperson, as if emboldened by a spirit of great authority and confidence. Toller immediately drops his glass, so surprised he is by this outside voice. He had become so consumed by the isolation of his own violent wishes that it failed him (and the audience) to consider an outside presence ever being possible again. Yet Mary's voice breaks through, striking in Toller "an obedience that is no longer infected with accusation, prohibition, and condemnation" (Ricoeur 1974, 447). How did she come through the door? This is never explained, no initial sound cue given to suggest an entrance. As explained in this chapter's beginning, Schrader never discloses why or how she arrives. All we know is that she is here, and that her appearance, along with her words, offer a lifeline to Toller, who can choose to become receptive again to someone—or something—outside himself once again.

As Toller strides across the hall to meet her in an embrace, her pregnant body against his pierced, bleeding flesh, we must yet understand that there is no leaving this film with an easy answer. It is the same realization Toller had come to just moments before, while planning his suicide, and it is a realization given a name by Ricoeur: that of *resignation*, or full recognition of

the inescapability of human suffering (Ricoeur 1974, 461). Ricoeur locates the movement of resignation first in the Biblical story of Job, whose tragic faith through great suffering is rewarded by the interruptive voice of God. Job is *spoken to*, no longer merely spoken about. That in itself, according to Ricoeur, is enough. After all, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?" is far from an all-encompassing consolation or answer to the perils of such suffering. Yet the intimacy the presence of the Other alone can provide, interrupting the suffocating loneliness of disillusionment and isolation, proves sufficient for Job and for Toller alike (cf. Levinas 1969, 93ff). Until this moment no character in the film has been allowed to set foot in Toller's private quarters, the physical location where his most intimate thoughts are trapped in his journal, and the place of compounded neuroses stemming from the information gleaned from the search history on Michael's laptop. Mary's presence interrupts the silent resignation of Toller's heart: "The occurrence of word . . . creates a link; dialogue is in itself a mode of consolation" (Ricoeur 1974, 461).

This leads to a second movement, which Ricoeur labels *consolation*. As the camera starts to swirl around Toller and Mary, the two now kissing with great passion and desire, we find that Schrader's use of dialectic here is not with words but with bodies. At first, Toller moves almost mechanically toward Mary. But in their kiss, the camera having no clear point of stasis, we experience a cinematic evocation of the sacramental quality of love, stumbling into intimations of an underlying goodness that emerges immanently, from *within* the natural order. In this final embrace, the very beginning of new life, Toller's burden has been lifted. Michael's lost faith in the possibility of life becomes a hope reconsecrated, with Toller's silent vow to raise his as yet unborn daughter. From the breakdown of symbolization in revulsion before Michael's mangled corpse, here with the promise of new life has emerged the promise of the deliverance of a reconsecrated world.

Having passed through the night of ecological despair, abstract and isolating notions of religion, piety, and devotion thrown out with it, the only thing that stops Toller from regressing to the most extreme form of political activism, and self-annihilation, is a passionate love, which breaks in radically from the outside in the form of Mary. The film's ending suggests that the call of the Other overwhelms guilt, and a tendency toward self-mutilation—both for Toller and for the humanity he represents. Far from Toller's initially theoretical relation to transcendence, the love displayed in this final kiss is love incarnate, profoundly carnal and intimately present in this world. In Toller, we can recognize our own temptation to despair in light of the horrors of interdependence, in the face of overwhelming denial or even petty religious justifications. *First Reformed* takes on the ecological terrors of our globalized, interdependent world, holds up the frankness of these dark realities to us

as in a mirror, and offers a response that begins to expose some of the deeper roots of our ecological crisis. It points us forward to a post-religious faith, grounded in a final, unexpected affirmation of the very goodness of creation.

NOTES

1. For a more comprehensive look at Paul Schrader's overall thesis in *Transcendental Style In Film*, read "Will God Forgive Us? Interdependence and Self-Transcendence in Paul Schrader's First Reformed" by Vernon W. Cisney (see chapter 3 of the current volume). In it, Cisney details the parallels between *First Reformed* and works by transcendental stylists Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer. He also unpacks *Transcendental Style* and its own relation to twentieth-century philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his concept of the time-image. Cisney argues for Schrader's evocation of the transcendental style as a central piece to *First Reformed*'s formulations on salvation and experience with the divine.

2. While we are only able to touch briefly on the specifically interdependent relations of parent and child, Eunah Lee's "Love and Horror: In Bong Joon-Ho's *Mother* and Lee Chang-Dong's *Poetry*" (see chapter 1 of the current volume) plays out the potentially harmful scenarios that can arise when "selfless love" for a child turns into "collective egoism." The two films offer extreme and morally challenging examples of mother-child relationships as a way of illustrating this "horrible paradox of love," with the power of memory being Lee's argued sole antidote to a sympathy that otherwise becomes susceptible to corruption and horrific actions.

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Chapter 5

The Horror of Interdependence

Climate Migration Anxiety by the Radical Right in Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja's **Aniara (2018) and** *Ari Aster's* **Midsommar (2019)**

Sydney Lane

The verdict has been in for a while: the forest infernos and underwater cities of anthropogenic climate change discourses and realities have psychological effects that we can no longer ignore (which have been variously identified as eco-anxiety, climate depression, environmental grief, and trauma) (Wallace-Wells 2019; Dodds 2011; Weintrobe 2012; Orange 2017). To understand the proliferation of these new kinds of psychologies, it is useful to study literature and the arts because, according to the film critic E. Ann Kaplan, they "showcase symptoms of social processes, cultural energies, and cultural change . . . they provide us with a barometer of what's going on in any particular society" (Kaplan 2016, 28). Indeed, climate change phenomena have inspired the creation of a new genre of climate-oriented "speculative horror" in literature and film—like Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2013) and Bong Joon-ho's film *Snowpiercer* (2013), for example—which provoke an affective mode of horrified anticipation of the dystopian worlds to come. In response to such work, an overwhelming majority of environmental humanities thinking focuses on imagining and fostering various forms of communal ethics of non/human mutual entanglement for the purposes of mitigating the impending climate crisis and ensuring our species' survival into futurity. These important ethics of interdependency are often framed in terms of a hopeful movement toward social and environmental justice via increased

identification and attunement with our deep constitution by others (Haraway 2016; Morton 2010). But less has been said about the possible psychic resistances to or horror of such entanglements, and even still less has been said about the developmental and political socialization of such resistances within the western capitalist patriarchies of the global north, a social order that requires hierarchy and inequality.

Considerably little, if any, attention has been given to how the legacies and lessons from popular science fiction and horror films may overlap in their critical speculations about these kinds of "phobic" psychological reactions to the human species' shift from supposed hyper-independence to a regained sense of "obligatory symbiosis"—the feeling in the age of the Anthropocene of returning, alongside our transnational "siblings," to claustrophobic embeddedness in a resurrected, cyborg version of recalcitrant "mother nature" (Serres and McCarren 1992). Perhaps aggravating this supposed new and uncomfortable sense of forced proximity, so to speak, is the global prediction that the "greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration—with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding, and agricultural disruption" (Brown 2008). With this prediction in mind, this chapter contributes to the studies of the psychological effects of anthropogenic climate change by exploring cinematic renderings of the rapidly spreading experience of climate migration anxiety. Climate migration anxiety may take very different forms, among others: on the one hand, it may manifest as a fearful anticipation of involuntary diaspora by people forced to leave their homes. On the other hand, for some groups in the nations that provide asylum to climate refugees, it may express itself as xenophobic "border" anxiety. This chapter will explore cultural representations of this latter emergent type of climate migration anxiety that is an expression of a dysfunctional political psychology rooted in the identity formation process characteristic of early emotional life in western nations of the global north. In other words, this chapter will join with other environmental humanities projects that study films that seem to be "trying to understand the complex psychological mechanisms that inhibit humans from coming together to save themselves and the planet" (Kaplan 2016, 8).

This chapter argues that Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) and Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja's *Aniara* (2018) both function as a subgenre of climate-oriented, speculative horror films that have arisen to critically represent the emerging political unconscious of the radical right and the mythological narratives they use to express their climate migration anxiety and their dread of the interdependent proximity of the "other." Key to the analytic pairing of these films is the parallel surge of similar kinds of ethnic nationalist movements and the negative social effects of such anti-immigrant

sentiment in both Sweden and the United States (Pred 2000, xii; Gessen 2018; SVT Nyheter 2020). These films offer a comparable transnational critical response to the contemporary spread, across Sweden and the United States, of the radical right's vision of transformation for their "difference-polluted" and "decadent" nations—a nostalgic vision oriented toward an idealized past of ethnonational and organic purity (Rydgren 2018). In other words, the reactionary fear and anxiety of a climate future marked by large-scale human population displacement—and the loss of control and identity the radical right associates with the intensification of local, national, and global forms of interdependency—manifests in the distinct form of a fascist utopianism grounded in the nostalgia for a lost golden age (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019). In so doing, these films show how the genre of speculative horror also draws upon critical traditions committed to making the destructive, popular myths that creep in and ossify in parts of the collective imagination, appear strange and horrific so as to problematize and dismantle them in favor of alternative futures (Suvin 1979).

However, these films are not just straightforward critiques of the xenophobic psychologies and pastoral mythologies implicated in enacting and justifying violence against marginalized populations globally, historically and presently. *Midsommar* and *Aniara* might often instead be read as bittersweet prognoses of the psychological ecologies that will come to dominate the climate-changed future. For example, these films offer a weak form of hope by speculating about how the as-yet-unimagined catastrophic traumas and novel experiences of our climate futures might come to so radically transform our subjectivities as to secure our freedom from the tyranny of these pathologies and narratives of gendered power and ethnic exclusion that violently react in horror at the impending forms of interdependence that will inevitably result as climate effects worsen. But the films also offer a bitter prognosis in the suggestion that this liberation may only be a happy accident, a byproduct of abrupt totalizing change that comes at the cost of shattering a system beyond recognition or care (Malabou 2012). Even so, the dark representations of dysfunctional interdependency between pairs of individuals and groups in *Midsommar* and *Aniara* foreground the way intersubjective recognition theories of engagement from psychoanalysis may inspire more life-affirming practices and systems for the present and future troubling times of climate-forced large-scale migration. Such theories may help us imagine how to live more sustainably, pleasurably, and purposefully at the intersections of our necessary (i.e., constitutive) identifications with our interdependency—the communities to which we belong and the new ones we will have to form *now*, not later in a revolutionary rebirth from the apocalyptic ashes of fascist imaginaries, but with the still living elements of our present planet earth.

THE MONSTROUS OTHERS OF SPECULATIVE
HORROR AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

According to the Marxist and psychoanalytic film critic Robin Wood's highly influential essay "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," horror films adhering to "progressive" logics are notable for "their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere" (Wood 1985, 129). On the other hand, characteristics contributing to the "genre's reactionary wing" entail the further necessary discipline and domestication of "uncivilized" (i.e., the repressed and othered) aspects of human identity and desire that have rebelliously resurfaced after the partial "failure" of patriarchal capitalist socialization processes during early childhood. In broad terms, the final part of Wood's theory suggests that "the figure of the Monster" in American horror films are portrayed as sympathetic or "evil incarnate" (Wood 1985, 113). In other words, the monster functions as a vehicle for the dramatization of a kind of Norse battle between the new gods, whose ambition is to allow for the progressive reemergence and striving for recognition of the repressed, oppressed, and othered aspects of selfhood, versus the old reactionary giants that seek to restore hierarchy and inequality via controlling constraints and prohibiting taboos.

Central to Wood's understanding of the political functions of the monster figure in American horror films is his concept of "surplus repression," which he defines as "specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture" (Wood 1985, 109). More specifically, he suggests that surplus repression succeeds when it has shaped us into "monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists ('bourgeois' even if we are born into the proletariat, for we are talking here of ideological norms rather than material status)" (Wood 1985, 109). For Wood, the repression of the human species' "natural" bisexuality (i.e., the "femininity" and same-sex attraction in men and the "masculinity" and same-sex attraction in women) is key to "forming human beings for specific predetermined social roles" (Wood 1985, 111). Under capitalist patriarchies, anything contrary to these norms is monstrously other. While Wood clearly recognizes that gender plays an important role in this "conditioning-via-repression" process, he seems to only focus on the Oedipal stage of development. Put differently, he does not emphasize the developmental and later/ongoing social significance of the earlier "maternal-infant dyad" stage.

Indeed, Wood's "monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists" also repress what the philosophical psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has theorized as the *intersubjective relational process* itself—the interactive, interdependent system of mutual, reciprocal recognition that first takes place

between two minds in the early maternal-infant dyad stage. This early inter-subjective process is theorized phenomenologically as oscillations between rhythmic oneness, joyful differentiation (i.e., a healthy consciousness of where the other ends and the self begins), and cocreated "world building" of intimate spaces of "thirdness" that are not reducible to either the self or the other. For Benjamin, this series of dialectical oscillations, in developmental terms, constitutes the formation of the self in the first place, before the Oedipal repression of the internal "other" from Wood's account of political socialization.

Benjamin's concept of thirdness as a kind of psychic position and inter-subjective space, as well as a process or activity, offers a useful model to help better understand the "monsters" of *Midsommar* and the "aliens" of *Aniara* as figuring the repression of the process of othering that haunts the collective imagination and discourse of the radical right in discussions of climate-induced migration. Benjamin's model builds upon object relations theories and infant-mother observation studies that describe how the mind is formed in a dialectical communication process between the attachment figure and the infant. For example, "normal" development begins with the subject's (i.e., infant's) necessary yet temporary sense of omnipotence, a perception made possible via the immature mental tendency toward excessive projective identification and the inability to differentiate between external and internal objects (Winnicott 1960). Projective identification is an unconscious strategy for reducing emotional distress. Through fantasy, it is a "mental activity that allows us to alter an unpleasant reality by making it into something more pleasurable" (Brennan 2004, 12). In this way, infantile pleasures and anxieties are confusedly associated with good and bad aspects of the self, and are defensively inserted into the objects of external reality, especially attachment figures in early experience. This normal stage of omnipotence and excessive projection is "appropriately subverted by the adaptive mother" incrementally at developmentally appropriate times (Winnicott 1960, 151). In other words, as the infant starts to notice the other as a separate, equal subject (via increased capacity for cognition and emotional regulation) and the attachment figure begins to intervene more markedly in one-way projective communications, the subject/infant is slowly freed from the psychic aloneness of thinking the external world emanates from themselves.

In observational studies of mother-infant interactions, these interventions take the form of basic interactive patterns of attuned "rhymicity," in which the good-enough attachment figure tries to mediate the persecutory intensity of "bad" projected external objects by carefully considering, understanding, and responding to the infant's signals of emotional disequilibrium in the form of "marked" ostensive cues (e.g., eye contact, contingent reactivity, special vocal tones, etc.). Self-other differentiating and empathetic, ostensive cues

trigger the sense of self as a center of meaning refreshingly separate from, yet also receptive to, the revitalizing influence of others. Additionally, this marked mirroring behavior stimulates the infant's trust in the future expectation of effective parental mediation (i.e., what Benjamin calls the lawful third or the sense that the world appropriately recognizes and responds to one's suffering). Attachment figures who consistently succeed in helping the infant to make meaning out of emotionally overwhelming experience create a sense of stable expectation and thereby instill the neural systems that enable an epistemological stance of trust and receptivity toward social others.

To summarize, Benjamin describes her theory of the oscillating process of intersubjective "choreography" through the metaphor of a cocreated and unscripted dance that one learns in infancy and continues to enact throughout the lifecycle. In ideal circumstances, the dance begins with (a) mutual intended attunement between self and other. Attunement is then inevitably replaced by (b) moments of breakdown in the rhythmic togetherness of the third and the corresponding inward retreat or dissociation of the self. And finally, in good circumstances of intersubjective literacy, these steps are followed by (c) the acknowledgment by the self of the other's communicated and recognized failures of alignment, which culminates in relational repair and psychic stability. Crucially, this last step of acknowledgment not only involves the subject's recognition of the independence and autonomy of the other, but also contains the subject's recognition of his or her own vulnerable and interdependent relation to the other.

However, this developmental process is violated and warped under forms of western patriarchal socialization in the global north. According to Benjamin, in such societies the masculine, invulnerable, hyper-independent "master identity" from Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) is idealized across race, class, and gender. And the early infantile splitting of the "good" subject from the "bad" projected object becomes part of the mechanism of repression and denial of the other. Repression in this sense becomes a method for avoiding the trauma of not being recognized in some capacity by the parent (e.g., a child assigned "male" at birth is caught admiring the look of his mother's lipstick on his face and is punished). This devalued, "bad" aspect of the self is then projected onto monstrous others. Benjamin suggests this process is finalized during the Oedipal stage of patriarchal socialization, which involves the universal repudiation of the "feminine" (i.e., the maternal body perceived as interdependent with and chained to the mortal realm of "nature").

This means that not only are feminine traits repressed and denied by "masculine" subjects, but the actual holding or "recognizing function" of the maternal/parental figure is also repressed. In other words, to deny the "fact of mutual dependency on equally human others" the whole intersubjective "dance" of attunement/breakdown/repair necessary to human survival is

repressed and forgotten (Benjamin 2019, 19). Instead, the Western subject without memory un-reflexively demands recognition while refusing to recognize the subjectivity of the feminine "object" (i.e., women, other cultures, ethnic minorities, "the proletariat," animals, and nature). For Benjamin, this projective form of "relating" involves the "complementary doer-done to relation," in which one is unable to relate to external others beyond the instrumental, defensive, and destructive projective fantasy that "Only one can live," self-versus-other, us-versus-them (Benjamin 2018, 12). The continued idealization of the master identity maintains a social aspiration toward the delusion of self-sufficient omnipotence, and therefore enacts the repetitive compulsion toward abuser/victim, doer/done to one-way projective entanglements and obscures the fact that mutual recognition "to recognize the other . . . is essential to emotional liberation" (Benjamin 2018, 14). In sum, Hegel's master identity must not only "renounce need for the maternal object in order to separate itself from early helplessness and dependency, that is, to become like the father" (Benjamin 2018, 15). But to secure the delusion of socially sanctioned omnipotence as naturalized reality, the master identity must also forget entirely this whole process of the formulation of selfhood that was absolutely interdependent on engaging with the mother's structuring recognition.

Imagining early emotional experience in these terms (as a slow emergence from the dialectical cycles of projective, instrumental relating into the reflexivity of intersubjective "holding" or mutual recognition) is useful for imagining the sociopolitical implications of how we oscillate between these psychic positions throughout the lifecycle. For example, as Benjamin suggests, we might apply this conceptual framework of intersubjective recognition and thirdness from infant development to the analytic dyad and social and collective trauma. Benjamin's theory seems to build upon Wilfred Bion's ideas to suggest a useful ethical model where individual subjects, regardless of relational type (i.e., analyst/patient and lovers), become conscious of and take turns enacting the occupation of the position of the "mother" and "infant." In Bion's terms, at times the individual subject performs the role of the "contained" by demanding recognition from an attachment figure. Performing the role of the "contained" involves communicating/transmitting unwanted affect to the attachment figure, who then satisfies the subject's need for recognition by "containing" or metabolizing, resonating with, and converting the toxic feeling into psychic nutrients. These affects then are able to become available to the subject's psyche as the recognizable and thinkable elements characteristic of reflective functioning and for re-introjection and mental growth (Bion 1962). In a mutually, reflective "benign hermeneutic circle," this dance generates Benjamin's cocreated "third" space—a lawful habitat—that allows for the interdependent, interacting pair to mature into the creativity of mutual enrichment and metamorphosis, growth. Indeed, attachment studies show that a sense of security of attachment, "rooted in a history of feeling

recognized, appears to increase the likelihood of trust" in others as valuable sources of knowledge (Fonagy et al. 2016, 795). Such an attachment history also "provides a model to follow when one encounters a vulnerable or needy other," like a displaced climate refugee, for example (Shaver et al. 2016, 879).

However, there are significant and negative interpersonal and social consequences if Benjamin is correct in her understanding of trauma as the non-recognition of the self by an other with whom one is interdependent. Likewise, Wood's claim that Western subjects are socialized through a violent mechanism, that requires the self to repress the otherness within, forebodes later debilitating sociopolitical effects. The problem is that subjects may assume dysfunctional attachment styles in developmental contexts of mandatory repression as brought forth by the attachment figure's non-recognition of socially devalued traits in the subject. And dysfunctional attachment styles include anxious and avoidant care systems. And anxious/avoidant care systems involve tendencies to feel "overwhelmed by personal distress, to slip into the role of another needy person rather than occupying the role of caregiver, or to maintain emotional distance from the needy other as a way of reducing his or her own negative emotions" (Shaver et al. 2016, 892).

Anxious and avoidant care systems may contribute to the decline of pro-social behavior that is key to the survival of diverse and democratic cultures. The point here is that perhaps this repressive style of forming western master identities—through the non-recognition of vulnerable, interdependent internal and external others—is especially problematic in the context of increasing numbers of climate refugees in need of deep support, recognition, and care. If predictions of masses of people in "aggressive" need activate dysfunctional care systems characteristic of the western nations of the global north, then it is probable that the discourses of the radical right may make these problematic psychic dispositions worse and more serious. Furthermore, the radical right may discover that evoking such dysfunctional relations to interdependency through apocalyptic narratives of rebirth and pastoral nostalgia may advance their nativist and anti-immigration agendas.

CLIMATE MIGRATION ANXIETY AND THE HORROR OF INTERDEPENDENCE

At first glance, the plots of Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) and Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja's *Aniara* (2018) seem set in dramatically different times and worlds. Despite the large degrees of temporal and spatial separation between these two films read through the framework of attachment theory and intersubjective psychoanalysis, they are useful for thinking about the ways the radical right rhetorically frames the rapidly spreading global issue

of climate migration. For example, both plot synopses oddly begin with the traumatic loss of a damaged "home" by a newly orphaned "family of man" as experienced by white, Western individuals from nations in the global north. This is an intentional reversal meant to highlight the reality that the burden of climate vulnerability disproportionately falls on the global south (e.g., residents of Batasan in the Philippines and the Maldive Islands). And both films trace the psychological effects of the Western refugees' fated migration journey across forbidden borders in search of a new Eden, only to arrive at the unexpected territory of the realization that "all they've ever dreamt of will never occur" and, even worse, all of their "visions and dreams" were always already "going towards their demise" (Rogell 2018).

In other words, in addition to being a critique of Western, master identity formation and dysfunctional relational dynamics as responsible for our species' march toward extinction, the plot arcs of both films foreground problems with pastoral nostalgia and narratives of apocalyptic rebirth from decadence by making explicit/implicit reference to the western addiction to the self-fulfilling prophecy depicted in Hieronymus Bosch's count-down-to-doomsday triptych oil painting from the late medieval period, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (see figure 5.1). The first panel of the painting depicts God's gift of Eve to Adam as birds fly in the distant horizons and animals roam. The second panel attempts to show a relationship between the "deadly sins" and overpopulation (with clear parallels to fears of mass migration by the over-populated global south—according to the contemporary western imagination

Figure 5.1 Hieronymus Bosch's Triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* **(c. 1480–1505).**

mired in the confused yet compatible logic of Malthus and Hitler). And the third panel shows the supposed results of the unrestrained, frenzied consumption from the second panel: Paradise is destroyed and replaced by a nightmare on Earth. As a strategy of critique, the films mirror the nostalgic ethos and apocalyptic logic of Bosch's painting. For example, *Midsommar* carefully conforms to these narrative expectations. But these expectations are ultimately disrupted and destabilized at the end of the film by the irruption into the plot of an absurd, pseudo-feminist revenge fantasy about total absorption into a loving "intersubjective" family, but at the cost of the complete reconstruction of one's sense of human identity and community belonging to the point that the previous self is unrecognizable and forgotten. In contrast, *Aniara* relentlessly documents the grueling sequence of violent events and inevitable consequences that stem from collective complicity in pastoral nostalgia—the regressive fantasy of omnipotence via one-way projective relations with maternal natures and their AI replacements (i.e., "'feminine beings,' by which I mean those who carry the negative affects for the other'") (Brennan 2004, 15).

Located in a future marked by environmental destruction and nuclear holocaust, *Aniara* tells the science fiction of an evacuation to Mars that goes horrifyingly wrong: the spaceship Aniara, carrying thousands of privileged refugees away from the dying Earth, gets thrown off course due to a collision with space debris. The engine catches fire and so to prevent a fatal explosion, the villainous captain (significantly portrayed by Swedish-Iranian actor and filmmaker Arvin Kananian) ejects the fuel supply and thus loses all maneuvering power over the ship. At first, the passengers attempt to adjust to life onboard the aimlessly wandering Aniara by escaping into a virtual paradise simulated by the "Mima," a kind of AI that is designed to reach into individual human memory banks to induce "near-spiritual" visual and sensory hallucinations of being back in the pastoral landscapes and wildernesses of Earth (see figure 5.2). The Mima is managed by a nameless protagonist (portrayed by Emelie Jonsson) who is simply referred to by her labor function as the "Mimaroben" (MR). Eventually, however, despite MR's warning, this instrumental treatment of the sentient Mima as a receptacle for the one-way projective "dumping" of negative affects proves unsustainable. The AI commits suicide after its desperate appeal for spiritual release is cruelly ignored by the captain: "There is protection from nearly everything, but there is no protection from mankind. . . . How terror blasts in, and horror blasts out. Deliver me from the vision." After the Mima self-destructs, the passengers, who have come to rely on the one-way comforting recognition that the Mima had provided, become apathetic and disoriented and start forming cults while ironically the captain implements violent authoritarian rule. Over the course of twenty-four years, the spaceship transforms into a sarcophagus

Figure 5.2 On the left, a frame from Midsommar showing passengers having escaped to their personal paradises. On the right, a frame from Aniara showing an image created by the Mima from the contents of MR's "memory bank."

that drifts off helplessly into the ominous depths of the cosmos—the blank, non-recognizing gaze of "mother" space. The resistant, incomprehensibility of interstellar space pushes the living-dead passengers over the edge, and they descend by piecemeal into the "decadence" of mindless consumerism, abject dependency, sex cults, and suicidal dejection. The final scene of the film shows the dark and lifeless spaceship, 5,981,407 years in the future, meandering toward an Earth-like planet in the Lyra constellation. The arrival to pastoral heaven has come a little too late.

Similarly, the plot of *Midsommar* traces a western heroine's journey from a lost home to her arrival at an unexpected "Paradise." For example, the disturbingly unexpected fairytale sounds of harps and an angelic choir accompany the opening scene of *Midsommar*, which is a prophetic mural (see figure 5.3) (Mu Pan 2020). Reminiscent of Bosch's representation of the tragic history and fate of humanity in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the film's opening mural consists of four separate scenes intended to reveal the entire plot in a single chronological image. After a few seconds, the mural opens from the center like the curtain of an opera to reveal a series of beautiful snowy wilderness landscapes from Northern Sweden. And the magical chorus is replaced with the haunting melody of a Scandinavian kulning song, the traditional herding call sung by women to attract grazing livestock back home from high mountain and forest pastures, but also to communicate to distant human listeners, and to deter predators and other threatening supernatural beings (Johnson 1984). The sense of foreboding solace and inertia given off by the Siren's call to return home to a pastoral mother nature is broken by the shrill sound of the protagonist Dani (portrayed by Florence Pugh) receiving a telephone call and the beep of her parents' answering machine inside of a silent house whose residents are all dead—aural signifiers of the fated events to unfold as depicted in the first grisly scene of the mural (see figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3   Mu Pan's *Mural for Midsommar* (2019). *Source:* Courtesy of the artist.

Very soon after these opening frames, the audience learns that no one was available to answer Dani's call because her sister had committed parricide and suicide via carbon monoxide poisoning—a reference to the intergenerational existential aggression regarding the burden of responsibility of inheriting a climate-changed world, an issue which is also suggested in *Aniara*.

After the tragic death of her family, Dani is thrown into a despairing search for a new family, or at least an intimate partner, to recognize and help her process and grow from the trauma. Dani is reluctantly invited by her emotionally avoidant and disloyal boyfriend, Christian (portrayed by Jack Reynor), on a trip with his anthropologist classmates, Mark and Josh (portrayed by Will Poulter and William Jackson Harper, respectively), to a summer solstice celebration at a small village commune in Hårga, Sweden—the home town of his only Swedish friend, Pelle (portrayed by Vilhelm Blomgren). They enter the community by driving under a sign in Swedish translated as: "Stop the mass immigration to Hälsingland. Vote for the 'Free North' [political party] this Autumn." After parking their car in the middle of the pastoral scene from Bosch's first panel (see figure 5.1), they are invited to consume entheogens under a midnight sun (that merely concretizes their alienation from others as well as their own bounded senses of selfhood). After entering the actual perimeter of the village town through a circular hole in a giant wooden, painted sun straight out of a radical right golden age (i.e., a piece of Hårga religious art), the plot unfolds with Christian and his American friends, along with two non-European Lononders, disappearing one by one, reduced to objects for a religious ceremony that happens once every ninety years and involves dark fertility rites and ritual senicide and sacrifice. In addition to their use in ritual sacrifice, the film also gives the strangely ironic impression

that the colonial, culturally appropriating Americans are also murdered partly to protect and preserve the Swedish community's nativist, cultural identity.

The opening scenes of *Aniara* also begin with a similar tragic loss of family. The film oddly begins with the ending credits running alongside a series of depictions of chaotic weather, war-ravaged landscapes, and ghostly cities. These scenes are accompanied with a shrill and constant staccato note that stabs a sense of panic into the elongated sounds of death-gasps—the ethereal white noise of a waterphone instrument. This disturbing visual and aural imagery concludes with a spaceship of refugees leaving Earth's atmosphere. As a series of frames provide a survey of the faces of the refugees onboard, a mother's disembodied voice is heard asking if her toddler would like to say "bye-bye to Earth. You'll regret it if you don't." To which the toddler responds: "Bye-bye Earth." Another tragic loss of family occurs later in the timeline of *Aniara*. MR becomes romantically involved with the pilot Isagel (portrayed by Bianca Cruzeiro). Isagel becomes pregnant after participating in ritual sex, and they plan to raise the child together as a family. However, during the last trimester of her pregnancy, Isagel begins to despair about the ethics of reproduction in the context of their small "island" nation threatened by the problem of scarce resources and the potential of a colonizing flood by the vacuum of space. Isagel believes "there are no possibilities here" for a child born into a society organized by a tranquilizing combination of hierarchical domination and religious mysticism: "I'll give birth to a prisoner. I'll deliver someone to eternal night." Isagel's circumstances parallel the suicide of Dani's sister. But they also recall images of the global south abandoned to deal with a crisis they did not create (e.g., as in the flooding in Bangladesh). Such island nations are surrounded by the cruelly unrecognizing empty stare of the wealthy westernized global north, like the Aniara spaceship is suspended in the cold vacuum of space. However, MR vows to Isagel that she is "going to get rid of the darkness," and she tries to create the conditions for new kinds of recognition, kinship, and intimacy appropriate for thriving in their new island nation. But on the sixth year of the voyage, Isagel kills the child and commits suicide.

In this sense, the Mima can be read as a representation of the personal and collective inaction and denial surrounding the climate crisis—responses which are "most common in the western nations of the global north, which, perhaps not surprisingly, largely brought about the crisis" and will also, not surprisingly, be the last to feel the effects of the crisis (Hiltner 2020). For example, after the passengers onboard Aniara have lost the nostalgic hope of ever being able to return to their original home-planet Earth and their utopian dreams of a new Eden on Mars are dashed, they become increasingly addicted to the psychological services provided by the Mima. In an introductory lesson outlining the protocol for interacting with the Mima, MR explains that she

was "originally created for the first settlers on Mars, who . . . simply put, she transports us back to Earth as it once was." MR teaches the passengers that they must comfortably lie down under the golden sun colored Mima, tilting their heads down, and then "once you go into the images, you won't feel your . . . ." MR never finishes explaining exactly what the Mima does to the mind, because she is interrupted and jostled about as the Aniara crashes into space debris. However, the film gives the impression that the Mima acts as a kind of physical and mental-spiritual sedative by taking away the passengers' moral culpability for destroying Paradise Earth. For example, a passenger asks her, "What's happening?" and the MR responds: "Not sure, but don't worry. Why don't you lie down on the Mima pillow. You can lie here for as long as you want." This dialogue demonstrates that the Mima provides the master identity the opportunity to continue the illusion of invulnerability via one-way projective relations to the objectified other, but also gestures toward the way this personal dynamic is extrapolated to the level of exploitative political relations between the global north and south. This sense of safety and access to "paradisiacal" resources that the Mima provides is a metaphor for distinctly western privileges that multiply inaction and denial, and which are literally built from the backs of "feminine beings," the social others and their lands that the western nations of the global north deny using instrumentally for the impossible purpose of unlimited economic growth and unbridled accumulation and consumerism.

But *Midsommar* and *Aniara* do not only share a concern with mythologies of apocalyptic rebirth into the lost golden age. Nor do the films only focus on the monsters born from psychological development under ethno-nationalist, western patriarchies may manifest in the form of the cults from both films, which consist of the odd mixture of nationalist white-separatism and distorted elements of eco-spiritual communalism, as advocated by some eco-fascist groups. They also showcase the monsters (and aliens) that haunt the nightmares of the radical right—the film is full of the "monsters within" described by Wood and revealed through Benjamin's model, "monsters" understood as the projections of the otherness loved, hated, and repressed within the "master identity." "The monstrous body is pure culture," according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's formulation: "The monster's body quite literally incorporates [the] fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary) . . . of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place" (Cohen 2020, 38). The "monsters" in the films also include the "original" repressed other, "woman" as the embodiment of a misconceived understanding of interdependency (i.e., the vessel of repressed feminine behaviors and "decadent" practices and "deviations" from patriarchal sexual norms).

Among these othered aspects of deviant sexuality, femininity, other cultures, and so on that are projected onto the monsters of *Midsommar* and the

"aliens" of *Aniara*, is the fear of practices or events that repeat the affective "atmospheres" of the foundational interdependency of early life. In both films, instances of erotic intimacy or ritual, practices or acts that emphasize the vulnerability of age and youth, the processing of trauma and public mourning rituals, are all accompanied with the most disquieting and nightmarish sounds to highlight the horror of interdependency and its interactive mechanism of mutual recognition, the primal rhythmicity of the third from early life. Both films' "horror" music and the sounds that emanate from their female or "feminized" characters during rituals and events all foreground how terrifying the power of radical interdependency is for the "master identity." Examples from *Aniara* include scenes that depict the cult in a prayer chant: "Come closer. Give us light," and other scenes that feature the cult's unsettling fertility ritual. Examples from *Midsommar* also include a scene from a fertility ritual accompanied by eerie moaning in unison to mirror and amplify the emotions of the "breeding" woman, Maja (portrayed by Isabelle Grill) (see figure 5.4). And yet another example includes the group mourning ritual from *Midsommar* marked by radical empathic mirroring and recognition, as well as the sounds of gasping breaths and guttural moans (see figure 5.4).

These rituals and their soundscapes all remind one of the reciprocal processes of recognition fundamental to the development of a sense of self, the fear of the object-other who gave the master identity recognition (i.e., a sense of power, independence, and invulnerability). But these intersubjective scenes and sounds also horrify by provoking the memory of the *process* whereby the object-other, who in justifiably demanding and deserving recognition of her separate existence and acknowledgment of her suffering, created the "master's" mind, bringing him out of solipsism and into a relation with the external world. In sum, these films put on display the point of view of master identity, which experiences these "intersubjective" activities as horrifying because they threaten his illusion of self-containment. But such images are also horrifying to the historically conscious perspective who remembers

Figure 5.4 The left column image is from Aniara and the right column image is from Midsommar.

and notices the way eco-spiritual crowds moving as one interdependent body in jubilant apocalyptic togetherness are haunted by the fascist propaganda of blood and soil, of images calling forth the "pure Nordic races" to return to the earlier golden ages of a nation's history. Similar to Nietzsche's agenda in his essay "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," these films will not let the audience forget that imagining a viable and sustainable way out of our troubling times will require a critical, archival, and creative consciousness, of a "certain kind of knowledge of the past, now in the form of monumental, now of antiquarian, now of critical history" (Nietzsche 1997, 77). According to this logic then, *Midsommar* and *Aniara* go all the way to the speculative conclusion of how the "Earth and Human will soon be a paradise lost" if one-way projective relations continue to dominate human identity formation and social dynamics at the individual and collective levels, as well as if they continue to reproduce through nostalgic apocalyptic narratives about the fight to regain the lost golden age through the obliteration of the (ethnic) enemy whose survival would only ensure a "dark future ahead" (Rogell 2018, 357).

However, *Midsommar* diverges from a straightforward critique of the radical right's horror of interdependency. *Midsommar* also speculates about how the psychological effects of losing family, ecological home, and intersubjective recognition may produce a monstrous, radical personality change in the shape of the "survivor's identity, a never before seen existential and vital configuration" (Malabou 2012, 19). In her book *Ontology of the Accident*, Catherine Malabou describes how this survivor's identity emerges post-trauma due to the principle of destructive plasticity. She defines destructive plasticity as a life force that "enables the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absolutely lacking. Plasticity is the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left. The only other that exists in this circumstance is being other to the self" (Malabou 2012, 11). In other words, traumatic moments of intolerable pain, violence, loss, or extreme tension "push a person towards an outside that does not exist" (Malabou 2012, 10). The result is the formation of a "flight identity" or a "radical metamorphosis" that is "well and truly the fabrication of a new person, a novel form of life, without anything in common with a preceding form" (Malabou 2012, 18). This kind of metamorphosing trauma, for Malabou, is the "sudden event, linked to the permanent disappearance of our childhood and thus to the impossibility of taking refuge in the past, the impossibility of regression" (Malabou 2012, 48). She suggests that suddenly without warning after a brutal catastrophe, we become unrecognizable to ourselves, as well as indifferent to our old worries as wholly new creatures with new desires. Although, Malabou notes, these new psychologies are often marked by emotional coldness and detachment. The survivor's identity is not necessarily an affirmative model, but it is a category of human life being born(e) and therefore may

be important to consider as environmental and political disaster escalates in scale and frequency.

The psychosocial dimensions of the climate-caused *accident* as manifested in the form of the survivor's identity are noticeable in the plot points from *Midsommar* that stray from the folk horror genre conventions. For example, Dani reacts differently to the exposure to psychoactive teas and midnight sun. While frantically dancing with other women from the village in a maypole competition, inspired by the Hårgalåten folk song, she becomes suddenly joyful, intimate with the others, and fluent in Swedish. The folk song lyrics derive from a Hårga legend, still widely told to children across Sweden, in which an entire town's youth are seduced into dancing to the death by a fiddle-playing demon (a story that recalls Bosch's third panel of frantic, overpopulated debauchery). But when Dani is the only woman left standing, after enduring hours of forced, erratic dancing, she is crowned May Queen by the Hårga people, and begins to feel finally recognized. She feels the first stirrings of a sense of stabilizing interdependence and familial belonging, although horror creeps in, even here. She is forced into dancing, kissing, and empathically mirroring until she is assimilated into the eco-fascist community. Dani's psychological metamorphosis culminates in the notorious closing scene of the film: The final camera shot foregrounds Dani's smile of complicity at Christian's transformation into a sacrificial animal via insertion into the corpse of a gutted bear to be slaughtered by a "cleansing" fire. When Dani smiles at the camera, it as if she asks the audience in fire-melted words formed of destructive plasticity: "If we lose all relation to childhood and the past, the moment we are formed by destruction, what do we look like? What do we look like once we are metamorphosized by destruction, once we are formed by destructive, explosive, nuclear plasticity?" (Malabou 2012, 70). The answer, the closing events of the film seem to suggest, might be the horrible repetition of fascist mysticism and sacrificial Malthusian environmental ideology, on the one hand. But the film also suggests that a break in the continuity of patriarchal subjectivity, culture, and history is possible. In a kind of revision of the story of Lot's wife, Dani's indifference to and disinterest in one final look back at Christian and her burning past is exactly what we may need to imagine alternative possibilities from the compulsion to repeat global variations of the same xenophobic nationalism.

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Chapter 6

Dissecting the Corrupted Body Politic

Fear, "Body Horror," and the Failure of Relations

Josh Grant-Young

It Comes at Night is a film well suited to exploring the horror of interdependence and relations, as it presents viewers with a compelling contemporary picture of a world where the very relations (family) and precepts (trust and honesty) we often rely on as means for maintaining order in dire times are undone. Within a claustrophobic house in the woods, with little semblance of a world left beyond, the protagonists of *It Comes at Night*—in their tight social unit—depend on one another for their very survival. Yet, as audiences learn by the film's end, such tight quarters—rather than producing robust relations and a harmonious unit—manufacture fear, suspicion, and, ultimately, failure.

Thomas Hobbes's philosophy is, I argue, well-suited to addressing the fearful worlds of post-apocalyptic horror (with its emphasis on the depraved state of a world absent government or security). Hobbes's account of how one might make peace within such a chaotic world of fear and mistrust is apt for the analysis of *It Comes at Night*, but takes a largely unfamiliar turn in this chapter.

I contend, in this chapter, that Hobbesian political thought—in its intense focus on the bodily of the "body politic"—presents a type of "body horror," which exposes various concerns with a certain conception of interdependence. Within the chapter, to illustrate such a "body horror," I drag various themes of the film and Hobbes's works through the viscera of the "body politic" and attend to the subversion of the dichotomy of internal/external common to the subgenre of "body horror" (a dichotomy crucial to Hobbes and the film as well). The chief interest of this chapter, then, is to explore Hobbes's

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political philosophy as a type of body horror itself—a horrific form of organ failure within the body politic.

Interdependence (Sharma, 2015; Beever and Morar, 2016), in terms of the horror of relations in this chapter, plays an important role. Hobbes provides a variant of interdependence through his concept of *unio*—a political order where all bodies are subsumed under one commonwealth (with no individuation of will, desires or action) and any notion of selfhood is bound to a unifying contract. The characters of *It Comes at Night*, in their desire to form a *commonwealth* of a type amid a world of ruin and disease, all agree to only act in a manner which upholds a set of clear rules—giving up many (if not all) of their individual wills, desire or agency in order to gain security. While this *unio* in the film functions effectively for a time, the inability to keep individual ambitions in check (along with a fundamental lack of trust) exposes the power of a contagion like fear to undo this form of interdependence easily.

How is this failure best demonstrated? Utilizing critical scalpels, I dissect the corporeal unity of Hobbes's body politic in a postmortem autopsy to determine organic sites of failure. In this effort, I examine various corporeal failures found within the "skin," "immune system," "eyes," and "body" as a whole. In doing so, I diagnose the various failures of both the family unit of *It Comes at Night* and how the film exposes tensions in the Hobbesian project of constructing lasting interdependent political relations in the absence of a peaceable world.

IT COMES AT NIGHT: A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

It Comes at Night (2017) presents a world where political relations have collapsed—a plague-like disease has pushed survivors into the country to avoid the dangers of infection and violence within cities. Paul, his wife Sarah, and son Travis occupy a decently provisioned house in the woods, rarely straying from the property and never leaving the house after dark. Already, the infection has claimed Bud (Sarah's father and Travis's grandfather) within the opening minutes of the film, driving home the threat from outside their walls.

Despite efforts to inoculate their home from external threats, the internal dynamics of the home require a covenant of types to ensure the safety of Travis, Sarah, and Paul. Several laws govern the house, maintaining the insulated order of the family and minimizing any possibility of danger. One must always keep the red door, the sole entrance and exit for the house, locked—especially after dark. If one leaves the house, they must never be alone. Most importantly, one must not go out at night.

When an intruder, Will, is captured by Paul during a late-night break in, the rules and training that once kept the family safe are tested. Will seeks fresh water and strikes a bargain with Paul—he will bring his food supplies and (on the suggestion of Susan to Paul) his family. Though suspicious of Will's intentions and initially reluctant to aid him, Paul eventually relents and (after self-isolating with Will's family to ensure their health) invites them to stay within his household.

Yet, as the families mix and become comfortable in this new union under Paul's rules, a new threat arises, which threatens the peace and safety of the household. Suspicions take hold again when the red door is opened at night and no party claims responsibility, throwing the once-secure home into chaos.

HOBBES'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Penning many of his works in the wake of the English Civil War, Hobbes's political philosophy aims to construct a state virtually impervious to destruction. His most widely known treatise concerning this political project, *Leviathan*, is dedicated to examining not only how such a state could be constructed but also why it is necessary.

Fans of post-apocalyptic narratives, even those ignorant of Hobbes's work, would recognize the theoretical justification he gives for seeking an incorruptible regime. *Leviathan* presents a terrifying world where government does not exist, and everything is permitted—the "state of nature." Both philosophical thought experiment and potential reality, Hobbes introduces a landscape of fear for the reader:

> In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (*Leviathan,* 76)[1]

One familiar with various post-apocalyptic films or works of literature (including *It Comes at Night*) might recognize such a world immediately. Transmitted from Hobbes's time to our present, we might envision a landscape littered with burned-out cars, decaying buildings, and streets littered with corpses and trash. The few remaining denizens of this world would

either band together in small units or strike out alone, with the strong preying on the weak.

At the very root of Hobbes's political philosophy is the concept of "continual fear." Hobbes's state of nature is one of perpetual violence and strife, where agents have the natural right to do and possess what they wish. In a franker manner: murder, theft, rape, and all kinds of unspeakable acts forbidden by our liberal political culture today are at the disposal of any agent to get what they want. Absent government, civil society, police, or military to maintain law and order, humans would be left to wage war against each other for survival.

Regarding morality, Hobbes considers this state of nature to be one in which we have no normative judgments of good or evil. We could not, in this condition, claim that murder (e.g.,) is, in-itself, morally wrong. We would have no religion, laws, or collective morality governing how we would behave. Instead, our desires and will define or justify our action and judgments concerning right action. Hobbes writes: "So long a man is in the condition of mere nature, (which is a condition of war,) . . . private appetite is the measure of good and evil" (Leviathan, 100). Thus, if I determined that my security in this state required that I kill another person, I would be justified.

So, how does one leave this state of nature and find safety? Hobbes's solution, undoubtably, might also sound horrific to many democrats today. With the threat of perpetual violence, individuals unite to make a "covenant" (agreement) to surrender their natural freedom to do as they please and agree to follow the laws and will of a benevolent (yet perhaps, in present political culture's assessment—terrifying) "sovereign"—a singular and absolute power that governs the commonwealth, cannot be broken and must be obeyed for the sake of future peace (*Leviathan,* 89).

This sovereign power and commonwealth can be established in two ways: through *acquisition* (conquering by force) or *institution* (achieved through a peaceful agreement of parties to seek a covenant). Regardless of how the covenant is established, Hobbes notes that—for the sake of stable order—all subjects of the commonwealth are *required* to maintain loyalty to the sovereign (and cannot rescind their loyalty to the sovereign once covenant is made). Further, the sovereign (in addition to determining all law—civil and legislative) maintains ideological control over which ideas are permissible for the commonwealth and may censor those deemed to threaten the peaceable nature of said commonwealth. Thus, the sovereign holds absolute power as the grounding principle for security/peace and as the source of knowledge for the commonwealth (*Leviathan*, 127).

It Comes at Night sees the patriarch of the protagonist family, Paul, acting as the sovereign of the household. Though it is plausible that Paul, Sarah, and Travis each played a role in developing the laws for the house, Paul maintains

absolute control. Sarah and Travis rarely (if ever) dissent from or challenge his will or rules, and often quietly defer to Paul on major decisions or support him. Paul's rule is one which seeks invulnerability, a certain sense of enclosure against the fearful world around his family, and (in his relations with his wife and son) limits any signs of tenderness, emotional dependence, or other weaknesses in his hegemonic masculinity.

The integration of Will's family seems at first to potentially be a case of *acquisition*: Will is briefly taken hostage and negotiates with Paul under extreme duress. Yet, once he reveals he has foodstuffs, other supplies/skills and a family, Paul is willing to consider integrating Will's family into his own by *institution*. Placing ourselves in Will's and Kim's position, it seems prudent to surrender any natural rights we might have to gain security (especially with Andrew's safety in mind). Paul's rules, which explicitly only put limits on movement outside of the house, seem relatively benign (even, charitably, well-meaning) compared to various regimes or collectives in post-apocalyptic fiction.

Yet, Will and Kim's decision to make a covenant with Paul does have deeper ramifications—they have also willingly agreed to trade their individual wills for those of this united family body. This new set of relations, rather than mere cooperation, has grafted them into a new bodily union. For Hobbes, the union found in a body politic brings with it (even beyond the state of nature) new fears within its flesh best exposed in the film.

FEAR, DEPENDENCY, AND HOBBES

For Shiloh Y. Whitney, the idea of fear in Hobbes becomes more focused. For Hobbes, per Whitney, what motivates action in human agents is divided into three categories: *desire* (power for oneself, "ease" and "sensuall Delight"), *fear* ("of determination and domination by others," or "Death and Wounds"), and *hope* to achieve our desires despite fears (Whitney, 555–56). Fear, within this "tripartite" resulting from "introspection" (looking within oneself and the goals of all humans per Whitney's reading of Hobbes), sees one's interests ultimately in conflict with the potential for them to be either dependent on or determined by others in the state of nature—"plagued by a susceptibility to undergo impediment or influence" (Whitney, 556).

Hobbes's conception of personhood, on this account, is principally one oriented around "corporeal vulnerability"—the very fragility of our bodies in the state of nature. Though we are all, as humans, capable of wounding, we are constantly in danger, remembering our "Fear of Death, and Wounds," of being threatened with wounds ourselves—a shared corporeal vulnerability of all humans (Whitney, 556). This vulnerability is, in part, our motivator for

entering the contract of commonwealth, to secure our future against our vulnerability as individual actors in the state of nature (Whitney, 557).

To enter such a commonwealth, per Whitney, amounts to an effort to create a body that "repudiates" vulnerability by its incorporation of many vulnerable bodies into a powerful artifice—a body politic. The body of the commonwealth is meant (as it will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter's section on the *unio/concordia* distinction) to act as one body in will and purpose, and its strength is its ability to preserve the lives of those who make contract with the sovereign and the commonwealth. However, as I will argue in this chapter, *It Comes at Night* exposes how this supposedly invincible Hobbesian body—despite its best efforts—can still result in various failures.

Thus, the fear of *It Comes at Night* is not all that different from that of Hobbes—corporal vulnerability is the primary fear found within the narrative of the film. From the theme of the contagion, whose power to easily permeate the body and bring about its ruin is catastrophically shown in the opening scene of the film, to the threat of constant violence or domination and need for establishing a clear community of covenants like that of the two families, *It Comes at Night* embraces much of Hobbes's logic of corporeal vulnerability to create many of its most horror-inducing scenes.

A MATTER OF RELATIONS: THE HORROR OF RELATIONS

Often, when we think about political relations in a common-sense manner, there is a holistic picture of relations where individuals (and individual organs of governance) play a role in maintaining the general function or health of the greater organism of the state. Healthcare, for example, might be administered effectively because of the cooperation, cofunding, and well-managed relations of various levels of the state (or ineffectively, in the absence of the preceding). We require, on this picture, a robust collective model of relations to thrive as a cohesive political unit.

If such a picture of the state is one which is often commonly appealed to, it is of little surprise that apocalyptic narratives of horror produce such intrigue and fear—who would want to find themselves in a situation in which all political relations fall apart and we descend into a "state of nature" like that described by Hobbes (e.g., are found in various apocalypse narratives)? Horror, it seems on a popular account like the one I provide, arrives in the absence of any such bonds which ensure our collective security and well-being. Absent these, should we live in a position in which we must either rely solely on our rational capacities or seek union with others (which Hobbes

would reject as we need the authority of the sovereign to enforce our contractual obligations). Yet, there is horror still in the solution of producing notions of interdependence.

In this chapter, various approaches to answering these questions above—including Hobbes's united (rather than merely holistic—*unio* not *concord* in his terms) concept of the body politic—are explored to answer two questions: (1) by what means do relations fail in *It Comes at Night*, and (2) what dark account of both relations and *interdependence* arise from the film's reading alongside Hobbesian political theory?

The first position one might hold is that of a "strong individualism"[2]—one which I cast here in dual terms via *methodological individualism* (the scientific picture of social phenomena as reducible to individuals, their internal functions, and interactions with other individuals) and a *political notion of individualism* (where one's freedom is understood as being absent any dependence on or compulsion by the will of another or being subject to any will other than by consent).

Such a conception of autonomous self-governance or freedom from the demands of and reliance on others has been thoroughly troubled by feminist philosophy—particularly epistemology (who claim that selfhood emerges and is framed through social context and relational knowledge). Conversely, Hobbes's contractual theory of the emergence of the state from anarchy is one which focuses on an abstracted individual (their functions, decisions, and agency) in a state of nature where little social context and no culture exists proper—rendering an individual's few relations as marked by violence and distrust. In many ways, Hobbes is a methodological and social individualist (Lukes, 1973; Peacock, 1986; Pizzorno, 1991; Udehn, 2002).[3]

However, suppose we in the state of nature were to form *little commonwealths* (a term Hobbes employs to families and small collectives in *Leviathan*), we would gain things like greater security (by virtue of cooperative strength and knowledge) or resource gathering—capacities that would not be easily achieved absent such dependence on relations. We would, on this account, certainly be materially better off than on a strong individualist picture. But would this ensure the collective survival of the group?

In the section that follows, I suggest that Hobbes would disagree. While commonly working toward an end, this new political community (on his account) would lack a firmer form of dependence necessary for the long-term survival of the political body. Kriti Sharma's *Interdependence* (2015) posits a robust type of such interaction where, rather than focusing on traditionally affirmative notions of agency and value tied to the individual (and relations which empower these), one finds themselves a part of a deeper set of dependent relations woven from the dissolving boundary between individual and environment (Sharma, 2015).

Rather than a harmonious collective where individuals work together to survive (*concord*), Hobbes prescribes a more deeply entrenched interdependence in place of merely stronger relations—the *unio*—where all bodies within the body politic act of a single will and toward a single end. In the section that follows, where I describe how said *unio* resembles a logic of interdependence and how forerunners to Sharma's view like Hobbes, in the political realm, have presented alternatively dark conceptions of interdependence which seem—by the standards of liberal democrats today—to be quite disturbing.

HOBBES'S BODY HORROR:
A BRIEF APPRAISAL OF THE SKIN

As we assess the cadaver of the body politic, we first find the type of necrotic sores, which populate Bud's body in the opening of *It Comes at Night*—large, swollen, and black with bile-like fluid. How was it that the skin and flesh of the body politic, its first line of defense against foreign contagion, came to fail the body?

Body horror is a subgenre dedicated to carving up the corporeal and exposing all manner of fearful viscera—with films either exposing the frightful monstrosity of the seemingly internal and human, ascribing agency to body parts, which act of their own accord, queer transformations of flesh and function, or simply brutalizing or dissecting various portions of bodies (human or otherwise). It seems apt, in a chapter devoted to examining the body politic and its fearful horrors, that a methodology rooted in such corporeal fear is employed.

In response to the modernist picture of corporeal unity (individual or body politic), Jay McRoy suggests in his writing on the corporeality of horror that horror cinema that focuses intensely on the bodily exposes "the artificiality of socio-cultural paradigms informed by modern myths of organic wholeness." McRoy, in this instance, speaks of the visual efforts of such films to anatomically separate or atomize portions of the body, chiefly to trouble a unified notion of identity.

Though not explicitly within the subgenre of body horror, *It Comes at Night* leads viewers to consider the primary threat to the household is an intensely corporeal one: the contagion that has engulfed the world outside, which threatens to pollute the very bodies of the little commonwealth depicted in the film. The opening shots of *It Comes at Night* preoccupy themselves with Bud, seated and staring at the camera, his body covered in necrotic discoloration and open sores. Around him, Paul, Susan, and Travis wear their own protective wall of artificial skin (containment suits) to ensure they are not infected

and face a similar fate. But what do these sores reveal about the contagion and what it means (per the film's visual language and the larger canon of horror's preoccupation with skin and disease)?

For Hobbes's commonwealth and the household of *It Comes at Night*, the primary danger of such intermeshed and claustrophobic relations is the threat of corporeal vulnerability—that our bodies are in a state of threat when they are not subject to corporal unity. Independent of one another, we are capable of being wounded, murdered, coerced, and dominated by the strength and will of others—incapable of properly defending ourselves. Such a logic seems to uphold the "modernist" picture of the body politic that McRoy refers to, that an organic wholeness is preferable to wandering the state of nature alone. However, even if we escape one form of danger outside the body politic, *It Comes at Night* posits another within the very body of the body politic.

Horror resides in the competition of wills (McRoy, 197–198, 201–202). Interdependency requires a unification, on Hobbes's account, of various bodies into one corporeal unit—a singular identity, which cannot be dissected if peace is to remain a constant. Thus, the efforts of this chapter (and its analysis of *It Comes at* Night) work against such a modernist conception of the singular body, carving it at its very joints to determine how various parts of the supposed unity of the body politic in Hobbes's work fail independently of each other as well as in tandem.

In short, the body horror posited by both Hobbes and *It Comes at Night* is found in a fear of precariously proximate relations of dependence—where one must necessarily seek out other bodies to strengthen a collective one against external threats (like the contagion). Yet, such tight quarters as the house in which various characters of the film reside ensure (rather than dissuade) the spread of contagion through the body. The very solution for peace, the growth of a body politic, may very well be its own undoing.

HOBBES'S BODY POLITIC: CONCORD AND UNION, OR, FLESH AND THE BODY AS A WHOLE

Sophie Smith (2018) draws an important distinction between two concepts of political philosophy: *concord* and *unio* (union). Many political thinkers preceding Hobbes in European thought (who, Smith notes, he "held responsible for Europe's recent strife") argued for "mixed commonwealths" with sovereignty being held in various parts of the state (e.g., kings and parliamentary bodies) rather than a sole authority, often drawing their inspiration from Cicero and Aristotle's *Politics.*

The body politic, on this account of concord, placed importance on how various parts of the body collaboratively governed the body in harmony,

with parts aiming toward the good of the whole. As Smith points out, Cicero placed considerable importance on a form of *concordia* as an agreed cooperation or consensus between various bodies of Roman government (e.g., Senate and *equites*) to ensure civil harmony. For Aristotle, the *polis* (city state) is seen in Book II of *Politics* as a polity founded on the harmony of various parts aiming toward the good of the whole community (Smith, 170–172).

Hobbes considered such relations fundamentally flawed in their assumptions. Rather than an agreed commonwealth founded upon concord, where various parts form bonds (or, ligaments, if you like) to harmonize the body, Hobbes argued the body politic was a *unio*—a union of both civic will and person into a single corporeality. For Hobbes, in *Elements of Law*, to split political power into different aspects of the state would be tantamount to carving up the body of the state itself into competing parts and weakening its power.

Hobbes provides several propositions for union in the face of a threat (Smith, 170–172):

- individuals must surrender their own wills to the singular will of the sovereign,
- the commonwealth is a singular body (per *Leviathan* and Chp. V of *De Cive*),
- the "people" have no individual or collective existence or will outside of the commonwealth but are entirely dependent on commonwealth and sovereign.

What of the walls of the body politic—its very skin and fleshy protective casing? The skin is often intuitively considered to be the stable boundary between our internal organs and the world external to us. This thick layer of defense, while by no means impregnable, maintains this crucial corporeal and philosophical distinction. Further, the very externality of the body often denotes its uniqueness in appearance, assuring our individuality among other bodies.

In terms of interdependence, particularly in the work of Sean Lema (2014), such proximate relations beget the fearful conclusion that "conceptual distinctions between 'organism' and 'environment'" start to dissolve. For Lema, the co-constitutive nature of organism and environment shaping one another is such that any organic independence of one or the other is rendered conceptually null (Lema 157–160). For Hobbes, the *unio*'s dissolution of individuated identity is remarkably similar in the sense that the contract (relation) that binds together the flesh of the body politic is a darkened account of interdependence on my reading. For Hobbes, a commonwealth's contract subsumes all bodies and wills under a singular order of dependence for the peaceable

security of the collective. All bodies within must surrender competing interests and their very singular existence—no distinctions now exist between flesh and the environment of the *unio* and world around it shapes the very nature and goals of those within the commonwealth. Further, all measures of security and will are ascribed to a singular and indivisible commonwealth, requiring hyper-vigilance of the united body internally and externally.

Could the proximity of such interdependence, where all bodies are but one flesh, be a precarious set of relations? It appears, in the case of *It Comes at Night*'s viral pandemic, the idea of corporeal unity already binds bodies together into one claustrophobic unit of dependency, where no distinction is made between persons as on Hobbes's account. In a household where few protections exist for maintaining quarantine properly within (and no individual with clear medical training), where bodies regularly share common spaces (rather than "social distance") and many hours are spent in close quarters, it seems all too obvious that interdependence of such a tight-knit type (absent proper elements to mitigate the spread of the virus) leaves the *unio* in a dangerous position. Examining the body, we continue to see evidence of the spread of corruption through various organs, black bile seeping from various lesions.

HOBBES'S BODY POLITIC: PANOPTICISM AND EYES IN THE NIGHT

Security, in the state of nature or in its wake, requires a certain amount of vigilance. To prevent any attack in the dead of night or to safeguard the borders of one's domain, ever-watchful eyes are required for the commonwealth. Here, another type of bodily monstrosity is required for the body politic to avoid failure—the need for a multitude of eyes. As we begin to remove the eyes for examination, several epistemic and perceptual concerns remain inscribed on the very retinas.

Those familiar with *Leviathan* are acutely aware of the frontispiece of the text, where the gigantic "artificial man" (the very body of the sovereign, containing all subjects) surveys the landscape in a state of constant wakefulness. Beyond the singular set of eyes, which this gargantuan body uses to meet the gaze of the reader, countless sets (obscured from the viewer, as the multitude's backs are turned) gaze inwardly at one another, ensuring the collective security of the union—united in a single purpose.

Exploring various terrible embodiments of security in political treatises, modern photography and art, Bruce Buchan notes in "Terrible Security: Bifocal Visions of Horror" that considerable attention in literature on the body politic has not given attention to "representation of corporeal security

in a frame of vision that is at once panoramic in its sweep across imagined terrain while also being intimately embodied." The frontispiece of *Leviathan* and the sketch that proceeded it provide two intriguing perspectives on the matter (Buchan, 10–32).

On one hand, the sovereign remains purposefully watchful on all that surrounds the commonwealth, ensuring the external security of the body. Yet, on the inside, Buchan writes that each subject in the multitudes within the body gaze toward one another. In this *unio*, all parties to the covenant now reflect a single will—that of total security. Thus, it would be sensible that in order to ensure the singular will of the sovereign is obeyed (and all dissent quashed), that all eyes are trained on one another to ensure the body acts and wills in union (Buchan, 16).

Yet, this hardly seems like a secure and unified existence. Buchan and I share similar sentiments regarding the promise of security that Hobbes's vision of a unified body provides. Buchan contends "for all its allure of certainty, of universality, and of mundane tangibility, security is a disruptive and destabilising concept" (Buchan, 16). The conceptual ground upon which this body politic is paradoxically founded is a sense of security born out of the absence of it or "anticipation" of insecurity—more simply, born out of paranoid fear. Per Hobbes's conception of anticipation, particularly for those outside in the state of nature (rather than "secure" within the commonwealth), one's condition is the perpetual work of pre-emptively staving off potential future risks to collective safety. Even within the commonwealth, I have suggested, one is always on guard for the potential failure of the body's ability to remain secure.

As the narrative of *It Comes at Night* progresses, I argue the ability to perceive danger from within (in part, due to the obsession with the surveillance of what lies outside the home) becomes a chief problem for the body politic. The proximity of Hobbes's bodily politics, bound so tightly together, betrays its own weakness: the constant preoccupation early in the film with potential threats outside leaves this body's faculties of sight divided (yet ignoring any sickness within). Fear, in its immanent capacity, is the most effective contagion against this body, as it respects no boundaries and can assail the body from all points.

It Comes at Night is a movie constituted by panoptic security and the gaze of open, frightening eyes. As the threats of the external world seem to be promised to arrive in the night, when the most crucial of Paul's laws (to not go out at night and keep the red door closed) come into play, wakefulness seems to require many watchful eyes.[4]

In keeping with the frontispiece of *Leviathan*, as the film progresses and families merge, this gaze turns inward. Several scenes betray the filmmaker's interest in depicting the constant gaze of Paul, which is frequently suspicious.

Even when he seems to outwardly present himself as welcoming (as he explains the rules to Will and Kim) or shares a drink with Will, Paul seems to occasionally betray an inward suspicion of those around him.

Yet, while Paul seems watchful in the internal world of his household, his perception of what ultimately threatens the household remains an external vision of danger. Despite his occasional suspicions of Will, when Stanley returns one evening as the red door is left open, Paul even suggests that only he and Will should leave the house—suggesting his primary concern remains what lies outside.

Even when one's eyes are closed in sleep, watchfulness remains important. Travis seems to be the only character who sees the danger that lies within the house—mainly through his nightmares, which punctuate the narrative. One of Travis's nightmares, after he witnesses Will and Kim engaging in sexual relations, has Kim climb on top of him in bed and begin to pour black bile (like that he dreams his grandfather Bud does) from her mouth and into his. This vision seems to predict the internal spread of the contagion, but he focuses instead on the later part of the dream (of Bud outside and Stanley barking in the forest).

Here again, we see the betrayal of the eyes. Travis seems to, despite having some precognition of the dangers to come from within the house, remain transfixed on the woods and external concerns like his father. Travis, seeing much in his nightmares, refuses to share them with Paul or Sarah, limiting the panoptic capabilities of the household. Why he refuses to share his nightly visions remains unclear, as it appears, he is at least somewhat suspicious of Will and Kim (though he is quite fond of their son, Andrew).

In terms of interdependence, I wish to speculate on two potential epistemic problems for the concept which is highlighted by the film—that (1) this Hobbesian account of interdependence may create considerable "cross-chatter" for determining any unified conception of truth (particularly if the holistic body of interdependence is plagued by competing wills and a lack of trust) and (2) that the conflation of internal/external also creates a perceptual problem for determining truth.

As discussed earlier, Hobbes's radical interdependence requires (in *unio*) the submission of all wills and that the sovereign acts as the sole source of what is known (internally or externally)—a carte blanche monopoly on knowledge and truth. Already, on a democratic account, one might be anxious in terms of the sovereign's monopoly as grounds for producing all manner of propaganda or disinformation in order to ensure order (fabricating, for example, a lie to ensure the collective do not stray from the borders of a commonwealth). With no recourse to challenge this power, the remainder of the commonwealth must—on faith—assume the fidelity of anything reported or concocted by the sovereign.

However, supposing competing wills (despite the legislation of the commonwealth) begin to spread through the body politic, there seems to be a further problem. What if among the many eyes of the commonwealth (whose aim is security) duplicitous vision (that is, to lie about what they see) become rife? Or, in the case of Travis, one refuses to report the entire content of their perception to the collective? Can we rightly say that interdependence is functioning properly? If all eyes of an interdependent system are meant to function in unison, does that leave it potentially susceptible to making certain epistemic errors if not all parts of this system are working in order?

While Sharma seems silent on these particular questions, *It Comes at Night* exposes the reality of such a claustrophobic dependence on the veracity and fidelity of various epistemic accounts within the system. As Will and Kim are not entirely honest about their will or sight, and Travis refuses to divulge important details of his dreams to the family unit, it makes it impossible for Paul to maintain the order of this unit and properly know what is seen. Such epistemic "cross-chatter" ensures it is impossible to determine what is true. Hobbes might argue that more disciplinary measures are required to ensure that will and sight are all reflective of the same truth, but what might Sharma offer in terms of a more democratic approach to the interdependence of sight? Would Sharma's account of interdependence face similar epistemic cross-chatter—incapable of verifying truth properly in the case of deception or omissions?

Further, the conflation of internal and external boundaries as realms where threats may occur in the film makes the ability to be vigilant in security equally difficult. Here we see one failure of the *unio*—that sight is not properly divided or directed in a manner conducive to security. A system more akin to *concord* (say, to allow Sarah or Travis to manage internal security while Paul focuses on the external) might very well provide more clarity in surveillance (or, at the very least, remove some of the burden from Paul), but given Paul's distrust of others and aggressive reactions to any challenge to his authority, any division of will or sight seems unlikely.

Last, it seems prudent to speak of the perceptions of audiences again briefly, as another set of eyes. Much of the movie's details remain in a state of epistemic inaccessibility (the nature and genesis of the contagion, the lives and dynamics of the protagonists prior to the contagion's spread, their internal wills and thoughts), leaving the audience to survey the film in a state of darkness and suspicion as well.

I argue that such a position of surveillance is quite effective in inculcating certain Hobbesian sentiments of fear within viewers (that they might, at various points, sympathize with the concerns for security that Paul has), but it also leaves audiences in a similarly helpless state to determine many factors for themselves, leaving them prey to all manner of suspicion.

Thus, taking this into account, despite the secure potential of various vantages provided by the body politic which greets readers on the frontispiece of *Leviathan* and Sarah's hope that many more within the home will ensure the collective safety of the household, it is clear that the sovereign's many eyes—multitudinous and ever-watchful—see nothing. As we set down our tools of dissection momentarily, having examined the rotted sockets of the body politic, it appears as though this is how the eyes have failed.

THE FAILURE OF RELATIONS: CONCLUSIONS

It Comes at Night gives audiences no vision of a peaceable life after the state of nature. Despite efforts to forge strong relations between members of the household's blended family (brought into union by covenant), Will, Kim and Andrew lie dead, Travis lay dying in bed (infected by the contagion that claimed his grandfather Bud) and Paul and Sarah await their own decline—likely infected too. The future seems bleak, if not completely hopeless.

Despite the picture of interdependence that Hobbes provides within his works, *It Comes at Night* displays (in its narrative) the relative ease with which such proximate and seemingly safe relations can give rise to all manner of fear, suspicion, and, ultimately, corruption. The *unio*, meant to safeguard the very body politic that the family form (and Hobbes advocates emphatically for as the primary rational response to the state of nature in which they find themselves), ultimately leads to its ruin.

Neither the epistemic reliance on others, nor the capacity for truth-telling, nor any overarching control of divided wills, or even shared experience of fear—contrary to Hobbes—provide the necessary security which the family of *It Comes at Night* needs in order to survive the night itself. With much of their attention, wills, and ends divided (even with the power of sovereign terror to keep them in check), the picture of interdependence provided by *It Comes at Night* breeds its own horror and remains prone to infection from the contagions of fear and distrust.

While Sharma and others who subscribe to notions of an affirmative interdependence may posit the value of looking toward more holistic and intermeshed relations as a means of ecological survival and *unio* in our precarious environmental age, there remain dark visions of interdependence as a tool of survival, which cast doubt on the strength of community. Hobbes's call for union in the face of existential threats—a frightful vision of interdependence—cannot hold such a body together. As we step away from the cadaver, which was once the body politic, and wash our hands of the black bile now coating our instruments and the table, we ought to take extra precautions that the contagion of fear not spread further.

NOTES

1. Sydney Lane's chapter in this volume presents a picture of nature as something that various political/environmental movements venerate or wish to preserve (along with the pre-Christian and ethnic rituals which connect individuals to the land)—one that breeds its own horrific sets of relations. However, for this chapter, there is no such enviable account. Nature, rather than the grounding of various ideologies and practices, is presented in both Hobbes's writings and *It Comes at Night* as a veritable nightmares filled with dangers both seen and unseen. The characters of the film (and those within a state of nature in Hobbes's *Leviathan*) can build no such connection to the Earth (reactionary or otherwise), but are instead in a constant struggle to separate themselves from it or escape it—and to deny their own natural inclinations in favor of rational self-interest and enclosure within a commonwealth.

2. For more on this term, see Jonathan Beever's chapter in this volume.

3. In Jonathan and Rick Elmore's chapter, further implications of radical individualism and self-reliance in the works of Cormac McCarthy are salient for this discussion in terms of suspiciousness and morality. On one hand, McCarthy's work *The Road* posits a claim to a morality in the state of nature (which acts counter to Hobbes's conception of a world of anarchy)—a "being human" instead of merely surviving. This humanness is predicated on the accumulation of and maintenance of resources, which Elmore and Elmore rightly challenge as a foundation for morality. Hobbes would certainly appreciate the father's pursuit of some self-interested goals but would suggest that the more rational and prudent decision (rather than remaining as a hardened individual) would be to seek community—Elmore and Elmore's conclusion as well. Further, in terms of blame, though the object of blame for our accounts differs, it is obvious in my chapter and Elmore and Elmore's that blameworthiness/guilt is a concept that is muddled in its use by characters in their own moral calculations or epistemic faults within a state of nature.

4. Smith also notes, in relation to Hobbes's conception of security and sovereignty, that monstrosity is important. Drawing on (via Richard Tuck) Aristotle's mention of the mythic creature Argus *panoptes* (the multiple-eyed guardian of Io known by his constant wakeful watch) is tied explicitly (as an agent of Hera) to a divine type of sovereignty (one of many creatures with multitudinous organs Smith mentions in relation to the concept). Of importance to *It Comes at Night* is the obscuring of Argus's vision by sleep (Hermes is sent by Zeus to put him to rest through music and aid in stealing away Io, Zeus's lover) and his death seem apropos to the film.

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Chapter 7

The Danger of Ecological and Economic Interdependence in the Films of Cormac McCarthy

Jonathan Elmore and Rick Elmore

In the ongoing debate concerning how best to articulate a response to climate catastrophe, the question of interdependence, often conceptualized by the term *the anthropocene*, has been central. For some theorists, a strong thinking of interdependence allows for the recognition of our mutual entanglement with, and responsibility for, the fate of the planet and the life forms inhabiting it, with this interdependence marked by our shared vulnerability, culpability, and kinship.[1] For others, ecological interdependence appears deeply concerning insofar as it both occludes differences and histories and tends falsely to democratize culpability, presenting, as a problem of "our" behaviors, what is, in truth, primarily the work of a small number of corporations, industrialists, and nation-states operating under a system that prioritizes short-term profit above all other concerns.[2] This chapter argues that the film adaptations of *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* address this question of interdependence. More specifically, they chart a thoroughgoing rejection of the notion of collective, "human" responsibility, with *No Country* illustrating the essentially neoliberal underpinnings of such claims to responsibility and *The Road* suggesting the need for a fundamental break with a logic of suspiciousness and resource hoarding in our conceptualization of community. What these films show, thus, is that one cannot have a meaningful notion of interdependence in a system committed to capitalist individualism. This insight suggests that questions over the form, character, or utility of interdependence must acknowledge that it is only with the end of capitalism that a meaningful notion of interdependence might emerge.

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NEOLIBERAL INTERDEPENDENCE IN
NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

The Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* opens with a monologue by Sheriff Ed Tom Bell. Overtop images of the American West at dawn, Bell reflects on his life, "I was sheriff of this county when I was twenty-five years old. . . . Grandfather was a lawman. Father too" (Coen and Coen 2007). Ed Tom comes from a long line of lawmen, a past important to him insofar as "You can't help but compare yourself against the old-timers. Can't help but wonder how they'd've operated these times" (Coen and Coen 2007). In the olden days, some "sheriffs never even wore a gun" (Coen and Coen 2007). But today things have changed, the nature of crime shifting in ways Ed Tom finds difficult to comprehend: "The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure" (Coen and Coen 2007). It will be this change in the nature of crime and of the world that occupies *No Country for Old Men*, the sun of a new day rising over a world that has abandoned the cattle fences, windmills, and gun-free sheriffs of the past. The exact character of this new world remains unclear, but we begin to get a sense of it in Bell's account of a past case.

Having reflected on his career and the sheriffs of old, Ed Tom relates a conversation he had with a "boy" he "sent to the electric chair" (Coen and Coen 2007). The man "killed a fourteen-year-old girl," and it was Ed Tom's testimony that got him the death penalty (Coen and Coen 2007). What perplexes the sheriff about this case is not just the horrific crime but the man's account of his motivations: "Papers said it was a crime of passion but he told me there wasn't any passion to it. Told me that he'd been planning to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said if they turned him out he'd do it again. Said he knew he was going to hell" (Coen and Coen 2007). According to the man, this murder was not the result of "passion," accident, or chance, but the execution of a long held conviction, this act of violence a foregone conclusions. What can one say, Ed Tom wonders, in the face of such an irrepressible drive to violence? "I don't know what to make of that. I surely don't" (Coen and Coen 2007). At issue here is not simply the motivations of one homicidal man, but rather the way in which his matter-of-fact, unavoidable drive toward violence resonates with a larger incomprehensibility of contemporary crime and society.

Concluding Bell's account of this case, the camera pans left, and a handcuffed Anton Chigurh enters the frame, led toward a patrol car by an officer. Aligning the incomprehensibility of Bell's case with Chigurh and contemporary society, Ed Tom states, "The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure" (Coen and Coen 2007). Bell struggles to understand the nature of crime, which, the shot suggests, shares the incomprehensibility of his capital

case: "It's not," he insists, that "I'm afraid of it"; rather he does not want to "go out and meet something I don't understand" (Coen and Coen 2007). In a world in which crime, and human agency generally, appear foregone conclusions, individuals playing out a set of seemingly necessary actions, what prospect is there for justice or social improvement? For a man like Bell, who has dedicated his life to "truth and justice," what would it mean to confront such a world? (Coen and Coen 2007). It would entail "a putting of one's soul at hazard," agreeing to "be part of this world" and, therefore, responsible for its ultimately inevitable outcomes. Hence, the opening sequence of *No Country for Old Men* frames the film as a worry over a certain deterministic logic directing the agency of contemporary society. This logic lends to every action an inevitable necessity, one that negates the possibility of responsibility and, consequently, appears incomprehensible to Sheriff Bell. It will be the exploration of this deterministic logic that structures the film as a whole, this logic most clearly developed in the character of Anton Chigurh.

A defining feature of Chigurh is his chilling deliberateness. From calm submission to arrest, methodically strangling a deputy with his own handcuffs, to politely cattle-gunning a random motorist to steal his car, Javier Bardem's performance brings a cold, calculating inevitability to all his character's actions, each premeditated and efficient, their outcome seemingly assured.[3] Yet, more than an effect of Bardem's Oscar-winning performance, this deliberateness articulates an essential aspect of his character, one highlighted in his dialogue with the gas station attendant.

Fueling his stolen car at a roadside Texaco, Chigurh approaches the cash register to pay for his gas and cashews, the shop owner casually asking how the weather is "up your way?" (Coen and Coen 2007). For a man whose every action is precisely planned and executed, there are no inconsequential acts, no idle thoughts, no empty gestures: "What business is it of yours where, I'm from" (Coen and Coen 2007). The confused proprietor responds, "I didn't mean nothin' by it," which Chigurh mockingly repeats, "didn't mean nothin'" (Coen and Coen 2007). The idea that this question or anything one does could be meaningless is laughable to Chigurh, since, for him, everything has meaning and purpose. This sense of inevitability manifests most clearly in the coin that he takes from his pocket, flips, covers, and tells the attendant to "Call" (Coen and Coen 2007). For Chigurh this is no triviality, as there are no trivial actions: "Do you know what the date is on this coin? . . . Nineteen fifty-eight. This coin has been traveling twenty-two years to get here, and now it's here, and it's either heads or tails and you have to say. Call it" (Coen and Coen 2007). Like the murderer who always knew he was going to kill someone, this coin was always going to end up here, on this counter, between these two men. It becomes clear in this exchange that Chigurh represents what Ed Tom fears, a deterministic reality wherein individual actions are determined

not by codes of ethics, notions of civility, or morality, but by a necessity to act, the logic of the world requiring that things unfold just this way. Yet, this determinism is not a simple fatalism wherein all lives and outcomes are fixed, since, for Chigurh, individual choice is essential.

With the coin still on the counter between them, Chigurh tells the store owner, "you need to call it. I can't call it for you. It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't even be right" (Coen and Coen 2007). Despite the fact that everything unfolds with a certain necessity, neither the coin flip nor Chigurh's presence at the station is a matter of chance; there is, nonetheless, agency at work in this determinism, Chigurh reserving a privileged place for individual choice and decision. The proprietor stands to win or lose "everything," so it is only fair and right that he choose heads or tails (Coen and Coen 2007). Chigurh cannot choose for him, since to do so would violate the nature of the logic he represents, a logic in which, although the contours of an individual's life are set, the outcome of their choices within those parameters remain open. The result of this mixing of determinism and choice is that it presents our existence as hanging on every decision, each moment a choosing that will determine the fate of our entire lives. Chigurh's insistence on our ability to make choices, even within a seemingly deterministic system, is further emphasized in his killing of Carson Wells.

Ambushing Wells in his hotel stairway, Chigurh forces him back to his room, where they engage in a conversation as much about the nature of Chigurh's worldview as their current situation. Assuming what he must want, Wells tells Chigurh, "I know where the money is," to which Chigurh responds, "I know something better . . . I know where it's going to be" (Coen and Coen 2007). Just like the quarter on its decades-long journey to the gas station, and as surely as the boy from Bell's memory would have kill again if released, Chigurh knows that the satchel of money is on a path to him: "It will be brought to me and placed at my feet" (Coen and Coen 2007). He "knows this," he assures Wells, "to a certainty," this certainty turning the conversation to the inevitable and immediate death of Carson Wells: "you know what's going to happen now. You should admit your situation. There would be more dignity in it" (Coen and Coen 2007). In this clear explanation of his worldview, Chigurh once again brings together predetermination and individual choice. The outcome of this encounter is fixed, already known to both of them: Carson Wells is going to die. Yet, even here, there is still a decision to make. Wells can "admit his situation" and claim whatever "dignity" remains to be had or he can die without dignity. While this might seem like little choice at all, the emphasis on choice in this scene and elsewhere is crucial to understanding Chigurh and the logic he represents.

Chigurh's emphasis on choice explains how, despite the determinism of his worldview, he nonetheless maintains a notion of individual responsibility.

Even though Chigurh holds the gun that will end Wells's life, he chastises Wells for not making better choices: "If the rule you followed brought you to this, of what use was the rule?" (Coen and Coen 2007). Like the coin, like the satchel, like Chigurh himself, Wells's life is the accumulation of his decisions. He could have chosen differently, opted for a different path. The fact that he did not, that he maintained a rule that brought him here, means that he is, for Chigurh, ultimately accountable and responsible for everything including his impending death. We see in this exchange an absolutely essential element of Chigurh's logic, that despite the fact that our lives are determined by forces outside our control, we are, nonetheless, totally and utterly responsible. This responsibility extends beyond us as individuals, Chigurh's insistence on Moss's culpability for Carla Jean's death highlighting our responsibility not only for ourselves but others and, ultimately, the world. We shall return to this extension of responsibility in a moment. However, it is important to note the profoundly economic character of Chigurh's logic.

Elsewhere we have developed the parallels between Chigurh's deterministic logic and the logic of neoliberalism,[4] seeing in Chigurh's emphasis on economic rationality, individual choice, and personal responsibility, a reflection of the cold brutality of a socioeconomic order that, while circumscribing the choices and opportunities of individuals, insists on their liability, each of us "entrepreneurs of the self" responsible for investing our human capital.[5] In addition, several critics see in *No Country* a critique of existing social and economic relations including the myth of American exceptionalism and the war on drugs.[6] While the majority of these readings debate McCarthy supposed defense of a more traditional, "mercantile ethic," and a return to good family values, what is essential for us is the key role played by individual responsibility in Chigurh's worldview. This notion of responsibility appears not only neoliberal but deeply problematic, the need to reject his assertion of absolute responsibility articulated in Carla Jean's final scene.

Returning home from her mother's funeral, the newly widowed Carla Jean finds Chigurh waiting on her. Echoing Chigurh's deterministic logic, Carla Jean says that she knew Chigurh would come for her, that "this wasn't done with" (Coen and Coen 2007). Yet, Carla Jean refuses to concede Chigurh's claim to her responsibility: "You got no cause to hurt me" (Coen and Coen 2007). She does not have the money, the few hundred dollars given to her by Moss "now long gone" and nowhere close to what she needs to repair the damage done to her life (Coen and Coen 2007). Chigurh agrees with her assessment, yet he insists on her culpability: "No, but I gave my word . . . to your husband" (Coen and Coen 2007). As the instrument of a deterministic logic, Chigurh must follow out the consequences of decisions already made, Moss's rejection of his offer to "save" Carla Jean leading to this moment and their responsibility for it. Yet, in a move that will define the ethos of the film,

Carla Jean rejects this claim to responsibility: "That don't make sense . . . not like that, not like you say. You don't have to do this" (Coen and Coen 2007). Speaking both of this situation and Chigurh's logic generally, Carla Jean insists that Chigurh bears the responsibility for her death: "The coin don't have no say. It's just you" (Coen and Coen 2007). She will not call the coin toss because the coin decides nothing, her death or survival entirely the result of Chigurh's choice. In this refusal, Carla Jean exposes the lie at the heart of Chigurh's logic and the neoliberal system he represents, the lie that because she has "a choice," she is responsible for her situation and its outcome. Hence one sees in this scene, a contestation of the false universalization at the heart of Chigurh's logic, the move from having a choice to total culpability nothing but an ideological cover for the agency and responsibility of the system itself, Chigurh's assertion that he "got here the same way the coin did," the epitome of this lie (Coen and Coen 2007). It is this critique of false universalization that, this scene suggests, is fundamentally at stake in *No Country*, the centrality of this critique also evident in Bell's conversation with Ellis.

Toward the film's end, having still not resolved the incomprehensibility of Chigurh or the logic he represents, Ed Tom visits his uncle Ellis. Amid talk of the past and confirmation of the sheriff's impending retirement, Bell asks whether, given the chance, Ellis would have done anything to the man who put him in a wheelchair. Ellis answers, "There wouldn't be no point in it. . . . Your granddad never asked me to sign on as a deputy" (Coen and Coen 2007). Ellis blames neither Bell's grandfather nor the man who shot him for his lot: "This country is," as he says, "hard on people," a place where "all the time you spend trying to get back what's been took from you, more is going out the door" (Coen and Coen 2007). Unlike Bell, Ellis harbors no illusions that one can retrieve what has been lost or save what is left: "After awhile, you just have to try and get a tourniquet on it" (Coen and Coen 2007). This situation is not, as Bell believes, something new; men like he and Ellis having always been "overmatched" by the logic of this system, a system that, like the outlaws outside his great uncle Mac's house, always had the jump on them. Yet for Ellis, Bell's error is not that he desires meaning and clarity in a system with none to offer, but, more crucially, that he assumes responsibility for the very system that has the jump on him. As Ellis pointedly states, "You can't stop what's comin'. Ain't all waitin' on you . . . that's vanity" (Coen and Coen 2007). Bell cannot control this system, nor is he, therefore, responsible for its outcomes. For Ellis, Bell's sense of responsibility is a sinful overestimation of his importance, an overestimation that returns us to the critique of false universalization.

Unlike Carla Jean, who sees through Chigurh's ideological account of responsibility, the conversation with Ellis reveals that Bell does not, moving into retirement still unable to comprehend the fundamental logic that drives

Chigurh. At the root of this incomprehensibility is Bell's continued commitment to Chigurh's understanding of responsibility, Bell assuming culpability not only for his failure to stop Chigurh but also, more crucially, for the failure to halt the emergence of the world he represents. It is this inability to reject Chigurh's logic of responsibility, this failure to deny, as Carla Jean does, his own accountability for Chigurh and the neoliberal world he represents, that ultimately undoes Bell's hope of understanding or contesting this logic. Thus, Ellis's chastisement of Bell suggests that it is not in Bell's character that we should seek an answer to the questions raised by the film, the sheriff too committed to the very morality he wishes to resist. Yet while Bell fails to articulate a way out of Chigurh's logic, the film concludes with the promise of such an escape.

No Country for Old Men ends with Ed Tom relating two dreams about his father. In the first, he was supposed to meet his father in town to get "some money. [But] I think I lost it" (Coen and Coen 2007). In the second dream,

> it was like we were both back in older times . . . going through the mountains, of a night. . . . It was cold and there was snow on the ground, and he rode past me, and kept going. . . .When he rode past, I seen he was carrying fire . . . . And in the dream I knew that he was going on ahead, and he was fixing to make a fire somewhere in all that dark and all that cold. And I knew that whenever I got there, he'd be there. And then I woke up. (Coen and Coen 2007)

While cryptic, we see in these dreams the promise of a break with the logic of Chigurh, the failure of economic exchange between father and son marking the breakdown of the very kind of economic determinism he represents. Yet, more than a mere break with Chigurh's logic, the second dream suggests, in the image of a father and son "carrying the fire" through a world of dark and cold, that it is in *The Road* that we will find the answer to what comes after the break with Chigurh's economic rationality. Hence, *No Country* ends with a gesture toward *The Road* as the continuation of its problematic, this invitation heralded not only by the content of Bell's second dream but also by the conspicuous picture of a road hanging on the wall behind him.

HOW SHALL WE DEFEND THE HUMAN? THE ANTI-ECONOMIC LOGIC OF *THE ROAD*

The film adaptation of McCarthy's *The Road*, like the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, follows a lone father and son making their way to the coast across a post-apocalyptic landscape. The film switches between scenes of their journey and remembrances of the past, these memories and dreams circling

around the absent mother. At the heart of these remembrances is the driving ethical question of the film: What meaning can human life have in a world that has no future? It is the attempt to answer this question that drives their quest toward the coast, this insistence on meaning evident in the father's relationship to the question of suicide, his difference from the mother, and his figuration of the boy as divine.

We first encounter the question of suicide early in the film, when, exploring an abandoned barn in search of food and supplies, the father and son discover a hanged family. The father assures the boy, "It's not what you think. They committed suicide" (Hillcoat 2009). "Why?" the boy questions, "you know why," the father responds, staring at his son for a long moment and fighting back tears. This introduces one of the most poignant scenes of the film, the father carefully showing the boy how to kill himself with the pistol. Crouched outside the barn, we see him open the cylinder and show the boy the remaining bullets, "You see that? Two left. One for you and one for me. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Like this" pointing the barrel into his own mouth, "Just like I showed you. Then you just pull the trigger" (Hillcoat 2009). They have, it seems, practiced this routine many times, the father preparing the boy for what is coming. However, he is also preparing himself, stating internally, after their run-in with the gang of cannibals, "I have only one question when it comes to the boy: can you do it [kill the boy] when the time comes" (Hillcoat 2009). Hence from the beginning, the suicide or euthanasia of the boy appears all but certain, the father preparing himself, the boy, and the viewer for this eventuality. Yet, while these early scenes suggest the father's recognition of the inevitability of their self-killing, it is the father's resistance to suicide that marks his dispute with the mother.

Following their escape from the cannibal gang, the father stares down at the viscera and severed head of the now eaten man he shot. The scene cuts to their life before the road. Two bullets lie on a dimly lit table, presumably the same two bullets the father showed the boy earlier: "That's all we have left" the woman says, a claim about their prospects as much as the ammunition (Hillcoat 2009). In this scene, the woman attempts to convince the man that it is time to end their lives, chastising herself for not doing it sooner (Hillcoat 2009). Her voice is hard and steady, her assessment indisputable: "They are going to catch up with us, and they are going to kill us. They're going to rape me, and they're gonna rape your son, and they are going to kill us and eat us" (Hillcoat 2009). The man protests, "whatever it takes . . . I told you," but the woman is having none of it: "Stop it. . . . Stop it!" (Hillcoat 2009). There is nothing left to do, no way to avoid their inevitable death and consumption. The man has no answer to this claim. Yet he persists, "We have to. . . . We will survive this. We are not gonna quit. We're not gonna quit" (Hillcoat 2009). Despite the soundness of her logic, the man refuses to admit the truth

of what the mother says, answering her realism with false hope and absurd machismo. At issue here is not simply the father's denial of the mother's assessment but his refusal to concede her deeper existential claim: that in a world with no future, nothing left to work toward, and nothing left to look forward to, life is meaningless.

Faced with his unrealistic assertion that they "will survive," the mother pointedly states, "I don't want to just survive. Don't you get it? I don't want to" (Hillcoat 2009). For her, a life reduced to survival is no life at all, existence unaffirmable without the promise of something more. It is this uncomfortable thought, that the value and meaningfulness of life is predicated on the promise of something to come, some future or possibility beyond the fact of survival, that emerges in the disagreement between mother and father. It will be the attempt to dispute this uncomfortable thought, to give a defense of the meaningfulness of their lives, and particularly the life of the boy, that drives the father and the narrative of the film as a whole. However, more than just a defense of the boy's existence, there is, in the father's quest, a defense of the meaning of human existence in general, this extrapolation from the boy to the human evident in the father's understanding of the child as divine.

In his initial voiceover, the father professes one certainty: "the child is my warrant, and if he is not the word of God, then God never spoke" (Hillcoat 2009). Critics have tended to read the boy's divinity as evidence for a theology at work in *The Road*, the child a representation of the christlike possibility of redemption in a fallen world.[7] Yet the scene's staging brings out precisely the boy's earthly and human character, the child's divinity stated as he stares in awe at the mounted head of a deer. The child reaches toward the deer, this gesture aligning his life with animal life, drawing attention to the kinship between them. There is, in this gesture, a recognition of the interconnectedness of life, the boy's divinity the expression of this interconnectedness. The image of the boy's divinity as a reflection of earthly life is also evident in his likening to the word of God, the child the manifestation of God's creation, symbolic of what is spoken and not the one who speaks. This insistence on the earthly nature of the boy's existence is further affirmed in the encounter with Ely.

Coming upon an old man on the road, the boy insists that they offer him some food, the father reluctantly agreeing to share their dinner. Sitting by the fire after dinner, the old man confides, "When I saw that boy I thought I'd died and that he was an angel. I had a boy one time of my own," the tears welling up, "I never thought I'd see a child again, never thought that would happen to me" (Hillcoat 2009). Ely sees in the boy the echo of his lost son, his overwhelming emotion resonating with the divinity the father sees in his son. Near tears himself, the man affirms Ely's impression: "He is an angel. To me, he's a god" (Hillcoat 2009). Yet, Ely warns against this assertion of the

boy's divinity, "I hope that's not true. To be on the road with the last god like that would be nothing but a dangerous situation" (Hillcoat 2009). Although unstated, Ely's resistance to divinity seems to be that it traffics in a certain escapism, the claim to divinity a foolish hope for something beyond life here and now. As he says, when asked if he "ever wishes he would die," "No, one cannot ask for luxuries in times like these" (Hillcoat 2009). For Ely, there is no world but this world, no life but this life, the hope for something beyond life, even the beyond of death, risking a fall into a dangerous situation of hope or delusion. We see here, as with the connection between the boy and the deer, a resistance to thinking the boy's divinity as transcendent. However, the importance of this emphasis on the earthly nature of the boy's life is that it extends the man's responsibility for protecting his son to the protection of life in general, this protection symbolized in the rejection of cannibalism.

As the man tells us in the opening voiceover, "Cannibalism is the great fear" (Hillcoat 2009). Cannibalism figures as the most immediate horror facing the pair on their journey, the world filled with the inhuman brutality of people relegated to the status of livestock. More than this, however, cannibalism marks the symbolic line between good and evil, the human and the inhuman, the rejection of cannibalism what separates those who "carry the fire" from those who do not (Hillcoat 2009). This distinction is made most explicit after their narrow escape from the cannibal house. Sitting across a fire, the boys asks, "We would never eat anyone would we. . . . Even if we were starving?" (Hillcoat 2009). The father assures him that they would not, "because," as the boy infers "we're the good guys . . . and we're carrying the fire" (Hillcoat 2009). It is the refusal to eat others that defines humanness in the film, a refusal more powerful than the fear of starvation or the threat of death. In this insistence on resisting cannibalism, one, thus, sees the father's answer to the mother's assertion of life's meaninglessness, the refusal to eat one's fellows the concrete appearance of humanness in this world.[8] They are not, as the mother would have it, simply surviving; they are carrying the fire, being human in a world in which, as Ely warns, humanness is all but gone. Yet, while this defense of humanness marks the moral ethos of the film, it is the practice of this ethos that, we contend, illuminates its moral lesson.

Although driven by a desire to maintain their humanness, represented in their rejection of cannibalism, the father and son disagree about how best to practice this maintenance. The father's defense of humanness is guided by an insistence on resource hoarding, his constant worry about "food and their shoes" emblematic of his resistance to sharing goods with others. Throughout the film, the father remains averse to helping every fellow traveler, from the man struck by lightning (a deleted scene from the theatrical release) to Ely and even the thief at the end, from whom the father takes not only their stolen goods but everything else as well. This hoarding and suspicion is necessary, the father insists, because sharing their resources endangers their survival,

every stranger at worst a potential cannibal and at best a drain on their precious supplies. Yet, while a logical response to their situation, this hoarding of resources and suspicion of others is consistently challenged by the boy.

Where the father is wary of others, the son welcomes fellow travelers, insisting on offering them food and whatever other help they might. His desire for connection with others extends even to those not physically present, the boy's impulse to thank the people whose bunker saves them, emblematic of this difference from his father. Similarly in their encounter with Ely, it is the question of companionship and sharing that divides them, the father chastising the boy for holding Ely's hand and insisting that they "can't keep him" despite the boy's unstated desire. As they watch Ely shuffle off, the boy chides the father, "He's going to die and you don't care," to which the father retorts, "I care enough" (Hillcoat 2009). Highlighting the centrality of this moment, the father continues, "Maybe when we run out of food, you'll have more time to think about it" (Hillcoat 2009). This brutal statement elicits from the boy his most direct condemnation of his father's approach: "Yeah, you always say watch out for bad guys. That old man wasn't a bad guy. You can't even tell anymore" (Hillcoat 2009). For the boy, the father's suspicion of others has lead him to see the two of them as the only "good guys" left, the man unable to see the goodness in others or distinguish good from evil.[9] Although clearest in this exchange, this is a worry that occupies the boy throughout the film, the child wary that his father's actions compromise the very goodness they claim to protect. Hence there is, the film suggests, a need to break with the father's logic, this break coming in the film's closing scene.

On his deathbed, surrounded by their few possessions, the gun clutched in his hand, the father reiterates the importance of protecting oneself and one's resources: "Do everything the way we did it, keep the gun with you always. Don't let anyone take it from you. You need to find the good guys but you can't take any chances" (Hillcoat 2009). The father insists that the boy's survival depends on protecting himself and his resources through the continued suspicion of others and avoidance of risk. Following his father's death, the boy must decide whether to honor his father's advice, his encounter with the man forcing him to choose between taking a chance on another's humanness or remaining suspicious: "you've got two choices here. You can stay here with your papa or you can go with me" (Hillcoat 2009). Faced with this decision, the boy attempts to eliminate his uncertainty: "How do I know you're one of the good guys?" "You don't," the man tells him, "You'll have to take a shot" (Hillcoat 2009). There is no way to go with the man and honor his father's logic, no way to avoid taking the risk his father warned him against. Confronted with this choice, the boy *unequivocally* breaks with his father's logic, choosing to go with the man on the assurance that he "carries the fire" and doesn't "eat people" (Hillcoat 2009). This decision is immediately affirmed when, returning from his father's body, the family appears as

promised, the children and dog confirm of their non-cannibalistic humanness. The boy is safe, his willingness to break with his father's logic, to take a chance and trust in the humanness of others, leading him to safety.[10] Hence, it is, the film suggests, a break with the individualistic, suspicious logic of the father that makes possible not only the boy's rescue but also the continuation of humanness itself.

The moral lesson of *The Road* is that the defense of humanness requires more than a break with cannibalism. It requires an openness to others and a rejection of the father's radical individualism, suspicion, and resource hoarding. This is, the film suggests, what it would take to live in a world in which "we don't have to worry about a thing," where the thought of living off the lives of others (cannibalism) would appear utterly alien (Hillcoat 2009). Such a world would be one fundamentally at odds not only with the apocalyptic nightmare of *The Road*, but, much more powerfully, one totally alien to the world of contemporary human life, a life dominated precisely by capitalist individualism. Hence, at the heart of *The Road*, we find the claim that a healthy, truly humane community requires a rejection not only of the deterministic, neoliberal logic of Chigurh, but also the economic individualism of the father, this economically organized individualism making impossible any truly flourishing notion of community, an impossibility that reveals the kinship between *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men*.

Whether in the neoliberalism represented by Chigurh or the liberal individualism that drives the father of *The Road*, our paper shows that it is the contestation of capitalist individualism that connects these two films, the boy's break with his father's logic returning us to the denial of the false universalization of responsibility in *No Country*. At stake in the boy's break with his father's logic is the realization that any defense of humanness, predicated on individualism, necessarily universalizes as "human" and "good," what is, in truth, a very select slice of the human population, his father's logic negating the humanness of everyone in the film but himself and the boy. Chigurh's universalization of responsibility performs the same sleight of hand, his claim that we are each absolutely culpable transferring to "all humans" what is, in truth, the work of a very few. Hence, as in the debate over interdependence, one sees in these films, a profound worry for the way in which, within the confines of capitalism, the claim to our collective "humanness" entails a misrepresentation of the nature of responsibility, the identification of this misrepresentation suggesting not only the need to reject "our" supposedly shared responsibility for climate catastrophe but, moreover, to question the very possibility of articulating a healthy notion of interdependence under capitalism.

As outlined in the introduction, one of the key issues in the current debates around interdependence and the Anthropocene concerns the question of responsibility, the degree to which "we all" bear responsibility for the current

state of the climate. Certainly one finds in both *No Country* and *The Road* a resistance to any notion of shared responsibility under the economic logic of capitalist individualism. However, more than this, these films suggest the impossibility of developing a healthy notion of interdependence within the context of capitalism. The capitalist insistence on individualism twists the notion of interdependence into little more than the redistribution of blame. Hence in these films, one sees not just a critique of capitalist individualism and its problematic tendency to misrepresent the character of responsibility, but, more powerfully, the claim that, within a capitalism system, the notion of interdependence, no matter how refined, risks unavoidably an ideological redistribution of guilt, transferring to the community what is, in fact, the fault of only some of its members. Given this risk, what these films contribute to the debate over interdependence is not an affirmation or rejection of its utility for our thinking, but a caution that, rather than debating the character and use of interdependence, we ought to perhaps focus our thinking toward the abolition of capitalism, since without such an abolition, there can be no interdependence worthy of the name.

NOTES

1. There is by now a large body of literature that employees the term Anthropocene, and a long tradition of thinking ecological interdependence as a basic starting point for our engagement with climate catastrophe. See, for example, Jan Zalasiewicz et al.'s "Making the case for a formal Anthropocene Epoch: an analysis of ongoing critiques" and "The Working Group on the Anthropocene: Summary of evidence and interim recommendations"; Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin's *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*; and Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz's *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us*.

2. For a general critique of the Anthropocene, see Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg's "The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative"; Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*; Chris Cuomo's "Against the Idea of an Anthropocene Epoch: Ethical, Political and Scientific Concerns"; and Jason Moore's *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, or the Crisis of Capitalism*. For more specific critiques of the Anthropocene's occlusion of difference, see, for example, Audra Mitchell's "Decolonizing the Anthropocene" and "Making a 'cene'"; Axelle Karera's "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics"; and Kyle Whyte's "The Roles for Indigenous Peoples in Anthropocene Dialogues: Some Critical Notes and a Question."

3. This methodicalness is further developed in the book where, we discover, Anton's initial arrest and killing of the officer is a carefully planned test to see if he "could extricate [him]self by an act of will" (175).

4. See Jonathan Elmore and Rick Elmore's "Human Become Coin: Neoliberalism, Anthropology, and Human Possibility in *No Country for Old Men*."

5. For a concise overview of the character of individual responsibility under neo-liberalism see, for example, Wendy Brown's "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization"; Andrew Dilt's *Punishment and Inclusion: Race, Membership, and the Limits of American Liberalism*, 69–77; and Jason Read's "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity."

6. See, for example, John Cant's *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*; Bob Catterall's "Is It All Coming Together?"; Stephen Tatum's "'Mercantile Ethics': No Country for Old Men and the Narcocorrido"; Patrick O'Connor's "Saving Sheriff Bell: Derrida, McCarthy and the Opening of Mercantile Ethics in *No Country for Old Men*"; and Raymond Malewitz's "'Anything Can Be an Instrument': Misuse Value and Rugged Consumerism in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men.*"

7. See James Carl Grindley's "The Setting of McCarthy's *The Road*" Lydia Cooper's "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative"; Erik J. Wielenberg's "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's The Road"; and Lamar Nisly's "'The sacred idiom shorn of its referents:' An Apophatic Reading of *The Road.*"

8. Many commentators see in this rejection of cannibalism an implicit critique of capitalism, the cannibalistic feeding off of others mirroring the exploitation of the working class. See, for example, Jordan Dominy's "Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the End of Capitalism"; Brian Donnelly's "'Coke Is It!': Placing Coca-Cola in McCarthy's *The Road*"; David Huebert's "Eating and Mourning the Corpse of the World: Ecological Cannibalism and Elegiac Protomourning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*"; and Christopher Lawrence's "'Because we carry the fire:' An Eco-Marxist Reading of Cannibalism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road.*" In addition, McCarthy's presentation of cannibalism also invokes the exploitation and dehumanization of American slavery, the emphasis on the plantation-style of the cannibal's house and the imagery of humans reduced to livestock echoing this racist history. See, in particular, Jay Ellis's "*The Road* beyond Zombies of the New South," 64–71.

9. We have discussed the father's subjectivity in depth in "'You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me': The Ethical Imperative of *The Road*"; see also Hannah Stark's "'All These Things He Saw and Did Not See': Witnessing the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's The Road" and Brent Ryan Bellamy's "The Reproductive Imperative of *The Road.*"

10. While critics have tended to read the ending of the film as more positive than that of the novel, "emphasizing deliverance instead of loss" through its expansion of the role of the absent mother, one finds, as we have argued elsewhere, the boy's clear break with his father's logic in both film and novel, a fact that highlights the continuity of the moral lesson between the two (Peebles 117 & 129). See also "'You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me': The Ethical Imperative of *The Road*" (145–146).

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Section 3

TECHNO-ECOLOGICAL RELATIONS
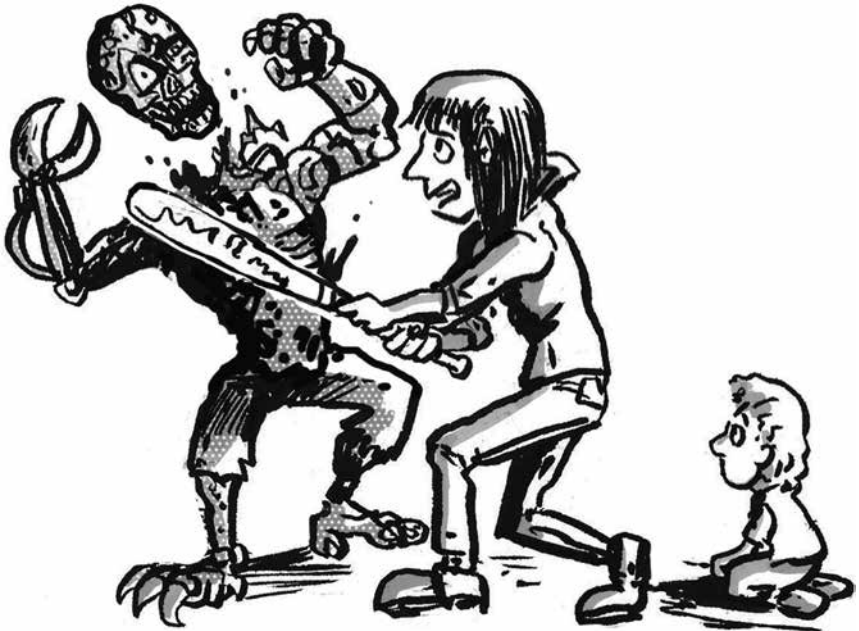
Chapter 8

When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth

The Horror of Being Prey and Forgetting Nature, Yet Again, in **Jurassic Park** *and* **Jurassic World**

Eric S. Godoy

Horror stories often use a confrontation with the horrific to teach a lesson. In sci-fi horror, this lesson is often that humans should know their place and restrain their desire for technological control of forces beyond them. Yet acknowledging our ecological interdependence—that we are not beyond nature, but part of it—is itself a horrific thought. It means that we can easily become a meal for another animal indifferent to our suffering or sense of self. This is a difficult idea for humans to swallow. Plumwood (1999), ecofeminist philosopher and saltwater-crocodile-attack survivor, writes, "So important is the story and so deep the connection to others, carried through the narrative self, that it haunts even our final desperate moments" (86). Indeed, much of our technologies are designed to keep this nature at bay, to keep us safe.

The trouble is, we constantly forget this interdependence as we lose track of what "natural" means. Consider especially the American nostalgia for an imagined past believed to be lost; a past in which our relationship with nature was more authentic, more natural. Yet, as I argue further, such a past never really existed. The scary thing is, so long as that nostalgia guides our desire for a return to a "proper" relationship with nature, we're bound to be misguided and forget again and again, no matter how horrific the consequences.

A ROAR IN THE DISTANCE

In *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993) and its sequel *Jurassic World* (Trevorrow 2015) (hereafter *JP* and *JW*), scientists have cloned dinosaurs, which walk again in an amusement park of extinct species on an island in Costa Rica. There, the dark side of our ecological interdependence is made very clear when the animals escape: we are confronted with the horror of becoming a meal for some of the fiercest predators that have ever walked the planet. Earth-shaking tremors portend the advances of an escaped *Tyrannosaurus rex*. She peers with her cold reptilian eye through the window of a car she effortlessly crushes under her weight. Indifferent to the screams of the children inside, she sees only fleshy snacks. While the *Tyrannosaurus* represents the immense and overwhelming power of nature, the park's *Velociraptors*, or "raptors" for short, represent its cold cunning. These pack-hunting dinosaurs use teamwork to create a diversion and outsmart a professional hunter (Clever girls!) They plan, tap their deadly claws with seeming impatience while stalking the characters, and they even quickly figure out how to open doors, which were never part of the ancient environment in which they originally evolved.

The scenes with these creatures are meant to inspire fear as the film's characters become the prey of predators from another time. The horror of becoming prey, in short, is that our human lives and cares mean nothing when we become food for another animal.[1] Many parts of the Western world have eradicated the threat of large and dangerous predators, and people have thoroughly insulated themselves from the possibility of becoming prey, at least while going about their daily lives. Sharks attack beachgoers on vacation. Grizzlies maul campers attempting to get away from it all. But as I'm drafting this chapter in the lobby of a Los Angeles hotel, I'm more distracted by the blaring and bland Musak than I am by the thought that a mountain lion might be stalking me from the hotel's tropical landscaping. I'm not going to worry about sharks in the pool or grizzlies in the hallways. But there are parts of the world, mostly in nonurban areas, where large predator attacks are a more serious threat. For instance, consider this report on lion attacks in rural Tanzania: "Lions pull people out of bed, attack nursing mothers, and catch children playing outside. Most rural houses have thatched roofs and many have thatched walls, so lions can force their way inside, and toilets are outside" (Packer et al. 2005, 927). When and where animal attacks do occur onscreen and in real life, they present us with an opportunity to reflect grimly on the interconnection that we share with our environment.

All living things need to metabolize with nature—that is, breathe, drink, and eat. Plants take in sunlight, water, and nutrients from the soil. Animals eat these plants or each other. Predators hunt their prey, simply because they need to eat. Humans tend to think of themselves as exceptional creatures, as

outside of nature, and as central figures in their own life stories. Becoming prey disrupts these fantasies.

Plumwood writes about her harrowing near-death encounter with a salt-water crocodile while canoeing in the paperbark wetlands of Kakadu in Northwestern Australia. In a scene that could very well have been in *JP*, she describes how she became prey for the area's apex predator. The croc attacked her canoe and, before she could escape up a nearby tree, it jumped from the water to seize her leg in its jaws and dragged her underwater for a series of death rolls—a move meant to exhaust and drown its prey. Eventually, she escaped, though badly injured, alone, sans canoe, and far from civilization. Because of her considerable experience in the bush and her incredible strength of will, she was able to drag herself across the soggy terrain to a place where she could signal to a passing park ranger who thereafter rushed her to a hospital. Plumwood (2012) advises us to learn the following lesson from her encounter: "The human supremacist culture of the West makes a strong effort to deny human ecological embodiment by denying that we humans can be positioned in the food chain" (16). She writes:

> This denial that we ourselves are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our death and burial practices. The strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent any other thing from digging us up, keeps the Western human body (at least the sufficiently affluent ones) from becoming food for other species. (Plumwood 2012, 18–19)

The horror genre too, she notes, often reflects our fears about becoming prey for other species. *JP* disrupts what she calls the "master narrative": becoming prey shatters the illusion that we always stand outside of nature from a privileged position of control and mastery over it. She writes that we often act as is if "humans exist in the world of culture and animals are in the other 'food' world of nature. This is the ultimate human supremacist illusion. The reality is we are both of us in both worlds at once" (Plumwood 2012, 37). The temptation to think of ourselves as protagonists in our life story is so strong that even in our moments of death, we refuse to admit that we can end up a meal for other animals. Plumwood incredulously recollects how even during the attack, she thought about how her friends and family would discuss her death and worried that they might assume she had carelessly decided to go for a swim in the crocodile infested waters (Plumwood 1999, 86). Plumwood reveals the horror of facing our ecological interconnection and the difficulties of understanding it even when we find ourselves in the jaws of a beast. In *JP* and *JW*, the horror of this confrontation isn't just for thrill though. Like in many horror films, the fear is meant to be instructive.

"LIFE, UH, FINDS A WAY": THE HUBRIS
OF BEING ABOVE NATURE

When it comes to *JP*, the moral of the story seems to be straightforward since it's a common one in popular environmental thought: we cannot rise above or outsmart nature. In the first film, chaos mathematician Dr. Ian Malcolm delivers this lesson in dialogue with John Hammond, the entrepreneur and creator of *JP*, and the lead geneticist Dr. Henry Wu. In this scene, Hammond and Wu explain how they intend to control breeding by cloning only females.

Malcolm: John, the kind of control you're attempting simply is . . . it's not possible. If there is one thing the history of evolution has taught us, it's that life will not be contained. Life breaks free, it expands to new territories and crashes through barriers, painfully, maybe even dangerously, but, uh . . . well, there it is.
Hammond: [sardonically] There it is.
Wu: You're implying that a group composed entirely of female animals will . . . breed?
Malcolm: No. I'm, I'm simply saying that life, uh . . . finds a way. (*JP*)[2]

The warning of *JP* is about hubris, or "playing god." A similar message can be found in the novel *Frankenstein*, a horror story Mary Shelley wrote for a competition and which has since been cited as the foundational work of the entire horror genre. The novel's subtitle is *The Modern Prometheus*. In Greek mythology, Prometheus created humans for Zeus, but later defied him by stealing fire to gift the humans. This fire is often thought to symbolize scientific knowledge and technological progress. Many cultures have myths about fire being stolen from greater spirits suggesting that humans are not capable of such a discovery themselves. Despite the different versions of the story, the message is often the same: technologies come to us in illicit ways. When we discover or invent them, we unleash new powers. And as inferior beings, unlike the gods or spirits, we are bound to misuse these powers and suffer our mistakes. Fire, mechanical, chemical, nuclear, cybernetic, and genetic technologies are examples of what has at different times been cast as transgressive knowledges for allowing us to mimic the powers of gods. However, all technology harnesses natural forces and uses them in predictable ways to affect the world. In short, all technology exerts control of nature insofar as it directs and shapes natural forces and tendencies—be they physical, chemical, or biological—especially to keep us safe from those parts of nature that would otherwise harm or eat us (Hale 2016, 86–89).

The success of the *JP* film franchise is explained in part by the prominence of such warnings against hubris in popular environmental thought. The moral of the films is as easy for the audience to digest as a pterodactyl

is for a mosasaur. Take, for instance, the writings of Rachel Carson (1994), a key figure in the modern US environmental movement. In her groundbreaking work *Silent Spring*, she lambasts the modern chemical industry, which had integrated itself with postwar industrial agriculture. Carson was a gifted scholar and talented writer. Part of the reason her work caught on is because she invoked an easily digestible moral that could motivate popular audiences: the warning of hubris (Garb 1995, 539). Nature, she claimed, has an order and finds a balance. Humans were upsetting this balance with powerful and disruptive new technologies.

Carson criticized the wanton deployment of a rapidly developing, undertested chemical arsenal of pesticides—many byproducts of war technology—to "solve" pseudo-problems only by creating new ones. She writes: "We have put poisonous and biologically potent chemicals indiscriminately into the hands of persons largely or wholly ignorant of their potentials for harm. [. . .] I contend, furthermore, that we have allowed these chemicals to be used with little or no advance investigation of their effect on soil, water, wildlife, and [people]" (Carson 1994, 12–13). Carson was right. Her work helped create regulations and laws to protect the environment as well as the people and animals dependent on it. The Environmental Protection Agency exists in part because of her research. But her warning was familiar. We are easily persuaded to be suspicious of new technologies. Stories about hubris are meant to warn us when arrogance leads us to assume we can control "godlike" forces.

But there is a problem with *JP* and *JW* when taken together if they are meant to be a warning against hubris. The moral of the sequel film—the confession of hubris and the return to a "proper" relationship with nature—depends upon a simultaneous forgetting of, and nostalgia for, the original film.

WE HAVE AN ASSET OUT OF CONTAINMENT, AGAIN

Dinosaurs in *JP* are resurrected by recovering fossilized fragments of their DNA. Scientists substitute the missing sequences with DNA from other animals—like a genetic Frankenstein—such as frogs. The resulting creatures are clones of dinosaurs.[3] The designers try to master the forces of nature by resurrecting long dead, unfamiliar species under what they presume are controlled conditions. But this control breaks down and the untamable force of life reasserts itself. Dennis Nedry, the park's computer-programmer-turned-Dilophosaurus-snack, is the more proximate cause of this breakdown. It is his virus, which shuts down the security system and allows the animals to escape

and wreak havoc, but I'll say more about him in the final section. Here, I want to point out that control was already unraveling without Nedry's help. As I began explaining earlier, the designers' hubris is in part exposed when the all-female population of animals, containing DNA never found in nature, unpredictably changes sex, as do some frogs, and reproduces.[4] Life finds a way despite the plan for no unauthorized breeding in *JP*. Dr. Alan Grant, an expert paleontologist, finds a raptor egg outside of the lab confirming this. Malcolm's predictions come true as the animals literally crash through fences and open doors in an attempt to prey on the island's few humans.

The clear moral is that humans cannot control forces of nature; that humans are hubristic to think they can tamper with the forces of life to resurrect extinct creatures. Note that zoos are not the problem—and *JP* is essentially a zoo. Such institutions routinely support breeding programs to rehabilitate threatened and endangered species, attempting to establish a healthy genetic diversity within those populations. Rather the problem occurs when humans use their cutting-edge genetic technologies to interfere with nature. Malcolm remarks, "This isn't some species that was obliterated by deforestation or the building of a dam. Dinosaurs had their shot and Nature selected them for extinction!" (*JP*). Dinosaurs died off naturally, long before humans existed. Several deaths and many near-death experiences are the price paid for upsetting "Nature's plan."

The sequel *JW* rehashes this theme, however, the story is quite different in an important sense. The resurrection and control of dead species is no longer an act of hubris. In fact, this practice has become normalized—so normal that park attendance is down because visitors have become bored with actual dinosaurs. (We might also consider how a sequel film about a dinosaur park, made twenty-two years after the first, might fail to captivate an audience used to seeing lifelike dinosaurs onscreen.) The designers in *JW* transgress a different sort of boundary by creating the *Indominus rex*. Unlike the major horrors of *JP*, the *Tyrannosaur* and *Velociraptor*, the *Indominus* is a deliberately fabricated hybrid species, containing the gene sequences of various other animals. It is not intended to resemble anything ever found in nature.[5] When Simon Masrani, the park's owner, asks Wu who authorized the creation of such an animal, Wu answers, "You did. 'Bigger.' 'Scarier.' Um . . . 'Cooler,' I believe, is the word you used in your memo" (*JW*). In other words, the *Indominus* is *more unnatural* than the cloned dinosaurs to which we've become accustomed.

Characters in the film acknowledge the mistake of the previous park. In an oddly meta scene, Lowery Cruthers, an employee in the park's control room, is questioned for wearing an original *JP* t-shirt—the kind that was actually sold to promote the first film (indeed I had one of these shirts in the early

1990s to let the world know I was a fan). His shirt is not in poor taste, he responds to a coworker's question, even considering the deaths and calamity that ensued because "that first park was legit. I have a lot of respect for it. They didn't need these genetic hybrids. They just needed dinosaurs, *real* dinosaurs" (*JW*).[6] But there is no mention here of the fact that the dinosaurs from *JP* were clones with altered DNA as well. Recall that adding frog DNA to the genetic soup played a key part in how control broke down in the first story. But this intentional forgetting that there were no real dinosaurs in *JP* is important for the moral of the second film to hit home.

Not surprisingly, control breaks down in *JW* for almost the same reasons. The *Indominus* utilizes the abilities it (un)predictably gained from its artificial genetic makeup to escape and run amok. The characters restore order by teaming up with the now tamed monsters of *JP*. The audience is meant to cheer for the triumph of these familiar, "real" genetic Frankenstein monsters over the new unnatural, *Indominus* threat but in doing so must forget that the new heroes are a product of the same hubristic technologies.

Owen Grady, a laid-back *Velociraptor* trainer, teams up with several raptors to battle the *Indominus*. In an almost comical scene, one used on the film's advertisement posters, Grady rides a motorcycle through the woods in formation with a team of four raptors to hunt down the *Indominus*. They find her, but the human-raptor team begins losing the battle.[7] Claire Dearing, the park's uptight operation's manager, decides that they "need more teeth." In another scene meant to reference *JP*, Claire releases a conveniently located *T. rex* (which they keep alarmingly close to the park's gift shops) and leads it to the fight with the iconic red flare used to distract the original film's *T. rex* away from the trapped children. Importantly, there is relief when the villainous abomination is defeated (and surprisingly little concern with the now loose *T. rex*).

We learn again the lesson about control, this time through Grady: "It's all about control with you. I don't control the raptors. It's a relationship. It's based on mutual respect" (*JW*). But the lesson here is more than that. In the film, the *Indominus* is villainous. It is horrific. It kills "for sport" (*JW*), as do humans. But most importantly, it possesses these traits because it is unnatural. Like many objects of horror, it is cast as an abomination against the natural order (Carroll 1990, 16). The heroes of *JW* are the villains from the first film. To reverse the alignment of the raptors it is important to establish the *JP* dinosaurs as the "real" ones with whom we can form relationships. *JW* tames the creatures of the first movie, excuses their unnaturalness, to defeat a new, more unnatural creature. Wu, the only character to appear in both films, tries to remind us of this: "Nothing in Jurassic World is natural! We have always filled gaps in the genomes with the DNA of other animals. And if

their genetic code was pure many of them would look quite different, but you didn't ask for reality; you asked for more teeth!" (*JW*).[8] It seems that what's going on here is simultaneously nostalgia and amnesia: both a longing to get back to "real" nature and a forgetting that that nature was never natural either. How is this possible? Perhaps it is that our conception of nature is deficient. Maybe the trouble lies in our concept of the natural as something that is separate from humans. Wilderness is the word often used today to describe the "purest" version of nature, that which has not been influenced by any humans. A careful look at wilderness will therefore be helpful.

NOTHING IS NATURAL HERE: FAKING, THEN FORGETTING NATURE

There are many well-documented problems with thinking about wilderness as a nature completely separate from humans (Callicott & Nelson 1998; Nelson & Callicott 2008). First, there never was such a wilderness. It was made up by romantic writers and early explorers of the southern colonies (Denevan 1992, 369). The land appeared to be untouched because European diseases, which had previously been unfamiliar to indigenous Americans, spread faster than colonization, leaving the population lower in 1750 than it had been in 1492 (Denevan 1992, 370). Likewise, the influence of indigenous agriculture on the landscape was not always obvious to those writing about the seemingly empty and untouched lands (Denevan 1992, 375). Finally, the image of wilderness we know today, in national parks for instance, often relied on the violent displacement of indigenous peoples living on that land (Cronon 1995, 79; Spence 1999).

A second, more serious problem with wilderness is that it dismisses responsibility for our environment (Cronon 1995). The nature under threat and worth saving is always "out there," beyond our city walls, in the wild. We neglect environmental justice issues, for instance, in cities with lead-filled drinking water, disproportionately high asthma rates, or food deserts.

Focusing on wilderness makes us forget about the nature all around us; that is, about our environment. In doing so, wilderness "reproduces the very values it seeks to reject" (Cronon 1995, 80). In other words, it excuses our way of life by selling a "fantasy" to those who are already separated from nature and still believe a return to a pure wilderness is possible. It's not possible because if such a nature is defined by what isn't human, any kind of relationship with nature destroys it: any use is "*ab-use*" (Cronon 1995, 85). What is more, using technology, building cities, and so on, is an important part of how humans live in the world today.[9] We can't give up civilization, Cronon (1995) writes:

> We work our nine-to-five jobs in its institutions, we eat its food, we drive its cars (not least to reach the wilderness), we benefit from the intricate and all too invisible networks with which it shelters us, all the while pretending that these things are not an essential part of who we are. By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit. (81)

By fantasizing about leaving civilization behind, we miss an opportunity to reflect on how we can make it more ecologically minded. Cronon here agrees with Plumwood that at the heart of the wilderness paradox lies a problematic dualism which leaves little room for reflecting on our ecological interconnection.

Steve Vogel (2015) expands on this dualism in his own work and warns us that another mistake it tempts us with is to think of nature as a social construction. But the trick is neither to deny such a thing as real nature, or real dinosaurs, nor is it to double-down on the wilderness definition of nature. Rather, it is to embrace that "to be in an environment is to be active in it, and with every act in it we change it" (Vogel 2015, 44). He calls it a "Cartesian dream" (after Descartes, who is considered a forebearer of modern dualism) to think we could ever exist independently from an environment. We make fires, plant crops, develop chemicals, and discover new technologies with which we transform our environment.

What this means for our ecological interconnection is that we are weaved together with our environment more tightly than we often realize, and that this closeness, when paired with our conception of nature as "always out there," is obscured. Our nostalgia to return to nature only works if we also have an amnesia about what that nature was. Hubris stories, such as *JP* and *JW*, that warn us about stepping beyond our proper place in nature are likely to fail when this place is not clear to begin with. The moral of such stories is that we are not above nature. This is a different message than one pointing out our interconnection and cautioning us to think more carefully and ethically about it. Warnings to leave nature alone because our attempts to exercise control will backfire simply can't work. As Vogel puts it, humans are always already in an environment they are constantly changing through their interactions with it. Humans are technological creatures. Our knowledge improves, and with it, our control. Many of the first airplanes crashed, but we eventually mastered flight. It wasn't far-fetched for the builders of *JW* to believe they could avoid the mistakes of the first park.

The villains can become heroes only if we can forgive their unnaturalness in the face of something even less natural. We are nostalgic for the first park with "real" dinosaurs only if we can forget that there was nothing natural about them either. We are nostalgic for a return to wilderness only if we forget the concept was invented and brought forth through violence and

death. We are cautioned for thinking we are above nature without reflecting on what a feasible, ethical interconnection with it might be. But I think there are resources within *JP* and *JW* for thinking about this connection.

"CONSUMERS WANT THEM BIGGER, LOUDER, MORE TEETH"

To consider this last point, I'd like to return to the idea that all living creatures must metabolize their environment. Humans structure this metabolism through their mode of economics, and the mode of economics that dominates the world today is capitalism.[10] Private profit drives all production, which means it is also the main driver developing the technologies used to control the forces of nature. Pesticides weren't just developed, manufactured, and used because they fed more people,[11] but because they generated profits.

The profit motive is a major source of conflict in both films. Crichton (2015) sets the stage for this conflict in the introduction to *JP*, his novel on which the first film was based. Crichton (2015) suggests that scientists once worked for the good of all humanity, but now, especially regarding genetic technologies, they work in secret and for private gain:

> Scientists have always rebelled against secrecy in research, and have even frowned upon the idea of patenting their discoveries, seeing themselves as working to the benefit of all [hu]mankind. And for many generations, the discoveries of scientists did indeed have a peculiarly selfless quality. (x)

Keep in mind that this is the introduction to the novel and is not Crichton addressing readers directly. It is an origin story of the fictional company InGen, which develops the technologies to clone the dinosaurs of JP. Though like in much of Crichton, and in any good science fiction, fact is blended with fiction here to tell a good story. So we shouldn't read this as an attempt to accurately describe the attitudes of scientists through history, but as a warning about the private development of new technologies for profit. The introduction is also meant to add a horrifying proposition for the reader to consider: the events described in *JP* could very well have already happened in the real world, and if so, it would likely go unreported due to the high financial stakes involved.

Even if this is a Pollyanna view of science,[12] the introduction establishes the background against which Crichton's entire story unfolds. Neglect this background and we are bound to incorrectly presume the problems lie in human nature (our greed or selfishness).[13] Yet Crichton's framing of the relationship between capitalism and technological development is telling. He calls the "commercialization of molecular biology . . . the most stunning

ethical event in the history of science, and it has happened with astonishing speed" (Crichton 2015, x). "But the most disturbing fact," he goes on, "is the fact that no watchdogs are found among scientists themselves. It is remarkable that nearly every scientist in genetics research is also engaged in the commerce of biotechnology. There are no detachable observers. Everyone has a stake" (Crichton 2015, x). So it is not just the development of new technologies, but the private pursuit of profit that is dangerous. When such discoveries are pursued behind closed doors for private gain, there is no check on our hubris. There are at least three consequences of this in the two films.

First, Nedry makes a deal with InGen's rival company. He is offered a large sum of money to smuggle dinosaur embryos off the island. To pull off his heist, he shuts down the park's security systems. The live dinosaur attractions then escape from their holding pens and run amok. The research that produced those embryos was developed "in secret, and in haste, and for profit" (Crichton 2015, xi). Only the companies that have patented the technology can profit from it. InGen's rivals are competing for the ability to profit from the discoveries of Wu. The book also goes into much greater detail about Hammond's exploitation of Nedry's labor—how the programmer is forced to work beyond the terms of his contract, debugging millions of lines of code by himself all without being allowed to understand the full purpose of the confidential project. Nedry's dissatisfaction and the temptation to defect only makes sense within a capitalist mode of production in which these discoveries are pursued privately for huge profits.

Second, JP's investors are worried about the safety of the park. Lawsuits from injured guests would hurt their returns. Their concern prompts Hammond to invite experts to inspect the park. It is around these experts that the plot revolves.

Finally, capitalism's role in the plot is much more obvious in the newer film. The *Indominus rex* is explicitly created to increase attendance and revenues. As Claire explains to potential park sponsors: "Our DNA excavators discover new species every year. But consumers want them bigger, louder, [*sic*] more teeth" (*JW*). Capitalist economies must constantly grow or risk going into recession or depression. Companies that don't survive fall prey to those who can keep up with this drive. The age of colonialism, and its legacy of violence which still echoes through the world today, was prompted in part by this drive to expand and seize greater profits (Patel & Moore 2018, 44–51). In doing so, capitalism is inherently destructive of nature, driving, among other things, the mass extinction of modern species (Dawson 2016, 38–62). The *Indominus*, in many ways, symbolizes capitalism's destructive forces as it breaks loose of all boundaries, leaving a path of death in its wake. The drive to increase profits pushed the second park to neglect the lessons learned by their predecessors, commit hubris by giving birth to a (new) abomination, and ultimately fail.

CONCLUSION: NOT ABOVE, BUT
WORKING WITHIN NATURE

The profit motive drives the conflict in *JP* and *JW* by pushing designers to commit hubris. But hubris stories are ineffective for getting us to think seriously about an ethical relationship with our environment. They too easily fall into a dualistic way of understanding the relationship between humans and nature, one in which there is no place for humans, who are technological beings. Such a definition of nature is unsustainable since humans are part of their environment. They transform it by living in it, just as all living things do. Rather, if we want to think ethically about our relationship with nature, we should look at the way we structure our metabolisms within it.

I have suggested that this means we look at capitalism, which in the modern era has accelerated its destruction of the environment upon which all life depends. It would be a mistake to talk about bringing species back from extinction without taking a moment to reflect on the fact that we are currently witnessing the worst period of mass extinction since the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs (Dawson 2016, 11; Kolbert 2015, 6). This period cannot be understood apart from capitalism and the cheapening of nature that it demands (Patel and Moore 2018, 44–63). Mass extinction is evidence of capitalism's destructive tendencies. De-extinction technologies might allow us to ignore this warning, furthering the fantasy that capitalism is sustainable. When species continue to die and oceans continue to rise, we might be tempted to think the only pressing issue is finding the right technological fix. And that idea scares me. We are not above nature; we are part of it. We can all, like Nedry, become a meal for another animal. And although we cannot abandon our technological side, we can be more conscious of how our technologies structure our metabolism with nature. We should take that roar in the distance, and Plumwood's words of caution, seriously: a prompt for us to imagine what a more ethical relationship with nature, technology, and each other could look like.

NOTES

1. For more on predation and violence, see Baumeister (chapter 2 of this volume).
2. I don't have room here to discuss the importance of gender in this film; however, for an excellent account of both the film's and Crichton's antifeminism and the story's endorsement of heteronormative family values, see Briggs and Kelber-Kaye (2000). For more on the connection between masculinity and predation, see Baumeister (chapter 2 of this volume).
3. We might even say that the resurrected animals are not technically dinosaurs since their genetics, biology, and environment are all different. I don't have room to explore this interesting question here, see Beever (2017) and Edwards (2014).

4. The novel, *JP* (Crichton 2015), goes into more detail about how other control methods fail. Although the creatures were designed to be dependent on lysine supplements in their food, they manage to survive after escaping the island by eating foods naturally high in lysine.

5. *Indominus* is made from a DNA buffet including *Velociraptor* and *Tyrannosaurus*, as well as modern animals such as the cuttlefish and tree frog—at least this is according to the script. Fans have pieced together clues about the hybrid's appearance and behavior to suggest additional DNA that may have been used.

6. Nostalgia themes play a prominent role throughout the film. Characters stumble upon icons from the first film: vehicles emblazoned with the original JP logo, night vision goggles through which we hope to catch our first glimpse of the mighty *T. rex*, and so forth. Indeed, the film opens with a bored Gray looking at View-Master images of what appears to be dinosaur battle scenes from old stop-animation movies, which invokes a twofold nostalgia through old toys and films. Even in a world with "real" dinosaurs, Gray must be ushered away from the toy by his mother so he won't miss his flight to visit the *JW* theme park.

7. In part because the raptors defect to the *Indominus* just as the characters learn the hybrid was cooked up with some raptor DNA.

8. The filmmakers decided that even the audience didn't want reality. Actual *Velociraptors* were most likely half the size as those portrayed in the films. And unlike the film's raptors, real ones were covered in feathers (American Museum of Natural History 2007).

9. For more on the role of technology in our interdependence, see Beever and Favela (chapters 10 and 11 of this volume, respectively).

10. For more on capitalism and consumerism, see Rogers and Corrigan, and Elmore and Elmore (chapters 4 and 7 of this volume, respectively). For a discussion of the word *metabolism* in the context of humans' relationship with nature, see Moore (2014).

11. In fact, some environmental philosophers argue that they don't (Shiva 2016).

12. Early modern scientists were often either wealthy themselves or worked under the patronage of wealthy families. Galileo named the four moons of Jupiter he discovered after a wealthy family he wanted to fund his research.

13. Malm (2015) has a great essay on how concepts such as the Anthropocene allow us to make this same mistake.

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Chapter 9

Weird Ecologies and the Uncanny in *The Happening*

Brian Onishi

I often stare out of my backyard window and notice the slow rise of unease welling up in my bones. I am regularly greeted by a legion of insects at my window and recoil at their seemingly feverish desire to get into my house. I doubt that they actually want in because I am more terrifying than they are. And yet, it feels very much like a tiny and impotent siege on my house by the local insect army. This is perhaps most striking at night when our back-porch light shines and what seems like all the bugs in western Pennsylvania are at our window. I can see the underside of moths, and spiders, and other creepy crawlies and am reminded of Stephen King's novella, "The Mist," wherein unspeakable monsters appear through a mysterious fog and wreak havoc on a small Maine town. While the mist shrouds these monsters in opaque clouds, my back-porch light reveals them in all their strange glory, their too many legs crawling across the glass, and their fluttering wings or mandibles preparing for flight or a meal. In my imagination these are tiny monsters, weird, delightful, and largely harmless. They are also easy to grasp as discrete entities with predictable desires, movements, and habits. It is when I look past the insects and notice the plants and trees in my backyard that the feeling of unease increases considerably. It is easier to focus on the insect siege and to render the plant community a background to the exuberant life of the landscape. But when I do focus my attention on the plants and trees, I am struck by their uncanny alien quality. I imagine their unseen networks of communication, their slow movement toward water, their vast time scales, and I shudder. The large maple tree casting so much shade upon my yard has been there for many years and will likely outlive me (and potentially my children as well). Its blank stare will remain long after I am gone, and like the roots below my feet, the feeling of the uncanny slowly grows.

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There is something so strange about plant life. Ask any gardener, or homeowner, or landscaper and they will tell you that plants and flowers and trees always exceed our designs for them. No matter how often we mow, the grass continues to grow higher; no matter how often we weed, the unwanted always rise back to life, resurrected zombies without care for our attempts at control. Unlike the insects at the window, the plant community has seemingly mounted a successful siege. The plants are not trying to get into my house, they are not trying to land on my skin, they do not care about me at all. And this lack of care may be the most unsettling aspect of plants; as little as I focus on plants, plants focus on me even less.

It is the uncanny strangeness of plants that I want to highlight in this chapter. I argue that plant ecologies are weird and unsettling and that paying attention to this weirdness reveals a great deal about our own attitudes, practices, and revulsions. To do so I will appeal to stories and narratives that imagine our relationship and communication with plant communities as uncanny and strange. Part of my analysis will focus on the ways that we imagine our relationship to plants and what this says about our relationship with local ecologies. I use M. Night Shyamalan's 2008 film, *The Happening*, as the main narrative source. I use *The Happening* for two main reasons. First, I argue that *The Happening* dramatizes what I call a weird ecology. This is a manifestation of a broader direction of thought I call the eco-weird, which focuses on the uncanniness of nature and environmental dangers. Second, I argue that *The Happening* highlights our own fears about global climate change. If climate change is anthropogenic (catalyzed by human activity), then the habits and practices that lead to climate change work directly against our own self-preservation. That is, the actions we think are improving our lives are ultimately promoting self-harm. And if we exist alongside and embedded within other communities (e.g., plant communities), then our actions are doing extreme violence to these communities. Not only are we perpetuating a cycle of self-harm, but we are potentially creating a feedback loop that transforms docile entities (like trees) into hostile forces. This concern about climate change in *The Happening* is manifest through feelings of uncanniness and is therefore an example of the eco-weird. Through misguided activities of self-preservation, we are turning some of the most docile entities into the most dangerous of enemies. In so doing, the safe and the familiar become terrifying and strange. Our feelings of homeliness are uprooted, leaving us anxious in our own home with an ecology (remembering the etymological relation between eco and home) that is hostile and strange.

Before I begin analyzing *The Happening*, I want to clarify what I mean by *the weird*. I am drawing on the genre of "weird fiction" as inspiration for a philosophical weird. According to H. P. Lovecraft, perhaps the best-known

author of weird fiction, the weird is marked by an uncanny intrusion from somewhere outside of our known reality. To quote Lovecraft:

> A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (Lovecraft 1973, 15)

There are two important things to note here. First, what breaks through is literally unthinkable. In many of Lovecraft's stories, the protagonist ends up either insane or on the brink of insanity. What breaks through from another reality leaves those who experience it unhinged from the reality they once knew. Thus, a mark of the weird is a breakdown of our epistemic limits. Second, because our epistemic limits are breached, we are left with a new distrust of our modes of organization and apprehension. The very laws of nature are broken, leaving us in a newly realized foreign world, and we ourselves are left untrustworthy narrators of our own experience.

In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher echoes Lovecraft's description of the weird, claiming that "the weird is that *which does not belong*. The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation)" (Fisher 2016, 10–11). Fisher goes on to say that

> the weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of *wrongness* a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate. (Fisher 2016, 15)

What is important about Fisher's argument here is the relationship the weird has with our epistemic categories. Like Lovecraft, Fisher's sense of the weird is that which breaks our epistemic grasp. Unlike Lovecraft, there is a focus for Fisher on the way that familiar objects can become weird. The possibility that what is most familiar becomes a mechanism for undoing our epistemic categories is just as if not more horrifying than a Lovecraftian monster emerging from the depths of the ocean. *The Happening* provides an image for how terrifying the familiar (plants) can be.

Finally, I argue that there is a philosophical relationship between what Lovecraft and Fisher describe as *the weird* and the epistemic limits

described by Quentin Meillassoux as the problem of correlation. According to Meillassoux, correlation describes "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (5). We are trapped within a circle of thinking and being such that we only ever have access to thoughts about experiences and never the experiences themselves. Yet, Meillassoux sets out to establish a mode of speculative thinking that breaks through the correlational limits. The hope of gaining access to the in-itself remains extremely dim, however, because any time that we attempt to think that which is outside the epistemic limits of our correlational relationship with being, we are sucked back into a direct relation with our thoughts. But if such a breakthrough is possible, then the philosophical weird is found where the in-itself traverses the correlational limit; a strange and maddening tapping of reality that captures our attention but remains just beyond the reach of our understanding. Even if there is an impossibility of ever escaping the epistemic limit of correlationism, I argue that the sense of weirdness experienced upon realizing that we are trapped in our own heads is also akin to the weird. If nothing else, we intuit a world beyond our thoughts. The inability to ever reach out to this world unfounds our intuitions and manifests the uncanny in the simplest tasks of perception. We are characters in a narrative that breaks the fourth wall yet cannot escape the limits of the movie screen.

The limitations of our epistemic grasp on the in-itself has a compelling connection to our relationship with plants. Perhaps the strangest and most unsettling part about our relationship with plants is that we seemingly do not have a shared language or means of communication. We lack access to plant life, and the idea that plants are living things already stretches our understanding of life as such. Because of this, our knowledge about plants seems necessarily limited. We accept that plants have life, and even a means of communication all their own, yet it is a life and communication that is so alien to us that we often treat them more like matter than animals. Due to this alien quality, there is a kind of epistemological ambiguity that emerges in our relationship to plants. *The Happening*, if nothing else, oozes ambiguity about plants (what could be more ambiguous than the title: *The Happening*?) and therefore fittingly dramatizes the connection between the weird, correlational limits, and plants.

THE HAPPENING

The Happening, M. Night Shyamalan's 2008 horror movie, was poorly received by critics and popular audiences. Its premise is intriguing, but for many, the film fails because it lacks a clear direction and a compelling

conclusion. The film begins with a rash of mass suicides, setting up a story driven by anxiety about anthropogenic climate change, pollution, and ecological destruction. We learn early on that our main character, Elliot, is a high school science teacher concerned about the troubling die-off of bees. As a possible explanation for the beepocalypse, one of his students suggests that it is merely an act of nature that we will never fully understand. This answer foreshadows the lack of explanations for the suicide epidemic and forces the audience to consider the mystery of nature not graspable by science. Instead of clear solutions to the problem, we are left with the unsettling idea that we are part of a larger community of nonhuman agents, and that we lack both the freedom to completely choose our own direction and the ability to predict what that direction will be.

There are two claims I want to make about *The Happening*. First, *The Happening* plays upon our anxieties about global warming and ecological destruction. We have no satisfying answers to this global problem, and we are scared that this will steal our freedom to act in a predictable climate. Second, the ecology found in *The Happening* is distinctly *weird*, and the atmospheric terror that it appeals to has as much to do with the uncanniness of being connected to nature as it does to our lack of freedom to respond to that nature.

ACT I: THE TERROR OF TERRORISM

At the surface level, there is something deeply disturbing about the possibility of ecological disaster. Such disasters, as evidenced by hurricanes Katrina and Maria, superstorm Sandy, and the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupt our assumptions about everyday life: grocery stores are swept away, electrical grids are ruined, and food supplies are interrupted. There are good reasons to think that climate change increases the chances of ecological disaster, which means that there are good reasons to be anxious about climate change. Yet, we cannot seem to keep ourselves from destroying the planet, leading us into an eerie cycle of our own ecologically driven demise.

The movie opens on a beautiful day in Central Park. It is a generally unremarkable day until a shrill scream breaks the serenity. This is a top-level intrusion of what seems to be a pleasant experience, the weird feeling of a disturbance from beyond the tranquil setting. Just after the scream, a woman on a park bench notices that everyone else in the park has stopped. Her friend, sitting next to her on the park bench, begins to mumble incoherently. "I forget where I am," she says, marking the previously familiar location as so utterly strange as to be unrecognizable. The woman at the center of the scene remains temporarily unaffected, capable of seeing the difference between

normality and abnormality. She is the perspective of the audience that is able to notice the eerie difference between a chaotic movement of individual activity and the collective halt of all activity as everyone stops at once.

Soon enough, the park goers begin to move in a backward and seemingly unintentional shuffle. If, as Fisher contends, the weird is that which doesn't belong, a sudden categorical shuffling of the ordinary, then this scene is markedly weird. The background assumption here is that the frame of normality and belongingness are grounded on an appeal to self-preservation and deliberate, self-willed action. That is, most of the activities in the park, meeting friends, exercising, getting to and from work, eating food, playing, watching kids, are all, in some way, related to self-preservation. The seeming intrusion from the outside, the sudden and spooky halt of these activities snaps us to attention because it defies our accepted categories of appropriate conduct. Further, it seems as though each individual's will is taken over by an unknown agency. The feeling of unease at our inability to act freely is strikingly dramatized, highlighting the potential impact that a global environmental crisis could have on our individual and collective wills.

Shyamalan contrasts the weirdness of the park scene with some basic modes of framing used to organize our world. When word spreads about the park suicides, teachers meet to discuss a course of action. Here we have a kind of town hall meeting where standards of safety are established and hopes of more information are stated. Reason guides the group of adults and tampers the anxiety of the unknown. Elliot, a high school science teacher, appeals to the scientific method while Julian, a math teacher and one of Elliot's close friends, provides statistics and figures as "counsel" designed to diminish the spreading fear. As in the park, we see the ground of familiarity built up and slowly peeled back. We want to assume that we live in a calculable and predictable world that is neatly organized and controlled. When that control is broken down, we panic until a new order has been established. It is unclear what kind of data Julian has to offer, or if it provides any kind of accurate account, and we are therefore left with the uncanny feeling that this order and control is completely fabricated. This loss of control leads to another mode of framing: terrorism.

Terrorism is an easy and comfortable method of framing the world because it offers reason to the seemingly unreasonable without any fundamental shift in our understanding. We can cast these off as outliers to a sane and predictable world and move on as if nothing has changed. There are, however, reasons to doubt the terrorism frame. In the park scene, the camera focuses on sudden gusts of wind, cueing us in to the uncanny direction of the oft safe breeze. Where has this wind come from? And what is its purpose? There is a tradition in horror of using wind to identify some new and threatening presence, usually from a place beyond our known reality. It is often part of what Eugene Thacker identifies as the "magic circle" motif wherein a cone of

safety is drawn around a specific group of people, creating a clear distinction between audience and spectacle (*In the Dust of This Planet* 77). But there is no magic circle in *The Happening*, and the remainder is a fully enchanted and disturbed reality. In Thacker's words, "There is no spectacle that we may view from inside the safety of the circle. Instead, natural and supernatural blend into a kind of ambient, atmospheric no-place, with the characters bathed in the alien either of unknowable dimensions" (Thacker 2011, 77). The wind comes from nowhere and everywhere, and the disappearance of the magic circle leaves us with an "alien" and "unknowable" environment, thereby reframing the world/climate as dangerous.

After the park scene, the frame cuts to a construction site. A small group of workers stand around telling jokes, swimming in the safety of the familiar, when a colleague falls from the site to his death. This first casualty is followed by more and more people falling from the sky, seeming to step off the ledge by their own volition. No discreet cause, no monster or visible rift in reality emerges to explain these deaths, and we are left with the shockingly eerie sight of a sky opening, not to rain, but to human bodies. It is as if the climate has changed so drastically that we now experience extreme weather as literal bodies falling from the sky. This death as a weather movement supports Thacker's claim that the magic circle has dissolved to reveal the world (or environment) as the vague locus of danger. The fear of ecological disaster and more extreme weather ushers in a weird climate and the realization that *we* may be the force from outside threatening to break through. This may even have to be our new working definition of the Anthropocene; an ecological age in which an uncanny human force threatens to destroy the familiar without care for its inhabitants. We are Cthulhu and we care not for this insignificant world. Or perhaps it is the other way around. Or both.

The first act in *The Happening* closes with another park scene, another gust of wind, and a slow march toward death in the form of a gun. We see a police officer, usually a symbol of safety and control, remarking on the chilly weather. This is another clue that terrorism may not be the source of the present terror. Another sudden halt and the once active park shifts to an eerie calm until the officer pulls out his gun and shoots himself. The camera focuses on the fallen gun and we soon see a man exit his vehicle and slowly and calmly walk toward the gun, pick it up, and shoot himself. The calm with which he approaches the gun is particularly off-putting. There is no frantic scramble. There is no resistance to this death. No other person moves except for a final woman who makes the same march toward the gun and does the same as the two men before her. It is as if they simultaneously know and don't know the danger of the gun; as if they knowingly walk toward danger with the calm of a person who, like Abraham with Isaac, faithfully expects that the gun will end up a benign threat. This, I argue, mirrors the march toward climate change and ecological disaster that is currently in progress. It is the warning of the

scientist mocked by the faith of the public in easy resolution. It is a benign threat that will never really reach us, until it does, and we have too little time to change our behavior and avoid the horror of our own destruction.

ACT II: MADNESS AND PLANT DEFENSE

In the second act, the juxtaposition of the familiar with the strange continues, creating a feeling of the weird through an "irruption into *this* world of something from outside" (Fisher 2016, 20). This irruption, according to Fisher, is an identifying mark of the weird. Surely whatever is causing mass suicides in Central Park is just such an irruption, but there are other minor examples that highlight this sense of the weird. For instance, the idea that plants are the cause of the New York suicides is first suggested by a man with wild eyes who talks to plants and, in the mid of danger, on the run from some unknowable terror, takes time to lament the bad reputation that hotdogs get even though they are full of protein and have a "cool shape." His subtle strangeness and potential madness make us discount his ideas, and the subversive looks that pass between Elliot and Alma add to our skepticism about his sanity. And yet it is this hotdog-loving, plant-talking man, not the scientist or the math teacher, who is the source of our information. That the conventional voices of reason (the scientists, the mathematician, the "expert" on television) have failed to account for *The Happening* makes it possible for little bits of madness to intrude on our sanity, to rearrange our organization and understanding of the world, and to ultimately swing the center of reason away from humanity to a broader ecology.

According to the hotdog man, plants can detect threats, organize a defense, and release toxins that mitigate their own destruction. Beyond thorny vines, plants are capable of releasing toxins that help them fend off potential dangers. If we accept this theory as plausible, then we also must accept the idea that plants communicate with each other in complex ways, and that we must consider their well-being when performing actions that have potential impacts on plant communities. Beyond the subtle shifts of reason demonstrated by the hotdog man, this is a profound, and profoundly weird shift in perspective. Not only are we introduced to a new kind of agency, but we are thrown into an ecological panopticon, watched and judged by the plants around us. The weirdness of the shift is the ungrounding of the familiar safety of plants. Their benign agency is now an imminent threat to our system of values, and we must tread with a growing sense of unease that we are being watched.

There are two separate, though not mutually exclusive readings of this shift. The first is that through the "monstrosity" of plants, we are confronted with our own hubris as humans. We want to control the environment, condition

the air, and manipulate landscapes for our own, specifically human, good. The threat by plants is a forceful intrusion by a nonhuman force, demanding a voice for nonhuman entities via violent means. The second reading is that this attack acts as a mirror for anxieties about climate change. Through our own action, including the misinformed and poorly conceived plans for control, we are ultimately harming ourselves and creating a toxic environment. The danger is not necessarily a malevolent plant agency, but our own destructive behavior. In this reading, we are putting ourselves on a path of self-destruction and a species-wide suicide.

As stated, these are not mutually exclusive readings. It is as if our self-destructive behavior has broken the backgrounded environmental system, thereby forcing us to realize how deeply interconnected we are with the rest of nature, and it is horrifying. Like Heidegger's hammer, it is only once the system is broken that we can pay attention to how the system works.[1] Almost every action we perform impacts hidden communities beyond our perceptual grasp, and *The Happening* dramatizes the idea that these communities can push back. Because they are so often unrecognized, this push back seems like a sudden irruption from somewhere outside our reality, a weird twist wherein the background of our actions is suddenly foregrounded in a horrific and sudden shift, like happily digging a trench in the earth, only to realize that we were actually cracking the shell of a massive turtle.

The second act ends the way it started—with a falsely calm handling of a suicide gun. The groups on the run break into smaller and smaller units. One by one they fall victim to the suicidal movement. Each group attempts to get away from the threat of the eerie wind, alluding to environmental NIMBYism (Not in My Back Yard) and population control. A soldier from one of the groups suddenly halts, turns to the side, and screams "my firearm is my friend." The familiar is again juxtaposed by the unfamiliar, the friend becomes the enemy, and the soldier becomes the agent of chaos. Elliot, Alma, and Jess (a small girl, orphaned by *The Happening*) make up our now-diminished group of main characters. They are all climate refugees now, alone and looking for safety in a small population. Their last stop is at a small, reclusive farm populated by a sole, lonesome woman. She has not been affected by *The Happening*, has not heard about the suicides, and is disconnected from the human world with only plants and trees as her companions.

INTERLUDE

I want to step back and clarify two basic concepts to my argument and then appeal to a secondary narrative as a way of understanding *The Happening* as an example of the eco-weird. The first concept is the idea of *interdependence*.

In her 2015 monograph, Kriti Sharma details the idea of interdependence and explores a potentially new path for biology and scientific inquiry in general. For Sharma, interdependence signifies the idea that there are no distinct entities prior to specific interactions. Part of Sharma's motivation is the biological concept of signal transduction. According to Sharma, "Signal transduction is commonly defined as the conversion of signals from the environment outside of a cell into physical or chemical changes within the cell" (Sharma 2015, 3). By the standard interpretation of signal transduction, entities are separate and distinct from one another and encounter each other via perceptual capacities and powers. When we see the wind rustle through the trees, we are enacting signal transduction via our senses of sight and sound. Sharma questions this standard interpretation because it entails that we are stuck with a surface layer of reality, trapped inside of our own perceptions. Sharma claims that "there is no peeking at the world independent of perceptions. All we get as organisms ourselves *are* perceptions and conceptions. And so . . . I began searching for and contemplating ways to think about the real world that do not assume its existence independent of perceptions" (Sharma 2015, 10). Ultimately, Sharma focuses on the relationship between necessity and contingency and develops something she calls contingentism.

According to Sharma, "Contingentism is an attempt to understand reality in a way that *accounts for* the full interdependence of perceivers and perceived phenomena—which means, necessarily, not taking either of them to be intrinsically existent. From a contingentist perspective, it is not necessary to separate objects and subjects in order to make sense of and live well in the world" (Sharma 2015, 17). In Sharma's contingentism, objects are constituted via their relations with other objects. A flower is a complex arrangement of cells, language, observers, and a great range of other constitutive parts of a whole. It is only our highly complex interactions and our consistent reference to flower-like objects (not necessary qualities) that "make flowers appear so obvious, vivid, and *stable* as objects" (Sharma 2015, 14). Without an observer to organize and describe habitually occurring processes, no such objects would exist. For Sharma, "There is a very precise sense in which objects depend on the presence of observers: only observers can perform the various actions necessary for experiencing phenomena as objects" (Sharma 2015, 22).

While I generally like the direction of Sharma's thought, the idea that the observer organizes the thing observed into a phenomenal object does not mean that the object lacks some essential unity. Rather, I argue that the object shows itself to each observer, revealing something unique about both the object and the observer. The bee also sees a flower, but the bee does not call the thing encountered a flower, nor does it organize it into scientific terms. The bee still encounters the same flower on some level, but the qualities

revealed to the bee's specific perceptual abilities are distinct from the qualities revealed to the human. In that sense, it seems more likely that the object is not exhausted by each observer, but that each observer must deal within the limits of their own perceptual bounds.

The problem I see with Sharma's account is that she seems to be making a move from epistemology to ontology. We are stuck inside of our own observations and our own perceptions. Therefore, there must not be a something *there* because there is no "something" that produces the qualities I see. I constitute the world via my perceptions, organizations, and articulation of the world and in that sense, it is my epistemology that defines my ontology. In Sharma's words, "We cannot even say, 'An object is none other than its properties,' because there is nothing independent of properties that possess properties. In other words, there is no possessor of properties. . . . There is no intrinsically existing 'ghostly level' called a 'whole' that is in any way separate from the parts" (Sharma 2015, 26). This is not to say that Sharma denies the existence of the external world. Rather, she denies that there are any definable objects as wholes, except as part of an interpretation of the world via specific powers of perception. "Properties do not inhere in objects," she says, because "properties are themselves constituted by senses. They are whatever can be observed or measured" (Sharma 2015, 27). Thus, on Sharma's account all things are interdependent because all objects literally rely on an observer to constitute it as a thing. At first glance this seems to be dangerously anthropocentric. For if there are no humans to constitute a flower as a flower, then there are no flowers at all. Yet Sharma's contingentism is quite broad, accounting for interactions between nonhuman objects, such as the interaction between light and a plant. According to Sharma:

> Light that is assimilated into a plant in the case of photosynthesis changes the physiology of the organism and actually *constitutes* or *builds* the organism. In the case of sensing, it can seem as though the world—particularly as *objects*—stays on the outside of organisms. Why do we not see sensing as a process of assimilation as well? Sensing is, after all, also a process that constitutes and builds organisms. (Sharma 2015, 55)

I am sympathetic to Sharma's claims about the relative constitution of objects and the emergence of properties via the interaction between observer and observed. However, I am not convinced that we can reduce all ontological claims to a common, atomic, sense of being. This is what Graham Harman calls "overmining" where overmining is the reduction of a thing to its outward relations (Harman 2011, 112). The problem Harman sees with this approach is that it leads to a kind of infinite regress, whereby all interactions create new objects. At every moment, we encounter new relations with objects and

contexts so that we are continuously generating new objects. Instead, Harman offers the idea that things appear and withdraw depending on our perceptual powers, the context we are in, and the perceivable reality available to us. That is, Harman seems to acknowledge the limit of human knowledge with a kind of speculative skepticism about how far we can really reach. According to Harman, "Human consciousness does not transcend the cosmos and observe it from a neutral scientific void, but forever burrows through an intermediate layer of reality, no more aware of the larger objects to which it belongs than of the tool-beings that withdraw from it" (Harman, QO; 113).

While there are some aspects of Harman's philosophy that do not stand up to scrutiny, the idea that we encounter a ghostly world where reality haunts us just beneath our powers of observation is compelling. That is, as Sharma indicates, it may be impossible to get beyond our own senses to the world beyond perception. But instead of offering an ontological claim that no necessary qualities exist and that all objects are manifest in every relation, we can speculate about the weird world that taps on the window of our consciousness and grabs our attention from the corner of our eye. As soon as we turn our full focus on what we think we saw, it vanishes, simultaneously mocking our limitations and calling us to investigate further. This is partly a problem of epistemology. What is it that shows up when I scrutinize the world? If I only have access to properties, then it may be an intuitive jump to say that the thing I encounter is merely a set of properties. Yet I would argue that the only claim we can make is about our access to objects rather than the objects themselves. The ability to speculate, however, remains and this is where the uncanny and the weird converge.

The idea that there is a world outside of our observation, outside of our very thought, is already weird. It creates a feeling of uncanniness specifically because it cannot be thought. It is some lost remainder, a haunting specter that never crosses into our frame of reality. According to Nicholas Royle, the uncanny "is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar . . . . It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home" (Royle 2003, 1). The idea that there is a world alien to ours, one that we cannot access and yet that frames our entire reality seems to be the quintessential manifestation of the uncanny. At the center of all our familiar perceptions, at the heart of our very grasp of reality is that which we cannot access. In Royle's depiction, we also get a clear picture of how close Lovecraft's weird fiction and the philosophical uncanny really are. Royle continues: "The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality. It may be that the uncanny is a feeling that happens only to oneself, within oneself, but it is never one's 'own': its meaning . . . may have to do, most of all, with what is not oneself, with others, with the world 'itself'" (2003, 2). Because the

uncanny often deals in the familiar, we experience it on an everyday level during our everyday encounters, but only when our attention is drawn to the boundaries that separate the familiar and the unfamiliar. I argue that weird fictions, including films like *The Happening*, offer us an opportunity to dramatize this uncanniness. In that sense, *the weird* is a narrative articulation of the uncanny with specific reference to previously unknown agencies that remain unknowable. Likewise, the eco-weird is a dramatization of the weird via natural or environmental settings; it designates nature as uncanny irruption.

Weird fiction has been associated most frequently with the supernatural horror of H. P. Lovecraft, whose cosmic horror is perhaps most famous for a monstrous entity named Cthulhu, so massive and misshapen that it drives all who see it mad. Cthulhu reframes our understanding of reality in much the same way a scientific revolution can. It extends our world beyond the anthropocentric focus of humans to a broader, violent existence. Much is made about the fact that Cthulhu cares very little for human life. We are but specks of dust to the Great Old One, and any violence that results is accidental and of little consequence for Cthulhu. In many ways, Cthulhu's lack of care for human life seems analogous to violent acts of nature like hurricanes or tornadoes. While I think there is an interesting connection between Lovecraft's pessimistic philosophy and eco-nihilism, I want to focus on a subtler connection between weird fiction and environmental philosophy.

In "The Uncanny Goodness of Being Edible to Bears," James Hatley offers an analysis of uncanniness in nature. According to Hatley, "The uncanny precipitates a crisis in which the very capacity to fix a boundary marking out the difference between one's own and the other's own is undermined, by the logic of a doubled lapse or confusion" (Hatley 2004, 21). In Hatley's account, uncanniness is precipitated by the knowledge that we are edible to other animals. "In merely the *threat* of being eaten," Hatley claims, "one finds oneself in the situation that the very body that sustains one's own life suddenly is also the body that is to be ingested, in order that another's life might be sustained. What was most intimate becomes most strange, and what was most strange becomes most intimate" (Hatley 2004, 21). In being edible to bears, we are thrown into a feeling of unhomeliness in the thing that is most familiar: our bodies. Our most intimate tool of experience is rendered alien by the possibility of being ingested by another, and we are thus thrust into a crisis.

Algernon Blackwood, whose weird fiction greatly influenced Lovecraft's work, often focused on the strange feelings that arise from our interactions with nature. In "The Willows," two explorers share a similar experience to Hatley's edible goodness. The narrator describes an "unbidden and unexplained . . . feeling of disquietude, almost alarm" that is brought on by the "realization of our utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements" (Blackwood 2011, 12). Like the scene in my backyard, the hidden

landscape full of willows reveals the insignificance of the human narrator. The men will come and go, die, and pass away while the elements will continue to grow. As the story progresses, they become convinced that there is an alien world behind the willows, attempting to break through via the plants. In that sense, the environmental setting is merely an occasion for a mysterious agency. The willows creep closer, but their movement is motivated by an outside force. While this certainly fits the mold of the weird, it displaces the environment and the plants as the danger itself. This marks a clear difference between the weird in "The Willows" and the weird in *The Happening*. In *The Happening*, nature or the environment is the danger; in "The Willows," the danger is hidden by nature. Following Thacker, this difference may be attributed to changes in the horror genre such as the elimination of the magic circle. The plants are no longer vehicles for an outside irruption but are the irruption itself.

ACT THREE: THE LONESOME WOMAN

The conclusion to *The Happening* is remarkably unsatisfying. The threat quietly fades as the wind slowly dies down. There is no final explanation of the viral suicides and the main characters mostly return to a status quo existence. There is, however, something haunting about the lonesome woman and the isolated house that populates most of the third act of *The Happening*. Here we find the terror of interdependence in a new guise. This lonesome woman simultaneously showcases the danger of isolation and the subtle threat of being constituted by nonhuman others. She holds outdated values and manners, slapping Jess's hand when she reaches for a cookie. To modern sensibilities, she seems unpredictable and thereby irrational, offering hospitality but no warmth, giving in to the demands for good conduct rather than celebrating them. If there is horror in interdependence, there is likewise horror in isolation.

If we return to Sharma's analysis, contingentism argues that each object is manifest via the interaction with an observer with certain powers of perception. But what happens when an object is isolated and unobserved? First, I imagine that this is very unlikely if not completely impossible. Every object is already made of other smaller and larger objects. Each object, then, may be its own observer, revealing certain qualities that others cannot, and blind to qualities that others can see. In isolation, we haunt ourselves. In isolation, the lonesome woman has become habituated to her own company, her own time, and her own actions without concern for others. The invitation of hospitality is thereby weird; a familiar act that does not belong in the hands of someone so estranged. In a life habituated to isolation, the invitation is

only to an isolated world, which directly contradicts the experience of being with others. Second, if an isolated object is possible, it would make relations with other objects foreign and alien. Elliot, Alma, and Jess intrude upon the lonesome woman's world and, like the explorers in "The Willows," are themselves the irruption of the familiar. And here we are presented with the same epistemological problem (and terror) that strikes both correlationism and contingentism; that is, we never know the other side except as it haunts us from beyond our grasp.

If we accept Sharma's claim that objects "depend on observers to bound them and hold them as continuous over time," (2015, 39) then an object in isolation is a kind of non-entity, a contradiction that both exists and does not exist. The lonesome woman is found, unassuming, unthreatened, unbeing. Unless, that is, we acknowledge that the plants have been observing her the whole time, maintaining her presence, and constituting her being. If so, then her strangeness is justified. She has been constituted not by a community of humans, but by a community of plants. This, beyond mere isolation, is what makes her awkward invitation weird. And here is where the film fails the premise. If she has been keeping communion with plants, animals, and other biotic communities, then why does she fall victim while our main characters are safe?

Perhaps the only real redeeming quality of this third act is the non-narrative sense of the weird generated by the feelings of dread and unease. The lonesome cabin and the disconnected woman are off-putting, if for no other reason than that she is unpredictable. She is an old woman, capable of violence without warning, much like the plant threat driving the film's action. Here we find Fisher's sense of the weird in a "particular kind of perturbation" involving "a sensation of *wrongness*. A weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here" (2016, 15). The lonesome woman should not exist and yet she does. The final scene at the isolated cabin mirrors the opening scene at the park—a serene and organized nature undone by the wrongness of human intentionality. The lonesome woman walks backward through her garden, and her head breaks through the glass window before she succumbs to the suicidal nature of the plant-based threat. Her demise, in many ways, seems to be caused by the intrusion of Elliot, Alma, and Jess. They bring the violence with them and introduce her to the malicious wind. She has survived on her own for so long only to be destroyed by the threat of human connection.

CONCLUSION

In a short passage from *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan describes the possibility that we have been cultivated to spread and promote the growth

of grass, not the other way around (Pollan 2006, 129). Returning to the scene outside my back window, I wonder if I have been colonized by the kingdom of grass. I mow it when it grows too high, allowing seeds to disperse and the sun to access its blades. I weed when foreigners have broken through, ensuring that the grass continues to monopolize the nutrient seas wetting the lush soil. My own agency under threat, I question the familiar ground of my action and allow a brief break in my independent being. Perhaps it is not one or the other. Perhaps there is a false dichotomy at play that claims that existence is a zero-sum game; either the kingdom of grass or the kingdom of me. I need not be in control, a single and lonesome agency against the ever-creeping motion of entropy, nor am I merely a pawn in the larger environmental economy. Instead, we grow together in an interdependence that can ensure a mutual flourishing. But this seems like too large a step away from my current understanding of nature and the environment, and the brief moment of calm gives way to anxiety about climate change, environmental disaster, and how my lawn looks to my neighbors. The weird irruption of nature has offered an aporia to an unfamiliar world where new possibilities emerge. It may not be the case that the eco-weird is a saving mechanism, a panacea for all our environmental problems. But it does have the potential to unsettle us and to reveal the horrible wonder, and the terrible awe of being with others.

NOTE

1. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes a hammer as equipment that is ready to hand. Things like hammers "subordinate themselves to the manifold assignments of the 'in-order-to'" such that we never see the hammer except as a means to completing a project (98). We only ever see the hammer as a separate thing when it breaks or cannot perform the action we intend (103).

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Resident Evil, the Zomborg, and the Dark Side of Interdependence

Jonathan Beever

In *Resident Evil* (2002), the main character, Alice, is wandering through the underground genetics laboratory, the Hive, and comes across a pair of Doberman Pinschers: skinless, growling, zombie Doberman Pinschers. That scene has always bothered me. Why would a genetics lab test on Doberman Pinschers in the first place? Is that a standard model of genetic research? Why are there only two animals in the entirety of the Hive, especially those two? Were they some Umbrella employee's pets visiting the lab on vacation and just put in lab kennels temporarily? The best I have been able to do by way of explanation is to make two initial assumptions. First, those particular dogs were in the movie for more than arbitrary reasons. And second, that reason was to build a narrative about what really scares us, in a world where the boundaries between what's inside and what's outside are blurred by biotechnological manipulation. The first assumption I, as a philosopher, am willing to hold for the sake of the argument of this discussion. Some may argue it is overly generous, given the franchise of video game–adapted films I am examining. The second, however, is an assumption that I think is instructive as a culture lens through which we can get a better handle on what I see as a deep and raw undercurrent of social anxiety[1] about the philosophical implications of emerging biotechnologies. These sources of social anxiety are *moral threats* insofar as they disrupt a system of norms grounded on a shared view of the way of our worlds of relationships—a fundamentally ontological view about interdependence.

In this chapter, I read the *Resident Evil* franchise of films as a developing reflection of this sort of social concern. The undead—and, more importantly, their evolution across a decade of film narrative—tell a story of the darker side of the nature of being, a place where relationality and ecology destroy and consume rather than build and birth; a nature red in tooth and claw. It

is a narrative that shifts the grounds of twentieth-century sources of social anxiety, like bioterrorism and human greed, toward a ground much more complex and subtle—and therefore much more horrible. It presents an ontology by which the relationships of interdependence that we commonly take to constitute, shape, and build individuals in the world instead do quite the opposite. Through a comparative analysis of genealogy of the concept of zombies and its representation in the *Resident Evil* series of movies, I argue that these cultural representations offer a visceral simulacrum of the dark side of interdependence. I hypothesize that the genealogy of the zombie threat within the *Resident Evil* franchise pushes representation of this dark view of interdependence significantly beyond the biological, drawing out questions of interrelations not only between organisms but among organisms and artificial intelligences: combining the zombie and cyborg into the new shape of the *zomborg*. In the first section of this chapter, I present a view of the zombie that I see as reflecting a "traditional" twentieth-century social anxiety about the role of biotechnologies on relationships. In the second section, I lay out the positive view of relationships that is threatened by these biotechnologies. In the third and final section, I argue that the 2016 installation of the film franchise presents a take on the zombie that reflects or represents a subtle existential horror about the implications of twenty-first-century ecological thought—thought which shifts attention from dependence relationships to *interdependent* relationships. This shift poses a radical departure from our "traditional" view of humanity's nature and place in the order of things.

ZOMBIES, VIRALITY, AND BIOTECHNOLOGY

The idea of zombies is nothing new. From the Caribbean mind-slave to the soulless undead, and from diseased plague victims to the qualia-free philosophical zombie, "zombie" as a concept plays radically different philosophical work depending on its contextualization. Across their contexts, zombies have been representations of moral threats, or sources of social anxiety. "The zombie as movie monster represents a very fluid metaphor . . . upon which our worst fears and anxieties can be grafted. Throughout time, the meaning of the zombie has changed, but so has our fears" (Strohecker 2012). Zombies represent our "ontological anxiety made flesh"—an anxiety about being itself. In its initial entry into the film market in 2002, *Resident Evil* set out to tell us that same familiar story, but in a context reflecting anxiety about the viral potential of emerging practices of bioengineering to radically alter being.

   Resident Evil (2002) was, on its face, a story about corporate greed and human failing in the context of bioengineering: we come to know Alice as a good-intentioned whistleblower wanting to shut down the

not-so-subtly-named Umbrella Corporation, which is engaged in "illegal genetic viral research" (Anderson 2002). And we learn, in between scenes of slaughter and mayhem that help identify the genre, that her "partner" Spence intentionally released the virus to delay knowledge of his theft of a sample of virus, which he intended to sell—a combination of intellectual property theft and bioterrorism marking two shared sources of social anxiety. The artificial intelligence system, the Red Queen, is taken in this story to be less of a moral threat in and of itself than a mere artifact of an evil corporation—as fundamentally and necessarily as bad as the corporation that created her. "Don't listen to anything she says," one of the characters reminds Alice's group, on their first encounter.

While these various sources of moral concern shape the story, for what it is, the underlying social concern is held up by the zombie. Indeed, the Red Queen, that corporate security system, reminds Alice's group and the audience of the real moral threat: the virus, instantiated as zombie. "The virus is protean, changing from liquid to airborne to blood transmission depending on its environment. It's almost impossible to kill" (ibid.). The zombie dogs Alice faces are mere visceral instantiations of that virus, combining an apparently common fear of Doberman Pinschers (unfortunate, from an animal ethics perspective) with a fear of the uncontrollable, unkillable, invisible, engineered virus. Later in the film, in a nothing-like-subtle move, Spence's moral wrongdoing (causing the (un)deaths of Hive workers by releasing the virus) is brought to justice by the virus in physical and lethal form as the brain-thing with a tongue zombie unnamed in the film (but known as the "Licker" in the fiction and video game iterations of this story). This virus-as-Licker closes out the film, too, having infected the last remaining human character, Matt, leaving the audience to dwell in their own anxiety about the future of a virus introduced into the world. And most centrally the human zombies, killed and reanimated by the virus, take up this same theme of concern about bioengineering. What is important about the zombie in this context is that it also reflects, on my read, an important shift in the social consideration of ontology. If early zombie narratives were about the horror of losing oneself to the other (I'm thinking here of films like Halperin's 1932 *White Zombie* [1932]), *Resident Evil* is about the horror of a world in which human ecology—as life and its relations—is radically altered by viral bioengineering.

The video game designers and writer and director Paul Anderson's adapting of this story reflects the rapid emergence in the mid- to late twentieth century of human capacities for bioengineering generally and, more specifically, the particular biotechnologies being developed alongside development of this story. Consider, for example, that the human genome was declared fully mapped on April 14, 2003 (National Institutes 2018)—just a few months after the release of the 2002 film. And the Human Genome Project began in

1990 (ibid), less than a decade before the first *Resident Evil* video game was released in 1998 (Story 2017). Thanks in part to these overlapping timelines, the potential for bio(medical) engineering to *enhance* individual human patients quickly became the stuff of science fiction and a core ethical concern. The moral threat in human enhancement was the shift of medicine from curative and preventative roles to augment human capacities and potential beyond what was statistically or biologically "normal" (Brey 2009). Olympic runner (and convicted felon) Oscar Pistorius is himself a good example of such threat. Pistorius battled to be allowed to compete in the Olympics, given that his legs are synthetic—running blades specially designed to enable running. The arguments surrounding Pistorius's participation in his sports asserted, on the one hand, that his synthetic blades were no different than eyeglasses for the near-sighted—they simply brought him up to a normal level and in no way enhanced his ability to perform. Others asserted, on the other hand, that synthetic blades gave Pistorius an unfair kinetic advantage, allowing him to propel his body forward faster than any biological legs could have. An initial study by Rice University's Locomotion Laboratory concluded that "Pistorius used 17 percent less energy than that of elite sprinters on intact limbs" and that Pistorius used "21 percent less time to reposition, or swing, his legs between strides" (Greenmeier 2016). The sufficiency of this evidence was challenged enough that the International Association of Athletics Federations ban was overturned and Pistorius competed in the 2012 Summer Olympics (ibid). These technical questions about the *amount* of enhancement do nothing, in the end, to answer the question about the *moral salience* of enhancement. Whether a little or a lot, human enhancement remained a moral threat through at least the end of the twentieth century.

Yet enhancement, really, is a secondary effect of more fundamental bioengineering. Bioengineering precursors to questions of enhancement have included genetic engineering, including somatic cell therapies, germ-line engineering, and tissue and neural engineering (Brey 2009). The increased potential to understand, manipulate, and control the constitutive elements of human biology opened the space for ethical and social considerations. And this public-level thinking about biotechnologies gave rise to fictional representations of the future implications of those emerging technologies. Additionally, these same biotechnologies allowed the biological to became informational: biobanks began to store large amounts of fundamental personal information about our genetic and genomic makeups. It quickly became less clear who owned this information, what rights the human source had vis-à-vis that information, and what potential harms and benefits might arise from this unique informationalizing of the human. An example here is that of Henrietta Lacks, first made a public name by journalist Rebecca Skloot who identified Lacks as the source of the ubiquitous and nearly immortal

HeLa cell-line (2010). The relationship between Ms. Lacks and the HeLa cells is one of identity, mediated by biotechnology, and integrated across time and space. I see it as an early example of what feminist postmodern theorist Donna Haraway would later call the cyborg in 1991: "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 1991). Indeed, as I've written before, "biotechnologies challenge the traditional boundaries between the human, the animal, and the machine. We are increasingly living under 'blurry' conditions that as of yet fail to offer any social consensus or reassuring ethical guidance" (Beever and Morar 2012, 99).

The cyborg is an ontological result of bioengineering and biotechnology, made visible and visceral in the science fiction work that arose alongside it. Haraway writes,

> Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted. Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality. . . . By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.

The importance of *Resident Evil* (2002), on my read, is just this reflection of the moral threat of cyborgs, which challenge the nature of being by challenging the nature of relationships. It is not lost on me, either, that the director of this movie, Paul Anderson, has received constant criticism for his work. Daniel Engher, in a piece for the high-brow *The New Yorker*, tried his best to appeal to his readers in calling the *Resident Evil* franchise "vapid science fiction" and Anderson "an action-trash auteur" but couldn't resist being drawn into the work. Yet he seems unable to articulate *why* he was so drawn, citing instead "a real electric spark" as if "the robotic process that created them had Easter eggs hidden in its code, producing moments when calculated mayhem bursts into abstraction" (Enger 2017). Other critics in that same magazine likewise had trouble explaining exactly why the films were so compelling. Speaking of a later film in the franchise, Richard Brody writes, "I think that the movie is not at all dismissible; on the contrary, as deadening and depressing as its numbing battles and explosions are, the feeling of emptiness it leaves is exactly the point. I'm not sure whether to ascribe this mood to Anderson, to the genre, or to the video game on which it's based" (Brody 2012). The difficulty in articulate the conflicting relationships between the *Resident Evil* franchise's poor critical scores and vast commercial success (clocking in at over a billion dollars) (Good 2017) is the result of the implicit

social anxieties on which the films draw. At some level, these films confront us with a significant moral threat.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

In this section, I argue that a positive view of ecological relationships is what is at stake in this moral threat. Many ecological and social theorists propose that relational or ecological thinking has positive ontological and ethical implications for understanding the nature and moral worth of the self. If we see "individuals" as co-constituted by their relations, then valuing others becomes a necessary condition for valuing oneself. Ecological thinking is at the heart of many feminist projects, too, which seek to reconcile what has been seen as "masculinist" projects of autonomy, identity, and individuality, with "feminist" projects focusing relationally and on interconnectedness.

In other work, I have argued that thinking about the individual has taken at least three forms (Beever and Morar 2016). The first of these is a view of strong individualism. This view holds individuals as akin to billiard balls: isolated, discrete, and self-contained entities negotiating space vis-à-vis one another. This view, I think, has been especially prevalent in mainstream western philosophy, which has historically privileged the autonomous capacity for rational decision-making above all other human capacities. This individualism has trickled down into explanations of other organisms, too, enabling us to believe we can understand any individual organism by simply isolating it and examining its internal functioning. This first view is one that has been widely and regularly challenged to such an extent that my referencing it here is to set it up as a bit of a straw man, against which to juxtapose other views. Strong individualism faces a central challenge in philosophy from feminist epistemology. Feminists have long been champions of the constitutive role that social relationships play in framing what we know about the world. Annette Baier, for example, argued that "we acquire a sense of ourselves as occupying a place in an historical and social order of persons, each of whom has a personal history interwoven with the history of a community" (1981, 187). Communities become the set of relationships that make us each what we are, shaping us through our relations. Similarly, feminist thinker Jennifer Nedelsky argues that "we come into being in a social context that is literally constitutive of us," (1989, 8) although not determining of us (2011, 32).

Other philosophers like Lorraine Code have taken up the metaphors of ecology toward this same end of explaining the role of relationships in constituting the individual. In her *Ecological Thinking* (2006), Code employs that concept both literally and metaphorically (2006, 51) to "unsettle assumptions

about isolated, abstract, formal knowledge claims advanced and evaluated in isolation from their circumstances of their making and the concrete conditions of their possibility and from their consequent situational effects" (2006, ix).

And while this thinking has been largely in the service of understanding social relationships, this idea of ecological relational thinking has much longer legs. If social relationships are constitutive, then any organism that enters into social relationships is shaped by them. Thus, nonhuman animals, just like human ones, are co-constituted by their relationships. I intentionally slipped here into talk of *relationships* rather than the more specific *social relationships* because we have strong evidence that environmental relationships are similarly constitutive. So, a third form of thinking about the individual looks beyond social relationships to relationships more generally. Two examples are instructive here: one external and one internal. Soundscape ecologist and musician Bernie Krause tells a story of a troop of elephants in Malawi, at a place called Senga Bay. The unique geological features of their region enabled them to develop a troop-specific dialect by incorporating echoes off cliff walls into their communication patterns. According to Krause, no other group of elephants on the planet shares this dialect, thanks to the uniqueness of their external environment (2013). If social and environmental relationships are external, microbial relationships are internal. Our individual human bodies are constituted of approximately half human cells and half microbial organisms; it is a ratio so close that a single "defecation event" can flip the balance (Sender, Fuchs, and Milo 2016). The relationship between each individual and their microbiome makes possible physiological capacities that are not the product of our own evolution—like obesity or leanness, for example (Turnbaugh et al. 2006). Microbial ecologists have continued to add nuance to a symbiotic view of the human organism and microbial communities, especially those present in the human gut. And even while they recognize relationships of dependence, the language of microbiologists upholds individualism in the distinction between the human body and the microbes that reside inside it. For example, a 2018 chapter on the topic evidences the interrelationship between functional microbiota and human health: "many complex diseases are now known to be negatively influenced by dysfunctional microbiota, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, fatty liver disease, inflammatory bowel diseases, Alzheimer disease, Parkinson disease, schizophrenia, and many more" (Turnbaugh et al. 2006). Yet that chapter begins by noting what the authors see as "the harmonic coexistence of microorganisms with the human body is the result of a long coevolutionary process" (Jovel et al. 2018). At work here is a view of two distinct entities, two individuals, that work together toward a common end (in this case, health). Thus, the human individual is constituted by relationships between its internal microbiome and its human cellular

structures, as well as by their external social and environmental relationships. Individuals depend on these relationships.

   Again, the position that I have outlined in this section is in support of interrelationships as fundamental to how the world and its inhabitants is made up. It is a view from scientific ecology that has been widely but only relatively recently taken up in the social imagination: we, generally speaking, feel all right about those sorts of dependent relationships. Lorraine Code calls such take-up the negotiation of an *imaginary*, or the "highly effective systems of meanings, metaphors, and interlocking explanations-expectations within which people, in specific time periods and geographical-cultural climates, enact their knowledge and subjectivities and articulate their self-understandings as knowers—as producers, perusers, critics, beneficiaries, and/or consumers of expert and everyday knowledge" (2006, 245). This sort of imaginary is an ontology largely and often left implicit; so when it is challenged by moral threats like those previously discussed, the response is often confused and anxiety laden. The imaginary of ecological thought is threatened by bioengineering, instantiated by the zombie.

DARK INTERDEPENDENCE

If *Resident* Evil (2002) gave voice to this moral threat to our ecological imaginary, then the 2016 installation of the film franchise presents, I argue, a take on the zombie that represents the dark side of constitutive relationships. It draws from the audience a subtle existential horror about the implications of twenty-first-century ecological thought; specifically, that individuals aren't just dependent but are *interdependent.* Such a view poses a radical departure from our "traditional" view of humanity's nature and place in the order of things.

   As the ecological imaginary has continued to develop, informed by scientific literatures and technological development, it has come to accept not only dependent relationships but also *interdependent* relationships. Dependent relationships are those that link together two otherwise distinct individuals. When feminist thinkers spoke of constitutive social relationships, for example, they have largely left implicit the assumption that the individual still stands alone. Individuals interact with and influence one another, but still much like the physical metaphor of billiard balls I offered above as grounding strong individualism. If an individual weren't in some specific relationships, for instance, they would still *be*, just slightly differently. Interdependence offers a much different perspective, asking us to consider what the world would be if *existence itself* depended on specific relationships. This is just the concern that biologist Kriti Sharma takes up in her brief and brilliant

Interdependence, arguing that although that term has been used in a myriad of ways, it is fundamentally about this ontological question. Sharma believes understanding interdependence requires distinct shifts in imaginary (my/ Code's term here, not Sharma's). "The first," Sharma writes, "is a shift from considering things in isolation to considering things in interaction. This is an important and nontrivial move; it is also a relatively popular and intuitive concept" (2015, 2). This shift is one already taken up by feminist thinkers, challenging strong individualism. The second, however, is much more significant: a move "from considering things in interaction to considering things as *mutually constituted*, that is, viewing things as existing at all only due to their dependence on other things" (ibid). The significance here has to do with the momentum of the imaginary, or the stability with which it supports the human experience of the world. The first shift is easy, by comparison, because "it does not actually require a change in the many habits and assumptions that usually commit us to viewing *things* as fundamentally independent" (Sharma 2015, 2). In fact this is an uncomfortable problem that is also an old problem: How can it be that a thing's existence and identity is contingent on constitutive relationships, inside and out? Plutarch first posed a problem like this in his example of Theseus's ship.

> The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same. (Plutarch 1880)

In previous work, a colleague and I have argued that interdependence introduces "a dynamism of change that brings with it strong potential for heterogeneity—especially when the factors constituting the self have their own dynamic relations." We felt that such a view of the individual was the best explanation, from an ecological perspective. But its implications were deeply uncomfortable: "the self well may remain not more than a useful fiction," we worried (Beever and Morar 2016). There is darkness here. Relationships that we initially took to build us up—supporting our free choices, independence, and moral worth—instead make us wholly contingent. Radical shifts in our relationships would fundamentally change us.

The dark side of this story about interdependence draws inspiration from emerging biological evidence, much as its "light" counterpart did. If some see interrelation and symbiosis, others see the dissolution of the self and parasitology. Couple this biological concern with technological concern, and

the picture looks even darker. No longer is the self internal and stable but instead externalized and informationalized, informed and shaped by a myriad of technologies more and more of which exert control over us in explicit and subtly implicit ways, epistemically and ethically.

Philosopher Sean Lema has gestured toward this darker direction in his own ecological thinking. He has argued that each individual organism is constituted by a series of interactions with its environment, and "interactions take primacy since it is interactions that shape an organism's development" (2014, 157). His account builds a case for a richly interactive environment-organism reciprocity (Lema 2014, 151), defending the view that "conceptual distinctions between 'organism' and 'environment' become obscure, so that when 'environments' change, so necessarily do 'organisms' conjoined to those environments, and vice versa" (Lema 2014, 160). Similarly, J. S. Robert has argued that epigenesis, the interaction between internal genomic processes and external environments, is constitutive not only of genes (2006, xv; 74) but also of environments themselves. Robert concludes, "It is evident not only that organisms construct themselves within environments but also that they help to construct their environments" (Robert 2006, 87). Both Lema and Robert push toward the idea of interdependence. Yet neither push quite far enough to uncover just how uncomfortable such a view is.

But this is what *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter* (2016) represents: the subtle existential horror of a radical departure from our "traditional" view of the order of things. Indeed, it is this story of interdependence that *Resident Evil* movies tell so well. It is a story about a developing threat with multiple origins and endless capabilities, created and informed by the interfaces between biology and biotechnology. While *The Final Chapter* continues the trajectory of a zombie film about a bioengineered virus released into the world, it takes some important departures from that storyline. But zombies take a backseat in the 2016 movies, as if what they stood for in 2002 as sources of social anxiety have been eclipsed by newer, more threatening problems. I identify at least three. First among these is the threat of apocalyptic environmental degradation and the social and political breakdowns that will necessarily follow. A key plot point in *The Final Chapter* is the argument from the head villain and head of the Umbrella Corporation, Dr. Isaacs, for an "orchestrated apocalypse." Isaacs tells his board that the world faces its end thanks to famine, population explosion, climate change, wars, and fascist states and so they might as well "end the world, but on our terms. . . . It's been done once before [points to the Bible], with great success" (Anderson 2016). From 2002 to 2016, the looming threat of climate change, species extinctions, and weirding weather patterns have entered our shared imaginary as newly important sources of social anxiety. The second of these are threats to the sanctity of human agency. This source of anxiety shows up

in the reprised role of the Red Queen. In the original 2002 movie, the Red Queen was set up as a glorified corporate security system. In this iteration, however, the writers offered the Queen *agency*. The Red Queen convinces Alice to return to the Hive and stop her creators, because they had intentionally released the virus. She decides to turn against her creators rather than merely follow orders because she perceives a conflict between two things she was programmed to value: service to the Umbrella Corporation and the value of human life.[2] This deciding, valuing, and acting are new facets to this Red Queen as artificial intelligence. In that same time period between the first film and its franchise's 2016 installation, advances in artificial intelligence gave us reason to start to seriously consider the extent to which all *and only* human beings were agential. This is especially true of so-called social bots or those online personas that drive more and more interactions on the internet (Ferrara et al. 2016). The third of these threats is radical post-humanism. *The Final Chapter* introduces bioengineered viral monsters, like its predecessors, but presents them as radical departures from their origins. After Alice fights and ultimately kills one, one of her team asks, "What the hell is that?" Alice responds: "bioweapon: this one's human." The presentation of the human as a bioweapon threatens the heart of ecological thought: humanity itself. Beyond biomonsters, *The Final Chapter* is a story about the horrors of human cloning—a story in which the individual is lost among the simulacra of identical copies. Indeed, both the heroine and the villain come to realize that they are clones, after thinking they were originals. Dr. Isaacs, the villain, is killed by his clone who can't reconcile the idea that he is not *really* Dr. Isaacs, and Alice meets the *real* Alice who is a decrepit and wheelchair-bound prisoner of the Umbrella Corporation. Hence *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter* reflects the radical and rapid change to the sources of social anxiety, shifting the zombie from representation of bioengineered direct threat to destabilizing posthuman restructuring of relationships. If the cyborg is the reconciliation of the embodied relational human and the (bio)technologies that constitute her, then the zombie is the reduction of the embodied human to the technological relationship. When the individual, perhaps especially the human individual, is seen as truly *interdependent* on its relationships, a rapid shift in the nature of those relationships can radically transform what the individual is. And ontological shifts are horrifying.

I am left wondering what to make of this shift in relationship between cyborg and zombie. Perhaps the horror that lurks in the darkness of interdependence is the *zomborg*, the cyber-zombie. This term is not mine; rather, it has origins in the performance art of Eduardo Kac, whose 1996 "Telepresence Garment" transformed him into a zombie-cyborg, which he termed *zomborg*, that could be "manipulated electronically by an operator" (Drucker 1997). Yet the condition of the zomborg that both Kac and I point

to is one exasperated by the overwhelming influx of information—from electronic, viral, microorganismic, social, and environmental relations—embedded in and controlled by a growing range of interactive devices and digital media streams. The zomborg is made up of an endless variability and number of digital information flows. I fear the moral threat is really that we are each becoming zombie by extending ourselves out digitally, interdependent with other information flows like the virus is interdependent with the host.

A GLIMMER OF HOPE

Remember that scene from the *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter* with the dogs? Alice is trying to reenter the Hive and faces a pack Doberman Pinschers: bioengineered Doberman Pinschers, with grotesque jaw adaptations, controlled by a computer system operated by a clone. These creatures are so distinct from their 2002 zombie predecessors that they have their own name: Cerberi (or Cerberuses?). They represent social anxieties that are far removed from their 2002 predecessors, even after such a relatively short time between films. If the 2002 film offered its audiences a representation of the horror of viral *biological* interdependence, its 2016 continuation showed us the horror of viral *digital* interdependence. From zombie to zomborg, the role of the *Resident Evil* films in helping us think through sources of social anxiety is to make visceral the dark side of interdependence, where the internal and external relationships that fundamentally make us up are radically transformed into something unrecognizable to us. Within the COVID-19 pandemic, this same horror of relations plays out in real-time, exacerbating the fears, anxiety, mistrust, and violent tendencies that linger below the surface of the human condition. The biological virus couples with the virality of digital information, creating a new horrifying zomborg that shuffles relentlessly through the mist of epistemic uncertainty.

While we might have good reason to fear the zomborg, given its fictional representation in *The Final Chapter* and our lived experience of it as a pandemic, the film gives us a glimmer of hope to embrace that fear, too. The final scene of the movie involves a rather poignant interaction between the artificial intelligence of the Red Queen and a biological clone of Alice. Alice's "original" has given the Queen her memories (digitally) and the Queen then gives those to Alice (the clone). Alice is remade: reconstituted from digital information flows back into the biological, thanks specifically to the very interdependence that itself brings horror. Alice does not run from this horror because she cannot run. She *is* the horror, embraced. In this act of (re)creation, the audience is reminded that what is at stake is what is really important: those relationships of interdependence themselves.

NOTES

1. Here, by "social anxiety" I mean a society-level implicitly shared sense of moral concern. I take this concept as an assumption here and recognize that it could be more clearly articulated with empirical evidence.

2. There is much more to draw out about consistency of this particular plot point: where was concern for human life when the Red Queen chopped Alice's original team from the 2002 film into tiny bits using a variety of technologies and bioweapons? However, I leave aside concerns about plot consistency for the sake of my argument in this chapter.

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When the Flame Goes Out

The Horror of Connected Consciousness

Luis H. Favela

"Who am I?" "What am I?" "Am I the same person now as I was one year ago?" These are but a few questions involved in defining what a *person* is (Olson 2019). It is commonly believed that consciousness is a central feature of personhood (e.g., Dennett 1978; Smith 2017). There is not much consensus on how to define "consciousness" (Van Gulick 2018). In general, consciousness refers to an individual organism's subjective phenomenal experience. "Subjectivity" refers to the distinct quality of consciousness demonstrated by its singular perspective (Nagel 1974). You have a perspective, as do I, as does a bat, a dog, a chimpanzee, or any other organism that has conscious states. "Phenomenal experience" refers to the character of those subjective experiences (Block 1995). For example, as I grab a warm cup of coffee, raise it to my mouth, and take a slow sip, the character of my experience includes heat, weight of the cup, and nutty bitterness. Note that when it comes to defining who I am—my personhood—it is those conscious states that seem to define much of what is significant and unique about me. In terms of significance, it is within my conscious states that my joys and sorrows are experienced. In terms of uniqueness, nobody else can share my conscious states. Sure, I can describe my phenomenal experiences, but nobody will ever *have* those experiences from *my* perspective. Given the utmost centrality this feature holds in regard to defining who we are, we may be facing a not-so-distant-future of horrifying consciousness-altering technologies.

Technological advances related to the expansion or improvement of consciousness are on the horizon. Examples include access to vast amounts of collective knowledge (Sandstrom 2014), brain-machine interfaces (Hanson et al. 2019; Masunaga 2017), efficient communication (Sotala and Valpola

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2012), mind uploading (Sandberg and Bostrom 2008), and preserved memory (Berger et al. 2011). It is well-known that these technologies are not without risk and potentially dangerous outcomes. From the loss of privacy (Buller 2013) to a widening sphere of personal assault (Carter and Palermos 2016), the alteration, enhancement, or expansion of one's consciousness is likely to come with unintended and adverse consequences. Here, I draw attention to one potential consequence of consciousness-altering technology that is not discussed in the relevant literature and that may prove to be more horrifying than the rest: the extinction of one's consciousness and, therefore, one's self. This claim is motivated by one of the most popular and promising theories of consciousness: the integrated information theory of consciousness (IIT; Massimini and Tononi 2018). According to IIT, a system's consciousness is defined by its maximum amount of integrated information. As a result, a single system cannot have multiple consciousnesses simultaneously.

If IIT is the correct theory of consciousness—or, if it is at least an accurate account of some key features of consciousness—and if each system has a single consciousness, then the consequence for consciousness-altering technologies are horrifying. The specific type of technology that would be most dismaying are those that increase the quantity and quality of connected consciousnesses. Consider, for example, an internet-like network of consciousnesses (cf. Sotala and Valpola 2012). If IIT is correct, and if single systems can only have one consciousness, then the more integrated the network becomes, then the more each person's individual consciousness will fade (compare with discussions of absent and fading phenomenal experience; Chalmers 1995). More unsettling still, perhaps individuals would not notice their fading consciousness. I explore this horrendous possibility as follows: In the next section, I further explicate IIT and elaborate on its anti-nesting principle (Schwitzgebel 2012, 2015). Next, I draw on examples from horror and science fiction media, specifically, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Lederman 1992), *Star Trek: Voyager* (Kolbe 1997), *The Strain* (del Toro 2014–2017), and *Rick and Morty* (Newton 2015). These fictional cases make vivid the possibility that as we become more connected through technology, the flame of our consciousness may diminish to the point of extinction.

THE INTEGRATED INFORMATION
THEORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

IIT is a scientific theory that conceives of consciousness in terms of integrated information, which can be quantified via a measure called Φ ("Phi"; Tononi and Koch 2015), which is pronounced like the first part of the word "fire." A controversial consequence of IIT is that everything physical is conscious,

with things like photodiodes being at one end of the spectrum with a Φ of 1 and human brains at the other end with a (currently) incalculably high Φ value. A major criticism of IIT centers on its apparent inability to address the possibility of single systems having multiple consciousnesses (Schwitzgebel 2012, 2015). The criticism is as follows: if consciousness equals information integration, then anywhere there is integrated information within a single system there will be consciousness. Since there are multiple locations where information is integrating in single systems such as humans, then it seems that IIT is committed to humans having multiple consciousnesses at any one time. To combat that worry, proponents of IIT claim that individual systems have a single consciousness that is its maximum Φ (Φ^{Max}; Hoel et al. 2016). In the remainder of this section, I highlight some of the features of IIT that will be most important during later discussion of the potential horrors that may result from connecting consciousnesses via technology. For detailed introductions to IIT, I recommend, Massimini and Tononi's *Supersizing the Mind: Towards an Objective Measure of the Capacity for Experience* (2018), Tononi's *Phi: A Voyage from the Brain to the Soul* (2012) and "Integrated information theory" (2015), and Tononi and Koch's "Consciousness: Here, There and Everywhere?" (2015).

As highlighted by its name, IIT treats consciousness as having two key features: information and integration. *Information* refers to the idea that each conscious state is unique from every other. In this way, the uniqueness of each conscious state means that they are highly informative. If conscious states were commonly similar or identical to each other, then they would not be very useful. *Integration* refers to the idea that each conscious state is a unified whole that cannot be broken down into the perceived distinct qualities of the experience. Consider the example of the moment you see a green apple. When you see a green apple, you perceive in your phenomenal experience (i.e., consciousness) immediate qualities such as greenness, roundness, and smoothness; not to mention expectations from prior experiences, such as the tartness you remember from the last apple you ate. If you took a bite out of the apple, then your experience would include qualities from other sensory modalities, such as a crunching sound and sweetness. According to IIT, seeing a green apple is a single, whole experience; it is not a bunch of smaller experiences (e.g., greenness, roundness, etc.) merely added together. Consequently, the nature of consciousness is such that one cannot experience only the greenness of an apple while totally excluding its roundness.

As mentioned earlier, IIT provides a way to quantify consciousness via the amount of *integrated information*, or Φ ("Phi"). In order to understand how Φ is a measure of consciousness, I present a modified version of Tononi's photodiode thought experiment (2004). Consider a photodiode, digital camera, and a bear's visual system. A photodiode has one bit of information and

no integration; a digital camera has one million bits of information and no integration; and a bear's visual system has one billion bits of information that are integrated. The first two have the same amount of consciousness, or a Φ value of one, which is the smallest amount of consciousness a system can have. Bears—like other mammals—have a high Φ value. Bears have higher Φ values than photodiodes and digital cameras, not because they have more information, but because their information is *integrated* and the others are not. Digital cameras, with their one million bits of information, have the same Φ value as photodiodes, with their one bit, because the information in digital cameras does not integrate. Photodiodes have one state: either on or off if exposed to light or not. Moreover, whether on or off, that state does not have a cause-effect relationship with other photodiodes. Digital cameras are like a collection of one million photodiodes: each part of the lens corresponding to a pixel is either activated or not. But digital cameras do not have high Φ because each of their one million "photodiodes" does not have a cause-effect relationship with the others. In other words, if one pixel is activated or not, no other pixel is affected. The visual system of bears is not like digital cameras. If any part of a bear's visual system (e.g., brain areas V1, V4, etc.) is affected, there will be cause-effect consequences throughout the system, which alters consciousness. If one part of a digital camera is broken, then the result is only a single inactive pixel, while the rest of the image remains the same. If one part of a bear's visual system is broken, then its whole consciousness would be different. In short, systems with high Φ values, such as mammals, do not just have a lot of information, but that information is also greatly integrated.

Though one of the most popular and promising scientific theories of consciousness, there are philosophical (e.g., panpsychism, or the idea that everything, from bowling balls to fish to asteroids, are conscious to some degree; Tononi and Koch 2015) and practical (e.g., calculating Φ in even relatively simple systems; Tegmark 2016) challenges facing IIT. One challenge in particular relates to the main claim of this chapter, that is, the problem of nested consciousnesses within single systems. It has been argued (Schwitzgebel 2012) that IIT does not explain why each system should have one consciousness. If consciousness just is integrated information, then there will be consciousness everywhere in a system where there is integrated information. In the human brain, for example, information integration seems to occur simultaneously in multiple locations (Tononi and Koch 2015). Thus, and seemingly consistent with IIT, the human brain should have multiple consciousnesses occurring at the same time. In response to this challenge, Tononi and colleagues revised IIT in later works to state that a single system can have only a single consciousness, which is its maximum Φ (Φ^{Max}; e.g., Hoel et al. 2016). Although not everybody accepts that modification, there are reasons to accept it (Favela 2019). For present purposes, I assume the most

up-to-date version of IIT is correct and accept that each system has a single consciousness, or Φ^{Max}. Consequently, I accept the anti-nesting principle (cf. Schwitzgebel 2015), which states that conscious systems do not have multiple concurrent consciousnesses or lesser consciousnesses nested within greater ones. Humans, for example, have one consciousness at a time. They do not have one consciousness in the back of their brain, along with another in the front of their brain, another in their spleen, another in the little toe of their left foot, and so on.

Another way to think about what this means is that while there is one part of the brain that underlies that single consciousness—where "one part" could mean a spatially located region or a spatially distributed network—the other parts of the brain are "zombie systems." A part of the brain is a zombie system if its neuronal activity does not give rise to phenomenal experience (Koch and Crick 2001). This differs from "philosophical zombies" that have the same neuronal activity that gives rise to consciousness in you and me except they are "dark inside," that is to say, they have no phenomenal experience despite being physically identical to humans that do (Kirk 2005). Just in case you are wondering, zombie systems in the real world does not refer to former humans that shuffle around unbalanced, without a heartbeat, and a hankering for yummy brains like those seen in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Train to Busan* (2016), and *The Walking Dead* (2010). In the next section, I explore a horrifying consequence of IIT and consciousness-altering technology.

THE HORROR OF CONNECTED CONSCIOUSNESS

Although the sciences of brain-computer communication and interfaces have been discussed for decades (e.g., Vidal 1973), it seems that in the past few years such technologies are finally on the horizon (e.g., Elon Musk's Neuralink; Masunaga 2017). Common examples of such recent technology are those that transform electric brain signals into commands for moving robotic limbs (e.g., Várkuti et al. 2013) and restoring sensations of touch for people with quadriplegia (Ganzer et al. 2020). Yet, even the most sophisticated of contemporary brain-computer technology remain quite basic, especially when compared to the possibilities depicted in film and television. The late twentieth century saw an explosion of films depicting sophisticated brain-computer interfaces. Films such as *Existenz* (1999), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *The Matrix* (1999), and *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999) depicted fully incorporated brain-computer technologies. Although these films address many deep philosophical issues—such as personal identity (e.g., *Ghost in the Shell*), privacy (e.g., *Johnny Mnemonic*),

and reality (e.g., *The Matrix*)—there is one topic that has not been addressed there or in other media. That issue is the horrible possibility of the elimination of our individual consciousness (and personhood) that could come about via brain-connecting technologies. But why think that is possible in the real world?

As mentioned earlier, brain-computer, -machine, and other interfaces are quickly improving (e.g., Ganzer et al. 2020; Hanson et al. 2019). Moreover, with such improved technologies will come increases in quantity and quality of connections among users (cf. Sandberg and Bostrom 2008). Consider, then, the realistic possibility of an internet-like network of brains (cf. Sotala and Valpola 2012). As brain-computer interfaces increase in sophistication, it could one day in the not-too-distant future be common for folks to connect to an internet-like system that is not composed of websites hosted on networked computers and servers, but a system of other brains. Perhaps this is done via a surgically implanted *headjack* in the back of your skull (e.g., *The Matrix*) or via signals sent to and from your eyes via a virtual-reality-like headset (e.g., *Johnny Mnemonic*). By way of such technologies, users will be able to explore shared virtual worlds and, possibly, each other's conscious states. The exploration of another's consciousness could be as passive as watching a movie at the theatre or as interactive as a video game. For current purposes, it is the latter possibility—namely, being able to affect and alter another's brain states—that is the most troubling. Appealing to IIT provides reasons why active interaction among multiple brains is cause for worry.

Remember, IIT defines consciousness in terms of integrated information (Φ), and claims that a system can only have one consciousness, that is, the maximum amount of integrated information a system has at any time (Φ^{Max}). As a consequence, IIT adheres to an anti-nesting principle, that is, individual conscious systems cannot have multiple consciousnesses simultaneously or lesser consciousnesses nested within greater ones. In other words, in a system that has various centers of integrated information, consciousness will only emerge where Φ is highest. In mammals, for example, several brain areas process information, for example, cerebellum, motor cortex, and various parts of the thalamocortical system (Tononi 2005). Yet, those areas do not have their own little consciousnesses simultaneously with the single larger consciousness that individuals experience. The reason is that consciousness only emerges in each brain via the processes that sustain the amount of integrated information that is greater than all the others. So, what does this have to do with brain-computer interfaces and internet-like networks of connected brains?

In accordance with IIT, the better technology becomes at processing information among brains, then the more integrated those brains will become. The more integrated those brains become, the more each brain will become a lesser Φ value compared to the larger Φ value that will emerge at the level

of the network. Specifically, the networked brains will have the Φ^{Max} value. If the internet-like system of brains is composed of parts (i.e., individual persons) that each have their own Φ^{Max} when isolated, when connected those parts will give way to the larger Φ value had by the network. In short, as the network becomes conscious, the people connected will become nonconscious. Along the lines mentioned earlier, each brain in the network will be like the cerebellum, motor cortex, and various parts of the thalamocortical system are in us: not conscious, because they do not have the most Φ in the system. As technology increases the quantity and quality of integrated information among brains, they will no longer have their own Φ^{Max} to sustain consciousness. Instead, those brains will contribute to the Φ^{Max} of the network they are a part of. Thus, as horrible as it would be, such technologies would bring about the elimination of individual consciousnesses, and, correspondingly, individual personhood. Personhood would be eliminated because—if the common view is true (e.g., Dennett 1978; Smith 2017)—consciousness is the central feature of personhood. Consequently, no consciousness means no personhood. Though not put in terms of IIT, such a horrible consequence has been explored in various horror and science fiction media. In what follows, I attempt to make more vivid just how horrifying consciousness-connecting technologies could be via fictional examples that have demonstrated similar dreadful consequences.

STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION

Star Trek: The Next Generation is a science fiction television series set hundreds of years in the future. It centers on the crew of the starship Enterprise. One of the show's most popular antagonists is the Borg. The Borg are cyborg-like organisms, who form a Collective that is composed of various alien species. The Collective is a hive mind that spreads across the galaxy assimilating organisms and technology in order to constantly evolve. When the Borg encounter a new civilization, they inform them that they will be "assimilated" and that "resistance is futile." As parts of a hive-mind, individual Borg serve as drones, and when they speak refer to themselves as "We" and numbered designations. In the episode, "I, Borg" (Lederman 1992), the Enterprise crew finds an injured drone in a crashed Borg ship. Once active, the drone refers to itself as "Third of Five" and responds to questions on behalf of the Collective, for example, "We must return to the Collective." As the episode progresses, members of the Enterprise crew take advantage of the drone's separation from the Collective and encourage "Third of Five" to eventually refer to himself as an individual "I" with the name "Hugh."

For present purposes, "I, Borg" is particularly illustrative of a potential consequence for individuality within technologically advanced, highly

integrated systems of organisms. The Borg Collective is a single system, composed of organisms who would be individual systems if not for their being assimilated. Each drone is so highly integrated into the Collective that they do not merely participate in a group, but are constituents of a larger system. Interpreted through the lens of IIT, when an organism is assimilated or born into the Collective (yes, there are baby Borg), they would contribute to a system that has a Φ value higher than their own. Consequently, following the anti-nesting principle of IIT, the Collective has consciousness (Φ^{Max}) but the drones do not. Thus, it is reasonable to view Borg drones as a type of zombie; or, to put it better still, they are zombie-cyborgs, or *zomborgs* for short (Beever, this volume). That "Third of Five" regains a sense of individuality when disconnected from the Collective, thereby viewing himself as "Hugh," means that he has achieved personhood. As discussed earlier, consciousness is commonly understood as a central feature of personhood. Hugh's gaining personhood after disconnecting from the Collective would be tied to his gaining his own consciousness. In short, Hugh had his own maximum Φ value when he became his own system. Consistent with IIT, Hugh's case demonstrates that assimilation results in the loss of personhood by way of the elimination of consciousness.

STAR TREK: VOYAGER

The Borg were so popular that they returned as major antagonists in another television series set in the Star Trek universe: *Star Trek: Voyager*. Set around the time of *The Next Generation*, *Voyager* centers on the crew of a starship that is stranded more than 70,000 lightyears from Earth. In a two-part episode, the crew of the Voyager end up cooperating with the Borg in order to defeat a more powerful and threatening enemy, Species 8472. The second of the two-parts is particularly noteworthy among fans for the introduction of the character Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero One, or "Seven" for short (Braga et al. 1997). Seven was introduced as a Borg representative to the Voyager crew while they worked together to defeat Species 8472. In subsequent episodes, Seven is liberated from the Collective and works to regain her individuality. It is later revealed that Seven was assimilated as a human child.

Like Hugh, Seven's case supports the IIT interpretation of what happens to organisms that are assimilated and those that are disconnected. Specifically, that assimilation results in the loss of personhood by way of the elimination of consciousness, and the recovery of personhood via the return of consciousness that occurs when individuals are disconnected from the Collective and become their own Φ^{Max}. Seven's case is instructional in a way that Hugh's is not in that the character's history reveals the consequences of IIT more

vividly. As a child, Seven (then Annika Hansen) was a person, with her own consciousness. After being assimilated, Annika loses her consciousness and is no longer a person (now Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero One). After being liberated from the Collective by the crew of the Voyager, Seven regains her own consciousness and is now a person again. Moreover, Seven begins to experience memories of her childhood, as well as experiences while she was a drone. What is particularly interesting is that Seven's childhood memories are experienced as her own, which is consistent with those events occurring while she had her own consciousness. However, to be consistent with IIT, it is arguable that Seven's experiences of events while she was a drone were not "her memories" per se, but were the Collective's memories. The reason they would not be her memories but the Collective's is that the events occurred while she was not a person with her own consciousness, but was a constitutive part of the Collective's consciousness. This raises other potentially disturbing issues concerning the relationship of responsibility and morality to consciousness and personhood. When Voyager's crew deals with this very issue, they find that Seven is not responsible for acts committed when she was part of the Collective. Yet, as interpreted by IIT, although Seven-the-drone did not have her own consciousness and personhood, she was still a contributor to the Collective's consciousness and what actions those conscious states informed and guided. In view of that, Seven *was the Collective*, in the way that the cerebellum, motor cortex, and thalamocortical system *are your brain*. Put another way, the nature of the Collective's consciousness was what it was at the time due in part to Seven's contributions, in the way that your conscious states are what they are due in part to the contributions of the various parts of your brain, even if the consciousnesses those parts would have in isolation is overridden by the larger system's (i.e., brain) more maximum Φ.

THE STRAIN

Whereas *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager* provide futuristic and technological illustrations of horrible consequences of connected consciousness, *The Strain* (del Toro 2014–2017) provides a biological and supernatural one. Set in contemporary times, *The Strain* is a horror television series that centers on Strigoi (i.e., vampires) attempting to take over the world. *The Strain* is particularly unique in its treatment of vampirism as virus-like, spreading to and converting hosts via worm-like organisms. The vampire virus originated with the Ancients, the seven original vampires. Like all Strigoi, the Ancient's have worm-like organisms that carry the virus. Once infected by a particular Ancient's strain, those Strigoi will share in its consciousness. Thus, the infected are genetic and conscious extensions of an

Ancient. The main antagonist of the television series is one of the Ancients: The Master. It is through his attempt to take over the world that the hive-mind-like nature of the Strigoi is revealed. As The Master spreads his worms (no, seriously), new hosts lose their sentience—that is, their consciousness of self and world—and serve as his extensions into the world. The Master can see and hear through these Strigoi, as well as speak through and carry out actions.

When seen through the lens of IIT, once the infected are turned, their information (e.g., what they see and hear) is integrated such that their individual consciousnesses are eclipsed by The Master's. Thus, like the assimilated who become Borg, the non-Ancient Strigoi are no longer individuals with individual personhood and consciousness, but are constituents of a larger system with its own Φ^{Max}. The Master's system of Strigoi differs from the Borg in a key way. Sticking with the earlier presentations (i.e., ignoring later versions that included a Borg Queen), the Borg are a totally distributed Collective. With no central controller, decisions are made as a collective. In the system created by The Master's worms, The Master is the central controller and makes the decisions. Thus, his Strigoi are merely extensions of his consciousness rather than constituting a new consciousness over and above The Master's own. Although this type of system is at odds with some of the technical aspects of IIT (e.g., system-level cause-effect relationships; Tononi and Koch 2015), the Strigoi case remains illustrative of IIT's anti-nesting principle. As stated, hosts lose sentience as the infection progresses. Their lesser, individual sentience (e.g., consciousness of self) gives way to the larger consciousness of the system they are a part of. Unlike the Borg Collective, however, such Strigoi systems are not distributed and have a central point of control in The Master. Understood via IIT, life as a Strigoi is made more horrifying. Not only do you have white fluid with worms in your body and grow a six-foot long proboscis-like organ in your mouth, but you have no subjective phenomenal experience. The only consciousness you have is that of The Master's, or any other Ancient that infected you. Other than that, you are a blood-sucking and veiny beast with a roast-beef-textured opening in your neck.

RICK AND MORTY

For my final illustration, I move away from the seriousness of the Borg's cybernetic implants and the Strigoi's worms. *Rick and Morty* is a recent, animated science fiction television show for adults. It follows alcoholic genius scientist Rick Sanchez and his awkward teenage grandson Morty Smith. Episodes typically center on Rick and Morty's adventures in space or across the multiverse—Rick has a gun that opens portals to other dimensions. As the series progresses, Morty (and family) learns that Rick has had many

adventures in space and in other dimensions. In the episode, "Auto Erotic Assimilation" (Newton 2015), Rick, Morty, and Summer (Morty's older sister) travel to a planet that has been attacked by an alien. Upon arriving at the planet, they learn that the inhabitants have been assimilated into an alien hivemind. Additionally, Morty and Summer learn that the hivemind is named Unity and that it used to date Rick. It is revealed that the process of assimilation results in the loss of the organism's individuality and free will, and the replacement of their mind with that of Unity's. Although there are comedic aspects of Unity's assimilations—for example, Rick parties and has sex with Unity via numerous avatars—such an act is quite horrifying.

Through the lens of IIT, Unity can be understood as being more like The Master/Strigoi than the Borg. With the Borg, the assimilated constitute the Collective and contribute to decision making. However, Unity is more like The Master/Strigoi in that those that are infected merely become their extensions. Unity's avatars and The Master's turned serve as their eyes and ears to obtain information, as well as their voice and bodies for whatever actions they desire. Thus, Unity and The Master/Strigoi are more akin to central controllers than collectives. All three do adhere to IIT's anti-nesting principle though. It seems that the Borg's act of assimilation into the Collective and The Master turning hosts into Strigoi via infection has the consequence of eliminating individuality/personhood. As discussed earlier, the loss of personhood may be due to the elimination of consciousness. Newly created Borg and Strigoi are integrated into systems where they no longer have Φ^{Max}. With the Borg, the Collective has Φ^{Max} and with the Strigoi, The Master has Φ^{Max}. Due at least in part to the anti-nesting principle, this means that individual drones and Strigoi cannot be conscious; and if they are not conscious, then they cannot be persons (i.e., individuality). Similarly, by no longer having Φ^{Max}, individual consciousnesses are lost when Unity assimilates a planet's inhabitants, which is further made evident by their loss of individuality (i.e., personhood). Partying and having sex with an old partner via various avatars is all fun and games until you start to realize that those acts are being committed in a puppet-like manner with living organisms that used to have consciousness and personhood.

CONCLUSION

I began with a series of questions concerning personhood (e.g., "Who am I?") and noted that consciousness is a commonly believed defining feature. The term *consciousness* tends to refer to a system's subjective phenomenal experience. IIT is one of the most compelling scientific theories of consciousness. IIT defines consciousness via the amount of a system's integrated information, or

Φ. IIT is further committed to an anti-nesting principle, which claims that each system can only have one consciousness at a time. Thus, although integrated information may be found in various parts of a system at any one time, it is the maximum amount of integrated information at a time (Φ^{Max}) that defines that system's consciousness. If IIT is correct, then there may be horrifying consequences for recent advances in consciousness-altering technology.

Technologies such as brain-computer interfaces that increase the quality and quantity of information exchanged among multiple individuals run the risk of also increasing the integration of that information. That is a risk because if IIT is correct that the level at which a system has the maximum information integration will be what defines its consciousness, then connected brains will become conscious at the larger system-level. That is horrifying news if the anti-nesting principle is true. If, for example, an internet-like system of brains becomes conscious, that means the local systems (i.e., individual brains) will have their consciousnesses eliminated. If individual consciousness is eliminated, then so too would their personhood.

Since it can be challenging to imagine individuals losing consciousness and personhood, I attempted to illustrate those consequences via cases from horror and science fiction media. The Borg, Strigoi, and Unity from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager*, *The Strain*, and *Rick and Morty*, respectively, provided cases consistent with IIT that illustrated assorted ways in which consciousness is eliminated from individuals as they become integrated into various kinds of systems. In all these cases, it followed that the elimination of consciousness went hand-in-hand with the elimination of personhood (or individuality). Although IIT may not be a complete account of the nature and processes of consciousness, that it is consistent with these cases seems to lend intuitive support to its capturing at least some true features of conscious systems. Such lessons should not be ignored when developing consciousness-altering technology. Despite the fact that such technologies are advancing and no doubt on the horizon, as the great Dr. Ian Malcolm once said, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could that they didn't stop to think if they should" (Spielberg 1993). So too should we stop and think about the potential adverse consequences such connecting technologies may have, especially the most horrifying consequences of all: the extinction of one's consciousness and, therefore, one's self.

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Conclusion

Imaginaries of Interdependence

Jonathan Beever

I am fortunate to live among great verdancy. Green life abounds around me in the rich wet warmth of this environment. And that green life encourages an abundance of other life and, in turn, depends on it. My life, and the lives of my family, friends, and colleagues is also dependent on these same chains of ecological connections that both link us together and make us what we are. This is as much true of environmental verdancy as it is of electronic flourishing: the extending networks of digital information play this same constitutive and transformative role. I am equally fortunate to be living with access to rich electronic flourishing, too. I am fortunate because I am made by chains of relations, whether the affect of the barred owls outside of my window or the meaningfulness of the digital messages I receive. It is easy to see that there is beauty in interdependence.

Yet, not everyone is so fortunate. There is darkness in interdependence, too. The same chains that make us also bind us, whether those chains represent a richness or a poverty. Even my young son sees that darkness. We used to drive to work and school together, pre-pandemic, along a tree- and field-lined corridor of roadway that is becoming more and more dotted with businesses of convenience. Regularly, we would talk about the richness of life we saw, including the white ibises that covered the trees in the mornings. And then, one morning, we found that a grove of those trees had been felled in the night, to make ready a lot for commercial development. My son saw the ibises, this time sitting on horizontal trees whose leaves were already wilting in the morning sun. He was heartbroken, and then angry at those people in their machines responsible for bringing the roosts to the ground. He was angry perhaps in part because he knew that the trees and the ibises were connected; but, he was angry also because of me. I had, unwittingly, passed on my own sadness and frustration about over-development of our

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verdant environment to him. His being, including his sense of self and place, is interwoven with my own. I had given my child sadness and anger. And I find horror in this interdependence.

I recognize that my anecdote represents, in the large scheme of things and especially during its writing in the pandemic and social unrest of 2020, a relatively small horror. There are others who face specters of interdependence much darker, and face them with much less control much more often. My point in offering my own small story was to point out that it has been easy, for many of us, to see the beauty and to relegate the darkness back to the shadows where it blends in and lingers in subconscious tension. The work of this book is to both bring to light this tension between the beauty and the horror of interdependence and also to explore the why, how, and when of those experiences. What would a new imaginary of interdependence look like? What would the taking up of such a worldview ask of us? What difference does it make to how we live and act in the world? These are hard questions. We live and act in a world so deeply committed to the idea that we each are autonomous individuals that thinking otherwise is almost impossible. It is akin to Borges's story of making a map of the entire world while standing inside the world. Yet, I continue to worry that interdependence is at once the empirically "right" view of the world and at the same time a threat to individual identity. And I think we share this same worry, in the dark corners of our understanding of the world and our place in it—and thus we experience it as horror in film. Through the films my colleagues and I have explored in this book, we have directed some light to those darker corners so as to better understand why true interdependence (as opposed to interconnection) should be seen as a problem on which future work should more intently focus.

Analyses in this book have illuminated a wide range of modes of interdependence, including bodily, psychic, biological, political, social, technological, and environmental. Eunah Lee set a feminist lens in front of this light to show us the "horror of loving relations" that arise from a moral blinding by the dependence relationship. Those thick relations are both at once beautiful and horrifying: beautiful in the strength of the bond between persons and horrifying in the solidification of sense-of-self just and only as the dependence relationship. David Baumeister pushed further to bring out the logic of predation as a form of interdependence among us human animals. He showed us only two possible responses to that horror: either extend the logic to social predation (the mob against the lone predator), or stop the logic by defending against the predator (the shepherd to the wolf).

Vernon Cisney demonstrates a limit point of this horror in his analysis, arguing that—for some—"interdependence is hell." Redemption or damnation, whether spiritual or environmental, are reached only together and, yet,

Cisney reminds us, "despair is . . . the disparity of the abyss of hopelessness, realizing that one's future in the world is . . . an impossibility." The interdependence we have with each other and with our global natural environment saves us or damns us. Rogers and Corrigan, through the same film's story, articulate why this interdependence is so horrifying to some. They argue that an "unquestioned modern emphasis on radical individualism" like the sort found in conservative religious or political communities stands in stark and irreconcilable tension with globalized interdependence evidenced empirically by climate change data.

The horrible tensions of conservatism and interdependence are the focus of Sydney Lane's analysis, too, although in a difference context. Lane argues that xenophobia and nationalism are symptoms or "bittersweet prognoses of the psychological ecologies that will come to dominate the climate-changed future." On her read, interpersonal relations at all levels are tightly interdependent with ecological relations at all levels, and a pending disastrous breakdown of one means the pending disastrous breakdown of the other—and the slow realization of this dependence wreaks havoc on our very being. Taking a similar tact, Josh Grant-Young positions Hobbes's body politic against contemporary film to show us a body horror: the organ failure of the body politic. That organ failure exhibits as a fear of precariously proximate relations of dependence—where one must necessarily seek out other bodies to strengthen a collective one against external threats. And therein lies another horror: diseased bodies emphasize the need for relations of social dependence, but in so doing threaten to spread their disease.

Elmore and Elmore shift the burden from the body to the economy, arguing that interdependence cannot be taken up or understood within the constraints of capitalism. Since capitalism emphasizes individualism, which itself does not privilege shared responsibility, interdependence (which demands shared responsibility) cannot flourish. Questions of shared interpersonal responsibility and responsibility for climate change too can be nothing more than accusations of blame within the current social and political systems. Those systems are unyieldingly interdependent: we must address capitalism if we want to address climate change.

Eric Godoy argues that the horror of interdependence lies in an idea at the root of these concerns; namely, that we are part of nature despite our efforts to stand apart or above. This very idea of our "naturalness" is horrific as it decenters human privilege and reminds us that we are sometimes not the hunter but the hunted. Few of us are ever forced to confront this perspective head-on and, when we are, it is the stuff of nightmares. Brian Onishi sees this confrontation in what he calls the "weirdness" of plants. Interdependence traps us in the correlation of being and thinking, unable to see either clearly. Onishi is carefully critical of overmining claims about what we can know

to claims about what we are, but sets the stage for that weirdness of plants to compel us our own careful critique. Ecological relations have their own dark side.

In my own contribution, I offer a sort of genealogy of ecological relations, from the natural to the biotechnological, arguing that each signifies a dark side of interdependence that scaffold together into something horrible; namely, the loss of self. Luis Favela asks us to consider the implications of these diverse ecologies as they specifically relate to consciousness in the interface between technology and brains. On a particular view of consciousness, individual consciousness fades as systems becomes more complicated. The horrors of interdependence can be found in this complexity: as systems (internal or external) become more richly *connected*, they also become more richly *dependent* such that the individual self begins to dissipate or distribute through the collective. We disappear into the networks we choose to engage.

Each story about the dark side of interdependence helps to give form to the specters of interdependence that lurk all around us. They help us more clearly see what worlds shaped by interdependence look like. Some of these worlds are beautiful while some are horrifying. Those stories, and others like them in film and fiction, shape meaning. Interdependence is otherwise hidden from us, hiding behind the masks of beauty, interconnection, and individualism. The idea that we are individuals, freely self-directing, is grounded in some deeper ideas about the nature of the world that are often left implicit—like the hidden foundation of what we think and believe. The more we push on this idea, the more we find ourselves convinced that, in fact, we are *not* free and self-directing in the way or to the extent that we have been conditioned to think. So, what are we?

This book has helped us see that we are bound up in ecological relationships and that those relationships shape us—no: they *are* us. Each of us is not just interconnected but *interdependent* on our relations, broadly construed. This basic but seemingly radical idea has, in our current moment, taken on a particularly poignant meaning. This book has come together in a global pandemic driven by the COVID-19 virus, itself interdependent with the rapid progression of anthropogenic climate change and unprecedented social and political unrest. The pandemic of the coronavirus is also a pandemic of other kinds as well, including a pandemic of meaning. What our relations *mean* to us is in flux. Cultural theorist and semiotician Jean Baudrillard saw this not as a problem unique to the current pandemic but as a problem of contemporary culture more generally. "Everywhere one seeks to produce meaning, to make the world signify, to render it visible," he writes, "We are not, however, in danger of lacking meaning; quite the contrary, we are gorged with meaning and it is killing us" (1987, 55).

I think again of my son. His world will be, like mine, one of interdependence. But it will be different than mine, to the extent that the dark side of interdependence is being made visible to him. His relations to and within the world will mean something different to him than mine do to me. He thinks about the ibises but also about the uncertainties of viruses, the risks of being around other people, and the challenges to the verdant life of the world he sees around him. His experience of that world is more and more mediated by richly complex systems of digitally mediated information in which he can at once lose and shape himself. He wears a mask when he goes out, to shield himself and others from viruses but also as if from an excess of meaning.

The horror of the moment makes the questions I have asked real and urgent, and their answers even more uncertain. As we look together to the future, this book proposes that we strive to more clearly understand how the masks of interdependence might fit together to give face to a new imaginary—a new view of the world and our places within and through it. What would such a view do to the worlds of relations in which we each live? Baudrillard quipped once that "all societies end up wearing masks. . . . But what remains intact is what was there at the beginning: space and the spirit of fiction" (1989, 118). Film, like the ones we explored here, offer some potential answers (some light and some dark) to my question. Maybe they can help us find a new mask to wear, to slow the pandemic of meaning.

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Coda

Difficult Intersubjectivity— Interdependence and Cinematic Ethics

Robert Sinnerbrink

This volume was largely edited during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, an unforeseen but socially confronting resonant context in which to think about the "dark side" of the idea of interdependence and how this might figure in contemporary cinema. As I write, the effects of this pandemic continue, both in terms of health impacts (death and infection rates) and social-economic upheavals (not only the risk of economic recessions but shifts in attitudes and practices brought on by social distancing measures). For these reasons, the need to understand the idea of interdependency in more complex and nuanced ways takes on an added urgency. How might the "dark side" of interdependency—or what I will call the inherent ambivalence of social relations or deeper ambiguities of intersubjectivity—be played out in contemporary cinema? What kind of ethical experiences, social problems, and political concerns are being explored in particular genres such as horror or science-fiction? These questions are central to the chapters of this volume, which examine both ethical and philosophical aspects of interdependency, focusing on the "dark side" of sociality and intersubjectivity. In what follows I would like to add some remarks on the philosophical and ethical aspects of this problem as well as discuss briefly a couple of film/television examples that explore these aspects in prescient and pertinent ways.

There are many philosophical precedents that might be useful to consider here. In what follows, I outline a few of the conceptual models of intersubjective relations between Self and Other that emphasize the ambivalences at the heart of human sociality. A case in point is Hegel's famous account of the so-called master/slave dialectic—or struggle for recognition between lord/master and slave/bondsman—in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977[1]). It remains one of the most influential as well as productive models for understanding the

dialectical complexity of interdependency, at least in regard to the development of self-consciousness and social intersubjectivity within varying historical and cultural contexts. As Hegel famously describes, one of the challenges facing modern subjects is to grasp and enact the dialectic between the independence and dependence of self-consciousness in ways that can reconcile our desire for independence, to be recognized as free, with the fact of dependency on others—namely, the intersubjective conditions of sociality enabling us to develop independent agency and (moral-political) autonomy. According to Hegel's dialectical-phenomenological account, the figure of the master, in risking death, asserts "his" independence by subordinating the slave, who sets aside his/her independence in order to preserve their life.[2] This acceptance of dependency in relation to the master, implicitly recognizing his or her freedom and independence, remains, however, a Pyrrhic victory, for it fails to achieve what it aimed for—a free recognition of the master's independence. The recognition that the master desired has been won, rather, in relation to a thoroughly subjugated or dependent consciousness (the slave): it thus remains an unequal relationship of domination maintained by force; the recognition offered is coerced rather than free.

The slave, on the other hand, by laboring for the master and thereby developing his or her skills and capacities, eventually achieves recognition of their independence in relation to the products of their labor within social reality. In the moment of Hegelian dialectical reversal, the empty satisfaction of the master and the "unhappy consciousness" or alienated condition of the slave eventually undergo a mutual transformation: the achievement of mutual recognition—or a recognition of the interplay of dependence and independence constitutive of modern autonomous subjectivity—within a context of rational social practices and self-reforming political institutions developing within historical time.

In the Marxist revolutionary version of events, this becomes the motor of class struggle leading to the eventual overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat and the abolition of capitalism in favor of the communist vision of a classless society. In the Hegelian "end of history" version, this becomes the achievement of the concrete conditions of intersubjective freedom within the universalizing norms and self-reforming institutions of modernity. We could translate this into more contemporary political terms: how to navigate between the two poles of libertarian individualism (the fantasy of ontological and political self-sufficiency via atomized individuality, which denies the social, historical, and institutional conditions of individual agency and moral-political autonomy), and anti-individualist communitarianism (which subsumes the value of individual autonomy into the needs of the anonymous collective or an overly abstract universalist conception of "the common good"). There are many philosophical theories, as well as moral-political

thought experiments (in literature and in cinema), that attest to the importance of reconciling individual and society today. This is especially so with regard to the role of "negativity" (as Hegel put it), the human capacity for "negation" that points to the inherent possibility of conflict and division, as well as invention and transformation, within human social relations, cultural practices, and political institutions.

Another philosophical idea that is relevant in this context is Kant's account of the "unsocial sociability" that characterizes contrary tensions between the desire for independence and recognition of dependence characterizing modern subjectivity (1991[3]). Drawing on Rousseau, Kant identified this contradictory dynamic as a prominent feature of modern social experience (and the core idea behind philosophical theories of alienation): namely, the ambivalent dynamic between wanting to distinguish ourselves as unique individuals or establish our identity in relation to others, and the desire to be recognized as belonging to the community, finding meaning and value as a legitimate member of society. For Kant, this contradictory dynamic becomes the motor of modern individualism and autonomous subjectivity, the competitive spur to invention and dialectical motor of historical progress, even while being shadowed by what other philosophers describe as *alienation* or the inability to reconcile the contrary drives toward independence and dependence in modernity.

In existential phenomenology, the dialectic between dependence and independence takes the form of the existential "problem of the Other," a mainstay of phenomenological inquiry from Husserl and Heidegger to Sartre and de Beauvoir (see Theunissen 1984). It refers to the problem of describing and analyzing complex forms of intersubjective experience, which is articulated phenomenologically via the complex dialectical reversals evident in the relationship between Self and Other. According to these approaches, the Self is, on the one hand, distinguished from the non-I, while the Self also finds its conditions of possibility, and its meaning and limits, in and through this relationship with the Other. For existential phenomenology, the Other is first encountered, it seems, as a "body-object" standing over against the Self; but this "body-object" is also experienced as another "center of consciousness" from whose perspective I appear, in turn, as a "body-object," which is to say, as an Other. This struggle between Self and Other inevitably sets up (at least according to Sartre) a conflictual dynamic in which each consciousness strives to be subject and to render the other as object. Sartre's stark positing of an ontological gap between Self and Other means that this conflictual dynamic—each Self positing itself as free and independent in relation to the Other posited as unfree and dependent—can never be entirely resolved or overcome. The standing possibility, moreover, of being posited as an object for the Other—a phenomenon manifest in what Sartre called "the Look," in

which the Other's gaze reveals me as an object for him or her—is why in Sartre's pessimistic existential ontology, the truth of Self-Other relations is ultimately revealed in conflict and struggle (or as Garcin has it in *No Exit*, "Hell is other people") (Sartre 1958[4]).

Other philosophers such as Hegel and Merleau-Ponty take a more measured or integrated view of intersubjective relations. They argue, rather, that despite the inherent possibilities of conflict, we nonetheless can open up a space of intersubjective recognition wherein one-sided recognition (Hegel's master/slave dialectic) eventually transforms into mutual recognition or reciprocal acknowledgment of the interdependency of Self and Other wherein one's own identity is bound up with, and possibly made by, that of others (see Pippin 2012; Daly 2016). Indeed, this represents the only viable solution to the Hegelian "struggle for recognition," which can manifest in all sorts of social relationships: namely, the establishment of intersubjective relations of mutual recognition in which we find our self-identity precisely in and through the Other. The solution to this struggle has typically involved recognition of our mutual interdependency, meaning the enabling, constitutive conditions of individual subjectivity and autonomous agency, which, in turn, depend upon our recognition of the freedom or rationality of other subjects against a background of shared practices, cultural meanings, and ethical norms. But this does not dispel the inherent ambivalence or ambiguity of intersubjective relations, which always remain vulnerable to misunderstanding and conflict, manipulation, and distortion, for a variety of psychological, social, or ideological reasons.

Although the prevailing ethical (and political) orientation today is toward an embrace of the Other, coupled with a decentering of the Self (the "sovereign individual"), as part of a generalized critique of inequality, privilege, and injustice, there is also an undercurrent that recognizes the inherent ambivalence of intersubjective relations and potential for conflict within social relations, even those predicated on mutuality, equality, and reciprocity. Given that popular (Hollywood) movies traditionally valorize the individual over the collective—or even the Self at the expense of the Other—how do things stand with regard to the cinematic treatment and ethical exploration of interdependence and its complex implications for relations between Self and Other?

As remarked, there are many examples in popular cinema of these philosophical themes and ethical ideas being explored in complex and thought-provoking ways. Indeed, as the chapters in this volume attest, popular cinema—horror and speculative fiction genres in particular—seems especially attuned to the "dark side" of intersubjectivity, recognizing and examining the ambivalences of intersubjective relations, the inherent possibility of social conflict, and the motivating role of negative emotions (fear,

resentment, anger, despair) that always shadow ethical relations between Self and Other. These ambiguities of intersubjectivity are also exacerbated or distorted by the ubiquity of digital media technologies and the pervasive role of social media in structuring our social relationships. Coupled with the current global anxiety over social relations in general—that they constitute a potential threat to health and safety, source of contagion, and risk to the community, even as they provide a basis for meaning, value, and identity—this "dark side" to interdependency takes on a more acute and urgent complexion. For these reasons, turning our attention to studying the ways in which contemporary cinema has articulated and extrapolated some of these anxieties and ambivalences becomes an important ethical and cultural task.

TWO EXAMPLES: *SAFE* (HAYNES 1995) AND "HATED IN THE NATION" (*BLACK MIRROR* S3 E6)

There are many relevant examples of horror, science-fiction, and speculative fiction narrative films discussed in this volume. In this concluding section, I would like to briefly mention two striking examples of how the negative aspects of interdependency, what I am calling the ambivalences of intersubjectivity, can be explored cinematically: Todd Haynes's bioethical/psychological horror film, *Safe* (1995) and the disturbingly dystopian *Black Mirror* episode, "Hated in the Nation" (S3 E6) (Brooker/Hawes 2016).

Safe is the film that introduced Haynes and actress Julianne Moore to a wider public, and one that has gained unexpected relevance again with the emergence of COVID-19 (Roth 2020). Set in 1987, at the heart of the Reagan years and against the background of the AIDS epidemic, it explores the "dark side" of interdependency within the context of a mysterious "environmental illness" reflecting the toxic and isolating character of modern urban life itself. The film presents the story of Carol White (Julianne Moore), affluent but affectless and emotionally disconnected homemaker in the San Fernando Valley, California, who is afflicted by a mysterious illness that causes her to become increasingly withdrawn and desperate for help. As her health worsens, starting with coughing, headaches, nosebleeds, fainting, and fatigue, she can find little sympathy or effective medical treatment for her "environmental illness" and eventually finds solace in a New-Age-style retreat (Wrenwood). The latter is populated by fellow sufferers of this ambiguous malaise, and run by an unnervingly charismatic and manipulative guru figure, Peter Dunning (Peter Friedman), who weaves together "wellness" and "self-help" platitudes with a "victim-blaming" emphasis on taking individual responsibility for one's health. The film unflinchingly presents Carol's worsening trajectory from affluent but socially distant isolation—removing herself from family,

friends, and the broader social world—to isolated recluse holed up in the rigidly run "therapeutic retreat," which takes on an increasingly cult-like character. Haynes draws striking parallels between social and psychological isolation, treating others as both source of contamination and of solace, as both posing the threat of stressful anxiety and consequent immuno-suppression and the promise of maintaining a sustaining psychological and emotional link with social reality. The ambivalence of Carol's situation, where others are both sources of contamination and of a sense of social connection, gives way to her ironic "cure" or self-affirming withdrawal from the world—an emaciated, fragile shell of a person wasting away in an expensive "isolation igloo" far from the noxious presence of Others. Carol's extreme withdrawal from social reality into the isolation of the self—the "safe" space of solipsistic protection from the uncertainty of the world of others—is presented as an ironic, self-defeating act of self-help "liberation." The blank vulnerability of Moore's performance as Carol, coupled with Haynes's framing of her fragile figure against oppressive domestic spaces, with harsh lighting and lurid colors along with the proliferation of "artificial" surfaces and objects, and the foregrounding of all the invisible but noxious chemical "threats" surrounding us all contribute to the anxious, isolated, and "sickly" mood that the film creates. The concatenation of themes of contamination, contagion, toxic environmental threats, isolation, and social anxiety makes this film even more pertinent and prescient in today's context of ambivalent social relations.

Recalling the episodic anthology format of *The Twilight Zone*, Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (2011–2019) presents compelling depictions of near-future scenarios exploring the dark side of contemporary digital technology and audiovisual culture. Although most belong to the genre of dystopian science-fiction, the episodes of *Black Mirror* could also be described as works of speculative cinematic fiction, deploying a variety of genres such as psychological horror, science fantasy, and the sociopolitical thriller (see Sinnerbrink forthcoming). "Hated in the Nation" (S3 E6), for example, offers a near-future dystopian vision of life restructured via the ubiquity of social media, where the rise of public shaming and vilification via online "call-out" culture is synthesized with the specter of informational data-harvesting in the service of governmentally controlled surveillance society. Shot in austere "Nordic noir"-style, this dystopian murder mystery begins with the death of a controversial right-wing journalist, Jo Powers (Elizabeth Berrington), brutally killed the day after publishing a story denouncing a disability rights activist's self-immolating protest action. Detective Chief Inspector Karin Parke (Kelly McDonald) and her junior partner DC Blue Coulson (Faye Marsay), investigate the case, linking it with the unexplained death of a rap artist, Tusk (Charles Babalola), who had also recently become the target of online hate for publicly belittling a child talent show performer on television.

The rapper dies after having a seizure in the hospital, where a metal object (an artificial drone insect or ADI being used to replace organic bees that are nearing extinction) is revealed as responsible for his sudden death, having previously become somehow lodged in his skull. The two deaths point to a pattern of targeted killings linked to online social media campaigns against controversial celebrities or despised public figures. As the detective drama unfolds, it becomes clear that individuals at the top of a virally circulating hashtag (#deathto), dedicated to the most hated figures on the UK internet on any given day, are being targeted and killed as part of what is revealed as a vigilante-style "Game of Consequences" orchestrated by a shadowy domestic terrorist figure. The latter has hacked into secret government surveillance data being gathered by the freely circulating artificial insects (ADIs) and has now redeployed the ADIs as deadly weapons that can be directed at will to attack the most "hated in the nation" social media figures as identified by the "#deathto" hashtag.

Weaving together the "toxic" aspects of abusive social media "pile-on" culture—where under a cloak of anonymity users can shame, harass, or intimidate despised figures—with the oppressive possibilities of networked data-harvesting and surveillance culture, "Hated in the Nation" perversely links the personal and the political in its dystopian vision of the disturbing ethical consequences of contemporary social media platform cultures. The inherent capacity or tendency of Self-Other relations to become ambivalent or conflictual is here exacerbated and amplified by the negative social effects and emotionally manipulative character of anonymous online shaming culture and big data surveillance mechanisms. Brooker's staging of a dark social media/televisual thought experiment—what would people do if their online shaming and calls for retributive action were actually carried out in social reality?—points to the dangers of the manipulation of public opinion, political polarization, and breakdown of social debate wrought by the unholy alliance between large-scale data-harvesting, social media shaming culture, and political surveillance technologies. The ambivalent interpersonal dynamics of Self-Other relations are show here to collide with, but also to intensify, the disturbingly anti-democratic political potentials of today's digital media culture—a data-driven version of the Deleuzian "society of control" that also anticipates Shoshana Zuboff's disturbing claims that we have entered the age of "surveillance capitalism" (Deleuze 1992; Auboff 2019).

Both examples point to the "dark side" of intersubjectivity, as mediated, for example, via social media culture, particularly when the latter begins to dominate and restructure social relations and communication more generally. Both examples explore the deleterious side effects of contemporary cultural preoccupations with "safety" and the manipulation of our social environments in order to expunge these of "toxic" contaminants, including noxious

Others; or how readily social anxieties and ideological fears can be channeled against social scapegoats or pariahs who become the hapless targets of social media-fueled venting of collective anger, resentment, bigotry, or moral outrage. These two cinematically powerful thought experiments, understood as broadly cultural, ethical, and historical, show how the idea of film as philosophy, or indeed the idea of cinematic ethics, needs to be extended into domains dealing with our "immoral psychology" (and not just benign cases of moral psychology): the motivations, meanings, and dynamics of negative forms of sociality, including conflict, deception, manipulation, and violence. Cinema and television can provide a fictional experimental space to examine our tendencies toward social conflicts, communicative distortions, and sociocultural pathologies. This is what the many films discussed so powerfully in this book attempt to do: to limn the ambiguities of intersubjectivity, showing the anxieties attending contemporary social relations—the ambivalent implications of interdependency that need to be examined alongside its potential for moral pedagogy and social transformation.

NOTES

1. See specifically chapter IV, "The Truth of Self-Certainty," "B. Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage," para. 178–196, pp. 111–119.

2. Hegel alludes to both ancient Greece and to medieval feudalism but the master/slave dialectic has been applied to many other instances of domination and subordination, from Marx's model of class struggle, de Beauvoir's account of relations between the sexes under patriarchy, to Fanon's racialized version of the colonial/indigenous struggle.

3. See Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Kant: Political Writings*, trans. H.S. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 41–53.

4. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1958), Part III "Being for Others," Chapter One, "The Existence of Others," Section IV, "The Look," p. 252 ff.

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