Nicole M.
Wellesley Massachusetts

Shatter My Mind
Mixed-media

My research is about activism in horror films. I explored some of the psychology behind the horror genre and the power the movies have to convey messages. I focused specifically on splatter films and their anti-capitalist sentiments, as well as the past and present of anti-racist horror films. Despite the horror genre's lack of traditional beauty, the movies are still works of art. In my piece, I wanted to capture the idea of ugliness and pain while still creating art that can be visually interesting. Additionally, I wanted to include some imagery from my research on horror. I made an etching of a distorted heart, referring to the way in which horror films grip your emotions using fear. I also wanted to allude to the gore of splatter films using the texture of my piece without actually creating a painting that makes the viewer disgusted. Finally, I used shattering plaster to represent the effect horror films can have on the viewer. They steal the viewer out of their everyday life and force harsh reality upon them, thus shattering their blank and simple perspectives and replacing them with the ugly truth.

For this piece, I was inspired by Bruce Connor and Wangechi Mutu. I was interested in the sculptural elements Bruce Connor added to his pieces, and I tried to incorporate that style into my piece with plaster, cardboard, and glass. Additionally, I was inspired by Wangechi Mutu's composition, style, and colors. Her pieces look interesting and feel almost creepy while still using vivid color.

In the process of making this piece, almost everything was new to me. I had never incorporated sculpture, painting, and printmaking together. I had not created much abstract art before. I had never worked with a larger scale. I had not worked with so much texture in my paintings before. Because of these new experiments, my process came and evolved as I worked. Despite some challenges, it was enjoyable for me to create this new and wild piece of art.

Activism in Horror Films

Nicole M.

The Oxbow School

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Writer's Note: Horror films are a popular form of entertainment that warrant a unique experience for the viewer when compared to other films. This paper explores common themes of activism present in many movies, specifically anti-capitalism and anti-racism in America. These activist films began to appear in the cinema around the 1970s and have ramped up as we made it to the present day. Today and in history, horror films have been used to communicate a message using darkness and fear.

If a knife-wielding maniac were chasing you down, trying to cut you up into itty bitty pieces, you probably wouldn't be enjoying yourself. So, why do some of us like watching it happen to other people on screen? While no one likes real-life terror – also called "natural horror." – in "art horror," terror can become enjoyable. Art horror uses a variety of rhetorical devices and techniques to elicit a specific mood from the viewer: typically fear. The horror genre tends to place morbid attention on death, murder, and evil; however, the pain, disgust, or discomfort that arises from viewing this content is not necessarily bad. This brings about the paradox of horror: the idea that pain is not separate from beauty (Bantinaki). Scary movies may not meet the traditional standards of beauty, but they are art nonetheless. And art is often fundamentally political. Horror films specifically can be extremely effective at bringing forth a meaningful message and are often used as forms of activism, specifically targeted against capitalism and racism in America.

Despite fear being considered a negative emotion, horror movies are often enjoyable because of the intense emotional reaction, the sense of control, and the unrelenting truth the films bring forth in viewers. First, horror films allow us to explore the possibilities of emotional experiences and stretch our emotional capacity without facing real danger. An adrenaline rush or

increased heart rate is not inherently painful. Fear actually causes a very similar bodily reaction to love. Butterflies in your stomach do not feel much better than a stomach twisting in fear (Sauchelli). Additionally, watching horror allows many people to feel secure and in control. One can enjoy fear with complete control over the situation that would not be present in a real-life occurrence (Bantinaki). Finally, horror films can often feel more real than the fake and happy atmosphere created by many other kinds of blockbuster films. Horror fans feel the genre is faithful to our human condition because it addresses the horrors of the world and "[i]mpinges on an illusionary veil of a peaceful and accommodating universe" (Sauchelli).

Horror films use of strong emotions and their dark nature makes them an effective tool for getting meaningful messages across. Horror movies are designed to elicit a specific mood from the viewer and can also draw attention towards a particular issue. Exploring emotional states through film without literally experiencing the horrific circumstances has value because it can deeply place us in other's shoes. If we can understand others' perspectives, we practice empathy and are more likely to take action toward change. Additionally, horror films are dark by nature and, therefore, express dark messages effectively (Sauchelli). A happy and upbeat film is unable to address the terrors of systemic racism the same way a grim and gut-wrenching horror movie can. Thus, horror films often attack the problems society likes to avoid, leaving a deep and thought-provoking impact on the viewer.

Since the 1960s, a specific genre of horror film, known as splatter horror films, have fought against American capitalism. Splatter differs from popular slasher horror flics, which are formulaic: the hero's inevitable victory over evil to maintain social order suggests a conservative or repressive social message. Splatter is also not the same as extreme horror, which looks extremely real and is gratuitously gruesome, typically sending an apolitical or even nihilistic

message. Conversely, splatter movies are gory, but somewhat unrealistically so, and provide a camp-like experience viewers can enjoy in a room full of friends. Unlike slasher or extreme horror films, splatter is frequently dedicated to the anti-capitalist left (Steven). Splatter films usually contain violence enacted by the lower class and the socially marginalized against the winners of the system that ensure their status at the bottom of the hierarchy. These films remind viewers of the horrors of capitalism and provide catharsis for people who wish they could escape. The gore in splatter films "emphasizes the materiality of bodies and brains, of the human substance within an economy" (Steven).

There were two waves of splatter films, with the first peaking in the 1970s as a response to the shift in the American economy from production to finance. For example, the quintessential first-wave splatter film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), reflects the circumstances faced by the industrial labor force at the time. The movie begins with several middle-class young adults stranded near an abandoned slaughterhouse because of a gas shortage inspired by one that happened in the 70s. The villains are a family of unemployed abattoir workers, including the infamous and horrifying Leatherface. We soon discover that the family applies their skills to the butchery of people. Near the end of the movie, we see the family consume the remnants of their victims. The poor are literally eating the rich, which directly represents the possibility of change from the rising lower class. This film demonstrates industrial labor workers' pain in response to the changing economy while remaining optimistic about a better future.

The second wave of splatter films occurred in the early 2000s and had a shift in tone from the previous wave. Movies such as the *Saw* franchise (2004-2010) explore "a helpless, seemingly inescapable totality and the foreclosure of political and economic alternatives" (Steven). Splatter films from this time were darker and more desperate than those from the first wave. They reflect

the feeling that the horrors of capitalism might be inescapable. In the *Saw* movies, the main antagonist, John Kramer, uses repurposed industrial machinery found in urban wreckage to test peoples' will to live through gruesome forms of torture. Middle-class victims are placed in the role of industrial workers and are destroyed by the machines, just like the fate of many workers in history. Additionally, the characters fight against the clock for survival, similar to how capitalist efficiency causes workers to put speed over safety. Finally, these films punish people who have failed Kramer within the capitalist system, such as bankers and doctors. Clearly, films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Saw* demonstrate the failure of capitalism in two distinct waves: the first with hope, the second with desperation. While splatter films were spreading their anti-capitalist messages, anti-racism has been active in the cinema since the first wave of splatter horror.

Blaxploitation films allow more people of color to enter the film industry and attempt to reappropriate the horror genre. Before the 1970s, horror was about fear of the "other" with a white, middle-class hero; however, ideologies of black nationalism and black pride were becoming increasingly prominent forms of social expression. This gave way to a film craze from 1969 to 1976 called blaxploitation horror films (Benshoff). In general, blaxploitation films were made by Black people for Black people and centered around militant Black characters who triumph over racist white characters. This structure flipped the usual traits of horror characters and brought attention to racism in other movies. *Blacula* (1972) is an example of a successful blaxploitation film about a Black vampire who many people could relate to in feeling like an outcast. This film, among many others, led to the popularization of Black urban culture by showcasing Black talent and referring to the Black Panthers, soul food, white racism, and ghetto life. For example, in the movie, Blacula says, "Funny how so many sloppy police jobs involve

Black victims." These films did not hide from expressing frustration with the system and pride in the Black identity. *Blacula* turned a mainstream monster into an agent of Black pride. Another example of a blaxploitation film is *Sugar Hill* (1974). When a racist white mafia murders her lover, the protagonist, Sugar, raises zombies marked as former slaves from the dead to avenge her lover. Despite Sugar and her zombies being villains, viewers are sympathetic to them and see them as the main characters of the film.

It is important to note that at the same time blaxploitation films instilled Black pride, they also have received criticism for reinforcing both racial and sexual stereotypes and tropes (Benshoff). In *Sugar Hill*, Sugar has no purpose other than to avenge her male lover and is sexualized throughout the film. Additionally, Sugar wears an afro when committing murder, but has straight hair otherwise, suggesting that natural hair is evil or uncontrolled while straight hair is normal and good. Thus, while blaxploitation films were certainly an advancement for Black representation in cinema, they also perpetuated harmful stereotypes.

However, a film titled *Ganja and Hess* (1973) differs greatly from other Black-authored films during the blaxploitation era. This art-house film deliberately and self-consciously uses thematic ambiguity to address many states of otherness, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion (Benshoff). This film blurs the binary oppositions between hero and monster and uses vampirism as a metaphor for capitalism and imperialism. Additionally, *Ganja and Hess* questions the complicated relationship between Christianity and Black culture, encouraging individuality and pride. One character says, "I will persist and survive without God's or society's sanction. I will not be tortured. I will not be punished. I will not be guilty." Unfortunately, white critics found *Ganja and Hess* confusing and vague and it was not very successful (Benshoff). Despite its lack of profit, *Ganja and Hess* is a revolutionary and effective film that is

"[c]oncerned with specificity of identity, the empowerment of black people, ... and the rewriting of American history" (Benshoff).

Similarly, a modern example of an activist, anti-racist horror film that has in fact garnered much success is Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). It is rumored that Peele got the name for his film from a 1983 skit in which Eddie Murphy suggested that Hollywood horror is a white genre. He says that a Black person who walked into a house where an apparition appeared or was hinted at would just "get out." Using this idea, popular horror movies are only possible because of white ignorance. For white people, horror is just in the movies and is not central to their everyday lives, as represented by their ignorance in horror movies (Benshoff). In contrast, horror is fundamental to the Black identity and worldview in both history and the current day. *Get Out* demonstrates Afro-pessimism, a term suggesting that the modern world was created by Black slavery (Benshoff). Genocidal violence has affected Black lives from the slave ships through the slave estates, Jim Crow, the ghettos, and, today, the prison industrial complex. Many people took Obama's presidency to mean that they were living in a post-racial America. Hollywood ran with this idea, and there was a spree of movies made about slavery to reflect on how amazing our progress has been. The main image of Black people in cinema was from the past, but never the future: "When was the last time you saw a black feature film set in space?" (Benshoff). *Get Out* challenges this characterization by defining slavery as more than just an institution from the past.

In *Get Out*, Peele illustrates how slavery is still present in different ways under contemporary forms of American racism; therefore, it is an Afro-pessimist film. The film opens with a shot of a wealthy suburb at night, echoing countless late-twentieth-century horror movies. Then, we see a Black man on the phone, walking nervously through the neighborhood. Off the bat, the movie intentionally creates a paradox. The wealthy white suburb is an inherently scary

place for a Black man. Unlike most white horror films, the character Andre is not ignorant of his dangerous situation. He says on the phone, "I feel like a sore thumb out here." Predictably, when he begins to be followed, he says, "Not today, not me." He is then assaulted by an unseen figure in a white car. This assault echoes the murder of Trayvon Martin, a Black American teenager who was shot while also walking in a white suburb. The film then cuts to the life of Chris, the main character, a Black photographer. Chris is initially introduced through the art on his walls: photographs that suggest Black pride and celebration. Chris's life represents the post-racial philosophy of the time; he is rich, successful, and has a white girlfriend. Chris appears "[r]ooted in but not restricted by Blackness." *Get Out* thus begins by affirming post-Blackness and is not yet Afro-pessimist.

As the film continues, however, it reveals the lie of post-Blackness. The plot progresses as we find out Chris's girlfriend, Rose, is taking him to meet her parents for the weekend. The following sequences closely echo the1967 movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner,* made directly after the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case legalizing interracial marriage. In this film, a white woman introduces a Black man to her parents. In both films, the white girlfriends do not tell their parents that their boyfriends are Black and assure them that there is absolutely nothing to worry about. However, *Get Out*'s plot soon takes a drastic turn from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* because it is not a love story. Chris continuously faces microaggressions and does not "get out" soon enough because of his continued belief in post-racism. In an interaction with Rose's mother, Chris is hypnotized and enters what Peele calls "the sunken place." The Sunken Place is a take on W.E.B. Dubois's double consciousness. Dubois's theory posits that there is a horizontal push and pull between assimilating into white culture and remaining true to Black culture. Peele shifts this to a vertical relationship with the Sunken Place, in which Chris is

underneath, unable to move or make a sound, and Rose's mother, a white woman, is on top and in complete control of Chris. Next, Chris barely escapes being enslaved by Rose's family after his body is auctioned off to an old, blind family member. After escaping, Chris is tracked down by Rose, and he ends up on top of her with a police car approaching them. This interaction echoes the stereotype of the Black rapist. In the theatrical ending of the movie, Chris's best friend is driving the police car, and he escapes to safety; however, in the alternate ending, included after the film, Peele remains true to the Afro-pessimist ideology, and Chris is arrested and incarcerated. Chris goes from slavery straight into the contemporary system of mass incarceration, exactly echoing American history's path.

Despite the dark fate of its Afro-pessimist ending, *Get Out* intentionally provides an alternative course of action to the viewer or a way to fight back. Earlier in the film, Chris takes a picture of the man who was formerly Andre, from the opening scene of the movie, his body now holding the brain of a white man. When Chris snaps the photo, Andre regains consciousness and warns Chris to "get out." The photo represents the power of the media to shine a light on racism and police violence. This glimmer of hope conveyed in the movie is extremely important because complete and total Afro-pessimism can be dangerous. Journalist Asad Haider warns against complete Afro-pessimism, saying it could "stomp out hope for future and unity while also educating Black people and leading to resistance" (Benshoff). By capturing the ethos of Afro-pessimism, yet still leaving room for hope and change, *Get Out* is a thoughtful, powerful, and nuanced representation of Black life in America.

Horror films play a massive role in pop culture, not only because people enjoy a good scare, but also because of their resistant nature and ability to impact the viewer's outlook on social issues. Like all art forms, horror movies elucidate emotional responses and draw viewers

in on a deep and personal level, creating a community of activists. Making social issues feel personal creates empathy towards groups of people and often leads to direct action. After all, empathy and community are the critical elements of effectuating change. Many privileged people move through their lives feeling disconnected and uninterested in social issues despite their impact on the rest of the world. Horror films have the ability to bridge that gap and allow people to come together and care about injustice.

So, the next time you see a knife-wielding maniac trying to cut someone up into itty bitty pieces, you will know that you are a part of something bigger. Your emotions are being intentionally fostered to direct your attention towards an issue you have the power to take action against.

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