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Exploring the Spiritual Value of Slasher Films: Watching Horror Movies as a Sacred Practice

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Introduction

Engaging in secular activity as a sacred practice is a concept that has been present in popular culture and public discourse for years, but at the time of this writing there are few scholarly publications on the phenomenon. Vanessa Zoltan, CEO of *Not Sorry Productions* and Co-host of the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*¹ is currently the most well-known individual who does work in this field.² In 2021 Zoltan published her book *Praying with Jane Eyre: Reflections on Reading as a Sacred Practice*,³ a semi-autobiographical work about her experience reading the novel *Jane Eyre* as a sacred text. Zoltan's work was my first exposure to this practice, and listening to *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* has become part of my weekly routine. Continually discovering new meaning in a text that I have been intimately familiar with since my early teenage years has been deeply fulfilling and become part of my regular spiritual fulfillment.

¹ See Not Sorry LLC, "About," *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, Accessed January 15, 2024. <https://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/about/our-story>

² Not Sorry LLC., "Team," *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, Accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/about/team/>

³ See Vanessa Zoltan, *Praying with Jane Eyre* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2022).

The rise of the religious “nones” in the United States has been a frequent topic in courses throughout my time at Harvard Divinity School (HDS). This concept refers to a recent marked increase in Americans who describe themselves as having no religious affiliation.⁴ As an individual who was raised without religion and encouraged to find my own spiritual or religious path, I have found myself a member of this community for years. Learning about this phenomenon in the context of the academic study of religion has led me to develop a growing interest in how this community makes sense of the world and whether we have developed novel secular rituals or experiences that are analogous to or replacements for religious ones.

The practice of engaging with secular texts as a sacred practice serves this purpose and may even function as a novel religious experience. Charles Long posits that the changes wrought in American religion and culture post-Enlightenment has required the formation of a new understanding of the term ‘religion,’ which Long defines as an “orientation – orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world,”⁵ and describes it as “the continual quest for the meaning of human existence.”⁶ This understanding of religion allows for the conceptualization of secular sacred practice as religious investigation, which offers a means with which the religious “nones” can search for meaning in and understanding of the world and our respective places in it.

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text and Zoltan’s aforementioned book both focus on reading as a sacred practice, but some experiences during my time at HDS led to my curiosity

⁴ Pew Research Center, “Modeling the Future of Religion in America: 1. How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades,” Religious Demographics, Pew Research Center, September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>

⁵ Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Colorado: The Davies Group, 1999), 7.

⁶ Ibid., 65.

about applying this concept to the medium of film. Reading has always been a big part of my life, but films and television have similarly provided me with emotional support and social connection. After my first semester at HDS I sought a divorce from my now ex-spouse and during that experience found myself processing those complex emotions in part through watching and re-watching specific television shows. But it was an experience with my brother when I was visiting my family during winter break in 2022 that ultimately inspired this project's focus on the horror genre specifically.

Horror has been my favorite film genre for many years and is something that my brother and I have bonded over. Cory and I have a longstanding ritual of going out to dinner together and then watching a horror film.⁷ During this particular visit he forced me to watch the early slasher film *Black Christmas* (1974). Prior to this experience, I had no interest in slashers because I abhor onscreen violence and considered films whose driving narrative is centered around someone murdering others to be frivolous, exploitative, and inherently misogynistic. *Black Christmas* piqued my interest because my initial interpretation of the film was that it was deeply feminist. I was intrigued by the inherent contradiction of interpreting a film as feminist when the film centers the systematic murder of women at the hands of a man,⁸ and so thought exploring this question might be an interesting topic from which to base my master's thesis.

During my last year at HDS, I discovered and have been investigating humanism⁹ as my primary spiritual orienting system. Humanists have no creed and no sacred text, and it is my

⁷ Unfortunately, I do not recall how this ritual began, but we have been doing it for many years.

⁸ This led to an academic interest in horror films. After this experience, I authored two unpublished papers about horror films for different classes in the Spring 2023 semester: "The Relationship Between Horror Films and Moral Panics in the United States" and "The Use of Birds as Tropes for Portents of Death in Horror Films." I had never been so deeply intellectually stimulated by any writing topic before, and I was also pleasantly surprised by the sheer abundance of scholarly literature about horror films.

⁹ The American Humanist Association defines Humanism as, "a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that

understanding that the very definition of humanism itself is constantly in flux, determined and communally understood through discourse. Watching films as a sacred practice offers me a way to not only explore humanism through the practice of self-exploration by way of engagement with others, but also facilitates meaning making about the society and world in which we find ourselves. Throughout the course of this academic year, my humanist practice has begun to inform how I relate to others and will help to frame the conclusion at the end of this paper as well as my continuing work going forward.

This thesis explores the process of watching the slasher films *Black Christmas* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *Scream* (1996), and *the Cabin in the Woods* (2011) as a sacred practice. I begin by providing definitions of important terms and briefly discussing how scholars have connected the medium of film with religion and religious practice. I then orient the reader to horror's slasher subgenre by briefly tracing its evolution and changing social context through time. Then I explain why the horror genre is uniquely situated for this practice through a discussion of the genre's use of the monster/monstrous. In the methods section I describe how I selected films and participants, present participant demographics, discuss challenges to scheduling viewings, and list the number of times each film was viewed. Then I briefly summarize my participants' reactions to the films along with listing some of their observations that were consistent across all four films. A synthesis of the post-viewing discussions is then provided for each film in chronological order of the films' release. I conclude by summarizing my observations, providing opportunities for further research, recommendations for future projects of this nature, and describing how this experience was for me a secular religious one.

aspire to the greater good." American Humanist Association, "Definition of Humanism," accessed February 23, 2024.

Definitions

Phillip J. Nickel offers an insightful definition of the *horror* genre, “Horror has 2 central elements: (1) an appearance of the evil supernatural or of the monstrous (this includes the psychopath who kills monstrously); and (2) the intentional elicitation of dread, visceral disgust, fear, or startlement in the spectator or reader.”¹⁰ This definition is effective for several reasons. First is that it allows for a more expansive definition of the monster that includes humans as monsters, which is left out of some earlier definitions. Second, it clearly explains the difference between something that is truly horror and something from another genre that features horror elements.

The *slasher film* has seen relatively continuous production since its inception in the mid-1970s. Adam Rockoff defines the slasher through its presentation and motivation of the killer, the type of weapon the killer utilizes, the age of the victims, and the setting. In most slasher films, the killer is a human who seeks vengeance for a past trauma. The weapon of choice requires close physical proximity to the victim, such as a knife, hatchet, sword, axe, or power tool such as a chainsaw or drill, to name a few. Although the settings vary, they are typically places where teenagers would stereotypically find themselves, such as a summer camp, school, suburb, etc.¹¹ The most famous work on slasher films to date is Carol Clover’s 1992 book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws in the Modern Horror Film*. Clover writes that the victims are teenagers who engage in “sexual transgression,” and introduces the slasher’s most well-known trope, the ‘Final Girl’, a

¹⁰ Phillip J. Nickel, “Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life: On Skeptical Threats in Psycho and The Birds,” in *The Philosophy of Horror*, ed. Thomas Fahy (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 15-41.

¹¹ Adam Rockoff, *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2002), 5-13.

female character who represents virginity, is relatively unfeminine, and is the final survivor who confronts and overcomes the killer in the end.¹²¹³

The terms *sacred* and *sacred text* were adopted from *Not Sorry Productions*, “a secular sacred text is any text you love that is generative – that gets you thinking, feeling, inspired, wanting to research and talk with others.”¹⁴ Considering a secular text sacred is a multi-level process that starts with believing that a given text is more than mere entertainment, but that it has multiple meanings that can be discovered through rigorous attention. It is important to note that these texts are not sacred in themselves but *become so* through the process of repeated engagement. To discover what these texts have to offer, one must interact with the text repeatedly and in community with others.¹⁵ I use the term *secular* more for convenience’s sake than drawing from any particular definition. For lack of a better word (and perhaps one is forthcoming from another scholar that applies to the religious “nones”), in this paper *secular* simply means not associated with a known religious tradition.

Feminism is a complex and long-lived social movement that has been influential in many different fields of study. This paper uses Sarah Gamble’s definition from the *Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*:

...the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society which is organized to prioritize male viewpoints and concerns. Within this patriarchal paradigm, women become

¹² Carol Clover, “Her Body, Himself,” In *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 32-14.

¹³ However, films are fluid in nature and so viewing slasher films with these specific scholarly formulas can prove frustrating. My own experience watching slasher films, including many not listed in this paper, shows that none of the above definitions are all-encompassing because many films violate at least one of these stipulations. It is important also to note that the subgenre has evolved significantly since its inception with the introduction of new tropes and the allowance of expanded conceptualizations of the monstrous.

¹⁴ Not Sorry LLC, “Sacred Text,” Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, Accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/resources/sacred-text/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

everything men are not (or do not want to be seen to be): where men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on. Under this rationale, which aligns them everywhere with negativity, women are denied equal access to the world of public concerns as well as of cultural representation. Put simply, feminism seeks to change this situation.¹⁶¹⁷

Ritual is a complex, multilayered term that has been difficult to define in the study of religion. In this paper I will utilize Catherine Bell's definition, which situates ritual as a practice that serves numerous functions, including its role in meaning making, and describes its use in religious, social, and personal contexts:

...A complex sociocultural medium variously constructed of tradition, exigency, and self-expression; it is understood to play a wide variety of roles and to communicate a rich density of overdetermined messages and attitudes. For the most part, ritual is the medium chosen to invoke those ordered relationships that are thought to obtain between human beings in the here-and-now and non-immediate sources of power, authority, and value. Definitions of these relationships in terms of ritual's vocabulary of gesture and word, in contrast to theological speculation or doctrinal formulation, suggest that the fundamental efficacy of ritual activity lies in its ability to have people embody assumptions about their place in a larger world.¹⁸

¹⁶ Sarah Gamble, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 1999), vii.

¹⁷ But that does answer the question of what it means to consider feminism in the context of film and filmic studies. Many scholars have written about the fact that the film industry oppresses women through how they are represented as stereotyped characters. Much has also been written about how critics and scholars in film studies also oppress women in how they write about films and which films and directors are heralded in their writings. Sue Thornham writes that the film industry creates movies that are representations of our world. And since for the most part, people who run the film industry are men, it is no surprise that their worldview and perspective are presented in film as truth. The work of feminism in film, then, is to concern itself with the representation of women and to explore "how films both reflect social structures and changes and misrepresent them according to the fantasies and fears of their male creators," and how these representations reinforce cultural notions of femininity and a woman's place in the world. "Feminism and Film," In *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 1999), 93-95. A feminist film or a film that is received as feminist, then, challenges the traditional representation of women in film, transforming them from objects within the narrative to subjects that influence the narrative.

¹⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xi.

Film as Religion/Ritual

I am far from the first person to connect films to religious or spiritual expression. In *Film as Religion, Second Edition Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, John Lyden writes that there is an increasing body of literature and acceptance to the idea that certain aspects of popular culture, such as film, can be considered “analogous to religion in its ability to shape worldviews, values, and identity.”¹⁹ This is not to say that films or the watching of them is a “religion” but that it can constitute a religious experience.²⁰ In *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, S. B. Plate argues that film and religion serve similar functions, “the result of both religion and cinema is a re-created world: a world of recreation, a world of fantasy, a world of ideology, a world we may long to live in or a world we wish to avoid at all costs.”²¹ The alternative world that is presented at the religious alter or on the film screen, then, become connected as the boundaries between them and the everyday become “crossable.” Plate goes on to say that the main argument of this book is that the construction of film itself is analogous to the construction of religion and the act of film viewing functions the same way as a religious ritual.²²

Some scholars have found strong similarities between the individual and collective experience of secular rituals when compared to religious rituals. In one study, Charles et al compared personal benefits between participants who attended a Christian service on a Sunday and another group who attended a secular Sunday Assembly service, which involves a group of people attending talks and/or enjoying music together. The researchers found that health benefits

¹⁹ John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (Second Edition)*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 3.

²⁰ Ibid., 3.

²¹ S. B. Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2017), 3.

²² Ibid., 3-4.

such as an increase in positive affect and decrease in negative affect were similar between the religious and non-religious rituals and both had a similar impact on social bonding.²³ In another study which also focused on the secular Sunday Assembly, Jacqui Frost documented the process through which nonreligious people constructed rituals for their weekly secular services. These rituals were often found to be “more meaningful” than religious rituals to members of the Sunday Assembly due to the communal nature of the work that went into constructing the rituals.²⁴ Ritual should not be overlooked as an important aspect to meaning making and social connection for secular individuals and groups.

A Brief History of Slasher Films

In this section I will provide an overview of the history of the slasher film to introduce the reader to slasher scholarship which offers the social context through which *Black Christmas*, *Halloween*, *Scream*, and *The Cabin in the Woods* arose.

Sotiris Petridis states that the slasher subgenre consists of three distinct cycles: the classical cycle (1974-1993), the self-referential (1994-2000), and the neoslasher cycle (2000-2013).²⁵ The rest of this section will use this framing to situate the four films in their relative historical contexts. According to Petridis, the slasher film primarily concerns itself with normality. In the classical cycle, which officially began with the release of *Halloween*, the killer is tasked with restoring order in middle class white suburbia. Coming into the fore around the Reagan era that espoused the importance of ‘family values,’ killers in the classical cycle target

²³ Charles et al, “United on Sunday: The Effects of Secular Rituals on Social Bonding and Affect,” *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 1 (2021): 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0242546>.

²⁴ Frost, Jacqui, “Ritualizing Nonreligion: Cultivating Rational Rituals in Secular Spaces.” *Social Forces* 101, no. 4 (2023). Note that Frost mentions that the Sunday Assembly is comprised mostly of former Christians. See page 2030.

²⁵ Sotiris Petridis, *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2019), 2.

teenagers that are engaging in behavior that violates the social norms of family values: drugs, drinking, and premarital sex. In most films in the classical cycle, the (typically) lone survivor is a female who embodies ideal sexual and moral behavior. Petridis continues to say that the killers in these films are almost exclusively white males, and as representatives of the highest social rank function as the ‘punisher’ or the restorer of proper social order.²⁶

As concerns of normality and society began to change in the early 1990s, audiences became bored of the conventions of the subgenre and so it began to adjust its formula, which led to the end of the classical cycle in 1994. Over the preceding years, there had been a notable decline in slashers' profitability due to the classical cycle's conservative nature. The emergence of the second cycle, known as the self-referential cycle, began with the release of Wes Craven's *New Nightmare* in 1994. The self-referential cycle existed for a short period of time in comparison to the classical cycle and served as a transitional phase towards the neoslasher cycle, which began in the year 2000. The change in syntax of the self-referential cycle was through breaking and overcoming the classical conventions of the subgenre by mocking them, “the second cycle of the subgenre began to subtract the basic elements of this conservatism and to use self-referentiality and intertextuality as techniques of overcoming it through parody.”²⁷

As with all horror before them, texts from the self-referential cycle were products of their time and reflect the social and political conditions from when they were made. By the middle of the 1990s, postmodernism had taken the forefront of American culture and the new generation, Generation X, needed a new form of horror that better reflected the cynicism of the era. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the Western world had become increasingly skeptical

²⁶ Ibid., 19-24.

²⁷ Ibid., 68.

of science and politics, having experienced a series of sociopolitical failures at the hands of its leaders. This immense cultural shift brought with it new cultural aesthetics such as intertextuality and pastiche, which Kendall Phillips defines as “a style that draws bits and pieces of other styles to form a kind of artistic collage of disparate chunks.”²⁸ The 1990s also brought the advent of cable television through which media was for the first time taking the forefront of culture. The 1980’s “media spectacles” had begun to blur the lines between what was reality and what was media, and some cultural events began to resemble media events, such as the O.J. Simpson trial.²⁹

The self-referential cycle brought with it a shift in the narrative paradigm and syntax from the classical cycle. The hyperconsciousness of both the characters and the narration itself reveal to the audience not only how slasher films are made, but how the public has perceived these texts. The normality that governs the self-referential cycle is redefined by diverging away from the punishment of deviant behavior or the expression of sexuality.³⁰ Within these new syntactic structures, victims are chosen not for the behaviors they engage in, but their own knowledge of previous films from the classical cycle, such films’ narrative structures, or their relation to the killer(s). The characters themselves, attempting to avoid death, work to overcome the conservative conventions of the classical cycle by effectively re-writing the narrative and thus creating new conventions, which is accomplished through self-referentially and intertextuality.³¹

²⁸ Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2005), 168-170.

²⁹ Ibid., 173-174.

³⁰ Sotiris Petridis, *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A theoretical Analysis* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2019), 69.

³¹ Ibid., 84.

The other main difference between the self-referential cycle and the classical cycle is the representation of the monster and the final survivor. In the classical cycle, the audience is often aware of who the killer is and there is no to very little narrative connection between the killer and his victims. In the self-referential cycle, we see a shift towards a whodunnit narrative, wherein the killer and his/her/their motive(s) are revealed near the end of the film. The monster(s) in the self-referential cycle are motivated through some direct narrative connection with their victims.

The final survivor in the self-referential cycle is far removed from Clover's concept of the Final Girl, with both a change in the number of survivors and the description of their characters. Unlike in the classical cycle, texts from the self-referential cycle usually have several final survivors. These survivors are more dynamic than in those in the classical cycle, they do not represent virginal ideals or family values, and they have some important relationship with the killer(s).³²

Although *New Nightmare* was released first and technically ushered in the start of the self-referential cycle, *Scream* (1996) has received far more attention in both scholarly literature and popular culture. The film's heavy use of intertextuality, pastiche, and self-referentiality are reactions to the proliferation of postmodernism in American society at the time. Petridis writes that "the self-referential cycle of the subgenre tried to move away from the conservatism of the classical cycle by incorporating into the Normality of its narrative a hyperconsciousness about the conventions of these films."³³ David MacGregor Johnston writes that "Scream challenges its viewers to interrogate the slasher [sub]genre, their response to such films, and the roles such

³² Ibid., 74.

³³ Ibid., 69.

films play in their lives.”³⁴ I take this to mean that part of the genius of this film is its incorporation of the audience into the film itself. The characters’ hyperawareness of the subgenre and their participation in it force the viewer to question their interest in the slasher subgenre and the validity of the social commentary of the films from the classical cycle, while offering new forms of social commentary.

At the time of this writing, Sotiris Petridis is the only scholar to have divided slashers into three cycles and is one of first to use the term “neoslasher.”³⁵ The neoslasher cycle lasted from 2000-2013 and was ushered in with the release of *Final Destination* (2000). The neoslashers are starkly different from the earlier films in the subgenre, “the new Normality is based on the representations of social classes and the emphasis of community structures based on their opposing elements. Normality is built around the informal struggle of social classes and the attempt to prevail against each other.”³⁶ The syntax changes again, placing the monster rather than the final survivor(s) at the center of the narrative, which explores the sources and origin of evil. The syntax around the final survivors is different in number and station and the victims who the killer chooses in these films justifies the killer’s violence to some degree.³⁷

The narrative structure of the neoslasher moves away from the whodunnit structure of the self-referential cycle, and instead focuses on the killer and providing their backstory.³⁸ This new focus on the killer meant the slasher film moved away completely from the gender representation

³⁴ David MacGregor Johnston, “Kitsch and Camo and Things That Go Bump in the Night; or, Sontag and Adorno at the (Horror) Movies,” In *The Philosophy of Horror*, ed. Thomas Fahy (Lexington, KY: 2010), 240.

³⁵ Petridis provides examples of “sporadic” uses of the term by other scholars but is the only scholar I have read who uses neoslasher as the title for the third slasher cycle. See note 3: *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2019), 145.

³⁶ Sotiris Petridis, *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2019), 89-90.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 105-129.

³⁸ With the notable exception of the *Scream* franchise that has retained the whodunnit narrative (author note).

to instead focus on social classes and exploring the origins of evil.³⁹ *Final Destination* created more expansive possibilities for the monster at the center of these films. In *Final Destination*, the killer is not a person but rather the concept of death itself. *Cabin in the Woods* (2011) features a mysterious corporation as the killer even though creatures traditionally recognized as monsters conduct the actual murders.⁴⁰

It has not escaped my notice that the inception of the subgenre (mid 1970s) and the division of its three cycles have occurred during periods of social upheaval and/or instances of the United States being involved with war (mid 1990s and 2001). Although this phenomenon is referenced widely throughout the scholarly literature, there are currently no articles, books, or book chapters specifically dedicated to it. Interestingly, many texts reference periods of transition in horror films in the United States during Republican Presidential administrations.⁴¹ In the next section I explore the use of the monstrous in horror to elucidate this phenomenon, situating horror as a genre whose very nature is that of social commentary.

Horror Films as Sacred Texts – an Exploration of the Monstrous

Horror films are uniquely situated to be used as sacred texts because the monsters at the center of these films reflect our society back at us in interesting ways. Rick Worland writes that the monster is the primary antagonist in a horror tale and is also the primary driving force behind the human desire to watch horror. The monster, he says, comes in various forms and categories that are non-human or supernatural in origin, such as ghosts, or human or human in origin, such as murderers and zombies. Worland goes on to say that any monster is “often a liminal figure, an

³⁹ Ibid., 132-133.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 102-105, 116.

⁴¹ For a few examples see Sotiris Petridis, *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2019); Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 9.

uncertain amalgam or transitional form between living and dead; human and animal; male and female.... the paradox of the monster is that it incites our fear, compels our attention, and quite often courts our empathy and fascination, even though it remains the most remote form of any possible reality.”⁴²

It is also important to understand how the appearance of the monster or monstrous in horror differs from its use in other genres. In his classic essay “The Nature of Horror,” Noël Carroll writes that what distinguishes the monster in horror films is that the characters around the monster recognize it as something that is experienced as “abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order.”⁴³ The monster, then, is inherently dangerous; a character who perverts the world or challenges or upsets our very perceptions of order in the world. The characters around the monster serve as mirrors or settings upon which the audience can understand how to react to the monster.⁴⁴

Bodo Winter posits that horror films use metaphors to amplify and reinforce our fears by telling us what to be afraid of, even if it is something we naturally fear (such as the dark).⁴⁵ Rick Worland writes that the monster or monstrous is the vehicle through which themes are explored in horror, and so certain monsters serve as metaphors for specific cultural fears. Horror films are compelling because, even though their monsters are not ‘real,’ “the implications of the stories told about them can offer insights into the material world.”⁴⁶ It is well understood within horror film scholarship that the monster at a story’s center accomplishes several things at once: the

⁴² Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 9.

⁴³ Noël Carroll, “The Nature of Horror,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 1 (1987): 52, <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.2307/431308>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁵ Bodo Winter, “Horror Movies and the Cognitive Ecology of Primary Metaphors,” *Metaphor & Symbol* 29, no.3 (2014): 151-153, DOI: 10.1080/10926488.2014.924280.

⁴⁶ Rick Worland, *The Horror Film, an Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 1-15.

monster reveals contemporary societal worries/concerns while also providing important warnings about our own futures. As society changes, the monster at the center of horror films changes in response.⁴⁷ Monsters, then, arise from within us, through the fears in our collective imagination and then reemerge anew, evoking terror and disruption as recognizable characters on the big screen.⁴⁸

Horror is described by many scholars as something that transcends culture, time, and space. Bruce Kawin refers to horror as a “universal human experience,” that has been around for millennia in various forms including folklore and popular culture.⁴⁹ One of the defining elements of horror is its use of repetition; horror tells and retells familiar stories, reuses familiar motifs, characters, and other recognizable storytelling elements. Many well-known monsters have been altered over time and often in response to a changing society and retold in new ways,⁵⁰ which has given rise to a sophisticated genre with myriad well-formed subgenres that can explore complex and often profound questions about humanity, life, and death. This recycling of story elements is a clever use of narrative storytelling that allows audiences to understand what is happening by playing with the familiar, or well-known myths that have become part of the cultural milieu.

⁴⁷ Geneviève Godin, “Monstrous Things: Horror, Othering, and the Anthropocene,” *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 56, no. 2 (2022): 118. <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1080/00794236.2022.2120709>

⁴⁸ This phenomenon has been well documented. Rick Worland has written that some science fiction films such as *The Thing* (1951), *Them!* (1954) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) were direct reactions to Cold War era fears of the threat of nuclear annihilation. These films worked as social commentary by transitioning the traditional horror film monster from functioning as a localized, community-level threat to monsters bent on the destruction of all humankind. *The Horror Film, an Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 193-207.

Similarly, Sarah Hughes posits that the monsters at the center of early slasher films influenced the social conditions under which it became possible for the Satanic Panic to become a nationwide threat rather than a localized phenomenon. “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000.” *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2017): no page numbers. DOI: 10.1017/S0021875816001298

⁴⁹ Bruce Kawin, *Horror and the Horror Film* (New York: Anthem Press, 2012), 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

Horror then, is neither new nor old, but something that follows us, adjusting its familiar stories and characters to stay relevant and remain an important part of our lives. Horror has so invaded our culture that even those who do not consume horror will still recognize the image or name of many of its monsters, such as Dr. Frankenstein's monster, Michael Meyers, Freddy Krueger, Norman Bates, etc. For these reasons, the horror genre offers a unique opportunity for meaning making about our world throughout time, which situates it well for the practice of watching secular films as a sacred practice.

Methods

Several methods were used to select films for this project. As stated previously, Sotiris Petridis has written the most comprehensive analysis of the slasher subgenre as of this writing, and has divided the subgenre into three distinct cycles: the classical cycle (1974-1993), the self-referential cycle (1994-2000), and the neoslasher cycle (2000-2013).⁵¹ Since I am interested in how the slasher subgenre has evolved over time and am curious whether the social conditions under which the films were produced might continue to influence their reception, I chose one film to represent each cycle. *Halloween* was selected to represent the classical cycle because it is the most famous film from that cycle, and in my opinion also provides an interesting contrast to my feminist interpretation of *Black Christmas*.⁵² I chose my final two films by making a short list of options from the self-referential and neoslasher cycles based on their historical value and representation in scholarly literature, as well as their respective representation of the subgenre's

⁵¹ Sotiris Petridis, *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2019), 2.

⁵² Before I chose to expand this project to include the entire slasher subgenre, *Black Christmas* had been initially selected as a comparison to *Halloween* which is why both films were chosen for this project. Note that some scholars do not consider *Black Christmas* a true slasher film but rather an important antecedent to the subgenre. See Clayton Wickham, "Introduction," in *Style and Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film*, ed. Clayton Wickham, 1-14. (Farnham, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7, & Adam Rockoff, *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2002), 42-44. This paper considers *Black Christmas* a slasher film.

evolution over time. *Scream* (1996) and *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011) were selected from that list based on the interests of the individuals who had initially agreed to participate.

Participants were selected in a variety of ways. I began by asking friends and family members who enjoy horror whether they would like to participate. Others became interested after hearing me discuss this project and offered to join. One of the joys of life in graduate school is a constant exposure to new people in class and work environments, so throughout the academic year I made new friends and acquaintances with whom opportunities for additional viewings arose. I am part of the Humanist community at Harvard and viewed a film with them as one of our regular meetings.

There were several unanticipated challenges to both finding participants and scheduling viewings with them. Adults have complicated lives, so planning film viewings involves navigating complex logistics. Also, life got in the way more frequently than I would have expected; I had to reschedule a few viewings myself due to illness or school commitments, and others cancelled or rescheduled for various reasons including illness, work or school commitments, and more serious reasons such as a death in the family and a miscarriage. Although I knew some people do not enjoy horror or find it morally reprehensible, prior to embarking on this project I never would have guessed that the horror genre is categorically inaccessible to many. Numerous individuals informed me that they are unable to watch horror films because of their affective experience; the films are simply too scary. Many others indicated that they would watch horror films but for the fact that they invariably cause nightmares.

There were 13 participants for this project.⁵³ The individuals who participated included four men, six women, and two gender-nonconforming or nonbinary individuals. Most participants were in their late twenties or in their thirties, and one participant was in his early 60s. Participants were mostly white and represented a range of educational backgrounds. Three received a high school education, three had a bachelor's degree, one had a master's degree, and the rest were in graduate school. Of the participants enrolled in graduate school during this project, four were pursuing a master's degree (one having already received a previous master's) and one was pursuing a PhD. Academic interests of participants in graduate school or with a master's degree included but were not limited to film studies, comparative politics, chaplaincy, Unitarian Universalist ministry, and Presbyterian ministry.

Participants also represented a range of religious and spiritual traditions. Three identified as having been raised in the Catholic church and consider themselves currently "decidedly non-religious," "agnostic," and "agnostic-ish." The rest identified as one of the following: Unitarian Universalist, Humanist, Pagan, "spiritual but not religious," Presbyterian, First Congregational (non-practicing), "Christian with Unitarianism leaning," "Jewish with a spiritual practice centering on 12-step recovery," swaying between "agnostic and Christian-ish," and Roman Catholic.

This paper is not human subject research but rather a contribution to the growing field of autoethnography,⁵⁴ so I did not provide participants with any stipulations other than viewing the

⁵³ The Humanist community at Harvard is counted here as a single participant. They requested complete anonymity at the individual level, so their demographic information is not included in this paper. That single viewing included approximately 12 students from various schools across campus and one staff member.

⁵⁴ Ellis et al define autoethnography as a method of writing and research that is both "process and product." Authors engaging with this discipline combine the practice of autobiography with ethnography to "systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011): no page numbers.

film with me either virtually or in person⁵⁵ and requesting their consent to record the post-viewing discussion. I let each participant choose which film(s) to watch,⁵⁶ so there was no control over how many times each film was viewed. Since there were no prepared interview questions for the post-viewing discussions, I let the conversations flow naturally and concluded when it felt appropriate. Most participants viewed one film, some viewed two, and three participants viewed all four films with me. For the three participants who viewed all four films, I did not dictate the order in which we viewed them. The final counts were *Black Christmas* (5), *Halloween* (5), *Scream* (5), and *The Cabin in the Woods* (7), totaling 22 viewings and recorded conversations that took place between September 2023 and March 2024.

Discussion

In this section I provide a synthesis of the various observations my participants and I made about each film. I begin by briefly discussing the various ways my methods influenced the content of the post-viewing discussions and describing why repeated engagement with others has been a necessary part of this sacred practice of watching horror films. I then briefly discuss larger concepts that were noted across multiple films before moving into a more detailed film-by-film analysis.

It is important to note that the post-viewing discussions built upon each other and became richer over time. Several aspects of my methods contributed to this phenomenon. The nature of repeated engagement with a text facilitated my ability to discover new meanings separately from my participants. I became familiar with the plot of a film after my initial viewing of it, which gave me the capacity to pay closer attention to other aspects of the film such as blocking, set

⁵⁵ Only one viewing occurred virtually, which was my conversation with Will Nienass.

⁵⁶ Except for the Humanist Group at Harvard. For this viewing, I had to choose ahead of time which film to view for scheduling purposes.

design, bits of dialogue, etc. that I had missed over one or sometimes even multiple viewings.

Although I facilitated the post-viewing discussions with a particular interest in discovering what my participants saw in any given film, I tended to carry over interesting questions or ideas that came up in previous conversations into succeeding ones. Additionally, there were some aspects of films I was particularly interested in that I repeatedly brought up, such as the feminist aspects of *Black Christmas* and the question around the complicity of the monsters in *The Cabin in the Woods*.

The first three films felt very different from *The Cabin in the Woods*,⁵⁷ and I noticed that several themes came up repeatedly across viewings for *Black Christmas*, *Halloween*, and *Scream* that were not present in discussions about *Cabin*. This includes a social critique of persons our society places into positions of authority (generally those whose purpose is protective such as police officers) and various ways that evil manifests in society.

Despite *Cabin*'s narrative and structural differences from the other films, there were a few themes that my participants and I discovered across all four films. These include a critique of the loss of personal connection and care in modern society, the contradiction that people can exist in isolation even when they are in community, the connection between mask wearing and identity, and the observation that advances in technology offer novel ways for humans to terrorize and surveil each other.

Now I will provide a synthesis of observations made about each film during the post-viewing discussions. The following subsection is organized by film in chronological order of theatrical release and separated by the films' relative slasher cycle. I orient the reader to each

⁵⁷ For ease of reading, *The Cabin in the Woods* will be referred to as *Cabin* throughout this section.

film by providing a very brief plot synopsis. Due to the restrictions in length of this paper and the substantial number of observations made about these films by my participants and me, I was unable to include everything that was discussed. Although I did my best to represent my participants evenly throughout this section as I believe their contributions to be equal in value, it is possible that some voices may be over- or underrepresented. Any such discrepancies are the sole fault of the author and do not necessarily reflect the content or scope of any conversation with a given participant. The analysis of each film begins with overarching themes that were discussed across multiple viewings and concludes with observations made by individual participants and/or me.

Synthesis of Notes from Viewings

Classical Cycle - Black Christmas

Black Christmas centers around a group of sorority sisters and their housemother who are terrorized and murdered by an unknown assailant. The killer harasses the women through obscene phone calls, and it is revealed to the audience early in the film that the killer is making these calls from within the house.⁵⁸

The most prominent theme that my participants noted in *Black Christmas* was the various ways that it presents as a feminist text. This includes social commentary on gendered violence, gender dynamics of a patriarchal society, and the film's portrayal of female characters. Caleigh felt that Billy (the killer) did not actually represent a person but was rather a metaphor for the violence that women face in society, "you can't name him, you can't catch him. He's always there. Because it's not actually a guy, it's a system of violence."⁵⁹ I asked Caleigh whether she thought it was inherently contradictory or problematic to consider a film feminist when its main storyline focuses on the systematic murder of women at the hands of one man. She responded by

⁵⁸ For readers unfamiliar with the plot of *Black Christmas*, see Appendix 1 for a thoroughly detailed summary.

⁵⁹ Caleigh Grogan, in discussion with the author, October 20, 2023.

saying that the point of the film is for the audience to be confronted with the violence that women really face in the world, and one way to illustrate this experience is by showing the literal deaths of women onscreen.⁶⁰ Cory said that Peter (Jess A.'s boyfriend)⁶¹ represents a version of the toxic male, and that Peter's destruction of the piano could allude to the nature of violence that women can receive at the hands of men. When Jess A. attempts to set boundaries with Peter and considers leaving him, he becomes agitated, destroying a grand piano in a fit of rage. Cory felt that this narrative suggests that Peter's aggression could potentially escalate from physical violence against inanimate objects to physical violence against Jess A.⁶²

Sophie felt that *Black Christmas* also provides social commentary on the gender dynamics of a patriarchal society. She noted that *Black Christmas* was released during a time when men were experiencing the perceived loss of authority due to the sexual liberation of women in the 1960s and she felt that this film is largely about "the breakdown of the patriarchal role in sexual reproduction." Sophie also noted that the sorority is a "homo-social space [comprised solely of] female company and friendship. And then men come in and things start going wrong. It is a lovely space of being together at the start which then encounters the masculine world and violence ensues."⁶³ Cory and Jess C. both noted that Peter serves as a good red herring in this film because it is not surprising in our society that a woman's killer would be her intimate male partner.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Caleigh Grogan, in discussion with the author, October 20, 2023.

⁶¹ The character Jess shares a first name with a participant. To avoid confusion, the character in the film will be referred to here as Jess A., and the participant will be referred to as Jess C.

⁶² Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, January 4, 2024.

⁶³ Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2024.

⁶⁴ Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, January 4, 2024; Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, January 25, 2024.

Every participant noted that the portrayal of the female characters in this film was a major part of its feminist presentation. In other slasher films, point-of-view shots are used to force the audience to participate in the killer's voyeurism, which invariably means watching women engage in sex, drinking, or drugs. In contrast, the point-of-view shots from Billy's perspective in this film are especially creepy because the women are engaging in normal, almost mundane activities.⁶⁵ The representation of female sexuality in *Black Christmas* was also of note to many participants who felt that it was particularly progressive for the horror genre, which often objectifies women and characterizes them in reductive, misogynistic ways, punishing them for engaging in sexual activity. This film shows that many of these young women are sexual creatures, and their sexual relationships are portrayed as normal rather than transgressive behavior.⁶⁶ Jess C. was interested in the behavior of the women under duress, stating that *Black Christmas* defies a common horror trope through how Jess A. conducts herself during the final confrontation with Billy, "I expected her to knock something over, and the fact that she didn't was a surprise because the stereotype is run, scream, trip over things, knock things over, draw attention to yourself, and she didn't do that."⁶⁷

Across viewings participants discussed how the setting of *Black Christmas* was used to amplify fear by subverting the audience's sense of safety, focusing specifically on the sorority house and the Christmas season. Most of the scenes in *Black Christmas* take place inside the young women's home, which should ostensibly be one's safest place in life.⁶⁸ Caleigh noted that the setting of a sorority house, traditionally a home exclusively for women, provides additional

⁶⁵ Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with the author, October 20, 2023.

⁶⁶ Molly Costello, in conversation with the author, December 2, 2023; Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, January 4, 2024; Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, January 25, 2024.

⁶⁷ Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, January 25, 2024.

⁶⁸ Molly Costello, in conversation with the author, December 2, 2023; Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with the author, October 20, 2023.

commentary on the patriarchy, “[the women] are living in this system of patriarchy, which is symbolized by the [sorority] house.”⁶⁹ During my final viewing of this film, I noticed for the first time that Billy was making his phone calls not from the attic as I had assumed, but from the house mother’s room. I wondered how Billy was able to navigate through the house so frequently without being observed, noting a few tense moments in the film when his shadow is clearly visible but unnoticed by the young women in the house. Jess C. suggested that when one is in a familiar space such as one’s home, one may be less likely to notice signs of an intruder due to cognitive dissonance or disbelief in its possibility.⁷⁰

Just like the use of a home as the setting, the use of the Christmas season further challenges the audience’s concept of safety in this film because Christmas is traditionally viewed as a safe and wholesome time in our culture.⁷¹ Cory stated that one of the most frightening aspects of *Black Christmas* is its suggestion that “these things can happen at even the most wonderful time of year.”⁷² Sophie mentioned that most horror films use muted colors to set the mood, but *Black Christmas* notably uses a bright color palette, “the aesthetic construction of the film is part of the [narrative],” which serves to amplify or reinforce the Christmas setting. During this conversation, I realized that the set design and use of camera angles provide the audience with constant reminders that it is the Christmas season; there are often trees, lights, ornaments, wreaths, and other decorations displayed prominently in the background. Sophie also mentioned that Christmas is sinister in this film because of its association with family, through which the

⁶⁹ Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with the author, October 20, 2023.

⁷⁰ Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, January 25, 2024.

⁷¹ Molly Costello, in conversation with the author, December 2, 2023; Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, January 25, 2024; Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, January 4, 2024; Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2024.

⁷² Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, January 4, 2024

film represents family as a ‘trap’ for women; Jess becomes pregnant and suddenly her boyfriend feels entitled to her, expecting an imminent marriage.⁷³

Classical Cycle - Halloween

Fifteen years after murdering his sister on Halloween night in 1963, Michael Myers escapes from a mental institution and returns to his hometown of Haddonfield, Illinois, where he stalks and kills a group of teenagers.⁷⁴

Across viewings participants commented on the absence of adults and how they function in roles of authority. This concept can be broken down into two main categories: the literal physical absence of adults and the inability of adults/authority figures to recognize the obvious presence of a murderer in the community. *Halloween* constantly reminds its audience of the physical absence of adult figures. Participants noted it is odd that Laurie and her friends are babysitting children whose parents are all gone on Halloween night, an evening that is typically centered around families taking children trick-or-treating.⁷⁵ The few adults who are shown on screen, except for the sheriff and Dr. Loomis, were doing something in the background or off in the distance. The audience is not shown Tommy’s parents and Lindsey’s parents are only shown in the background as they leave, but notably from Michael’s point of view. Laurie’s teacher is never even shown on screen, her presence is rather that of a disembodied voice.⁷⁶

The Humanist Community noted that authority figures in *Halloween* fail to notice numerous obvious signs of Michael’s nefarious presence in the community. There are several examples of this: Michael drives a conspicuous state-owned car around town all day and audaciously carries the body of one of his victims through the front yard of the house, visible to

⁷³ Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2024.

⁷⁴ For readers unfamiliar with the plot of *Halloween*, see Appendix 1 for a thoroughly detailed summary.

⁷⁵ Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023; Jess Coogan, in conversation with author, February 15, 2024.

⁷⁶ Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023; Jess Coogan, in conversation with author, February 15, 2024.

anyone in the neighborhood. Notably, it is only one of the children, Tommy, who seems to notice Michael creeping about town.⁷⁷ The Humanist Community also noted that the sheriff seems unconcerned when someone has broken into a hardware store and stolen rope, masks, and knives; items which are often used in crimes such as burglary. Instead of assuming there is a criminal on the loose, the sheriff blames the theft on silly local youth.⁷⁸

Several participants mentioned that authority figures either did not take the threat of Michael seriously or were completely incapable of believing there was a threat in the first place or even the possibility of one. Sophie noted that “one thing you get a sense of in this film was the overwhelming sense of safety in this little suburb, nothing bad happens. You don’t lock your door, you just... leave your kids with whomever.”⁷⁹ Some participants felt that the adults in this film were too worried about their own lives to notice what was really going on around them, which is why Michael was able to get away with these murders. Jess and the Humanist Community pointed out that it was particularly difficult for Dr. Loomis to convince almost any other authority figure of the danger that Michael poses to the community.⁸⁰ Jess also mentioned how surprising it is that other than Dr. Loomis, no one from the mental health institution that Michael escaped from seems interested in searching for Michael, almost as if they “think he might just wander back on his own.”⁸¹ Even if Michael was not a danger to others, one would think an institution would be interested in seeking the return of one of their charges.

⁷⁷ Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with author, February 11, 2024.

⁸⁰ Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023; Jess Coogan, in conversation with author, February 15, 2024.

⁸¹ Jess Coogan, in conversation with author, February 15, 2024.

Most participants noted that one of the ways that authority figures failed to believe in or notice Michael was due to their cynical view of teenagers, blaming *them* for the signs that Michael was in the community. Early in the film Dr. Loomis visits Michael's sister's grave, and he discovers a hole in the ground where there should be a tombstone. The cemetery worker blames it on "kids." As mentioned previously, the local sheriff also blames teens for the break-in and theft at the hardware store. The film itself seems to uphold this view; *Halloween* presents teenagers in a rather cynical light. Most participants noted that the teenage characters are largely dislikable, so their deaths were not emotionally impactful to them.⁸² In my discussion with Sophie, I had begun to wonder whether slasher films tell us that since teenagers are neither children nor adults, they do not really belong anywhere. She said, "culturally they are alone even though they are together."⁸³

I had discussions with all participants about how *Halloween* presents Michael as the embodiment of evil. There were a variety of reactions to this idea, including questions about the nature and origin of evil, whether Michael might be redeemable, and what it might mean that Michael was produced by the community he terrorizes in this film. All participants noted the young age at which Michael committed his first murder and took issue with Dr. Loomis' claim that the child was evil from that point.⁸⁴ Sophie and the Humanist Community both theorized

⁸² Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023; Will Nienass, in conversation with author, February 7, 2024; Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with author, February 11, 2024; Jess Coogan, in conversation with author, February 15, 2024; Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with author, March 2, 2024.

⁸³ Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with author, February 11, 2024.

⁸⁴ Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023; Will Nienass, in conversation with author, February 7, 2024; Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with author, February 11, 2024; Jess Coogan, in conversation with author, February 15, 2024; Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with author, March 2, 2024.

that Michael might be a modern representation of Frankenstein's' monster, that he may have *become* evil after being told that he was for so many years.⁸⁵

Whether Michael is redeemable or not proved to be an unanswerable question across viewings, especially since the film provides very little of Michael's backstory. The moral reprehensibility of murder further complicates this question, but many participants were uncomfortable with or simply disagreed with the idea that any person is categorically unworthy of society's care and consideration.⁸⁶ Caleigh suggested that Michael may be a metaphor rather than an actual person, which links back to her reading of Billy in *Black Christmas*. She also said that the young women in *Halloween* are inherently unsafe in the world, and Michael is an existential threat to them; he is unstoppable, even by bullets, which may suggest that there is no way to make women safe in the world as it is.⁸⁷ Will did not see Michael as the embodiment of evil. He was more concerned with the idea that *Halloween* might be furthering stigma against individuals with mental health issues, especially since the film makes no references to an attempt at rehabilitation for Michael, something also noted by the Humanist Community.⁸⁸

Jess and Caleigh both discussed their understanding of the use of masking in *Halloween*. Jess noticed that Michael puts on a mask before murdering his sister in the opening scene. She said that a six-year-old who murders someone is "not six-years-old in their brain" and the mask allows Michael to become another identity. This led me to the realization that Michael's mask serves this same purpose in his adulthood. When Michael returns to Haddonfield, he *becomes*

⁸⁵ Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023; Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with author, February 11, 2024.

⁸⁶ Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023; Jess Coogan, in conversation with author, February 15, 2024; Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with author, March 2, 2024.

⁸⁷ Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with author, March 2, 2024.

⁸⁸ Humanist Community, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023; Will Nienass, in conversation with author, February 7, 2024.

himself when he puts his mask on. Jess noted that when Laurie unmask Michael toward the end of the film, he prioritizes putting the mask back on over escaping from the gun that Dr. Loomis has just arrived with. She felt that this suggests that Michael's mask has become such an important part of his identity that it overrides any sense of self-preservation.⁸⁹ Caleigh had the opposite view, stating that Michael's mask further *removes* him from himself, which anonymizes him, and further distances him from society, which provides him with more power to do harm.⁹⁰

Sophie felt that Michael serves as a metaphor through which “the specter of the Vietnam War is sort of haunting this entire film... [The United States Government] took these normal young men from this kind of environment and sent them out to become murderers...” through which Michael represents a “returned figure of our cultural mistakes.” She said that during this time men were returned to their communities traumatized, haunted, and viewed as out of place. Neither Sophie nor I would ever suggest that we think war veterans are murderers or should be equated with the evil that Michael is supposed to represent in the film. I thought this was compelling because the Vietnam War would have been fresh on the minds of audiences at Halloween's theatrical release.⁹¹

Self-Referential Cycle – Scream

Young Sidney finds herself at the center of a real-life slasher film one year after the brutal murder of her mother. Sidney and her friends must use their knowledge of the horror genre to survive.⁹²

Emmeline had an interesting observation about the appearance/nature of evil in *Scream*. They felt that the killers each represent a different kind of evil. Billy is motivated to kill by revenge and misogyny. Although morally reprehensible, this behavior makes sense in the context

⁸⁹ Jess Coogan, in conversation with author, February 15, 2024.

⁹⁰ Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with author, March 2, 2024.

⁹¹ Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with author, February 11, 2024.

⁹² For readers unfamiliar with the plot of *Scream*, see Appendix 1 for a thoroughly detailed summary.

of our patriarchal society. Stu, on the other hand, is terrifying in a completely different way. He kills simply because he enjoys the act; he is having fun the entirety of the film, even as it becomes apparent that he is nearing his own death.⁹³ Many participants found Stu the more frightening killer than Billy for this reason. Tash noted that Stu does not follow important social rules and behaves rather erratically, which contributes to why he is frightening.⁹⁴

I had a few interesting conversations about masking in *Scream*. Maeve asked me why I thought the principal character put on a Ghostface mask he had confiscated. I responded by wondering whether this moment provides commentary on the use of masking's relationship to social power. I theorized that the principle's position of authority is one that was given to him by society, but the Ghostface mask offers an entirely different kind of power, a power that you give yourself.⁹⁵ Jess noted that unlike in *Halloween* where the mask gives Michael a sense of self/identity, the Ghostface mask functions differently. She felt that the wearer of the Ghostface mask loses their sense of self, effectively *becoming* Ghostface, an entirely different persona. We noted that in both *Scream* and *Halloween* the killers are unmasked, but in *Scream*, the killers do not put their mask back on. I then mentioned that Sidney briefly became Ghostface, noting, "Ghostface can be anybody, but not anybody can be Michael Meyers."⁹⁶

There were several discussions about the multiple layers of this film and the disconnect or confusion between reality and media. Caleigh noted that the killers believe they are creating a slasher film in real life by manipulating the people around them. Stu and Billy are bound by their own knowledge of the rules and tropes of slasher films, and it is revealed in their dialogue

⁹³ Caleigh Grogan, Emmeline Cordingley, and Tash Laraway, in conversation with the author, October 20, 2023.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Maeve Hammond, in conversation with the author, November 24, 2023.

⁹⁶ Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, February 15, 2024.

throughout the film that they no longer see the distinction between reality and their slasher film. Billy has sex with Sidney, not out of a desire for emotional connection through physical intimacy, but because the rules of slasher films dictate that virgins cannot be killed.⁹⁷ Maeve stated that the real villain of *Scream* is the “lack of empathy [in the community],” and that if everyone was not so absorbed in their own reality or non-reality or their own selfish motivations, “they could have clearly seen who Ghostface was.”⁹⁸

The self-referential elements of *Scream* enhanced the viewing experience for participants. Emmeline and Tash, who both do not watch horror films, said that they were able to appreciate *Scream* because I was there to explain references in real time.⁹⁹ Sophie said that self-referential films “flatter the audience” by including the audience in the narrative. I told Sophie that the first time I saw this film was long before my current familiarity with slashers, so I did not understand the references and did not enjoy the film. Sophie responded by saying that part of the fun of *Scream* is delighting in one’s own self-knowledge and feeling like a participant in the film itself.¹⁰⁰

One of the self-referential elements of *Scream* is its subversion of the audience’s expectations of tropes, which influences viewer’s affective or physical viewing experience. In one scene Sidney opens a closet door to gather some belongings and the music swells. This is a well-known horror trope wherein the music cues the audience to expect the killer to appear in the empty space previously blocked by an opened door when it is closed, but when Sidney closes the door no one is there. Many participants jumped or called out and laughed at themselves at this

⁹⁷ Caleigh Grogan, Emmeline Cordingley, and Tash Laraway, in conversation with the author, October 20, 2023.

⁹⁸ Maeve Hammond, in conversation with the author, November 24, 2023.

⁹⁹ Caleigh Grogan, Emmeline Cordingley, and Tash Laraway, in conversation with the author, October 20, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with the author, January 20, 2024.

moment. Maeve mentioned that she noticed clothes moving in the closet during this scene and assumed that Stu had been hiding in it for some time, as he jumps out of it a bit later in the film. We rewatched this scene together and discovered that Maeve was wrong! We were both impressed by the strength of her imagination and the power of suggestion offered by music cues.¹⁰¹

Several participants also discussed the use of technology as cell phones and the internet were beginning to come to the fore around the time this film was released. I noticed after multiple viewings that the age of the person(s) with whom I was watching *Scream* seemed to affect how they commented on the characters' phone etiquette. Younger participants tended to question the amount of time that characters spent on the phone with Ghostface, both before and after his nefarious intent became apparent. I theorized this is due to the participants' experience (or lack thereof) with cell phones and/or land lines growing up. I recalled spending a lot of time speaking with strangers on my landline as a tween in the 1990s because at that time there was no reason to suspect malicious intent on the part of callers and caller ID technology was not yet ubiquitous.¹⁰²

Steve and I went off on many tangents, because I was very interested in his encyclopedic knowledge of the horror genre. When I brought up the scholarly interpretations of slasher movies, Steve responded by saying that no one should be able to decide how individuals receive horror films. I agreed with his statement, responding that part of my goal for this thesis paper is to elevate my discussion partners' voices to the same level as published scholarly works.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Maeve Hammond, in conversation with the author, November 24, 2023.

¹⁰² Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with the author, January 20, 2024; Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, February 15, 2024.

¹⁰³ Steve Anderson, in conversation with the author, December 15, 2024.

Neoslasher Cycle – The Cabin in the Woods

A group of five college friends go away for a fun weekend together to a remote cabin in the woods. They soon find themselves in the clutches of a mysterious corporation who has sent monsters into the woods to murder them.¹⁰⁴

One theme that came up across viewings was *Cabin*'s exploration of the nature of free will. This was discussed through a few main themes: the corporation's manipulation of the five youth to force them to fit the pre-chosen archetypes, Marty's marijuana use immunizing him from corporate control/manipulation, and whether the monsters had agency. Most participants noted that the film's very use of the five archetypes was odd, because the archetypes do not seem to be a reference to other horror films or any literature that anyone was aware of. Many also noticed that the five young people did not necessarily initially fit the description of their designated archetype, and the corporation instead forced them into their archetypes by manipulating them through various means, including by drugging them.¹⁰⁵

I was particularly interested in the presentation of Marty's marijuana use in *Cabin*, so I brought this concept up in most conversations. Cory stated that Marty's drug use allowed him to think differently from the other characters and live outside the 'status quo', which is what made it possible for Marty to realize that they were being controlled and manipulated by an outside force when none of the other characters were able to do so.¹⁰⁶ Although his marijuana use allowed him to experience the world differently and notice some of his and his friends' manipulation, he kept getting distracted, so it was difficult for him to put the pieces together until

¹⁰⁴ For readers unfamiliar with the plot of *Black Christmas*, see Appendix 1 for a thoroughly detailed summary.

¹⁰⁵ Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with the author, January 12, 2024; Sophie Gilmore, in conversation with the author, January 20, 2024; David Holden, in conversation with the author, February 3, 2024; Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, March 11, 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, December 20, 2023.

it was almost too late.¹⁰⁷ Most participants wondered where the line begins and ends with free will in *Cabin*.¹⁰⁸

I was also interested in the experience of the monsters and whether they had any sense of self or autonomy, as well as how complicit they were in the acts of the corporation. They must have some comprehension of the role they play in the sacrifices, because they seem to understand in what order they should be killed. I was curious whether the monsters should be worthy of our consideration because they could potentially be victims of the corporation; they live alone in perpetuity in small elevators waiting on the off chance that once a year they might be selected for the sacrificial event. I asked most participants what they thought of this, which led to some interesting discussion. Caleigh said that the film suggests that the monsters understand power and control and their place within the corporation. Patience, a member of the “zombie murder torture family” arrives during the final scene and kills the Director with her axe even though Marty is next in line to die. Right before Marty knocks the two off the side to their deaths, Patience makes eye contact with Marty but does not move as if to attack him. Caleigh felt that there was no way to read this other than Patience deliberately taking out her captor.¹⁰⁹

The nature of the monsters was a topic of discussion in every conversation. The characters that the audience recognizes as monsters do not function as the monster of the film, but rather are used as weapons by the corporation. It is the corporation itself that is the monster at the center of this film. Brandon noted that the monsters are different in every country, and that

¹⁰⁷ Molly Costello, in conversation with the author, February 24, 2024; Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, March 11, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, December 20, 2023; Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with the author, January 12, 2024; Molly Costello, in conversation with the author, February 24, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with the author, January 12, 2024.

each country has its own mythology.¹¹⁰ During each viewing, I continued to notice that many of the monsters were fashioned after or must be references to the monsters of many famous horror films. Cory wondered whether these monsters are brought into being by the gods down below through the beliefs of humans; that perhaps they are not characters at all, but “fears made manifest.”¹¹¹ Caleigh noticed that not all the monsters are references to horror films. She suggested that some represent everyday fears, such as bad surgeons, creepy scarecrows, and corporate people who are “human in their monstrosity.”¹¹²

Many participants were interested in the use of technology in this film. Molly noted that the five young adults had gone out into the woods on vacation together, expecting to be away from technology and surveillance only to be the most intimately surveilled than they would ever be at any other point in their lives.¹¹³ David wondered whether the extensive use of “high technology” put this film more in the genre of science fiction than horror, noting that *Cabin* has much in common with popular science fiction films such as the *Mission Impossible* franchise where technology is used to give characters god-like powers. In this case, the god-like powers are given to the corporation.¹¹⁴

Jess felt that *Cabin* offers social critique on how social media in the modern world disconnects humans from the world happening around us. The corporate employees watched the events unfolding before them on screens, which “feels like a message about the removal of humanity when it comes to social media, because [the corporate employees] were so distanced from [the human sacrifices]. And it reminds me of [how] nowadays, when we see horrors in the

¹¹⁰ Brandon Domer, in conversation with the author, December 18, 2023.

¹¹¹ Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, December 20, 2023.

¹¹² Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with the author, January 12, 2024

¹¹³ Molly Costello, in conversation with the author, February 24, 2024.

¹¹⁴ David Holden, in conversation with the author, February 3, 2024.

world... we're often seeing it through our phone screen, which removes us from it." She felt that the employees of the corporation are quite distanced from the sacrifices despite having thoroughly studied them, knowing incredibly intimate facts about their lives, and constantly looking at images of them on screens.¹¹⁵

Caleigh found *Cabin* a beautiful testament to the importance of human friendship and the physical expression of platonic love. She said this film is different from other horror films in how well developed the main characters' relationships are; the narrative shows us evidence of deep connections between this group of friends through dialogue and physical interaction. In several moments both Marty and Dana point out their concerns to their friends that they have not been acting like themselves. There are several moments in *Cabin* where characters that have no current or previous sexual relationship express tender physical intimacy with each other. Some I noticed during this discussion with *Caleigh* and in other subsequent viewings, such as when Marty and Dana engage in a long embrace on the elevator, and when Dana kisses Kurt on the cheek to wish him good luck just before he attempts to jump his motorbike over the ravine.¹¹⁶

I asked Jess whether she observed the use of masking in *Cabin* because we had lengthy discussions about the concept in *Halloween* and *Scream*. She felt that masking manifested in this film through the corporate employee's collective dissociation from their human sacrifices. In one scene the corporate employees were taking bets on which monster would be summoned to kill the sacrifices, but Jess said that the film notably did not present this scene as sinister. She also noted that no one seemed surprised that the new guy was the only employee not participating in the betting pool, assuming he would inevitably participate in the future. Jess said it is a common

¹¹⁵ Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, March 11, 2024.

¹¹⁶ Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with the author, January 12, 2024.

cultural phenomenon for people to act differently at work than they do in their private lives, which is another part of the masking in this film. They are at their workplace, doing a job, and they rationalize their participation in this yearly sacrifice by seeing their mission not as killing or murdering others, but as the noble profession of saving the world. Jess speculated that if these people were to witness deaths outside of work, they would probably be horrified.¹¹⁷

David considered *Cabin* a commentary on capitalism, “I liked that evil triumphs... [because] the corporate attempt is to control things that are uncontrollable.” He said that just like in how the corporation functions in the film, the system of capitalism does not care who is sacrificed, “as long as the system continues.”¹¹⁸ The film ends without revealing the identity of the corporation, but its extensive size, resources, and similarity to a “Bond villain lair” requires extensive funding, which David felt suggests that the corporation is probably a government operation. It is possibly the one place where all the governments of the world cooperate; they know what the stakes are, and he said there is ample evidence that governments are willing to sacrifice people for their own ends. The corporation failed in the same ways that late-stage capitalism does, “it becomes more and more frenzied... hubristic, more and more convinced of its own certainty and its own purpose of being right, regardless of the price paid by others.”¹¹⁹

Conclusion

My experiences watching films for this project provides additional nuances to the idea that viewing films is ritualistic in nature. The practice of repeated watching specifically lends itself well to meaning making, which supports John Lyden’s and S.B. Plates’ work that situates

¹¹⁷ Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, March 11, 2024.

¹¹⁸ David Holden, in conversation with the author, February 3, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

film as a religious experience.¹²⁰ My respective relationship with each film deepened over the course of the project as I became more intimately familiar with the films and gained exposure to new insights about them. It was notable that with every viewing each participant discovered some new meaning that no previous participant had, so it almost felt as if I was experiencing the film anew every time. Repeated viewing also facilitated my own ability to discover new meanings because after an initial viewing of any film, I had the capacity to pay closer attention to dialogue or background information because I no longer needed to focus on plot.

Each viewing constituted its own ritual that was part of the larger ritual of repeated engagement. Some aspects of ritual were consistent across viewings. The nature of watching films in community with others requires being in close physical proximity in front of a screen. Although the physical environment was often different, each viewing consisted of the same structure: watching the film itself followed by a meaning making discussion. The sharing of food was also an essential aspect of this ritual, as popcorn was consumed at every viewing, and dinner was involved during or before almost every viewing. I developed unique social rituals regarding food with the participants with whom I watched more than one film, such as specific toppings to go with our popcorn and pizza. This ritualistic experience was not only intellectually stimulating and spiritually fulfilling, it was also excellent for relationship building, as several acquaintances became my friends over the course of our discussions.

My methods posed some unique challenges that I could not have anticipated. Since the number of observations that can be made about a film is virtually boundless, I collected far too much data to conceivably include in a paper of this length. For others interested in conducting a

¹²⁰ See John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (Second Edition)*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 2-3 & S. B. Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2017).

similar project, I would recommend choosing fewer films. I would also recommend choosing films based on personal preferences rather than attempting to explore the history of a subgenre; Since participants made observations about the films in the context of our current world for the most part, choosing films from the different cycles of the slasher subgenre did not yield interesting results.

Although the number of viewings was essentially evenly spaced between films, I was surprised to discover that the number of unique observations made about each film was not evenly distributed between them. Even though I viewed *The Cabin the Woods* only twice more than the other three films, the unique observations made about *The Cabin the Woods* were almost double that of the other three films individually. Unique observations made about *Black Christmas* and *Halloween* were about the same. Interestingly, *Scream* defied my expectations by having the least number of unique observations made about it. At the start of this project, my early participants and I were most excited about the inclusion of *Scream* due to its reputation as one of the best and most famous horror films ever made. I have been unable to discern the reason(s) behind these discrepancies or whether they are of importance. It would be interesting to conduct this project again including only *Scream* and *The Cabin in the Woods*, and compare the results.

Despite having rich discussions about *Halloween*, it was the only film chosen for this project for which I did not find the viewing experience to be enhanced after multiple sessions. I noted this in some of my post-viewing discussions and myself and my participants theorized that this might be because *Halloween* is a relatively simple film with very little action. Clever filmmaking techniques are used that make the film worthy of its fame, but I found it almost boring after multiple viewings. Will summed up this phenomenon humorously in a memorable

moment: “Imagine you’re somebody who really likes pizza. You’re getting all these... deep dish, stuffed crust, pretzel crust, all these crazy toppings... there’s a vegan one, or there’s alfredo sauce. And then somebody’s like ‘have you ever had the original cheese pizza, just a regular hand-tossed cheese pizza?’ And you’re like, you know what? I’ve never just had a plain original cheese pizza.” Will said that it was difficult to be objective when watching *Halloween* because he has seen all the films that have come after it.¹²¹ Even though he had never actually sat down and watched *Halloween* before this viewing, it felt to him as if he had seen it before.

There are a few opportunities I recommend for further research. First, I noted that the level of fear, tension, or anxiety I experienced when watching any film was contingent upon the affective experience of the person(s) I was watching with, regardless of the number of times I had viewed the film or how recently. Second, I asked some participants why they like the horror genre, and one theme that came up in every response is that horror offers catharsis of pent-up anxiety by providing a safe space to engage with fear.¹²² There is a body of research on the catharsis that horror offers and the seemingly contradictory nature of the experience of the pleasure of fear that horror fans experience,¹²³ but there is no published research at the time of this writing that addresses the connection between the level of fear an individual experiences while watching horror and the affective experience of others watching the same film in the same place at the same time. It would be interesting to learn whether this experience is specific to certain personalities such as mine or whether it is a larger social phenomenon.

¹²¹ Will Nienass, in conversation with author, February 7, 2024.

¹²² Cory Maples, in conversation with the author, January 4, 2024; Caleigh Grogan, in conversation with author, March 2, 2024; Maeve Hammond, in conversation with the author, November 24, 2023; Steve Anderson, in conversation with the author, December 15, 2024; Jess Coogan, in conversation with the author, March 11, 2024.

¹²³ See Katerina Bantinaki, “The Paradox of Horror: Fear as a Positive Emotion,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 70, no. 4 (2012): 383-392, DOI: <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1111/j.1540-6245.2012.01530.x>, and Paul Bloom, “The Paradox of Pleasurable Fear,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 25, no. 2 (2021): 93-94, DOI: 10.1016/j.tics.2020.12.001.

Third, I noted in my methods section my surprise at the number of people who cannot watch horror films because they are “too scary,” and/or cause nightmares. It would be interesting to learn the reasons behind these phenomena and it is surprising that there is currently no published research dedicated to either. Fourth, I noticed while watching these and other horror films there is a tendency for them to take place in the Midwest, even if they were notably not filmed there, such as *Halloween*. At the time of this writing there is only one published work on the Midwest as a setting in film and literature that *mentions* horror, although the book features no dedicated chapter or section to horror.¹²⁴ Lastly, I briefly mentioned in the *Brief History of Slasher Films* section that many scholars refer to the fact that horror experiences significant transformations during periods of social and political upheaval or change, but there is no singular work dedicated to tracing and exploring this phenomenon.

During the public presentation of this thesis, Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain at Harvard, asked me what it felt like to work on a project like this as part of my participation in the humanist community this year. I did not have a good answer to this question in the moment but have since realized that facilitating this project made me feel as though I became a secular religious practitioner. Even though most of my participants did not know each other or even interact with each other in any way (apart from the two group viewings), it felt as though my participants functioned as a unique asynchronous congregation that I was the informal leader of. Further reflection has led to the realization that this project was my first real experience as a practitioner of humanism. This provides further evidence that secular rituals such as engaging

¹²⁴ See Adam R. Ochonicky, *The American Midwest in Film and Literature: Nostalgia, Violence, and Regionalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

with secular texts as a sacred practice are analogous to religious rituals in meaning and purpose even if they are disparate in form and structure.

Something I continue to grapple with as a scholarly question and as I continue to explore humanism is what it means to engage sacredly with something that is not only inherently violent, but completely inaccessible to so many people. With this project I have shown that horror offers social and spiritual value by way of relationship building, meaning making, and may even constitute religious practice if engaged in a certain way. However, it is important to note that horror can also harm. As mentioned previously, horror can cause physical and emotional distress or nightmares, which excludes many from the genre's consumption/enjoyment. And I have not yet even addressed the fact that the horror genre historically overrepresents white, able-bodied people. Lack of representation aside, horror has a long history of outright racism, misogyny, and xenophobia. It is disappointing that I did not dedicate more space to explore these thoughts in this paper, and I recognize that incorporating them into my future horror work does not ameliorate the harm posed by their exclusion here.¹²⁵

The rise of the religious “nones” in the United States has necessitated a renewed look at how this population makes meaning of the world around them and their relative places within it. In response to this question, this thesis explored the concept of viewing horror films as a sacred practice using an autoethnographic approach. Charles Long's definition of religion as an orientation through which humans “come to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place

¹²⁵ Although many scholarly works reference the lack of representation of minorities in horror films, there is no singular scholarly work dedicated to this topic as whole. For readers interested in the representation of African Americans in horror films, see Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

in the world,”¹²⁶ and “continual quest for human existence,”¹²⁷ was used as a theoretical framework to posit the practice of sacred engagement with secular texts as a secular equivalent to religious investigation. I have described how the adoption of *Not Sorry Production*’s method of reading as a sacred practice to the medium of film offers a means through which religious “nones” can accomplish this feat. I have demonstrated that the monsters at the center of horror films uniquely situate them as important vehicles for social commentary, which make horror films excellent secular texts for sacred engagement. It was found that horror films offer virtually boundless opportunities for discovery, which facilitates a deeper understanding of our world, our places within it, and what it means to be human. These meanings can only be uncovered through repeated viewings and intentional conversations in concert with other humans.

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¹²⁶ Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Colorado: The Davies Group, 1999), 7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

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Appendix 1

Black Christmas Expanded Plot Summary

Black Christmas begins with point-of-view shots of an unidentified man entering a sorority house by climbing a trellis outside and entering through a third-floor attic window. Meanwhile, the sorority sisters are hosting a Christmas party downstairs when the phone rings. Jess (Olivia Hussey) answers and holds the phone out for all the sisters to hear what she reveals is someone who has called before. The caller is obscene, he yells and rants in different voices before threatening to kill them and hanging up. One of the sisters, Clare, leaves the party to pack her suitcase for the trip the next day. She is strangled to death by an unseen man that had been hiding in her closet. The next morning, her father arrives and travels to the sorority house after Clare failed to meet him at the appointed time. Some of the sorority members go to report Clare missing, but Sergeant Nash doesn't take them seriously. Jess meets with her friend Peter and says that she is pregnant but wishes to have an abortion. As the obscene phone calls continue, Jess reports them to the police who install a tap on the line. Peter begins acting aggressively towards Jess and acting suspiciously. Various sisters in the sorority house are murdered by the unseen killer as well as the house mother. Eventually, Jess is confronted by the killer who attacks her, and she runs and locks herself in the basement. Peter appears looking for Jess ostensibly having been alerted by her screams. Assuming that Peter is the killer, she kills him offscreen. After the police find her, Jess is laid in bed sedated as the police discuss the case, assuming that Peter was the killer. The movie ends as we are shown the attic again and the ranting and raving killer of the killer as the phone begins to ring.¹²⁸

Halloween Extended Plot Summary

Halloween takes place on Halloween night in 1978 in the fictional suburban town of Haddonfield, Illinois. The film opens in with the stabbing death of Judith Myers at the hands of her six-year-old brother Michael when she is not paying attention to him while babysitting. Fifteen years later, it is revealed that Michael has been living in a mental institution under the purview of psychiatrist Dr. Samuel Loomis (Donald Pleasence). On a rainy night, Michael escapes from the institution, steals a car, and drives away. Michael arrives in Haddonfield and begins stalking teenager Laurie Strode (Jaimie Lee Curtis) after he sees her placing a key under the mat from inside his dilapidated old house. Meanwhile, Dr. Loomis travels to Haddonfield in

¹²⁸ Black Christmas, directed by Bob Clark (1974; Toronto, ON: Somerville House, 1994), DVD.

search of Michael and discovers Judith Myers' tombstone is missing. Loomis teams up with the local sheriff in search of Michael, whom Loomis describes as pure evil. Over the rest of the film, Michael stalks Laurie and her friends at their various babysitting jobs, murdering Laurie's friends one by one. During the final struggle between Laurie and Michael, Dr. Loomis arrives, shooting Michael in the chest five times, which knocks him off the balcony. As they peer over the balcony, it is revealed that Michael is no longer there.¹²⁹

Scream Expanded Plot Summary

Scream takes place in the fictional town of Woodsboro, California. In the opening scene, high school student Casey Becker (Drew Barrymore) is home alone and receives a phone call from an unknown person. Casey and the caller playfully discuss horror films until the caller becomes threatening and reveals that her boyfriend, Steve, is tied up on the patio outside of the house. The caller demands that she answers trivia questions about horror films to save his life, but she answers a question incorrectly and he is killed. She attempts to escape the house but is violently murdered just as her parents arrive home. Just before she is murdered, she peels off the mask of her murderer and seems to recognize him. The next day, Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) arrives at school to a media frenzy as news of the murders has passed through town. It is revealed that almost a year ago, Sidney's mother was brutally raped and murdered. Sidney goes home to an empty house (her father is travelling) and falls asleep before receiving a threatening call from the killer which first appears playful like with Casey. She is attacked by Ghostface, who runs away when he cannot enter her room at the same moment that her boyfriend Billy (Skeet Ulrich) climbs through her window to check on her. She hugs him and becomes suspicious as a cell phone falls out of his pocket. Billy is questioned by the police and claims to be innocent. Sidney's friend Tatum (Rose McGowan) agrees to take Sidney home to stay with her for the night. They go to Tatum's home where Sidney receives another threatening phone call. The next morning, Sidney and Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox), an overzealous reporter, speak outside the school and Gale states that Sidney's mother had several affairs and intimates that Cotton Weary, who Sidney had pegged for her mother's murder and has been serving time, is innocent. Billy is back at school having been released from the police station. Tatum's boyfriend Stu (Matthew Lillard) plans a party at his house to celebrate the closure of school, which occurs in response to the murders. Gale sets up a camera in the living room at the party that records and sends the video to the news van stationed outside. Tatum is murdered. Sidney has sex with Billy and is attacked by Ghostface. It is revealed that Billy and Stu had raped and murdered Sidney's mother a year ago and were planning to frame Sidney's father and live on as the only two survivors of his attack. Sidney and Gale turn the tables on Billy and Stu, who are killed in ensuing fight.¹³⁰

The Cabin in the Woods Expanded Plot Summary

The Cabin in the Woods opens with two employees working in some sort of underground office discussing a ritual after other rituals in various cities around the world have failed. Then we

¹²⁹ *Halloween*, directed by John Carpenter (1978; Burbank, CA: Starz Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

¹³⁰ *Scream*, directed by Wes Craven (1994; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2021), DVD.

transition to meet American college students and friends Dana (Kristen Connolly), Jules (Anna Hutchison), Curt (Chris Hemsworth), Holden (Jesse Williams), and Marty (Fran Kranz), who plan to spend the upcoming weekend together at a cabin owned by Curt's cousin. On the way to the cabin, they pull over to get gas and encounter a strange man who warns them about the area they are going to. He is a bit aggressive and threatening so they leave and head off to the cabin. They begin to party and have fun together despite the ominous creepy setting of the cabin. The cellar door suddenly opens, and they all go down, revealing a room filled with mysterious objects. Dana starts reading a diary that was written by someone named Patience Buckner in 1903. The diary reveals Patience's horrific abuse at the hands of her sadistic family. Dana then reads Latin which releases the Buckners from their graves and they begin slowly stumbling towards the house. Jules and Curt leave to have sex and it is revealed that the corporation has been manipulating the five young adults with drugs. Hadley releases pheromones into the air in the forest to encourage Jules and Curt to have sex. Members of the corporation reveal that Jules' breasts must be shown on screen, after which the Buckners begin to attack. Meanwhile back at the cabin, Marty discovers a hidden camera in his room and gets some idea of what is going on but then the Buckners attack again. The three remaining survivors attempt to flee in their RV. One of the corporate leaders runs to explode the tunnel the youth arrived through so that they cannot escape. Not giving up, Curt attempts to jump his motorcycle over the canyon but crashes into the forcefield and plunges to his death. As Dana and Holden drive off deciding what to do next, Holden is stabbed by one of the Buckners who had been hiding in the back of the RV. Dana survives the resulting crash and is shown in screen back in the corporation in a fight with papa Buckner while the corporation celebrates their apparent success. However, it is revealed that Marty is still alive, and he and Dana escape down into the bowels of the corporation where they discover the corporation's purpose. They release all the monsters, who proceed to wreak havoc and kill many members of the corporation. The Director of the corporation (Sigourney Weaver) explains that if Marty does not die next, the old gods underneath will be released and all humans on earth will die. In the ensuing struggle, The Director is killed, Dana and Marty have a heartfelt moment, and a large hand is seen crushing the cabin and signaling the end of the world.¹³¹

¹³¹ *The Cabin in the Woods*, directed by Drew Goddard (2011; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Entertainment, Inc., 2012), DVD.