

# **Horror-Ritual: Horror Movie Villains as Collective Representations, Uncanny Metaphors and Ritual Transgressors**

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## **Introduction**

This paper explores the ritual function of horror movie villains from multiple perspectives within ritual studies, with particular emphasis on the functionalist branch and Roy Rappaport's definition that ritual is "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by performers."<sup>1</sup> First, the paper considers the ways in which horror movie villains are hybrid collective representations in the sense of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and uncanny metaphors mobilised through media as described by Steven Schneider. Second, a Neo-functionalist analysis of ritual defines the reinforcement of binary categories (child/adult, human/divine, war/peace, and so on) as a fundamental aspect of rituals. We can elaborate the notion of the ritual binary to then demonstrate the multiple ways in which the horror movie villain transgresses these to fulfill his or her ritual role. Third, the paper elaborates six specific ways in which horror movie villains transgress social binaries, such as those of gender, the space of the body, and life and death. The function of horror villains as transgressors gives them a critical, ritual role in horror movies from a functionalist ritual perspective: to reconstitute binaries. Fourth, according to Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle it is the job of

media to perform ritual re-presentation of the original blood sacrifice of soldiers who died for the nation, a blood sacrifice that replenishes the Durkheimian totem of the US flag. Horror villains could be perceived as one such media re-presentation. This section builds further evidence for horror villains as both collective representations and ritual transgressors. The paper concludes with a comparison of the fates of anti-heroes in two films from the new ultra-violent genre of horror (that is, “torture-porn”) with two recent Academy Award-winning films to understand how the villain as construction for ritualised punishment may be changing.

### **Villain as Collective Representation and (Uncanny) Metaphor**

This section considers the ways in which horror movie villains are hybrid collective representations and uncanny metaphors mobilised through media. Here, “collective representation” is used in Emile Durkheim’s sense, implying an agreed upon, culturally defined object, idea, category or class with tremendous synergistic and transcendent properties that goes beyond the individual.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, “uncanny metaphors” refer to Schneider’s suggestion that horror movie monsters represent a secondary aspect of Freud’s uncanny distinct from sexual repression – the return of surmounted thoughts. These two frameworks for understanding horror movie villains emerge from two distinct traditions of ritual studies, the functionalist and the phenomenological. The functionalist approach to ritual suggests that ritual is a pivotal means by which society rejuvenates itself and maintains stasis. The functionalist approach to ritual emphasizes the persistence of ritual form over time. Proponents of the phenomenological tradition, on the other hand, view the functionalist approach to ritual as reductionist. Phenomenologists thus have stressed an approach to ritual that recognises the “transhistorical sacred.” Phenomenologists emphasize the timelessness of ritual symbols and myth rather than its form.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the first task of this paper is to demonstrate that a horror villain can be interpreted as both a collective representation and as an uncanny metaphor, and thereby reconcile these two traditions for the case of the horror villain.

Childhood fears and nightmares are neatly circumscribed by the onset of adulthood. However, the power of monsters to compel the imagination is evident in the popularity of modern horror. To address this popularity we should examine what Emile Durkheim described in the “cultural logic of collective representations.” The two quantities (scientific and cultural logic) are distinct because, as Durkheim noted, scientific concepts may be elaborated but they are usually in the “very slight minority.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, a collective representation is something that is verified by experience and more intuitively

understood between people. A collective representation is compelling enough to be perpetuated through society over time but without the rigorous definition garnered from scientific scrutiny.

Durkheim has much to say about collective representations. In some respects, he is very optimistic about human nature. Durkheim begins his discussion of collective representations by hypothesizing an ideal world that is the natural product of social life. This ideal world is the set of values and practices of the social world around the individual that inculcates him or her with a sense of social responsibility, and it is best exemplified by the power of religion in people's lives. While for Marx it is production that makes us human, for Durkheim it is the ability to project a larger social and moral order, an incarnate idealism. This is a faculty without which man cannot survive. Thus, with this set of idealistic principles, Durkheim further posits something called a collective representation. As noted, this would be an agreed upon, though not necessarily scientifically precise, culturally defined object, idea, category or class. The collective representation has tremendous synergistic and transcendent properties that go beyond the individual consciousness. One example is language, a collective representation in which we are all embedded, in which each word has such depth behind it that, as Durkheim notes, "we even lie to each other without wishing to: it is because we all use the same words without giving them the same meaning."<sup>5</sup> Collective representations, like genes, morph and recombine over time. These representations are always of a social nature; language, class, time, space, and causality are all examples. Durkheim sees no reason to distinguish between culture and collective representations on the one hand and rationality on the other. In fact, the genius of his argument is to recognise that the social can be studied scientifically. For now, let it suffice to see how the horror villain might arguably be perceived as one such collective representation of socially constructed evil by virtue of the sum total of language he uses, his inflections and mannerisms, his style and physiognomy – in essence, the sum total of his performance. The notion of the horror villain as collective representation will be elaborated in the following sections.

Approaching horror movies from a psychological and phenomenological perspective, James Iacchino contends that horror movies are filled with Jungian archetypes: mother/child, mad magician, hybrid monsters and "technomyths," or recycling of myths for the modern age.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Steven Schneider theorises that horror movie monsters are "uncanny" metaphors with reference to Freud and Lakoff.<sup>7</sup> Schneider suggests that theorists of monsters in horror movies have used Freud's uncanny to interpret horror movie monsters as a return of repressed impulses. However,

they have neglected to take into account a second component of the uncanny, namely the return of surmounted thoughts, that is, alternative ontologies that have been explained away in adulthood. Schneider advances the possibility that “the womb” is not all there is behind horror and that horror monsters represent not merely the struggle for recognition of all that our civilisation represses, but “the struggle for validation of all that our civilisation disavows and denies.” Horror movie monsters are not embodiments of repressed fears but rather “metaphorical embodiments of paradigmatic uncanny narratives.”<sup>8</sup>

No such thing as monsters? Not according to Schneider and Durkheim. For Schneider, the horror movie villain is a mobilised metaphor. The real monster is the meta-narrative that the villain represents, while in Durkheim’s theory the villain is a collective representation, a social fact that transcends the individual consciousness thus taking on a life of its own. While hailing from different philosophical traditions, these two quantities (narrative metaphor on the one hand and collective representation on the other) are not incongruent. Rather, both interpretations suggest that the horror movie villain is a cultural amalgam of language and behavior that goes beyond the individual consciousness.

### **Ritual and Binary**

Having established that the horror movie villain can be interpreted as a collective representation and as an uncanny metaphor, let us next turn specifically to the Neo-functionalist definition of ritual to begin to understand how the horror movie villain as a collective representation can have a ritual function. Two aspects of a “Neo-functionalist” conception of ritual are central to this understanding: the ritual reinforcement of binary categories, but also the “Neo-Durkheimian” description of the role of mass media to ritually re-present sacrifice. We begin with the former.

Functionalism is a sociological perspective on the structure and function of society prefigured by the work of Durkheim and exemplified by his conceptions of mechanical and organic solidarity. Rappaport is a proponent of “Neo-functionalist” systems analysis and more specifically cultural materialism.<sup>9</sup> Neo-functionalists distance themselves from traditional functionalists by adopting an ecological approach to ritual.<sup>10</sup>

Bell describes the emergence of culturalists as distinct from functional structuralists. What makes these culturalists distinct is that they view ritual less in relation to social organisation, and more as a symbolic language arising from culture. While Rappaport’s theory of ritual remains grounded in the material, someone like Clifford Geertz describes the role of ritual sym-

bolism to understand the Balinese cockfight.<sup>11</sup> For Geertz, anthropological analysis parallels the interpretation of a text as if the anthropologist is reading culture over the shoulders of participants. The function of ritual is never a resolution but rather a display of social passions.

Bell elaborates other approaches to ritual in the culturalist vein, for example, emphasis on performance and practice.<sup>12</sup> Performance is a way to understand the non-intellectual dimensions of ritual, the emotive, physical and even sensual aspects of ritual participation. This entails focus on kinaesthesia, synesthesia, levels of reflexivity and meta-communication. Practice, on the other hand, stresses human praxis in a Marxist tradition, including, for example, the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his emphasis on habitus, gift giving, and transgression.

One aspect that spans approaches to ritual is the concept of a binary. Ritual reinforces binary categories of child/adult, action here/effect there, human/divine, and then formally transgresses them.<sup>13</sup> This is an attribute of ritual whether one is a culturalist or a functional structuralist. In fact, under the rubric of ritual practice, Bell observes, "transgression is licensed by the very ceremonies that reinforce order." According to Bell, Pierre Bourdieu characterises ritual as "strategic practices for transgressing and reshuffling cultural categories in order to meet the needs of real situations."<sup>14</sup> Ritual permits social binaries to breakdown for a few minutes, and thereby reaffirms boundaries between the sacred and profane.

Rappaport also makes reference to the role of binary in the function of ritual: "The occurrence of a ritual transmits a binary (yes/no, 0/1, on/off, either/or, boy/man, war/peace, etc.) signal. Indeed, binary signals are intrinsic to ritual occurrence, and they are, in their very nature, free of ambiguity."<sup>15</sup> The conveyance of a binary is part of Rappaport's observation that ritual digitalises continuous (analog) information, broadcasting information to the members of a society about the state of the community. This is true not only of Maring culture but of Presidential inaugurations and coronations. But performance is also an aspect of Rappaport's definition of ritual. That is why his theory is elegant and comprehensive: he is able to integrate performance with a materialist interpretation of ritual that relies on information theory.

Specifically, then, Rappaport's ability to span the cultural and the material in his definition of ritual is relevant to understanding the ritual role of horror movie villains. For Rappaport, ritual is: "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by performers."<sup>16</sup> The ritual function of horror movie villains as collective representation and as (uncanny) metaphor (that is, the embodiment of a meta-narrative) is to trouble binary distinctions just long enough to re-

establish them through their spectacular deaths. These villains are scapegoats; they are ritual straw men to absorb the animosity of the collective and reaffirm collective beliefs. Observe how villains in horror are useful to perpetuating the identity of the group in a strictly functional way by representing the outsider or other, and it is only through the ritual performance that this villainous identity is established in the first place.

### The Villain as Transgressor

Villains have already been considered as collective representations and as uncanny metaphors. We then looked at aspects of ritual that may be related to the representation of villains. These included (but were not limited to) transgression, performance and ritual reinforcement of binary categories. Furthermore, horror villains can be interpreted as mediated ritual re-presentations of blood sacrifice; they are at least collective representations perpetuated by media (as we shall see in the next section).

There is ample evidence that villainous characters operate as transgressors in horror movies to upset binaries. Recall the statement from Bell regarding Bourdieu's definition of ritual as "strategic practices for transgressing and reshuffling cultural categories in order to meet the needs of real situations."<sup>17</sup> Again, ritual permits social binaries to break down, reaffirming the sacred/profane distinction when they are reconstituted. Indeed, horror villains function as transgressors in distinct ways. First, they are a conduit for sexual transgression and sexual sublimation. Second, they endure a spectacular fall, thereby reconstituting transgressive categories. Third, they unsettle clearly delineated boundaries of the body. Fourth, they unsettle the established patriarchal boundaries of the home. Fifth, they transgress heteronormative gender distinctions. Sixth, they refuse to die, troubling the absolute binary of life and death.

First the horror villain enacts sexualised transgression and second, as a result, he or she suffers a spectacular fall. According to Hendershot, Georges Bataille believed that those who transgress do the most to reconstitute categories of transgression.<sup>18</sup> Hendershot contextualises transgression in Cold War era horror like *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann, 1958) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) in terms of Bataille's theory. The villains in these films become the focus of erotic sublimation and fulfillment. The films' transgressions – it does not matter if they are violence or scientific hubris – are at heart a sexual sublimation. Thus in *Psycho*, the final scene of Norman Bates's dead mother superimposed over his face shows how the transgression of violent murder yielded the fulfillment of the desired erotic fusion. The villain is thus not only a vessel for transgressive erotic energy

but also the sacrificial victim – the Paschal lamb – for the reconstitution of transgressive categories. This is a spectacular aspect of villainy as the embodiment of transgression. He or she becomes a vessel of sexualised energy and also suffers a spectacular downfall as a sacrifice that is taught a lesson. This corresponds to the idea that those who transgress normal boundaries in horror become abject and are punished, to which we turn next.

Third, the horror movie villain troubles the neatly delineated boundaries of the body, and fourth, they unsettle the established patriarchal boundaries of the home. These two categories are intertwined because they both pertain to a fundamental spatial transgression. Marcia England focuses on the binaries of the body and home (inside/outside).<sup>19</sup> The normal boundaries are made nervous, and those who cross become abject; they are punished (particularly for sexuality). England examines the films *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), *Evil Dead II* (Sam Raimi, 1987), and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2001). The putrefying corpses in *Evil Dead II* typify transgression of the body, while *The Others* traverses the boundary that distinguishes the family from outsiders and thereby questions the sanctity of the home. Sarah Trencansky maintains that horror films of the 1980s like *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) and *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker, 1987) trouble rigid structures of family, home, and the Ideological State Apparatus, which are resolved promptly at the end of the film by the “Final Girl” who vanquishes the monster.<sup>20</sup>

Fifth, horror villains transgress heteronormative gender distinctions. For example, Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark La Pointe demonstrate how villains in Disney animation perform gender transgression.<sup>21</sup> Homosexuality has long been synonymous with villainy in Hollywood. According to Hendershot, the film *The Bad Seed* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1956) demonstrates how homosexuality was not only equated with pedophilia and villainy but came to symbolise communist sympathies. Li-Vollmer and La Pointe use Disney cartoons to discuss villainy and gender roles on screen, but the cross-dressing Norman Bates might just as easily be an example, as would Leatherface’s female mask in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Toby Hooper, 1974). The horror villain as gender transgressor fits well within Rappaport’s definition of ritual. Rappaport regards gender as a “Cosmological Axiom” in his general description of the structure of ritual. Cosmological Axioms are statements of faith that support Ultimate Sacred Postulates (USP), or ritual beliefs, which are agreed upon a priori.<sup>22</sup> The male/female binary is a Cosmological Axiom according to Rappaport. Resolving that blurred binary in horror films reinforces it as a Cosmological Axiom and thus the USP’s of the society at large. Clearly delineated gender is part of the rules in society

and thus in horror movies.

Finally, horror movie villains refuse to die. Not dying is a special case of unsettling binaries (in this case, dead/alive) that is particular to the horror movie genre. Unkillable monsters are a horror movie device that developed in the 1980s and that can perhaps be linked to postmodernism.<sup>23</sup> The situation is complicated by the rise of the horror franchise. For example, the villain's transgression is perpetuated by organisational constraints and industry routines, like *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), which took on a business life of its own despite the best efforts of the director to "kill" the franchise.<sup>24</sup>

Summing up, horror movie villains function to overstep key social boundaries that delineate binary distinctions. This set of boundaries includes the heteronormative binary described by Judith Butler that essentialises gender and sexuality.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the collective representation and uncanny metaphor that is the horror movie fiend serves a ritual purpose as the very instigator of the transgression that Bourdieu describes as being so closely tied to ritual. Horror villains transgress, trouble binaries, become abject and are punished. In this sense, they are also liminal figures. Victor Turner describes the relationship between liminality and ritual, arguing that ritual is a liminal process because it brings about a state of "communitas," an esprit in which a feeling of solidarity prevails.<sup>26</sup> The normal divisions between individuals break down. However, this "liminal" state is dangerous precisely because this unshackled energy is extremely volatile:

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalised relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.<sup>27</sup>

This is the spirit that overtakes the horror movie audience that is riveted to their seats in expectation of vengeance. In a manner of speaking, the horror villain becomes the impetus for and focus of that volatile energy, and the vessel of transgression, and so his punishment is the binary signal that re-collapses the chaotic tumult of the liminal group (audience) into the normal order of the everyday. In this sense, the ritual role of horror movies in the developed world might have a similar function to the Sinhalese exorcism rite.<sup>28</sup> Or they might have a role similar to the Balinese cockfight, which is, first and foremost, a blood sacrifice to the demon world.<sup>29</sup> Finally, it is not just the audience's response to the villain that suggests his or her ritual nature but the actual performance of villainy, as Li-Vollmer and La



Pointe suggest, the mannerisms, inflections, costumes and physiognomies of the character. While the villain satisfies the binary component of Rappaport's definition of ritual, he also satisfies the *performative* aspect and thus the fact that frequently the ritual is predominantly for the benefit of participants, not the spectators.<sup>30</sup> The very fact of being embodied demands acceptance from ritual participants; it is an indexical register of their acquiescence.<sup>31</sup> This suggests that (*a la* Judith Butler), social notions of villainy can be subverted and gradually phased over time by way of performance. Future qualitative work could explore, for example, the industry procedures for casting villainy, including interviews with actors, directors and casting directors to understand how villainy is perceived and performed, and furthermore how these professionals consciously alter the performance of villainy.

### Ritual Re-presentation of Blood Sacrifice

Marvin and Ingle argue that nationalism fulfills the same role in modern secular society as religion in pre-modern societies.<sup>32</sup> As such, the flag becomes a collective representation in Durkheim's sense, but moreover it is a totem symbol. A totem is a symbol (like the US flag) that is so symbolically potent that it can compel members of the group to die for it. Horror movie villains are not totems but they may perhaps be collective representations of group conceptions of evil. Perhaps horror movie villains, then, are media re-presentations of blood sacrifice – a virtual sacrifice to re-establish agreed upon binaries and social norms that evoke some kind of original blood sacrifice.

The question of the original blood sacrifice that these villainous straw men represent is a tricky one. If one adopts a psychoanalytic frame then ritual is the sublimation of guilt for the original sin of killing the father (patricide).<sup>33</sup> In pre-modern culture that meant the ritual of killing and eating the totem animal, the renunciation of women after the death of the father, and the prohibition of intra-clan sex as an "obsessive mechanism" to stave off repressed desires. According to Bell, Girard takes the argument in a different direction by arguing that identification of the "totem victim" as "other" reinforces group cohesion. Bell also refers to the "akitu" ritual of the Babylonians, which involved the ritual debasing and slaying of a criminal raised to the throne as a mockery to impress upon the king the need to comport himself properly. Thus, from a purely Freudian perspective, the sacrifice recalled by re-presentations of horror movie villains is the repressed guilt of patricide, the original blood of the king.

However, a purely Freudian analysis of horror movie monsters is not

satisfactory. Returning to Schneider, movie monsters are not only about repression but the denial of alternative ontologies that have been explained away in adulthood. Though it cannot be said with certainty that horror movie villains embody original blood sacrifice, Schneider insists that they are the embodiment of uncanny cultural narratives. Rather than re-presenting blood sacrifice, horror movie villains can be ritually remodeled and re-presented through media as collective representations and meta-narratives of discredited ontologies, of reality claims that have been dismissed as irrelevant. Again, this is a compromise between the functionalism of Neo-Durkheimians to conceive of ritual as a way to maintain the cohesion of the group and the more myth-based understanding of ritual cultivated by scholars such as Schneider operating in a phenomenological vein.

From the phenomenological standpoint of myth, what is “re-presented” by media in the case of horror movie villains, then, is not necessarily original blood sacrifice but instead previous embodiments and portrayals of villainy – it is the enemy constructed by mass media to operate as the totem foil:

The guilt we feel about the killing we cannot admit to reconsolidates the group. The surrogate victim, the savior, is the son we expel into death. The ritual victim, the scapegoat, makes our anger and killing acceptable and disguises its real target. Our rage at the scapegoat provides a pretext to kill the savior. With the death of enough sons, the group finds relief from internecine tensions.<sup>34</sup>

The sympathetic magic of mass media is allowed to infect the figure of the horror villain, to charge him with the energy of previous portrayals of evil. Of course, this could also imply the blood of the first scapegoat “ritual victim” or the first totem failure, an outsider (since ancestors and enemies are also outsiders that demand blood).<sup>35</sup> The satisfaction that audiences feel watching the villain fall, particularly in horror, would once again be a sublimation of the awful secret that the totem kills its own to be replenished. As Mickey Rourke’s character confesses in the Gulf War-era film *White Sands* (Roger Donaldson, 1992) about military-industrial espionage and arms trade, “This is about creating enemies where there aren’t any.”<sup>36</sup> The degree to which horror villains re-present original blood sacrifice or are merely collective representations of evil remains unresolved.

Finally, because there is also a need for young men in contemporary societies to be transformed by touching death (to adopt the role of willing sacrifice) the horror movie villain is re-produced by media to become a means of (virtual) death-touching.<sup>37</sup> Horror movies are a type of youthful initiation rite (particularly for young males). The bloodbath that ensues en-

sure that the (virtual) sacrifice is a success: “Blood must touch every member of the group.”<sup>38</sup> For example, the elevator doors pouring out a river of blood in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) or the final scene of *Dead Alive* (Peter Jackson, 1993) – a literal bloodbath for the protagonist – are examples in which the set or characters are covered in blood to ensure that they all have some contact with death. Furthermore, the whole screen is saturated with blood to ensure that the viewing audience has this common experience of (virtual) death-touching.

A good example of villains as media re-presentations of blood sacrifice comes from Spike Lee’s *Tales from the Hood* (Rusty Cundieff, 1995). In a tip of the hat to *Trilogy of Terror* (Dan Curtis, 1975), the movie presents three ghost stories told by the owner of an African-American funeral parlor, one of which involves a racist Congressman (appropriately named Duke after the former Louisiana Republican Congressman and KKK Grand Wizard) who is persecuted by vicious enchanted dolls of African-American ancestry. Finally, as he is about to succumb, Duke wraps himself in the American flag. As the dolls tear him apart, he literally rejuvenates the totem with his blood, atoning for his racial transgressions and those of his ancestors, and becoming the regenerative male flagbody.<sup>39</sup> Duke invokes the US flag in an analogy with his own body. However, in this case the Congressman’s blood replenishes not the blood of fallen soldiers but of the forgotten and vengeful souls of African American slaves that have enchanted the uncanny vessels of his undoing, and whose blood has originally been shed in the construction of the modern-day US. While a complex set of transgression, politics, racism and horror movie devices converge in the villainous figure of Congressman Duke for the retribution and recompense of lost souls, the essential function of the villain remains the same: the binary works, the villain is punished. In this case, the villain is a re-presentation of original blood sacrifice.

### **Case Study: *Saw* and *Hostel* v. *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men***

This section compares fates of anti-heroes in two films from the new ultra-violent genre of horror (again, “torture-porn”) with two Academy Award-winning films. The purpose of this is to understand how the villain as construction for ritualised punishment may be changing. The treatment of villainy in two recent mainstream films (and their resonances with the new breed of ultra-violent horror) would seem to suggest that Hollywood is experimenting with variations on the resolution of binary transgression. In particular there are parallels between *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas

Anderson, 2007) and *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan Cohen and Joel Cohen, 2007) on the one hand, and *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) on the other. Before the Oscars ceremony, Entertainment Weekly proclaimed 2008 “The Year of the Bad Boys.” The author noted the portrayal of central characters nominated for awards that were compelling but nonetheless villainous:

Audiences embrace the unembraceable, queasy qualities of the villains in *No Country* and *There Will Be Blood*. These men stand out from this nefarious pack in three distinctive ways: their soul-quaking ferocity; the never fully explained motivations for their cruel behavior; and the daring extremes to which their creators go to portray that behavior...But here is where these two films really lift off into uncharted artistic territory: In neither case do the filmmakers attempt to give us the reason, the “psychological” explanation, or, thank heaven and hell, the “backstory” of how Chigurh and Plainview came to be the way they are.<sup>40</sup>

It is ironic that EW distinguishes the “intentionally inexplicable nature” of these bad guys from “the aesthetic of exploitation flicks like the *Hostel* and *Saw* franchises” because the complication of the villains in these films evoke new categories for horror and mainstream villainy alike. First, these four films suggest the emergence of a category of anti-hero whose evil is, contrary to EW’s oversimplification, rationalised and explored (Actor Javier Bardem is quoted in the article: “[My character was] the logical violent reaction to a violent world.”). In some respects, Daniel Day Lewis’s Plainview in *There Will be Blood* is anything but incomprehensible. He is totally alienated from his own labor and those around him by an aggressive capitalist system based in oil production and private land ownership and this has murderous consequences. In contrast to his quintessentially villainous appearance (he looks like Snidely Whiplash, complete with thick black moustache), he is a multifaceted character whose transfiguration is best conveyed slowly and without dialogue through the language of close – ups, the interplay of darkness and light, and an emphasis on facial expression. This is demonstrated in the scene where Plainview saves his adopted son, H W, who is almost killed when one of the oil pumps malfunctions and Plainview watches intently as they burn off the oil through the night. Plainview emerges, covered in tar-black oil, as a kind of primordial demon from the darkness as the camera slowly zooms in on his face. Like Jigsaw in *Saw* (who is dying of cancer), Daniel Day Lewis’ character is more complex than previous villains yet totally recognisable in his utter banality.

Furthermore, another aspect that the villains from these four films

have in common is that each in his own way is dangled within a larger network of evil that is beyond even their capacity to fathom, much like the amorphous “Culture Industry” described by Horkheimer and Adorno. Because the cause is not so clear, though, the punishment is also nebulous. Punishment is the complex synergy of social pressures. In *No Country for Old Men*, Bardem’s character, Anton Chigurh, is a psychopathic serial killer seeking the drug money from a botched deal. After going on a rampage, it is not the police who catch up with Chigurh but ironically a totally random car accident. This “retribution” recalls Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s critique of the Culture Industry, which emphasizes the paranoia of late capitalism and a total lack of agency on the part of the individual.<sup>41</sup> In *There Will Be Blood*, Daniel Day Lewis’ Plainview beats a man to death in his personal bowling alley and then proclaims, “I’m finished”! The intimation is that he is truly finished – he has killed a man in cold blood and will go to prison. Plainview himself is just another casualty of the aggressive culture into which he was born. When Paxton (played by Jay Hernandez) exacts retribution on the anonymous Dutch businessman who brutally murdered his friend Josh in *Hostel*, the transgression would seem to have been avenged. However, the Elite Hunting organisation, the true villain, lives on (indeed anyone who has seen the sequel knows what becomes of Paxton in the first five minutes).

In all these cases, the binary recuperation in the anticipated retribution somehow falls short; it does not exactly work. It is almost as if these films are made to be ritual failures. Perhaps this implies a new synergistic, *systemic* retribution for horror villains that is, ironically, not so satisfying. As the horror genre as a whole gradually shifts, the nature of horror ritual must naturally be transformed. Perhaps this suggests that the fate of a new generation of horror movie villains is not to die in a black and white representation of good and evil, but rather that their fates should be equivocated, and that the horror ritual of villainous punishment should be interpreted more ambiguously along the lines of Geertz’s suggestion that ritual is not a resolution but rather a display of social passions.

Finally, EW did have a point that we never quite get the background stories on any of these characters. This was the calling card of the late Heath Ledger’s performance of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008): “Wanna know how I got this smile on my face”? Unlike the boogeyman of 1980s horror, it is not only that we cannot kill these villains; we don’t even know where they came from. One is reminded of the experience of postmodernism described in “The Ecstasy of Communication” by Jean Baudrillard as chilling and schizophrenic, and the experience of simulation as moving through realities that are incommensurate.<sup>42</sup>

The postmodern horror monsters described by Trecansky reflected a postmodern anxiety surrounding the breakdown of social institutions in the 1980s (such as Freddy, Jason and Pinhead). In the new millennium, these unkillable horror movie villains have moved closer to the realm of everyday realities in *Saw* and *Hostel*. Furthermore, there are resonances between unkillable postmodern horror monsters and recent mainstream depictions of villains, and the devil is in their details. Jigsaw has cancer and the anonymous Dutch businessman in *Hostel* murders because he wanted to be a doctor, while Plainview deals in oil and Chigurh deals drugs. They are a different kind of collective representation altogether – no longer supernatural, altogether too recognisable. Our fears no longer need the strict metaphorical embodiments of a boogeyman. They have migrated into the realm of real institutions and the everyday.<sup>43</sup>

### Final Thoughts

Horror films are an increasingly diverse and global source of social commentary, from capitalist critique in Nigerian horror, to commentary on commerce and censorship in post-Suharto Indonesia.<sup>44</sup> Horror films are a genre with political dimensions that recently comment on the relevance of communications technologies to everyday life.<sup>45</sup> Understanding the ritual dimension of horror villains helps us to better understand the universal appeal of this undying genre.

To summarise, horror movie villains are arguably collective representations and uncanny metaphors. While these two definitions hail from different philosophical traditions there is no reason to assume they are mutually exclusive. Rather, they are useful for understanding the villain as a representation that transcends individual consciousness. Horror movie villains also transgress social binaries like the body and home. Their function as transgressors gives them a special role in horror films to reconstitute binaries in accordance with Rappaport's definition of ritual. This model also incorporates performance and thus the embodied performances of actors are also an important factor in the ritual of horror movie villainy. On the other hand, it remains an open question whether horror movie villains are ritual media re-presentations of original blood sacrifice or merely the recapitulation of constantly evolving collective representations and meta-narratives. However, they seem to fit the criteria for invented enemies, fictions that justify killing members of the totem group. Finally, as we saw with *Saw* and *Hostel*, the villains in these horror films bear a striking resemblance to their counterparts in mainstream Hollywood fare from a similar time period. This suggests not only that our collective representations of evil and uncanny

metaphors may be changing to favour less supernatural, more commonplace forms, but also that the whole binary basis for ritualised punishment of on-screen villainy was (at least for a while) in flux.

As a final suggestion, Foucauldian interpretation of horror movies is overdue to determine how horror functions as a kind of ritualised self-surveillance of audiences who interpolate themselves as horror aficionados. The connection to ritual is also a question of the boundary between horror and reality TV. Is there any such thing as reality-horror, for example, the Sci Fi Channel production *Scare Tactics* (Scott Hallock and Kevin Healy, creators, 2003), in which friends set up unwitting friends in simulated scenarios of terror? Perhaps reality television programs that are otherwise considered mainstream might count as a kind of horror show considering the intensifying role of surveillance in reality television and the increasing synergy of the symbolic authority of TV and police.<sup>46</sup> This would have serious consequences for the meaning of a villain as ritual scapegoat, as the policing authority of media increasingly relies on arbitrary zones of victim and criminal and fictions spill over into everyday realities. Future research on villains in the media should investigate the extent to which reality television (which is, after all, melodrama) is scripted with one individual singled out early on as the outsider and habitual offender.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1999) 24.
- 2 Emile Durkheim, "The Cultural Logic of Collective Representations", in *Social Theory*, ed Charles Lemert (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999) 89-99.
- 3 Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 9-10.
- 4 Durkheim, "Cultural Logic" 94.
- 5 Durkheim, "Cultural Logic" 94.
- 6 James F Iaccino, *Psychological Reflections on Cinematic Terror: Jungian Archetypes in Horror Films* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1994).
- 7 Steven Schneider, "Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the

- Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror”, *Other Voices*, January 1999, University of Pennsylvania, date of access: 29 November 2008, <<http://www.othervoices.org/1.3/sschneider/monsters.html>>
- 8 Schneider, “Monsters” 6.
- 9 Bell, *Ritual* 29-33.
- 10 Functionalists took a strict systems theory approach to ritual, examining it as if its society of origin functioned like a machine made up of interlocking parts. Neo-functionalists, on the other hand, took a more nuanced view of ritual in relation to the broader environment. Rappaport was regarded as a cultural materialist because his explanations of ritual stemmed from a physiological understanding of the complex interactions between society and environment that in large part remain material conditions (that is, the Maring people maintaining ecological equilibrium through ritual sacrifice of pigs).
- 11 Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”, *Daedalus* 101 (2005) 1-37.
- 12 Bell, *Ritual* 73-8.
- 13 Bell, *Ritual* 65.
- 14 Bell, *Ritual* 78.
- 15 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion* 89.
- 16 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion* 24.
- 17 Bell, *Ritual* 78.
- 18 Cyndy Hendershot, “The Cold War and Horror Film: Taboo and transgression in *The Bad Seed*, *The Fly* and *Psycho*”, *Journal of popular Film and Television* 29(1) (2001) 20-31.
- 19 Marcia England, “Breached Bodies and Home Invasions: Horrific representations of the feminised body and home”, *Gender, Place and Culture* 13(4) (2006) 353-63.
- 20 Sarah Trecansky, “Final girls and terrible youth: Transgression in 1980s Slasher horror”, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29(2) (2001) 63-73.
- 21 Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark E LaPointe, “Gender Transgression and Villainy in Animated Film”, *Popular Communication* 1(2) (2003) 89-109.
- 22 Rappaport questioned how it possible for large, complex societies to maintain a variety of notions of truth and still maintain order. This is the role of Ultimate Sacred Postulates (USP), or agreed upon truths that are the starting point for all other discourses. For example, in the United States one USP is that America is the number one country in the world. Thus, in Rappaport’s ritual model there are levels of understanding beginning with the USPs, which are grand statements that drive purpose. Below this level of truth lie Cosmological Axioms (CA), or statements of faith. From the USPs and CAs derive the logical entailments of ritual. In the Catholic Church, for example, the CA that brides are pure logically entails that she wear white at a wedding. Cosmological Axioms can change over time without substantial change in the USPs.
- 23 For example, in her discussion of abjection in horror movies and its relationship to final girls, Trecansky wrote: “In these postmodern horrors, as the divisions be-



tween reality and dreams are smashed open, and anarchy results, 'institutions fall into question, Enlightenment narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read male, white, moneyed, heterosexual) subject deteriorates' (Pinedo 11). For the viewer this fulfills the 'need to express rage and terror in the midst of postmodern social upheaval' (Pinedo 48) and allows the films to question the nature of self altogether. As the heroines confront the legacy of the monster, they open themselves to exploring the depths of their own psyches. Jason lurks as an abject presence of wasted youth (he died as a child) at the bottom of Crystal Lake; Pinhead and Freddy display their fragmented bodies, serving as a reminder of the 'aggressive disintegration of the individual' (Lacan 74), the rapidly transforming self-image the heroine undergoes as she realises the full scope of societal repression" (Trecansky, 71).

24 Martin Harris and K Conner Bennett, "You Can't Kill the Boogeyman: Halloween III and the Modern Horror Franchise", *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32(3) (2004) 98-120. More work should be done on horror movie production to determine the degree to which the Boogeyman keeps coming back due to popularity versus institutional constraints.

25 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006, 1990). Furthermore, I have said nothing about accusations that horror films are de facto misogynistic. I believe it is generally true (and England would agree). However, for an interesting exception, see Linda Badley, "David Cronenberg's Anatomy Lessons", in *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995) 125-36. In this essay she discusses the inversion of the "male-gaze" in Cronenberg's remake of *The Fly* (1986). Similarly, Cronenberg inverts gender norms in *Dead Ringers* (1988) with his depiction of males made hysterical by the imposition of a female body.

26 Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas", in *The Ritual Process* (Aldine de Gruyter, 1995, 1969) 94-113, 124-30.

27 Turner, "Liminality" 128.

28 Bruce Kapferer, "The Ritual Process and the Problem of Reflexivity in Sinhalese Demon Exorcisms", in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (ISHI, 1984) 179-207.

29 Geertz, "Deep Play" 62.

30 Roy Rappaport, "Ritual", in *International Encyclopedia of Communications* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1989) 469.

31 This seems reminiscent of Bataille's statement that those who transgress believe the most in transgression. Again, it would contribute much to a ritual understanding of film villainy to explore the performance of villainy from the perspective of actors who portray it, to investigate institutional attitudes toward villainy.

32 Carolyn Marvin and David W Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem rituals and the American flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

33 Bell, *Ritual* 14-19.

34 Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice* 79.

35 Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice* 78-82.

- 36 White Sands (1992) trailer: date of access 4 December 2009, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMOFV05ZOds>>
- 37 Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice* 74-5.
- 38 Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice* 87.
- 39 Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice* 54. There is even a YouTube channel devoted to Tales. Skip to the end of the first video and see for yourself what becomes of Duke: date of access 4 December 2009, <<http://www.youtube.com/user/TalesFromThaHood>>. Spike Lee was executive producer for this movie. It was filmed in Philadelphia.
- 40 K Tucker, "Oscar Watch: The Year of the Bad Boys"?, *Entertainment Weekly*, 8 February 2008, date of access: 4 December 2009, <[http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20007870\\_20164475\\_20176841,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20007870_20164475_20176841,00.html)>
- 41 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry", in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2002) 94-136. This example also recalls Adorno's annoyance with the advice to "Drive Safely" in the 1950's LA Times Astrology Column, advice that typifies the randomness of Culture Industry. See Theodore W Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed Stephen Crook (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 42 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication", in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture*, ed H Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983) 126-34.
- 43 For more on quotidian horror movie monsters, see also Ernest Mathijs, "Threat or Treat: Film, Television, and the Ritual of Halloween", *FlowTV*, 30 October 2009, University of Texas at Austin, date of access: 5 December 2009, <<http://flowtv.org/?p=4486>>
- 44 Andrew Smith, "Reading Wealth in Nigeria: Occult Capitalism and Marx's Vampires", *Historical Materialism* 9(1) (2001) 39-59. See also Katinka van Heeren, "Return of the Kyai: representations of horror, commerce, and censorship in post-Suharto Indonesian film and television", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8(2) (2007) 211-26.
- 45 John S Nelson, "Horror Films Face Political Evils in Everyday Life", *Political Communication* 22(3) (2005) 381-6.
- 46 Nick Couldry, *Media Ritual: A Critical Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 109-14.