



The Journal of Gods and Monsters

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The Journal of Gods and Monsters

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Editors' Note

We are pleased to present another edition of the journal. In this issue there are items that will provide much to think about in the connection between religion and the monstrous.

In this issue, we take turn towards the experiential, and are especially interested in the way that monstrous creatures become a way to encounter the ultimately terrifying. This includes an essay by Daniel Wise who explores the pop culture phenomenon of ghost hunting. This is not only a popular individual pursuit, but it has also become the focus of several television programs. In his discussion, Wise draws upon Rudolf Otto and his concept of the numinous which is used as an analytical lens to shed light on the popularity of the belief in demons among ghost hunters.

This issue continues with a contribution by Filip Andjelkovic who explores the subject of techno-horror. Andjelkovic makes the case that techno-horror can become a way of expressing unconscious fantasies which then function as a vehicle for experiences of the transcendent.

Finally, this edition of *The Journal of Gods and Monsters* includes several reviews of significant books in the field. It is our hope that these reviews help the reader to get a feel for some of the printed scholarship on religion and monsters, and that this might be helpful in making decisions about adding these works to personal or university libraries. The review section concludes with reflections on some recent films that offering interesting opportunities to think through the intersection of religion and the monstrous.

We hope that you will be informed and challenged in your reading of this edition of the journal.

- The Editors

Ghost Hunters' Demonic Encounters as Religious Experiences

Daniel Wise
Independent Scholar

Abstract: Ghost hunting became widespread in the United States after the October 2004 of the reality television show *Ghost Hunters*. Ghost hunters, or paranormal investigators, use scientific methods to investigate reportedly haunted locations and seek evidence of ghosts and other spirits. Ghost hunters are especially preoccupied with demons. The analytical lens provided by twentieth-century German philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto reveals that demonic experiences serve as powerful religious experiences for ghost hunters and provide comforting evidence of the existence of the spirit world, a cosmos ordered according to good and evil, and even God.

Keywords: ghost hunters, paranormal investigation, demons, religious experience

There are bloodstains on the walls. Horrifying groans and screams and animal growls come out of nowhere. People feel nauseous or dizzy in the space, or they get angry or sad. They feel like someone is watching. They feel like a hateful presence is stalking them. People are pushed and scratched; the scratch marks visible on their skin. The unlucky ones see terrifying, twisted, monstrous figures, or shadow figures black as a void. Hauntings like this are commonly reported by paranormal investigators who claim to have come across demonic hauntings. According to these investigators, the demonic is alive and well in the twenty-first-century United States.

Ghost hunting is booming in the twenty-first century, and the demonic is a central obsession of the ghost hunting subculture. Ghost hunting reality television shows are central to the ghost hunting subculture, and every show I have encountered features episodes on demonic encounters. Some, such as *Ghost Adventures*, perhaps the most popular show, feature demonic hauntings every season. The demonic has been discussed at every ghost hunt I have observed. I have heard dozens of ghost hunters, in media or in live interviews, discuss the fact that paranormal investigators in general are perhaps too preoccupied with the demonic. One example can be found in the words of exorcist James Long, who expresses dismay that, given how dangerous the demonic is, there is still widespread demonic interest and writes that he “cannot understand the fascination of wanting to see a demon.”¹

I have spent nearly a decade ethnographically observing the ghost hunting subculture. I have read their books and websites, I have listened to hours of podcasts and online radio shows and watched hours of ghost hunting television. To top it all off, I have attended a ghost hunting convention, participated in six ghost hunts, and interviewed upwards of thirty ghost hunters from around the country.

Ghost hunters claim that demons, inhuman evil spirits hell-bent on destroying human lives, stalk our communities and our homes. They haunt or infest locations and objects in order to oppress or possess people. According to ghost hunters and demonologists, copious evidence of demonic activity has been collected and can be presented to anyone skeptical or curious about the topic. In fact, what they consider good evidence of demonic activity must be collected before

¹ James Long, *Through the Eyes of an Exorcist* (Lulu.com, 2013), 100.

a reputable demonologist or exorcist can be convinced to perform an exorcism. House cleansings are provided a bit more readily, as they are generally less dangerous. Beyond the paranormal investigators themselves, there is a wide swath of the public who believe the investigators are experts on demons and eagerly consume demonic tales and information, particular through television media.

I argue that ghost hunters are preoccupied with demons because demonic experiences function as fulfilling and ultimately comforting religious experiences for ghost hunters. Drawing on monster theory and particularly the work of twentieth century German philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto, I show that demonic experiences are not so different from other experiences of what Otto would call the numinous. An encounter with a demon is a *mysterium tremendum* indeed. Ultimately, for ghost hunters, demonic experiences serve as empirical evidence that there is a spirit world, that the cosmos is ordered into good and evil, and even that there is a God.

Twenty-first Century American Ghost Hunters

It is hard to say how many people in the United States are ghost hunters or take an interest in paranormal investigation. The Baylor Religion Survey of 2005 found that 49% of Americans believe ghosts probably or absolutely exist, 25% have researched ghosts, apparitions, hauntings, or electronic voice phenomena, 20.7% believe communication with the dead is possible, and 22% claim to have experienced a haunting.² The paranormal investigator directory website paranormalsocieties.com lists 4,892 currently or formerly active paranormal investigation groups, the vast majority of which are in the United States. This directory is far from exhaustive, as many ghost hunting groups are not listed on the site. Finally, an entire cable television channel, the Travel Channel, is dedicated to paranormal programming with at least eight shows devoted to ghost hunting. This television channel used to be devoted to national and international travel but eventually transformed due to the popularity of its show *Ghost Adventures*.

Ghost hunters seem to be roughly equally divided along gender lines. Although women are the founders or lead investigators of many groups, these roles tend more often to be filled by men.³ Ghost hunters tend to be racially homogenous. Most ghost hunters I have encountered have been white. This situation is highlighted by the ghost hunting television show *Ghost Brothers*, which tries to stand out in a crowded ghost hunting television market with the hook that all of the team's investigators are Black. This is not an indication that African Americans are uninterested in ghosts, as long-standing African American spirit traditions are well-documented.⁴ Ghost hunters tend to span the political spectrum from left to right. Though some ghost hunters identify with a particular religious denomination, most of them tend to be religiously unaffiliated despite having a Christian religious upbringing or background.

Ghost hunting as it now exists in the United States began in October 2004 when the reality television series *Ghost Hunters* premiered on what was then the SciFi Channel. The show featured two Roto-Rooters plumbers, Grant Wilson and Jason Hawes, in Rhode Island who ran

² Electronic voice phenomena are ghostly voices that appear on audio recordings and are a common form of evidence used by ghost hunters to establish a haunting. Bader, Mencken, and Baker, *Paranormal America* (2010), 44, 107.

³ On gendered power dynamics among ghost hunting groups, see Marc Eaton, "Paranormal Investigation: The Scientist and the Sensitive," in *The Supernatural in Society, Culture, and History*, ed. Dennis Waskul and Marc Eaton (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 76-94.

⁴ For just one example, see LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory Among Gullah/Geechee Women* (Duke University Press, 2014).

The Atlantic Paranormal Society in their spare time. The series followed Wilson, Hawes, and their volunteer team as they investigated hauntings around the United States using a suite of sophisticated electronic equipment. The team claimed to take a scientific approach to investigating and gathering evidence of the paranormal. The demonologists who work with the TAPS team, twins Carl and Keith Johnson, are introduced in the very first episode.

The premiere of *Ghost Hunters* led to an explosion of interest in ghost hunting in the United States, even though a significant ghost hunting subculture that interacted on the internet already existed. More ghost hunting reality shows followed, such as *Paranormal State* in 2007 and *Ghost Adventures* in 2008, and thousands of Americans formed paranormal investigation teams of their own. Ghost hunters have no central authority or organization to define correct belief or practice, so they are incredibly diverse in their approaches and ideas. In general, they seek evidence of paranormal forces and attempt to help families and individuals dealing with hauntings by investigating reportedly haunted locations. Often, like the TAPS team, they claim to take a scientific approach and proclaim they are just as willing to debunk false paranormal claims as they are to document quality evidence. Like TAPS, they tend to use a variety of electronic equipment. Some of this equipment detects electric energy and its fluctuations, as ghosts are often conceived of as being made of energy or manipulating energy to manifest in the physical world. For example, EMF meters of various types detect fluctuations in electromagnetic fields in the environment. Parascopes are said to detect triboelectric energy. Other equipment includes various types of cameras, including night vision, full spectrum, and infrared cameras, as well as electronic voice recorders. The cameras and recorders are meant to capture anomalous images and sounds that may be evidence of paranormal activity. Ghost hunters also frequently employ psychic or mediumistic abilities in their investigations. Some investigators claim to be sensitives, meaning they can sense spirits and spirit energy; others claim to be mediums, meaning they can sense and communicate with spirits.

Ghost hunters tend to be creative and eclectic in their spiritual and supernatural beliefs. They draw on Christianity, Eastern religions, New Age spirituality, Native American religion, psychology, and more to form their beliefs and practices surrounding ghosts. Particularly influential on ghost hunters' demon beliefs has been Roman Catholic demonology as it has been filtered through Catholic paranormal investigators such as Ed and Lorraine Warren. Generally, the ghost hunting world is obsessed with demons. It is a truism among paranormal investigators that inexperienced or unserious ghost hunters are preoccupied with demons and interacting with the demonic. Among ghost hunters, it is generally considered unwise to desire contact with demons. Nevertheless, the ghost hunting world in general is demon obsessed. The ghost hunting reality television shows frequently focus on demonic cases, even though most veteran ghost hunters claim demonic hauntings are exceedingly rare. Unlike the Spiritualists of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century United States, contemporary American ghost hunters are deeply interested in the demonic and they often seek it out.

Demons in America

Ghost hunters' fascination with demons is consistent with patterns seen in the American public at large. Belief in demons is thriving in the United States and may even be stronger than it was in the middle of the twentieth century. A poll conducted in 2012 found that 57% of respondents believed "it's possible for people to become possessed by demons."⁵ According to a

⁵ "National Halloween Survey Results," Public Policy Polling, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.publicpolicypolling.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HalloweenResults.pdf>.

2007 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey, 48% of respondents agree or strongly agree that demonic possession is possible. Three years later, the Baylor Religion Survey found that 70% of respondents believe that demons probably or absolutely exist.⁶ Also in 2007, a Pew Research Survey found that 68% of Americans believe that angels and demons are active in the world.⁷

Historically, demon belief seems to have surged in the United States around the time of the release of the *The Exorcist* novel in 1971 and film in 1973. The movie deeply affected audiences across the country and its effects shocked a public that assumed the influence of religion was waning in society. Just several years earlier, in 1966, *Time Magazine* had released its iconic cover asking the question, “Is God Dead?”⁸ The public response to *The Exorcist* and the other demon-themed media it inspired may have been a reaction to the God is dead rhetoric of the 1960s. More evidence of this reaction can be found in the best-selling status of evangelical author and preacher Hal Lindsey’s 1970 book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, which elaborated on premillennial dispensationalist end-times prophecies and marked the 1970s as the age of the antichrist. The popular reaction revealed that, for many Americans, God and the devil were very much alive and well. *The Exorcist* paved the way for other demonic media such as Malachi Martin’s 1976 “nonfiction” book *Hostage to the Devil* and David Seltzer’s *The Omen* film that same year. The *Exorcist* and the reaction of which it was a part led to a marked increase in the public demand for Catholic exorcisms and played a large role in sparking the rise of charismatic or neo-Pentecostal deliverance ministries that aimed to deal with the demonic in the decades that followed.⁹ Judging by some measures, the surge of interest in the demonic that started in the 1970s and the following decades has held steady or even continued to grow. Prominent American Roman Catholic exorcists testify to the increase in demand for exorcisms by pointing to the growing number of American exorcists officially appointed by the Catholic church. In a 2016 interview, Father Vincent Lambert reported that when he was appointed by his archbishop to be the exorcist for Indianapolis in 2005, he was one of only twelve officially appointed exorcists in the United States. He reported that at the time of the interview, the number had grown to around fifty.¹⁰ Another American Roman Catholic exorcist, Father Gary Thomas, reported in a 2018 piece in the *Atlantic* that there had been fewer than fifteen recognized Catholic exorcists in the United States in 2011, but that number had grown to well over 100.¹¹ Also relevant are Gallup’s findings that the percentage of Americans who believe in the devil, a

⁶ “Baylor Religion Survey, Wave III (2010),” The ARDA, accessed October 13, 2020, http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Codebooks/BRS2011_CB.asp#V99.

⁷ Russell Heimlich, “Goblins and Ghosts and Things That Go Bump in the Night,” Pew Research Center, October 27, 2009, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2009/10/27/goblins-and-ghosts-and-things-that-go-bump-in-the-night/>. Thank you to Joseph Laycock for tracking down most of these statistics. For more on the prevalence of belief in demons and exorcism in the twenty-first century US, see “Why Are Exorcisms as Popular as Ever?” The New Republic, December 28, 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/126607/exorcisms-popular-ever>.

⁸ See Joseph Laycock, “The Folk Piety of William Peter Blatty: *The Exorcist* in the Context of Secularization,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 5 (2009).

⁹ See Michael W. Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Doubleday, 2001). I also want to thank Joseph Laycock for our discussion about *The Exorcist* and its aftermath.

¹⁰ “A Day in the Life of a Modern Exorcist,” YouTube, Vice, September 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7szlOjtKGY0&feature=youtu.be>.

¹¹ Mike Mariani, “American Exorcism,” The Atlantic, December 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/catholic-exorcisms-on-the-rise/573943/>.

concept closely linked to demons, rose from 55% in 1990 to 70% in 2007.¹² In 2014, the Baylor Religion Survey found that 58% of Americans absolutely believe in Satan, while 49% absolutely believe in demons.¹³

Demons according to Ghost Hunters

To understand American ghost hunters' demonic experiences, one needs to understand what ghost hunters are talking about when they talk about demons. As I explain above, there is no organization or governing body that has the power to establish or police ghost hunters' ideas and practices, so they can be diverse. Speaking generally, ghost hunters often draw on Christian cosmology to think about demons. Demons are conceived of as evil spirits with a desire to torment humans. To get a sense of how demons are imagined by ghost hunters, one can start with two of the most influential demonologists in paranormal investigation circles: Ed and Lorraine Warren. The Warrens, a Catholic husband-and-wife team, were paranormal investigators based in Connecticut. They rose to prominence in the 1970s and remained active until Ed died in 2006 and Lorraine died in 2019. One event that catapulted them into the limelight was their investigation of the infamous Amityville haunting of the 1970s. More recently, the Warrens rose out of paranormal circles into the wider realm of popular culture through the film *The Conjuring*, its sequels, and its spinoffs. In *The Conjuring*, actors Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga play Ed and Lorraine Warren in a story based on a 1971 haunting in Rhode Island investigated by the Warrens. The Warrens' writings, interviews, and lectures in the last decades of the twentieth century were central in forming many paranormal investigators' views of the demonic realm both before and after the boom in ghost hunting initiated by the October 2004 release of the Sci-Fi Channel reality show *Ghost Hunters*. Many ghost hunters looked to the Warrens for guidance about demons and demonic hauntings until the Warrens' deaths, and the teachings they left behind are still referenced in the current moment. Some of the most prominent demonologist in paranormal circles, such as John Zaffis and Carl and Keith Johnson, learned directly from the Warrens. The Warrens are indeed controversial figures among contemporary ghost hunters, with some highly praising them and others seeing them as frauds or attention seekers; however, one still finds the mark of the Warrens on some of ghost hunters' most widespread ideas about demons. The Warrens will serve as a strong base on which to build an understanding of how ghost hunters see demons.¹⁴

¹² Frank Newport, "Americans More Likely to Believe in God Than the Devil, Heaven More Than Hell," Gallup, June 13, 2007, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/27877/americans-more-likely-believe-god-than-devil-heaven-more-than-hell.aspx>. One might be tempted to attribute the rise in American devil belief to the 2001 September 11th terrorist attacks. To the contrary Gallup polling found that the percentage of Americans who believe in the devil had risen to 68% by May 2001.

¹³ Bader, Baker, and Mencken, *Paranormal America*, 196-197.

¹⁴ A person following the footnotes will soon notice that I have only cited one book, Gerard Brittle's *The Demonologist*, in my overview of the Warrens' beliefs about demons. This particular book, based on interviews with the Warrens, is easy to access and these citations should make it easy for anyone exploring to delve deeper into the Warrens' thought. Other materials on and from the Warrens largely align with what is found in *The Demonologist*. I should also note that even the Warren organization seems to recognize the normative value of *The Demonologist*. The production team of *The Conjuring* film, which consulted directly with Lorraine Warren, gave the book to Vera Farmiga when she was doing research for her role as Lorraine. Furthermore, the Warrens' son-in-law, who used to sell tickets to events in which one could meet with Lorraine Warren and view some of the Warrens' haunted objects, used to give out copies of *The Demonologist* to whomever bought two or more tickets.

The Warrens often refer to demons as “inhuman spirits” to emphasize that, unlike a ghost, an inhuman spirit is “something that has never walked the earth in human form.”¹⁵ According to the Warrens, demons are fallen angels, an idea that is common in Christian cosmology.¹⁶ Demons are driven by their absolute hatred of God and their desire to see the ruin of humankind. The Warrens admit that it can be difficult to tell the difference between a malevolent human spirit and a demonic inhuman spirit, but certain signs reveal when a spirit is demonic. Lorraine explains, “Only the demonic...has the power to bring about such incredible negative phenomena as fires, explosions, dematerialization, teleportation, and levitation of large objects.”¹⁷ Dematerialization is when objects cease to exist for a time and teleportation is when objects are moved instantaneously from one place to another. Whereas an earthbound human spirit might do little things like “levitate a pencil or break a cherished teacup,” in the case of a demon “the whole house would be ruined in a deliberate, orderly way.” Demons are said to often look monstrous or appear as dark voids in the environment.¹⁸

Demons also physically harm people. Ed Warren, describing his years of experience confronting the demonic, says, “I have been burned by these invisible forces of pandemonium. I have been slashed and cut; these spirits have gouged marks and symbols on my body. I’ve been thrown around the room like a toy. My arms have been twisted up behind me until they’ve ached for a week. I’ve incurred sudden illnesses to knock me out of an investigation.”¹⁹ Author Gerald Brittle summarizes what the Warrens told him about demonic hauntings in interviews:

Everything associated with the spirit was terrifying and negative. Quite distinct from a ghost, which would vanish if fear was aroused, this spirit only *intensified* in an atmosphere of fear. Its arrival was accompanied by a sense of utter terror and foreboding; an undeniable sense of evil and wild animosity would fill the room. Often a foul, revolting stench—of sulfur, excrement, or rotting flesh—would fill the area where it materialized; many times it would leave behind a residue of blood and other bodily fluids. And like a beacon, it projected an unmitigating sense of hate and destructive jealousy; its every action was cruel, violent, and wrong. Furthermore, the Warrens noted, when these bizarre entities were present they played dirty, used foul language, and caused injury.²⁰

Sometimes demons are known to leave rather obvious clues to their identity, such as by turning crosses upside down or by scrawling blasphemies on walls and mirrors. One might hear diabolical laughter, or a “threatening voice, sounding like no human being you ever heard” may order one to leave a haunted location. Demons can make many frightening sounds, from heavy breathing and knocking to explosions, bestial noises, and bloodcurdling screams.²¹ Demons can be identified by their reactions to “religious provocation” as well. They will lash out and produce preternatural phenomena when confronted with “religious articles [such as a crucifix or holy

¹⁵ Gerald Brittle, *The Demonologist: The Extraordinary Career of Ed + Lorraine Warren* (New York: Graymalkin Media, 2013), 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 45-46, 99, 100, 196.

water], the recitation of prayers, or reference to God or Jesus Christ.”²² Demons will also manifest in some of the ways that human spirits can manifest, such as by causing a sudden drop in temperature in a room or malfunctions with electronic devices such as telephones.²³

The ultimate goal of a manifesting demon is to either possess a person’s body or drive them to murder or suicide (or both).²⁴ According to the Warrens, before a demon gets to the final phase of possession, its activity will go through two prior phases: infestation and oppression. During the infestation phase a demon will essentially begin haunting a person’s home or another location where the person spends time. A series of small paranormal disturbances will build up over the course of weeks or months. The point of infestation is to create fear and generate the negative psychic energy from which demons draw power. The Warrens explain that infestation will not occur, or will not get far, unless a person creates an opening for the demonic and invites it into their lives of their own free will. A demon must be invited. There are many ways to invite the demonic in. One could perform black magic, or hold a séance, or use a Ouija board. In one famous Warren case, two young women invited demonic infestation by paying too much attention to and trying to communicate with a doll that would preternaturally move on its own and which they later believed to be haunted by the spirit of a dead little girl. It turned out that, in reality, a demonic force had taken hold of the doll. People who attempt to reach out to more innocuous spirits often end up contacting the demonic instead. The Warrens also note that if one engages in dark behavior or has a dark attitude, one will attract dark spirits. Evil and sinful acts attract demons, as does a “dour, depressive person.”²⁵

After infestation, demonic activity intensifies, and a demonic haunting will enter into the oppression phase. Oppression is ultimately a psychological attack meant to dominate a person’s will. Once a person’s will is broken, the demon can take possession of them. During oppression, a demon’s supernatural manifestations will become more intense, and the demon will try to directly affect a person’s mental and emotional state. If oppression is successful, the next step is full on possession in which a demon takes control of a person’s body.²⁶ For the Warrens, demon possession looks much like it was portrayed in William Peter Blatty’s book and film *The Exorcist*. The possessed person’s physical features become grotesque, and the demon or demons speak through the person in strange voices. A possessing spirit will seek to mutilate the body it inhabits or “take off on a spree of wild physical mayhem. The demonic spirit isn’t content simply to possess the body: its mind is fixed on death. The basic motive behind possession is that ‘One can kill many.’”²⁷ In fact, in a murder trial concluded in 1981, the Warrens testified that Arne Cheyenne Johnson killed his landlord under the influence of demonic possession.²⁸

To get rid of demonic infestation or oppression, the Warrens used house blessings or bindings. These were performed by the Warrens themselves or a priest, usually a Catholic priest. A house binding forces the demonic spirit “to either show itself (if present) or move on.” A binding, when performed by Ed Warren, involved moving room to room with a crucifix and holy water. Holy water was sprinkled “at all four points” of a room and Ed said aloud, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command all spirits – whether human or diabolical – to leave this dwelling and

²² Ibid., 81, 99.

²³ Ibid., 87, 99.

²⁴ Ibid., 157.

²⁵ Ibid., 127-136.

²⁶ Ibid., 138-150.

²⁷ Ibid., 220-221.

²⁸ Gerald Brittle, *The Devil in Connecticut* (New York: Bantam, 1983).

never return.”²⁹ In the case of full-on possession, a priest must be called in to perform the Roman Catholic rite of exorcism.

Building on and Reacting to the Warrens

While the Warrens and their school of thought about demons are supremely influential, many ghost hunters deviate from their schema, either building on the Warrens' school or contradicting it in significant ways. Due to the diversity of ghost hunter belief, I will not be able to exhaustively survey every way in which ghost hunters deviate from the picture of demons laid out by the Warrens. I will provide a few examples and explain how those examples reflect general tendencies of belief and practice among ghost hunters.

Kurt, a ghost hunter based in central Ohio, tries to provide a non-sectarian account of the origin of demons. He believes there were pools of positive and negative energy generated by the Big Bang, and that demons are made from the negative energy. When describing the origin of demons and what they are, he says “I try to do this as non-denominational as I can. Because it doesn't actually matter...if you believe in a magical being that lives in the sky and waves their hand, or if you believe that it's an old man that lives in the sky, or if you believe in the power of the planets, or whatever, or you can be an atheist. One thing that we know for a fact...that happened, and I do say fact because it's been proved beyond theory, is that we know that there was a Big Bang...Out of that explosion you had two pools of energy...you had a positive energy and you had a negative energy, and...that negative energy is what, I honestly (sic), has become the demonic part, if you will.” He explains that we know the Big Bang was a big explosion, and “every explosion, you're gonna put out positive ions, you're gonna put out negative ions” as we see in “atomic explosion tests that we've done.”

In Kurt's description, we see two prominent tendencies among ghost hunters: a tendency to deviate from institutional religious teaching and become religiously eclectic, and a tendency to scientize. Toward the first tendency, many ghost hunters, perhaps the majority, have roots in traditional religious faith but no longer affiliate with the faith of their upbringing. Many of them are “Nones” or are “spiritual but not religious.” This being the case, it is unsurprising that many ghost hunters do not strictly adhere to the very Catholic school of the Warrens. In this case, Kurt wants an account of demons that can function across religious traditions. We also see Kurt using scientific language. He appeals to the Big Bang, which he takes care to note is proven scientific fact. He attempts to draw on the chemical processes of an explosion and he uses the language of energy. Ghost hunters often depict their investigations of the paranormal as scientific endeavors. As we can see in this example, that tendency can move into demonology.

Like Kurt, other ghost hunters often draw on resources outside of the Roman Catholic Church and other traditional Christian institutions to deal with demonic hauntings. One popular ritual for dealing with demons or negative spirits in a space is called a cleansing or clearing. Khoa³⁰ is not a ghost hunter, but they do overlap with ghost hunters' demonological milieu. They are the owner of a metaphysical shop in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and they offer home cleansings for a fee. They are willing to tailor a cleansing to a client's religious sensibilities, but they also offer one according to their own set of spiritual beliefs. They call the highest tier of home cleansing a home exorcism. As part of their ritual, they will use a blade, such as a pocketknife or athame, a ritual knife meant for spell work, that is meant to metaphysically cut dark bonds on the home and the people who live there. They will also perform sigil work, in

²⁹ Brittle, *The Demonologist*, 99-100.

³⁰ Khoa is a non-binary individual who uses they/them pronouns.

which they draw sigils, or powerful magic symbols, meant to drive away evil and bestow protection. They will often leave the client with a sigil to place beneath their doormat. Khoa also often performs candle magic, or magic that involves the burning of various candles. They do smoke cleanses using plants believed to hold spiritual power. The cleansing material is lit on fire, then blown out so that it is smoldering and releasing smoke. The smoke is what does the cleansing of the space and the atmosphere. Khoa's cleansing is just one example of the type of non-Christian practices that may be used for dealing with demons. Oftentimes ghost hunters will note that the particular religious tradition or ritual of a cleansing or clearing does not matter as much as the power of the clearer's "intention." It is the power of a practitioner's intention or will in an exorcism or clearing that makes the ritual effective.

Though many or most ghost hunters are interested in demons, not every ghost hunter believes in them. A particular ghost hunter might not believe in demons for a variety of reasons. At times, demons do not fit into a particular ghost hunter's theology or cosmology. A ghost hunter may align themselves closely with professionalized parapsychology. The founders of psychical research who led and wrote for the Society for Psychical Research in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were not particularly interested in demons and were more likely to see accounts of exorcism and the demonic as folklore or mental pathology rather than legitimately supernatural activity. The same can be said for the founders of laboratory parapsychology later in the twentieth century. In 1949, laboratory researcher J.B. Rhine, who could be considered the founder of modern parapsychology, was alerted to the case of alleged demonic possession that would later inspire William Peter Blatty to write *The Exorcist*. In the case, Rhine did not see diabolical activity. Instead, he saw evidence for psychokinesis and theorized that the demonic phenomena were caused by the power of the young victim's unconscious mind.³¹

Nineteenth century Spiritualists and turn-of-the-twentieth-century psychical researchers were not as fascinated by demons as twenty-first-century ghost hunters, even though they all share a scientific quest to prove the reality of spirit phenomena, ultimately because demons did not fit into Spiritualist cosmology. Spiritualists saw all souls and God as fundamentally good. Upon death, a human soul entered an eternal progression into higher and higher levels of enlightenment, and souls could then share this higher wisdom with seance sitters. There was little room for demons in this optimistic universe. Psychical research has its roots in Spiritualism and was founded to investigate spiritualist phenomena. On top of this, psychical researchers at the turn of the twentieth century may have been more skeptical of the supernatural than twenty-first-century ghost hunters. In fact, though many Spiritualists joined the Society for Psychical Research at its founding, there was a large-scale Spiritualist exodus from the Society in 1886 after prominent investigator Nora Sidgwick published a report stating that popular medium William Eglinton was a fraud.³² Like the founders of laboratory parapsychology, many psychical researchers likely saw belief in demonic possession as delusion or manifestations of misunderstood altered states of consciousness. Another possibility is illustrated by William James in his 1896 Lowell Lectures on exceptional mental states. There he equates demonic possession in his time with Spiritualist phenomena. He believes the frightening experiences of

³¹ William J. Birnes and Joel Martin, *The Haunting of Twentieth-Century America* (Tom Doherty Associates, 2011), 356.

³² John Beloff, *Parapsychology: A Concise History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 75-76; Gauld, 203-204.

demon possession of yesteryear have been replaced in his day with positive experiences of mediumship.³³

Like the Spiritualists, some ghost hunters may also hold a theology or spirituality that does not leave room for an objectively, totally, and essentially evil being like a demon. Many of the ghost hunters in this category still leave room for spirits that behave badly or in evil ways without being objectively, totally, and essentially evil, as they are depicted in the Catholic tradition of the Warrens and some other Christian strains of thought. Defining demons as objectively and essentially evil is important for many ghost hunters, as will be seen later when I discuss experiences of the demonic. For the purposes of this chapter, I will only call those spirits that are evil in this way demons. As I will show, many ghost hunters themselves make this distinction when discussing whether they believe in demons.

Some of the ghost hunters who reject the existence of demons as I have defined them hold what Catherine Albanese would classify as metaphysical spirituality.³⁴ This type of spirituality includes New Age spirituality, New Thought, and theosophy. In these spiritualities, the cosmos is essentially good even if individual souls sometimes experience trauma or lack enlightenment, causing them to fail to express fully their own goodness. Some beings behave badly, but they are not essentially evil beings. A variant of this metaphysical outlook can be found especially among people who identify as witches or some variety of pagan. Rather than focusing on the idea that the cosmos is ultimately good, they will emphasize the ambiguity in all things. Jodi, a pagan and ghost hunter from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, believes demons are a “heavily Christianized construct.” While she does not use the term demon, she does “believe that there is evil, that there are things of near full darkness;” however, she continues, “I do not feel things are so black and white, purely or absolutely good or evil. As such, I don’t see even dark entities as without use or recourse.”

Rudolf Otto and Demonic Experiences

One reason many contemporary American ghost hunters value or crave encounters with the demonic is because those encounters function as powerful religious experiences. They are powerful in both their emotional intensity and effectiveness as well as in their ability to grant cosmological assurance. By cosmological assurance, I mean reassurance about the way our cosmos or the universe and reality in which we live is structured. Demonic experiences are more cosmologically reassuring than simple experiences of spirits of the dead. An experience of spirits of the dead is evidence of the persistence of life after death, which is often very comforting for an individual. An experience of a demon is evidence not only of a spirit world, but of the potentially more comforting existence of a greater moral order to the cosmos and the existence of a good higher power. A demonic experience has more cosmological significance than an experience of spirits of the dead.

When I call demonic experiences religious experiences, I want readers to recognize that experiences of the demonic can be just as impactful and significant in the lives of experiencers as any experience we traditionally label “religious,” such as mystical experiences or ecstatic worship experiences. We can conceptualize demonic encounters as religious experiences by

³³ Eugene Taylor, *William James on Exceptional Mental States: The 1896 Lowell Lectures* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 93-95.

³⁴ On metaphysical religion and ghost hunting, see chapter three on scientism.

using the lens provided by early-twentieth-century German theologian and philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto.

Otto argued that when one encounters the numinous, one experiences a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.³⁵ Put simply, the numinous, for Otto, is the divine. To be more precise, it is that indescribable, transcendent thing one encounters when one encounters the holy. It is that part of the holy that is left over once you take away the aspect of holy that means completely good or morally right. According to Otto, the term holy has “a clear overplus of meaning” once you subtract that part of its meaning that means completely good, and that overplus is what is captured by the term numinous.³⁶ Otto goes as far as to say this powerful, transcendent aspect of the holy was what was originally meant by some of the early terms for holy, such as the Hebrew *qadosh*, the Greek *hagios*, and the Latin *sanctus*, before they later came to mean good or morally right.

Otto, as a Christian theologian, believed that he was naming something supernatural, divine, or transcendent when he used the term numinous. For Otto, the numinous was of God. This element of Otto’s thought might be objectionable to readers or scholars who want to examine religious experience without appealing to the existence of the supernatural.³⁷ Fortunately, it is not necessary for us to adopt Otto’s theology in order to use his terms and his lens. Otto can be useful whether you want to grant the existence of God or the supernatural or not. We need only grant that many people have the experience of encountering something they would term divine or transcendent during religious experiences.³⁸

Otto describes the experience of the numinous as a *mysterium tremendum* - a terrifying mystery. Otto writes that *mysterium* “denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar.”³⁹ *Tremendum* is only meant to evoke fear or terror as an analogy. It is not the common fear of something scary. It is more akin to the holy fear of the Hebrew Bible, the “fear of God” or “fear of the Lord.” Otto suggests the closest English word to his sense of *tremendum* might be “awful” as long as we maintain its association with the word “awe.” To imagine how fear or terror might be associated

³⁵ As far as I can tell, nowhere in *Das Heilige* does Otto use the phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* even though many commentators have used this phrase to summarize and communicate his ideas. Otto frequently uses *mysterium tremendum*, and he has an in depth discussion on the term *fascinans*, but never does he join all of the terms together.

³⁶ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 5.

I am using John W. Harvey’s 1929 English translation of Otto’s work. I feel comfortable doing so especially because Otto himself approved of the translation, writing, “An English critic has said that ‘the translation is much better than the original’; and to this I have nothing to object.”

³⁷ See, for example, Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁸ Eminent historian of American religion Robert Orsi has come to the defense of Otto and his concept of religious experience. Orsi argues that the religious studies scholar often finds that their subjects encounter something not accounted for in social and cultural reductionist accounts of religion. The divine is real to their subjects in a way that problematizes scholarly attempts to bracket the question of whether the supernatural is real. There is something extra in the equation of religious experience: “2 + 2 = 5.” Orsi stops short of arguing that the something extra in religious experience is supernatural, and I will as well. Orsi’s argument and defense is useful in that it allows us, in the case of ghost hunters’ demonic experiences, to consider more clearly how those experiences feel for believers and the effects of how those experiences feel. See Robert A. Orsi, “The Problem of the Holy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 99.

³⁹ Otto, 13.

with experiences of the numinous, one might reference the theophanies of the Hebrew Bible. In particular, one can look at Exodus chapter 20 in the Hebrew Bible, that pivotal chapter where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. After Moses and his brother Aaron receive the commandments on Mt. Sinai, they find the people of Israel standing before the mountain terrified by the presence of God:

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.’ Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.⁴⁰

We find another example of fear in an experience of the numinous in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. In the gospel of Luke in the New Testament, there is an account of angels appearing before shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus, and the entire angelic display is depicted as terrifying:

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

How, then, is Otto’s *mysterium tremendum* related to the fear ghost hunters experience when encountering demons? Otto writes that the antecedent stage to fear of the numinous or “religious dread” is “daemoniac dread.”⁴¹ Otto is using the term daemoniac in its ancient Greek sense. In ancient Greek thought, a *daemon* was a superhuman spirit which could vary in power and moral temperament and was often conceived of as less than a god. Though we eventually get the English word “demon” from this term, *daemons* were not conceived of as necessarily evil. They varied in temperament like the classical gods of the Greek Pantheon on Mt. Olympus. Otto sees daemoniac dread as an antecedent stage to religious dread because, like many Western scholars of his time, he sought to rank forms of religion in terms of how civilized, advanced, beautiful, and good they were. Otto’s view is also evolutionary, with more primitive forms of religion evolving into more civilized forms of religion. At the bottom of the religion hierarchy would lie things like magic and animist forms of religion, while at the top would lie modern Western (especially Protestant) Christianity. Otto’s assumption is that a phase of fear and worship of daemons or powerful spirits in a society, Greek or not, proceeds and is lesser than the fear and worship of gods as part of what might truly be called a religion. Otto is granting that an encounter with a powerful spirit is closely related to or even a form of the experience of the *mysterium tremendum* of the truly numinous. Otto also includes among primitive forms of *mysterium tremendum* the “dread of ghosts.” Otto calls the dread of ghosts a “queer perversion, a

⁴⁰ Though Otto does discuss the Old Testament as a rich source of numinous dread, I do not believe he ever cites this passage in particular. He does cite one of Luther’s sermons on Exodus 20.

⁴¹ Ibid., 14-15.

sort of abortive off-shoot” of daemonic dread, yet he still recognizes the affinity between dread of ghosts, daemonic dread, and dread of the truly numinous. Ultimately, the *mysterium tremendum* experience “first begins to stir in the feeling of ‘something uncanny’, ‘eerie’, or ‘weird’” like one would experience when encountering a ghost or hearing a ghost story.⁴²

By outlining the more “primitive” forms of numinous dread, Otto paves the way for us to link demonic horror with religious experience and to even paint demonic horror as a type of religious experience. If we do away with Otto’s hierarchy of religions, we can recognize that dread of ghosts, daemonic dread, and religious dread are not actually separate categories or stops along an evolutionary progression. We can say that all of these forms of dread are some sort of numinous dread. They all fall under the category of religious experience. Otto himself begins to move in this direction when he draws an analogy between daemonic experiences transitioning into divine experiences and a man’s taste in music becoming more refined. He explains that a man with an uncultured ear “may be enraptured by the sound of the bagpipes or the hurdy-gurdy,” though after he progresses in his musical education, he can no longer bear the sound. Nevertheless, the man would have to admit to himself that the feeling conjured and the faculties he employed were the same when he listened to the bagpipes and hurdy-gurdy then and when he listens to more refined music now.⁴³ Otto’s concept of numinous dread is valuable as a phenomenological description of at least some common forms of religious experience. As our excerpts from Exodus and Luke above begin to show, and as Otto shows in his own work, terror or fear or dread of a specific sort is often a major component of religious experience. Often present in an experience of the divine is a “fear of the Lord.”

Ghost Hunters’ Experiences of the Demonic

Fear or dread is usually one of the central components of a ghost hunter’s demonic encounter. Paranormal investigators who claim to have encountered the demonic often describe the event as not only one of their most intense experiences, but also as a horror beyond all horrors. As one would expect from an encounter with a *mysterium tremendum*, people often describe demonic horror with a sense of awe. Lorraine Warren describes one encounter with a demon: “I could not begin to relate the sheer desperate terror I felt as that morbid black thing inside the whirlwind came closer and closer to me. I tried to move, but I couldn’t. I tried to scream, but no words came out! I felt a sense of doom then that I have never felt before.”⁴⁴ A Miami-based paranormal investigator with whom I spoke likened the feeling of coming face-to-face with a demon to the initial shock of encountering one’s greatest fear drawn out indefinitely. Bishop James Long, a demonologist of the American Old Catholic Church, describes encounters with demons as follows:

the pure hatred will rattle your entire body. When you are in the presence of true hatred, the desire to see beyond what you are feeling emotionally will immediately subside. The desire to want to see the entity that is causing such emotional turmoil will cease to exist. Standing in front of something that has pure hate for you is an experience one never forgets. The hatred and evil is more powerful than any other emotion you will ever experience in your life. A complete dread engulfs your entire being.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., 15-16.

⁴³ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁴ Brittle, 6.

⁴⁵ Long, 100.

From these examples, we can see that demonic experiences can be as powerful as any other religious experience.

Demonic experiences' continuity with other less-ambiguous experiences of religious dread is not the only aspect that marks them as powerful religious experiences. Demonic experiences are also profoundly cosmologically significant. They are potent experiences that prove to the experiencer not only the reality of the supernatural, but also the reality of a divine moral order. The blatant evil of the demonic assumes the existence of cosmic good and evil.

Strictly speaking, the experiences of the *mysterium tremendum* Otto describes are amoral. Otto-type experiences simply evoke awe at the numinous other. Moral knowledge does not flow automatically from these experiences. In the case of ghost hunters' demonic experiences, a further conclusion is drawn after the awful experience. Part of what evokes awe in a demonic experience is the pure hatred and evil one feels when confronted with a demon. As my examples show, ghost hunters often draw the conclusion that evil is an objective reality and the cosmos is ordered into the categories of good and evil, with God as the ultimate good that counterbalances demonic evil. Strictly speaking, Otto experiences do not convey moral knowledge, but ghost hunters draw moral cosmological conclusions from demonic experiences.

Gerald Brittle, who wrote *The Demonologist*, a book detailing many of Ed and Lorraine Warren's demonic encounters from the 1970s, comments on the cosmic significance of these encounters: "When considered in totality, what the Warrens say cannot help but challenge our whole notion of life, death, and man's place on this planet."⁴⁶ For an example of the way demonic experiences can affect a ghost hunter's worldview, one can turn to the reflections of prominent paranormal investigator and demonologist John Zaffis. Zaffis is well-known in ghost hunting circles and even at one time had his own Syfy Channel reality series called *Haunted Collector*, in which Zaffis located haunted objects in the homes of people seeking help and safely removed them. In his 2004 book *Shadows of the Dark*, Zaffis describes the religious doubts he held before getting involved in paranormal investigation and demonology: "I was never a strong Catholic beforehand at all. I grew up in the 1970s and we questioned everything, and I mean everything. We questioned the Devil, we questioned God, and we questioned our parents and society." Things changed when he began his career as a paranormal investigator and began encountering demons: "It opened my eyes up...If these things could really happen and there are such things as demonic influences, I was ever more convinced that there had to be a Higher Power, or there has to be a God. With me, when you look at something, there is black and white, there's Yin and Yang, there are always two sides to everything. If there is a negative here, [there] has to be a positive." Zaffis held a desire for proof of the reality of the divine, and he was not satisfied to rest on traditional religious claims alone. He says, "Sure, I was taught in [Catholic] school that God existed, that spirit was real, but I never really accepted any of it at all. These types of [demonic] experiences started to make me realize that there is definitely a Higher Being, which I refer to as God."⁴⁷ Tiffany, a paranormal investigator based in Maryland, describes in her bio on her paranormal group's website how her view of the cosmos has been affected in a similar way by her experiences of the demonic: "I've never been religious, regardless of the fact that I was raised in the Catholic church. But, I've seen enough to know that there is true evil in

⁴⁶ Brittle, x.

⁴⁷ Zaffis and McIntyre, 7-11.

the universe, and much of it hiding among us. If that evil exist[s], then a supreme good has to exist as well. I think that extreme good, who or whatever it is, put me here to do what I do.”⁴⁸

I can provide one case study that aptly demonstrates the religious significance and enchanting power of demonic experience. I interviewed one ghost hunter, a dentist in Iowa, who became a “Christian,” a term he uses as a general term, and then a Roman Catholic as a result of his experiences with the demonic. He reports that the beginning of his move from being not particularly religious to being a Christian was a specific incident he experienced in the eighth grade. For a period of time, he had been having paranormal experiences. He was having nightmares, he was seeing three-to-four-foot-tall shadow figures running around, and he was hearing knocking on his bedroom walls. One night, an eight-foot-tall black shadow in the form of a hooded figure appeared in his bedroom. He hopped out of his bed and began praying more fervently than he ever had before. This caused the shadow figure to disappear, and he was never bothered again until he encountered dark forces through ghost hunting later in his life. He tried to interpret this experience from “a science-minded point of view.” He explains, “I had a phenomena [sic] that was going on, my independent variable was that I prayed, and after that, I had no more phenomenon.” When I asked if the experience was a conversion experience for him, he explained that the event convinced him that God or a higher power exists, something that is more powerful than the forces that had been plaguing him. Prior to the event he was involved in the Christian youth ministry Young Life, but he found himself persistently questioning the existence of God. This questioning is unsurprising given that his father was an atheist, and his mother was a Unitarian. The shadow figure event “made God absolutely, 100% a reality” for him. The conversion to Catholicism came much later and arose out of a process of reasoning from the starting premise that the demonic is real. He explains, “the big kicker for me is that...I know that the demonic thing is for real...and I know that God exists and can clear this stuff up and can kick this stuff out. And so therefore, if the Catholic Church has a 2000-year history of being, basically, paranormal investigators and able to...perform exorcisms, perform blessings, and all that sort of thing and it works, the only conclusion that I can come to is that...God is real, Jesus is real, and [the Bible’s general message about angels and demons is real]...if it’s not real, why does this stuff work?” When I told him it sounded like his paranormal experiences led him to become Catholic, he responded, “that’s 100% true.”

Timothy K. Beal, in his work on monster theory, builds on Otto’s likening of religious experience to terror. He argues that monsters are monstrous because they are “otherness within sameness.” They are, as Freud says, *unheimlich* or uncanny. Beal holds that there are two primary reactions to the monstrous – it is either demonized or deified. When monsters are demonized they are labeled a threat to “our” order and the “order of the gods.” When they are deified they are marked as a “revelation of sacred otherness.” Beal notes that, often, the monstrous is both demonized and deified. This is what we see in ghost hunters’ encounters with the demonic. The demon is of course demonized as a violation of all that is good and holy, yet it is also treated, often not consciously, as a revelation of divine order in the cosmos. Demons violate the good and orderly while also making the good and orderly real.⁴⁹

Experiences of the demonic are religious experiences. They have no less power to orient the lives of people than other experiences traditionally labeled “religious.” Through Otto’s lens,

⁴⁸ “Investigators,” Spectral-Echo Paranormal Association, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://spectralechoparanormal.weebly.com/investigators.html>.

⁴⁹ Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 5-10.

we can see that demonic experiences are phenomenologically similar to other powerful experiences we deem “religious.” Otto may have been wrong about the *sui generis* nature of religious experience, but he provides insights into what religious experiences feel like for those who experience them and the emotional effects they leave. Beal reminds readers that Otto believed in a “transcendent wholly other” and even in the introduction to *The Idea of the Holy*, the work where Otto introduces his ideas about encounters with the numinous, he “discourages readers from reading his book if they have not had such an experience of the sacred.” Beal does not so discourage readers and neither do I. Like Beal, I see value in Otto’s likening of experiences of the holy to experiences of terror despite his theological commitments. We can liken the terror of a perceived encounter with God to the terror of a perceived encounter with a demon.⁵⁰

Around the United States, ghost hunters are longing for the terror of the demonic. They crave an experience of the numinous from its dark side. Ghostly experiences give them a taste of the *mysterium tremendum*, but an experience of the demonic intensifies the encounter with the numinous. A ghostly experience provides evidence of the reality of the supernatural and perhaps the soul, but a demonic experience provides more powerful evidence of the supernatural and establishes some order in the cosmos. It is not all meaningless and relative: good and evil truly exist, as attested by the existence of essentially evil spiritual monsters.

⁵⁰ Beal, 7.

Prosthetic Gods, Projected Monsters: Imagination and Unconscious Projection in Narratives of Technological Horror

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Abstract:

This paper examines several narratives of techno-horror in literature and film. Special attention is paid to the recurring trope of monstrosity arising from a technologically augmented sense of sight. Utilizing a psychoanalytically informed analysis, this paper argues that fictions can express latent, untenable dimensions of very real experiences. In the case of techno-horror, narratives of sight, imagination, and projection-made-monstrous are rooted in contemporary relationships with technology and its capacity for depicting and transmitting unconscious fantasies. In this relationship, the technological is the extension of a tangible category of humanity, while nevertheless containing the fear that this extension dissolves its stability.

Thus, the genre of techno-horror is unique in expressing the role of unconscious fantasies – our unattainable ideals for becoming “prosthetic Gods,” as Freud put it (1930) – in our relationship with technology. Like the ideal of transcendence in religion, this technological ideal is a desire for both an impossible future, as well as the wish to return to an equally impossible, infantile past. Ultimately, this paper suggests that techno-horror narratives are expressions of a failure in taking responsibility for the othered unconscious fantasies that motivate our relationship with technology. Understanding these narratives within the context of psychoanalytic projection and situating them within the long tradition of imagining a transcendence of the human subject affords a better understanding of the cultural work accomplished by these contemporary expressions of the human-made-monstrous.

Keywords: projection, imagination, psychoanalysis, monsters, technology

As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reiterates in each of the seven theses that introduce his seminal collection, *Monster Theory*, the monstrous body is a “cultural body” – it points to or, rather, it *de-monstrates* (from the Latin *monstrare*) something other than its own form.¹ That which is other – the monstrous and inhuman – often emerges out of, and at the behest of its counterpart: the familiar and human. These demonstrations serve a variety of functions from regulating behaviour to demarcating social, aesthetic, and even geographic boundaries – as medieval maps famously noted on the peripheral regions of the known world: *hic sunt dracones*.

Monsters, most importantly, tell a double narrative,² obscuring the origins of their own culturally transformative and regulative work. They are a distorted mirror image of ourselves, or rather, of our interiority – our own desires, wishes, and impulses which are unbearable to

¹Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

² *Ibid.*, 13.

conscious reflection. Monsters are forces of deconstruction, of the abject, the unconscious, and the imaginary, amongst other theoretical registers, each offering a descriptive language for examining a common theme: the self as other.

Thus, it is not surprising that monstrosity is most often depicted as the hybridization of an element of humanity with something that is wholly other to it. The unfamiliar element that is most often coupled with the human is the animal – think the werewolf, centaur, or mermaid. But in our contemporary cultural imagination, animality is just as often supplanted with mechanization – think scientific creations and automata, such as Frankenstein’s monster, the Terminator, and the rogue AIs which mirror gods and demons in the Gnostic cyber-spaces of *Neuromancer* (1984) and *The Matrix* (1999-2021). In narratives of science fiction and horror, the technological often evokes an age-old sense of animism or religious transcendence, participating in a feedback loop where hopes for the future find themselves paired with realized fears of regression.

The narratives of technological horror which are my focus share the common theme of an augmented sight – one which promises much in terms of future humanity, but often results in monstrous visions. What these narratives underscore, is that the way in which we imagine the world exposes an inextricability between the familiar, the represented, and the unfamiliar, the unrepresented which threatens what *is* represented from an area outside of its control. Cultural images – whether of restrictive monsters or emancipatory future-humanity – are psychological projections. And, like all of our capacities to represent, imagine, and dream, they are never free of the unconscious. This capacity is – at its foundation – a capacity to take what is unbearable *within* ourselves and project it into a monstrous or sublime form that is situated *outside* of ourselves.

Thus, my arguments in this paper, although focused on fictions, are really about how fictional narratives – as cultural dreams – express latent dimensions of real experience. Not least of all, our relationship with technology. One of Freud’s central insights continues to be relevant in this regard. While his broader aim was to understand the internal origins of individual as well as cultural narratives, fantasies, and ideals, he developed a valuable language for describing how the latent and untenable, or, rather, the *unconscious* regions of experience find their voice not only through dreams, for the individual, but through collective cultural products such as religion, technology, and fiction. Thus, through imagination and representation, we instantiate the categories of ourselves, as subjects, in relation to what we consider to be other. And in imagining technologies which expand the familiar subject, while inevitably pushing up against (and sometimes wandering into) the other, we find the inexpressible moment in which *hic sunt dracones* mutates into *hic sunt machinae*.

In the first section of this article, I engage with Victoria Nelson’s suggestion that secular, Gothic monstrosity is a modern “back door” into traditionally religious notions of transcendence. Emphasizing the relationship between the cultural imagination traced by her historical analysis and the broader language of psychoanalytic projection, I elaborate on the role of real and imagined technologies in the migration of transcendence that her work describes. In so doing, I underscore the continuity between traditionally religious or supernatural conceptions of transcendence and the anticipated extensions of the human subject which preoccupy the contemporary technological imagination.

In the second section, I examine several contemporary cultural artefacts which narrativize the monstrous-transcendent augmentations of humanity through technology. Specifically, I focus on the pineal eye as evoked by H.P. Lovecraft, in his short story “From Beyond,” and by

Georges Bataille in his literary-philosophical reveries. For these authors, the pineal eye perpetuates a model of transcendent, sublime, yet monstrous sight while shifting the means of fostering this augmentation from the realm of the spiritual into the technological and biological. I continue, in the third section, by examining two films which explore related themes: David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and Olivier Assayas' *Demonlover*. Both films express the close association between a capacity for monstrous, transcendent vision and contemporary practices of augmented sight, especially through technologies of cinema and new media.

Finally, in the last section, I suggest that the re-reading of Freud offered by critical theorist of the imaginary Cornelius Castoriadis elucidates the role of autonomy and creativity in popular culture's dreams of techno-monstrosity. Even though the genre of techno-horror depicts the confrontation of the human subject with itself as a failure of understanding, this failure simultaneously contains the possibility for self-recognition and autonomy. I suggest that psychoanalysis' emphasis on autonomous, individual responsibility – on a “scrap of independence”³ maintained by the ego as we encounter the contents of our own minds – illuminates this dimension of our imagined relationship with monstrous technology.

Fantasies of techno-horror are the negative prints of an unrealized future promise. They express a failure to sublimate the regressive psychological forces beneath our relationship with technology. This technology is an extension of a human subject that strives, and inevitably fails, to realize its own unconscious ideal: prosthetic Godhood.

1. Technologized Transcendence

“Whether it manifests as lightning or a wall socket,
the transcendental force formerly perceived as divine energy now powers machines.”
- *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson⁴

Victoria Nelson has argued that a cultural transformation has occurred since the Protestant Reformation.⁵ The unseen, supernatural forces of the divine and demonic have migrated from a spiritual and immortal *pneuma* to a personal and mortal *psyche*. That is to say that, far from being eradicated, “earlier notions of the soul and divine agency often surfaced in secular literature and poetry in disguised or demonized form,” represented most frequently as the symptoms of mental illness.⁶

Amidst this process, the popular, literary imagination became the new nexus through which old narratives of transcendence were transmitted and maintained – but with a reworked relationship regarding the human subject. Nelson calls this the “sub-Zeitgeist” of the religious imagination. This sub-Zeitgeist is a “desacralized transcendence”⁷ through which the traditionally religious migrates into other realms of cultural representation – not least of all into

³ Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XVIII (London: Vintage, 2001), 67–143; for a discussion of Freud’s crucial insistence on this “scrap” of individual autonomy, despite the ultimately unresolvable, unconscious conflicts and tensions upon which the psychoanalytic subject is founded, see Joel Whitebook, “‘A Scrap of Independence:’ On the Ego’s Autonomy in Freud,” *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 16 (1993): 259–382.

⁴ Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 259.

⁵ Nelson, *Secret Life*; Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁶ Nelson, *Secret Life*, 164.

⁷ Nelson, *Gothicka*, 15–17.

the way we have come to culturally depict the familiar-unfamiliarity of the dynamic psyche. The discredited and discarded world of external deities, demons, and monsters is thus introjected into the demoniacal and alien nature of our own, only partially conscious, minds.

Especially, the literary genres of the supernatural, with their emphasis on the psychological dimension of horror, have assumed the role of a latent outlet for the sacred – a “back door to the world beyond appearances.”⁸ This is a world, which, even as it is dismantled and deconstructed on an ontological and epistemological level, always seems to captivate as a means of explaining and describing feelings and experiences that seem other to everyday, mundane life. The traditionally religious experiences of revelatory uprushes of meaning are thus preserved, in all of their cultural and personal experiential force, but are transposed, emerging from a mysterious *within* and not from a sacred *without*.⁹

Nelson thus locates an important transition, not only with regard to cultural expressions of what is other and alien, but also pertaining to the manner in which culture represents what is familiar and close to home. The nineteenth-century Gothic saw an increased interest in expressing the entangled relationship between the irrational and the rational, and as a result, “transcendental forces once perceived as external would slowly be internalized to those areas of human perception labeled the ‘imagination’ and the ‘unconscious,’ [...] art and science (as well as human consciousness itself) would replace religious worship as unacknowledged venues for the drawing down of the divine and the raising up of the human.”¹⁰ The experience of transcendence, as it shifts from the externality of spirit to the interiority of psyche, is thus reworked as the manifestation of otherwise common, repeated encounters between the human subject and the limits of its own self-representation. Interpreted within a psychoanalytic framework, encounters with the transcendent and sacred are reformulated to be encounters with psychic projections.

For Freud, the psyche’s capacity for projection is, ultimately, a defense against the unbearable experiences, affects, and impulses with which the human subject is in constant conflict. Through projection, the human capacity for imagination becomes a vehicle for the untenable and unpleasurable *within* to be managed by being encountered as an untenable and unpleasurable *without*.

The psychoanalytic subject is forged out of a relationship between two kinds of psychological processes. The primary processes are those of the pleasure principle. They are motivated by our unregulated internal impulses, desires, and drives – ultimately, by the body. The secondary processes are those of the conflicting reality principle. They arise from the external, renunciatory demands that reality impresses upon us. The reality principle demands a renunciation of infantile desires and wishes, their sublimation into alternate forms that recognize the restricting demands of an external reality.¹¹ In this sense, Freud sees the reality principle not quite as a negation of pleasure, but as its deferral. The reality principle, although abolishing the infantile notion of narcissistic omnipotence – the belief that our wishes can immediately and automatically spring from thought and desire to deed and fulfillment – nevertheless displaces and contains this ideal to the unconscious fantasizing of symptoms, reveries, and dreams. It is among

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Nelson, *Secret Life*, 165.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XII (London: Vintage, 2001), 219.

this category of imaginary experiences that projection, as a defense against an unbearable inner experience, is located.

Projection, essentially, engages with a kernel of the long-abrogated wish for narcissistic omnipotence; it engages with the wish that a thought might simultaneously be a deed, and for a desire to be its own simultaneous fulfillment. Projection is thought, affect, and memory made flesh, while nevertheless masking the subject's agency in encountering its own interiority as an external experience. The power of psychic reality – of our experiences as we perceive them affectively and internally, as opposed to how they might actually be – is thus affirmed in the projective capacity to imagine the world to be otherwise, to play with boundaries, with categories, and with demarcated meanings. It is in this human capacity for imagination – operationalized through art, religion, dreams, neurotic symptoms, etc. – that Freud finds a sublimated expression of the primary, unconscious impulses for narcissistic omnipotence. He writes that it is through this psychic faculty of projective imagination that we can circumvent the demands of reality-testing and “[fulfill] wishes which were difficult to carry out” under its renunciatory restrictions.¹² Reality is not wholly torn apart through this kind of fantasizing; such fantasizing is not a regression to the level of a primary, infantile illusion of omnipotence.¹³

Freud's understanding of the dynamic tension which underpins the very structure of the psyche dissolves any sense of what is fantasy vs. reality, and what is normal vs. deviant psychical functioning, into an interconnected spectrum. “Each one of us,” he notes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “behaves in some one respect like a paranoiac, corrects some aspect of the world which is unbearable to him by the construction of a wish and introduces this delusion into reality.”¹⁴ The development and progress of civilization, by which Freud broadly means the achievements of culture (*Kultur*), is understood to be inextricable from an increase in unhappiness, even as it fulfills humanity's most longed-for ideals of mastery over nature. For Freud, this relationship, between culture as the collective fulfillment of wished-for ideals and an inexplicable unhappiness that arises from their fulfillment, is the result of civilization's inherently renunciatory demands – demands which are rooted in the individual psyche. Civilization both fulfills the individual's earliest ideals of power and mastery, the remnants of an infantile narcissism, while simultaneously instilling an internal guilt, one which ensures that cultural developments are always tempered by the reality principle, always curbed from engaging in a truly regressive collapse into unconscious fantasies of omnipotence.¹⁵

Freud notes that technology itself, as a part of this ambivalently progressive, civilizing force, is rooted in the dynamic attempts at resolving a primal wish. Technology is a means through which uncertainty is harnessed, a means through which “man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning.”¹⁶ The telephone serves as an extension of the ear, the television as an extension of the eye. Technology is the material product of an ideal omnipotence and omniscience,¹⁷ an imaginary extension of identity impressed onto the world and operationalized as an actual extension of the body – the realization of the human subject as a “prosthetic God.”¹⁸ Technological extensions are, in this

¹² Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XXI (London: Vintage, 2001), 79-80.

¹³ Freud, “Formulations,” 222.

¹⁴ Freud, “Civilization,” 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

way, the products of the same narcissistic impulse which fuels the capacity for imagination. And this is a capacity which resides at the boundary of inner and outer experience, where the wish is preserved for thought to be automated in its fulfillment as deed. Technological extensions thus serve a broader sublimating process which places infantile ideals into the service of progressive, civilizational advances. The fulfillment of this process contains the renounced kernel of a desublimation in which the discourse of progress perpetually intersects and is intertwined with the germ of regressive collapse into the primary, infantile narcissism that is harboured unconsciously by each mature subject.

It is significant, then, that Nelson notes technology has come to dominate contemporary cultural expressions of formerly religious transcendence. In doing so, technology “did not rob us of the idea of the soul at all. On the contrary, the machine *received* this idea.”¹⁹ The technological extensions of the human body, like gods, demons, and spirits, who sublimated the ideal of infantile omnipotence into an abrogated, external form, continue to act as objects which are both real and partially-fantasized, both rooted in the subject and external to it. Through these technological objects, just as through supernatural beings, our internal worlds can co-exist with the necessarily renunciatory demands and disappointments of external reality.

Recognizing the continuity of this transition, from the ideals of divine enhancement to the ideals of the machinic augmentations, it is possible to explore the notion that the very process of imagining the human subject is one which occurs at an intermediate place: one which cannot collapse itself into categories of familiarity and otherness, humanity and inhuman monstrosity, but only exists in the transitional state of passing from one and into the other. The paranoid fantasies of a technologically facilitated latent threat to the human subject – of technological monstrosity – are thus also the elucidations of a disjuncture that is not only encountered *in here*, but resonates with an *out there* – they problematize the distinctions which we draw between the one and the other.

Technology is, thus, always partially imagined – partially responding to an extension of the subject which is totalizing and complete, but never truly realizable through the limited artifice of machines and mechanical augmentations. Each technological advance carries with it its own imagined future, which it has not attained. Each technological advance is thus always partially un-invented, even as it promises an aura of perfectibility to each human sense or appendage it augments.

The desire for fostering a potential human perfectibility is the trace of a repressed wish for omnipotence. This wish is only ever imperfectly and incompletely reified by technology in practice. However, technology’s inextricable relationship with this unconscious wish – its perpetual existence as a channel for partial returns of a repressed narcissism – is precisely what makes it a fruitful site for emergent monstrosity, for the emergence of the other and unfamiliar than is, at once, the familiar, but unacceptable, self. Technology *de-monstrates* the unconscious, precisely as it fails to realize the subject’s unconscious wish for perfectible omnipotence.

Technology is the expression of an unconscious fantasy – and thus a “back door” to the sacred – in the same way that notions of gods and spirits pointed to an abrogated ideal of omnipotence desired by the human subject, cast-off and projected onto objects, figures, and forces found without, in the external world.

¹⁹ Nelson, *Secret Life*, 250.

2. The Pineal Eye as an Imagining Machine

“‘That [pineal] gland is the great sense-organ of organs – I *have found out*. It is like sight in the end, and transmits visual pictures to the brain. If you are normal, that is the way you ought to get most of it... I mean get most of the evidence *from beyond*.’”
 - “From Beyond,” H.P. Lovecraft²⁰

Nelson notes that twentieth-century American horror author, H.P. Lovecraft, is a kind of paradigm for examining not only the collapsed identification of the monstrous and the transcendent, but their collective dependence on projection – making the internal, external – as a means of self-reflexive discovery. That is, Lovecraft’s protagonists – often going mad from monstrous knowledge at the end of each narrative – are following parallel lines of discovery: one being collective and cosmic, dwarfing the significance of humanity and its ideals in favour of eldritch beings; and the other, individual and subjective, *de-monstrating* a monstrosity within through encountering a monstrosity without.

This kind of resonance between the monstrous inner and outer is, as Nelson calls it, a kind of “psychotopographic” externalization – a projection – in which the subject externalizes an untenable, inner reality in order for it to be experienced in a form which influences and affects the subject as an external reality.²¹ Assailed by the reified form of its own dissociated and ejected portions, the subject fails to recognize the depths of itself once these depths come to be mapped outwards onto a monstrous, external – and ultimately, differentiated - reality. There is thus a recurring narrative in Lovecraft’s fiction, as a contemporary bearer of a seemingly discarded, but really only transformed, transcendence. It is a narrative central to locating the human subject in Lovecraft’s cosmos: the human always exists as a hybridized form, always forced into realizing itself through gazing at an other that springs out of itself, and yet is established as that which the human subject is not.

Particularly in his short story, “From Beyond,”²² Lovecraft fixates on the latent, monstrous potentials of our capacity for imagination. The story begins when an unnamed narrator visits a reclusive friend, a scientist by the name of Crawford Tillinghast. During his visit, the narrator comes to realize something is horrifically wrong with Tillinghast, who reveals a machine he has been working on. It is a machine meant to stimulate the pineal gland, located in the brain, facilitating a capacity to see an omnipresent dimension which is overlaid atop our own. This dimension is populated by unfathomable, malicious monstrosities whose very existence obliterates any sense of an anthropocentric cosmos.

The feeling of dread which permeates Lovecraft’s universe comes precisely from the sense that the categories that we utilize to demarcate meaning, to denote what is familiar, definable, and human, ultimately relate to a universe that is, at best, indifferent to our categories and, at worst, ravenously malevolent. Lovecraft’s understanding of the human, as a category of identity, emphasizes its perpetual tension with an inhumanity that is located both in an unseen without, but is also accessible by amplifying sensory capacities that are ever-present from within. Psychoanalytically, Lovecraft’s subjects become aware of the inherent irrationality – the inherent drives, desires, and impulses which are antithetical to the conscious subject – in relation to reality, in the externalized, reified form of inhuman, cosmic monsters.

²⁰ H.P. Lovecraft, “From Beyond,” in *The Dream Cycle of H.P. Lovecraft: Dreams of Terror and Death* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 47.

²¹ Nelson, *Secret Life*, 110.

²² Lovecraft, “From Beyond.”

In “From Beyond,” Tillinghast, operating within the long tradition of literary “mad scientists,” recites a monologue in which he criticizes the limited scope of human perception, concluding, nevertheless, that it is an inner capacity which can unveil “whole worlds of matter, energy, and life which lie close at hand.”²³ His machine is at once an augmentation of the familiar senses, as well as an apparatus meant to act upon “unrecognized sense-organs that exist in us as atrophied or rudimentary vestiges.”²⁴

Significantly, Tillinghast’s machine is not a mere extension of the subject that widens its vision, but instead a forced regression. Thus, Lovecraft’s pineal eye is a kind of fantasized organ of the unconscious, re-engaging with the primal, narcissistic ideal of reifying imagination – making thought into matter. Going against the grain of reality and its renunciatory demands, such a magically omnipotent ability is – essentially – monstrous. It is this internal monstrosity which is crystallized, externally, into the form of a monstrous, othered, and previously unseen cosmos. In this process, what is obscured is the fact that a concrete, definable human subject is not *embedded* in this cosmos, but that the dynamic familiar-unfamiliarity of the human subject, its disavowal of portions of itself, is ultimately the *source* of that very cosmos. It is this disavowed monstrosity that is the unconscious foundation of the familiar, and Tillinghast states as much when he proclaims that “we shall overleap time, space, and dimensions, and without bodily motion peer into the bottom of creation.”²⁵ What is peered into is the unseen foundation of the visible, the repressed instability at the core of the subject’s tentative stability.

Lovecraft’s story is an illuminating example of the contemporary expression of technology alongside other means of imagining an extension of the human – specifically, transcendence and monstrosity. Technology, as a practice of partial attempts to reclaim an infantile omnipotence, receives, as Nelson has argued, the traditional dimension of spiritual transcendence. Like religion, it does so both as a transformation of mundane experience into more sublime, higher, forms, as well as in the form of a regressive return of the repressed. Imagining technological extension participates in the kind of unconscious fantasizing which both dissolves and reaffirms the limits of the human subject, dissolving it in fantasies of grandiosity, while also reaffirming its limits in relation to an external, monstrous, reality that is formed from out of its own unassimilable, unconscious wishes.

Technology promises a supersession and amplification of the human, the fulfillment of a long-repressed wish for omnipotence, but one that poses a threat to the human subject. The terror of this wish’s fulfillment and the unconscious guilt of infantile regression is reified into a human-made-monstrous. The former suggests new ways of envisioning the augmentation of human potential, and the latter grapples with the regressive origins of this narcissistic wish, ultimately coupling the extension of the subject with its very dissolution, an interruption and breakage of the bounded relationship between inner and outer experiences, between fantasy and reality.

Not unlike Lovecraft’s literalization of unconscious fantasizing as an organ of sight, Georges Bataille, too, presents a kind of philosophical fantasy of the pineal eye as a nexus of powerful imagination which is both constructive and dissolutive.²⁶ For Bataille, socially-rooted anthropological or scientific representations necessarily collapse in their inability to correspond

²³ Ibid., 46.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The imagery of the pineal eye is shared by Lovecraft and Bataille as well as their era – both tap into an early twentieth-century investment towards unlocking the human potentials which were promised by the Theosophical confluence of psychology, biology, and emergent waves of proto-New Age comparative spiritualism.

to experience: they demand mythological representations, they dissolve in their inability to result in anything but phantasms.²⁷ Bataille imagines the pineal eye as an organ exclusively attuned to our capacity for mythological, phantasmatic sight. This organ, however, is doomed (much as is the fate of the characters in Lovecraft's story) to a self-immolation, as humanity's evolutionary erection guides its gaze upwards to the blinding sun. The pineal eye, Bataille writes, "is not a product of understanding, but is instead an immediate existence; it opens up and blinds itself like a conflagration, or like a fever that eats the being, or more exactly, the head."²⁸ The pineal eye is thus, for Bataille, an organ of imagination, yet it is one that *consumes*, as well as represents, the rational order through which the subject has come to stabilize itself and its world. It is an organ that enables new, unthinkable thought to burn through a previously closed system of logic but leaves little room for the emancipatory hope that a new system might take its place.

Rodolphe Gasché, interpreting the phantasmatic in Bataille's thought, finds it to be neither fantasy nor imagination in their usual contradistinction from reality. The phantasm is a *rupture*: co-dependent on the reality out of which it breaks, a reality that was itself sustained by its potential extension into the phantasmatic, and co-creative of new forms of reality that assert their existence in this moment of breakage that is, in fact, a simultaneous moment of extension. As Gasché notes, "in a sense, the phantasm matures in a matrix, until it is pushed out and *projected*."²⁹ This is a crucial elaboration of Bataille. The rupture that is effected by the phantasm, is encoded, structured, and saturated by the system that it cleaves open. This is the functional quality of projection through which the newly thinkable, the previously *unthinkable*, operates – whether regressive and monstrous or progressive and emancipatory.

One of Bataille's images through which he models the contradictions of the human subject is what he calls the *Jésuve*, an amalgamation of the parodically creative *je suis* and the erotic yet eruptive force of *Vésuve*. The *Jésuve* is imagined as the extreme limit of experience, through which one's subjectivity, the "I am" in relation to the world, meets its ever-present phantasmatic contradiction in the form of the archaic pineal eye. The pineal eye, erupting "at the summit of the skull like a horrible [...] volcano,"³⁰ is the forgotten component of the *je suis*, the logical, yet forgotten interiority that is contained by its consciously accepted structure. The pineal eye – as evoked by Bataille's image of the solar anus and the volcanic *Jésuve* – erupts, literally *projecting* its contents outwards and decapitating, in the process, the regulating role of reason and boundedness as encapsulated in the head.³¹

Thus, for Bataille, the category of the human is solely the shell whose breakage facilitates the necessary resolution of a tension in our very being. The human subject emerges at the moment in which it shatters, revealing itself to have been an obstruction of a latent reality that extends itself into something beyond the human as it comes to erupt and be projected outwards

²⁷ Georges Bataille, "The Pineal Eye," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927 - 1939*, ed. Allan Soekl, trans. Allan Soekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 79-82.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁹ Rodolphe Gasché, *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmatology*, trans. Roland Végső (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 146.

³⁰ Georges Bataille, "The Jesuve," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927 - 1939*, ed. Allan Soekl, trans. Allan Soekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 74.

³¹ This image shares a resemblance with another one of Bataille's conceptualizations of the contradictory nature of the human subject, the *Acéphale*. The *Acéphale* (translated as 'headless' or 'leaderless') is depicted as a headless Vitruvian Man and would come to be the guiding emblem and eponym for a literary group, journal, and 'secret society' established by Bataille in the 1930s [For the texts published by *Acéphale* see Alastair Brotchie and Marina Galletti, eds., *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, trans. John Harman and Natasha Lehrer (London: Atlas Press, 2018).].

into new forms of thought, new experiences, and new realities. In this process, the human is both reified and drained of meaning at once – not capable of bearing its interior, it sacrifices its exterior in order to eject what cannot be contained, what cannot be recognized, into a recognizable, albeit monstrous, object.

Lovecraft's monsters, in "From Beyond," who emerge from out of the human – literally, in the form of amplified brain functioning – can be thought of as phantasmatic beings. They are born out of the shattering of a fixed idea regarding what constitutes knowledge, perception, and the limits of experience. In breaking out of the matrix which defines the limits of representation, they serve to simultaneously ratify its limits by obscuring the restraining processes of sublimation and renunciation which prevent a recognition of an outer monstrosity's otherwise internal origins.

By thinking through the dialectical inseparability of humanity and inhuman monstrosity, each constructing the other, we can start to perceive a desublimating force that antithetically underpins the otherwise civilizing and regulating force of projective imagination, of abstracting the untenable. Lovecraft's technologization of the constructive/dissolutive aspects of the imaginative faculties is, in fact, a technologization of hitherto unseen psychic currents. Currents which were previously envisioned as the supernatural and spiritual forces of a sacred cosmos. Envisioned either as religious transcendence or technologized monstrosity, what is made visible in imagining either form of human extension is the perpetual overlap of the unconscious with consciousness, made known solely through an indirect, sublimated, and symptomatic form. It is apparent that the manner in which both technology and religious transcendence are imagined share a sense that human experience is always akin to a palimpsest. New, idealized futures are cast atop of regressive wishes for omnipotent power and control; the promise of progress is thus inseparably marked by the threat of regression.

Describing the effects of the pineal eye's augmented sight, Lovecraft likens it to a cinema projection onto a painted screen: "indescribable shapes both alive and otherwise were mixed in disgusting disarray, and close to every *known* thing were whole worlds of alien, unknown entities. It likewise seemed that all known things entered into the composite of unknown things, and vice versa."³² The mad Tillinghast exclaims to the narrator, "you see them? You see them? You see the things that float and flop about you and through every moment of your life? You see the creatures that form what men call the pure air and the blue sky?"³³

Gasché's explication of Bataille's phantasm resonates with this proclamation. The phantasm is a hybrid, growing inside a system of enclosure, feeding off of it, before it can break beyond its boundaries into something new, something previously unthinkable. The phantasm is "a nonplace in-between, suspended between the actual places of the inside and the outside, it is an irreducible middle that corresponds most accurately to what it is supposed to represent, since it is itself a crack, a division, and a being that is in-and-for-itself not by itself."³⁴ The human subject itself is just such a crack, a mere, fluttering moment of transgression defined by its irreducibility, its perpetual in-betweenness. The human subject is a dynamic process – it is the moment of tenuous transition, from a bounded place into an expansive outside, one into which it naturally stretches yet within which it cannot ever be sustained.

³² Lovecraft, "From Beyond," 49.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Gasché, *Georges Bataille*, 148.

3. Old Fantasy/New Flesh

“‘The television screen is the retina of the mind’s eye. Therefore, the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore, whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore, television is reality, and reality is less than television.’”
 - *Videodrome*, David Cronenberg³⁵

Exploring similar themes, David Cronenberg’s 1983 body horror classic, *Videodrome*,³⁶ also examines how fantasy is not only transmitted through technological amplifications but the literal transmutation of idea and image into matter and flesh. The film’s protagonist, television producer Max Renn, finds the line between reality and imagination to be blurred as he seeks out increasingly shocking (that is, erotic and violent) entertainment for broadcast. Just like Lovecraft’s “From Beyond,” Cronenberg’s film poses questions such as: Is the monstrous a product of the protagonist’s insanity, or is the world full of tangible, external monsters? Does mind affect matter? Are mind and matter all that different? Just as in “From Beyond,” *Videodrome* focuses on technology’s capacity to accelerate something that has long-existed inside the human body. The human appendage which is accelerated in *Videodrome*, transforming thought into matter, is described as either an evolving organ of future-humanity or a malicious tumor that regressively consumes a naturalized human state. It is “like an organ” or a “tumor,” “old flesh” and “new flesh.”³⁷

Media theorist, W.J.T. Mitchell, asks an important question, analyzing a crucial scene in *Videodrome* as he does so: “what do pictures want?” The scene in question echoes the television spirit world of *Poltergeist* and inverts Sadako’s TV emergence in *The Ring*, as Max Renn’s television set, pulsating with fleshy veins, seduces and literally consumes him through its screen. The answer is plain: the images we broadcast through our technological media want *us*.³⁸

What is significant, in relation to this scene, is the ambiguity which *Videodrome* sustains between flesh and fantasy, human and machine. The desires stimulated by or depicted in pictures – specifically the pictures of mass entertainment which stand in, as reified forms of our collective and personal internal fantasies – stem from us, from viewers, perhaps more so than from marketers, content creators, writers, or directors. As Mitchell emphasizes, the desires that motivate our representational practices – art, entertainment, etc. – stem from the discarded parts of ourselves, a kind of second self which, psychoanalytically, can be interpreted as the second self of unconscious desires and fantasies.

Not necessarily with regard to monstrosity, but obscenity, Mitchell makes clear that the image itself is not in any essentialized way ‘obscene’ or ‘monstrous.’ Obscenity is constructed through the disavowed and abrogated desire to see and consume, a desire which stems from the viewer and is finely tuned by their own personal emotions and experiences, as well as the social context in which they are embedded. Images, then – those which arouse abjection and horror – are really receptacles for subjective projections. As Mitchell notes, “a picture is less like a statement or speech act, then, than like a speaker capable of an infinite number of utterances. An

³⁵ David Cronenberg, *Videodrome*, Blu-Ray (Universal Pictures, 1983).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ WJT Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 217-221.

image is not a text to be read but a ventriloquist's dummy into which we project our own voice.”³⁹

Yet unlike the machine in “From Beyond” or the signal broadcast in *Videodrome*, the technologies which we do actually develop in order to represent our fantasies – television, videotape, digital media, the news feeds of social networking platforms – are never quite so automated. Although our relationship to them is founded on projection – the projection, specifically, of what we desire but do not acknowledge – they are nevertheless not an ever-ready and automated bio-technological hybrid which we can seamlessly jack into.

Our representational technologies do not autonomously mediate between mind and matter. Fantasy does not leap from the inside out – even as we desperately try to bridge that gap with algorithms that know what we want before we want it, and an overabundance of speed and information that will never leave us wanting. Technology does not directly answer our fantasies, people do, because technologically facilitated images are ultimately works of artifice.

This is illustrated in the complementary vision of Olivier Assayas’ 2002 film, *Demonlover*.⁴⁰ Assayas’ film, like “From Beyond” and *Videodrome*, also depicts the transmission of fantasy through technologies that represent, or aid us in better perceiving, reality. But, by acknowledging the role of others, of society itself, and side-stepping the automation of fantasy-fulfillment in the form of a mind-matter mutation trope, *Demonlover* is far more prescient and terrifying.

In the film, media executive Diane – embroiled in corporate espionage – is tasked with purchasing the rights to distribute Japanese animated pornography (*hentai*). The animation company she is dealing with needs financing in order to facilitate their transition from an outdated 2D to a new 3D format. One of the most striking, albeit entirely understated, scenes in the film is when Diane asks, during an early meeting, whether the *hentai* artists use models for their depiction of underage characters.

The question is central to the film: Is a real, living model necessary to stage and orchestrate the representation of a fantasy? Is a model necessary in order to facilitate the transition of fantasy from inner to outer reality, even if the fantasy product is entirely one of artifice, entirely unreal, or, perhaps, monstrous? Fundamentally, where do our images of what is other to ourselves and to established reality come from?

The Japanese term *hentai* is significant in this regard. In English, *hentai* exclusively means a type of animated pornography, which itself includes many varying styles and subgenres, which is produced in Japan. In Japanese, however, *hentai* is a word that consists of two characters (変態) – one meaning unusual or strange change, and another meaning condition, attitude, or appearance. The term, more generally, means transformation, transition, or metamorphosis. More specifically, it is then applied to Japan’s domestic animated pornography and carries the connotation of sexual perversion – a *perverse transformation* in sexuality and desire.⁴¹

Demonlover goes on to answer the question regarding the necessity of models in the externalization of fantasy. Of course, in that early scene where Diane meets with the animation company, they admit with great reticence that they had had an instance of an animator using underage models for his characters. But it is not until later in the film that the issue of fantasy

³⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁰ Olivier Assayas, *Demonlover*, DVD (Lionsgate, 2002).

⁴¹ “へんたい, 変態, Hentai,” Jisho: Japanese-English Dictionary, accessed May 14, 2022, <https://jisho.org/word/%E5%A4%89%E6%85%8B>.

models is really brought to the foreground. Diane discovers that the distribution of the hentai site, “demonlover.com,” is actually a front for a website called “Hell Fire Club,” where users submit their fantasies and pay to have them performed and streamed by living subjects in real time. This is the real aberrant metamorphosis of fantasy – from 2D to 3D to real life models. *This* is the real *hentai*, and the website of the innocuously artificial 2D and 3D pornography is a natural portal into the manipulation and orchestration of real life. In Hell Fire Club, real life is not only the abstract model, but the indispensable real-time medium for modelling fantasy.

However, Assayas does not seem to be arguing for the common assertion that pornography or violence onscreen leads to offscreen enactment. Instead, what *Demonlover* makes clear is that the online fantasy image is indistinguishable from reality precisely because it is *made* from it. It uses up reality like an artist uses a medium, and like unconscious fantasies use conscious experiences of abject monstrosity, untethered from its internal origins, to approximate an expression of the inexpressible.

By avoiding the automatic leap from mind to matter in the generation of fantasies, Assayas’ horrific image of fantasy-generating machines resonates with our actual experience of technology today, with the “real” user-generated content which we continuously produce and consume online. These ‘real’ technological systems are the evolution of the imagining machines evoked by Lovecraft and Cronenberg in the form of fictional, technologically mutated, organs. Instead, *Demonlover* illuminates what is only latent in these other two narratives: that molding reality is both a terror and a sublime desire, that technological progress is a palimpsest which writes the future over the surface of barbaric regressions. The desire to possess one’s fantasies as external objects, to receive mirror images of the disavowed portions of oneself, is the desire that motivates how we imagine future-human experience as much as it is motivated by a narcissistic wish for mastery which equates inner experiences with external reality.

When one logs onto Hell Fire Club in *Demonlover*, the first things that flicker across the screen are scenes of bondage and torture with the instruction: “send us your fantasy and we will make it real.”⁴² This is seen when Diane first discovers the site, but it is repeated once again in the final scene of the film where it is Diane herself who is now a victim of Hell Fire Club. As a model and toy for users to play with by proxy of the Club’s sadistic torturers, users can dress Diane as various famous characters and celebrities, as superheroes and video game characters. And in this final scene, a young boy uses his father’s credit card to submit a rape fantasy involving the character Storm from X-Men. He settles in to watch his fantasy inflicted on Diane, all the while doing his science homework. She is, of course, no longer Diane, no longer a human being, but a toy: a raw medium, standing in as a simulacrum of humanity for the purposes of playing out the representation of another’s fantasy. As on-the-nose as this final scene is, the film is powerful precisely because it uncomfortably de-fictionalizes what Lovecraft’s pineal eye and Cronenberg’s organ of the “new flesh” both suggest. That is, the young boy’s fantasy of domination is the foundational, narcissistic fantasy of the human subject, realized by technological extensions of our senses and projected onto the screen of that same technological system.

Dudley Andrew, in chapter three of *What Cinema Is!*⁴³ offers an excellent discussion of the role of projection – as in the role of screening cinema – from traditional films to new media. Although not focusing fully on the psychoanalytic implications of the term, Andrew notes that the power of the image, in depicting realism, is dependent on its capacity for facilitating

⁴² Assayas, *Demonlover*, 2002.

⁴³ Andrew Dudley, *What Cinema Is!: Bazin’s Quest and Its Charge* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 66-97.

projective eruptions – emergences of something new, something left unrepresented in the image itself. These eruptions emerge both from a fleeting transparency beyond the cinematic frame – through cinema’s ability to depict screens within screens – as well as from within viewing subjects themselves, cast onto the concrete representations of the screened image.⁴⁴ In *Demonlover*, Assayas’ meditation on computers as fantasy-generating machines is the screen within the screen, and his characters, such as the teenage boy, stand in for viewing subjects. However, these viewing subjects are also us, the viewers of the film, who recognize the resonance between the wish-fulfillment that the depicted machines provide and our own fundamental fantasies of omnipotence which underpin our real relationship with technology.⁴⁵

What *Demonlover* implicitly highlights is that our actual systems of technological representation – our social networks, news feeds, channels, etc. – all *do* ask us to send them our fantasies. They do so implicitly, through digital marketing, algorithms, and various statistical trackers. And, most importantly, these systems are infinitely mutable in their programmability and impermanence. The platforms never stop tracking and the feeds never stops scrolling. It is in this way that real technological systems *do* ask us to send them our fantasies, and that these systems *do* aim to realize them by representing real people as if they were models for the purposes of the most inhuman entertainment.

The user-generated Internet is, in this way, a space through which everyone can accomplish each other’s fantasies, just as much as it is an index of requests for fantasy representations. Unlike the mind-matter omnipotence of “From Beyond” and *Videodrome*, in the ‘real’ world, mind *is* made matter, but not automatically. We ask for it, and others make it happen. We vote on what we want to see with seconds, minutes, and hours of our lives spent looking at this particular image, this story, this account over another. It is in this way, and not by some nefarious manipulation, that our visual representation of reality continues to be staged for the purposes of entertainment and fantasy. We do it ourselves, and we are nudged along by the nature of the technologies we have placed at our own disposal.

This gets at the heart of what is expressed, regarding technology, in all three of these narratives. Technology is always partially imagined, un-invented, and incomplete. It is the sublimated fulfillment of an attempt at reclaimed omnipotence, a partial regression which negotiates with the renunciatory demands of civilizing progress. From the first cave paintings to the written word, all the way to film and its distribution through the Internet – technologies of representation have always been dream-makers, have always been the imagination-made-machine. They are modelled on minds that do not fully know themselves. As such, these technologies take what is inside of us – familiar and other, human and monstrous – and turn it inside-out.

Immateriality is made material, but not as automatically as the unconscious, infantile wish of narcissistic omnipotence would have it. *Demonlover*, unlike the human/machine permutations of “From Beyond” and *Videodrome*, exposes the necessary impossibility of fantasy-made-flesh. Instead, in *Demonlover*, we find that structures of technological and social artifice – technological networks, machines, and the people who establish and sustain them – are the underlying forces which direct the reification of unconscious fantasy through technological images. In *Demonlover*, technology negotiates with the ultimate regressive aim of our

⁴⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁵ Although my focus, here, is on the broader tradition of techno-horror and how psychoanalysis enriches our understanding of its relationship with unconscious fantasies, *Demonlover* – as early as 2002 – offered a rich avenue for exploring the tangible place of new media, contrasted with traditional cinema, in relation to viewers’ fantasies.

unconscious wishes: the elimination of technology itself, as the middle between fantasy and flesh, and a revived instantaneity in the transition between the two.

4. “Where id was there ego shall be:” Imagination and Autonomy

“Desires, drives – whether it be Eros or Thanatos – this is me, too, and these have to be brought, not only to consciousness but to expression and to existence. An autonomous subject is one that knows itself to be justified in concluding: this is indeed true, and: this is indeed my desire.”

- *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cornelius Castoriadis⁴⁶

Imagination is the extension of a fundamental capacity for fantasy, one which orients itself towards the sublimated fulfillment of unconscious desires and instincts. And an instinct – or drive, *Trieb* – is, significantly, a *frontier* phenomenon. It is an interface, as Freud elaborated, between the mental and the somatic [*Seelischem und Somatischem*]. Drives function “as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body.”⁴⁷ Thus, imagination operates as an interface between mind and body, between fantasy and flesh; falling into neither of these categories fully, yet simultaneously encompassing both.

For psychoanalyst and critical theorist Cornelius Castoriadis, the world itself is, ultimately, rooted in the processes of imagination and projection.⁴⁸ He describes society as an imaginary institution, instantiated from out of the underlying, infinite potentials of an undifferentiated magma of significations. Just as unconscious fantasies are anacletic in relation to reality – they “lean on” and crystallize around real experience in order to evoke inner fantasies – so too, the social imaginary is instituted and continues to institute itself through processes of demarcating social logic (*legein*) and through practices of social action (*teukhein*) which lean on real experiences.⁴⁹

This is why, as Castoriadis argues, the demarcations and distinctions which govern a social logic of difference and sameness, groups and ensembles, self and other, are not essentialized forms into which human subjects fall. They are, instead, sustained by a social imaginary which, itself, institutes and is instituted by its subjects. Although imagination is, for psychoanalysis, always partially regressive – partially engaged in an uncanny, infantile wish for omnipotence, always located on the border of where monsters threaten to emerge – it nevertheless possesses the ability to institute the individual and the social as something *new*. This is what is understood, by Castoriadis, as the subject’s capacity for *creative* imagination, the ability to break through the fixed logic of an imposed social order towards new forms of thought, new identities, and new experiences.

The monstrous forms of technological imagining, which I have examined, intersect with the creative potentials of imagination in their collective emphasis on a human ability to imagine, and in so doing, effectively *create* new realities and categories of existence. Whether monstrous,

⁴⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 104.

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XIV (London: Vintage, 2001), 122.

⁴⁸ Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution*, 303-305.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 289-291, 370

future-human, or both, this process invariably acknowledges an investment of power in the human imagination, even as it resolves in its own self-deconstruction and dissolution. Similarly, a significant insight of psychoanalysis is that irrationality – a dynamic and dialectical relationship of the repressed unconscious with consciousness – is the avenue through which new forms of thought and the capacity for self-reflective transformations can emerge. Irrationality, the capacity to think beyond the limits of the subject, is the central engine through which new thought becomes possible – through which the subject can reconstruct and reorganize their identity in relation to themselves and their world.

Castoriadis clarifies that Freud's famous dictum – "where id was there ego shall be"⁵⁰ – is not calling for unconsciousness to be merely replaced with consciousness, for the unconscious to be intellectualized and flattened. Instead, Castoriadis places this often-misread quote into its appropriate context.⁵¹ The work of psychoanalysis is, as Freud continued in the same paragraph, "a work of culture"⁵² – like the draining of a dam in order to provide more self-reflective living space. For Castoriadis, "where id was there ego shall be" – or more precisely, and in a far more active sense, "shall become" [*werden*] – is an acknowledgement of one mode of being by another. It is an active recognition in which the unconscious, as a site of non-thought and a lack of autonomy, is replaced with autonomous agency and a capacity for critical thinking. And this capacity is, itself, by no means a stable thing: it is an ongoing process marked by a shift in the relationship between the unconscious and consciousness.⁵³

The unconscious is thus realized by the subject to be a part of itself – the ego, encountering the id, in this scenario, proclaims 'this is me too.' And in so doing, autonomy is achieved through recognizing that the discourse of the other, the unfamiliar and alien, is a discourse which speaks through what is familiar – what is me.⁵⁴ It is only through processes of imaginary investment that the other, the unconscious, is given its own autonomous existence, is thus able to hijack the conscious subject and terrorize it through encounters with an external monstrosity. This monstrosity, however, is really the projection of the subject's own internal experiences – it already belongs to it, though the subject does not recognize it. In this sense, techno-horror – such as the narratives of Lovecraft, Cronenberg, and Assayas – evokes a ruptured form of fantasizing in which such a recognition fails to occur.

Augmentations of human senses, as sites of horror, are thus moments of failed responsibility and abrogated autonomy. Within them, the contents of one's mind are given free rein to terrorize, to become reified as external monsters. The other is not the other-in-me – which would be no less terrifying, but at least an other that I am *responsible* for. The other is, instead, the other from beyond – unconsciously imagined, and only imagined, to be autonomous, to answer for itself, so that we do not have to answer for it.

The technologically-augmented eruptions of fantasy which I have examined underscore a primal, monstrous inhumanity – the other which, upon mature reflection, is found to be no less other, but also no more distinct from the self. The pineal eye, for Lovecraft and Bataille, is a monstrous organ of sight that literalizes Freud's description of the unconscious mind,

⁵⁰ Sigmund Freud, "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XXII (London: Vintage, 2001), 80.

⁵¹ Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution*, 102-103. Also see Cornelius Castoriadis, "Psychoanalysis and Politics," in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁵² Freud, "Dissection," 80.

⁵³ Castoriadis, "Psychoanalysis," 128-129.

⁵⁴ Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution*, 102-103.

desublimated and unrepressed beyond all human recognition. The pineal eye is, in this sense, a guarded, vestigial organ which purports to ‘see’ things beyond the world of appearances, as they really are. But – as with the dynamic nature of the Freudian psyche – the pineal eye is not really an organ of regressive wish-fulfillment, merely reinstating an unrestricted, infantile narcissism. It is, instead, an organ of projection which forgets its own functioning. Just as gods, demons, and spirits receive our omnipotent ideals while obscuring their origin in human desires and experience, the monstrous visions of this augmented organ offer a mirror while foreclosing the potential for recognizing oneself in its surface. So too, the pulsating bio-mechanical television set of *Videodrome* and the omnipotent molding of reality depicted in *Demonlover* seem to ask, as well as occlude, an answer to their questions: what old fantasies and desires are being awakened alongside new augmentation of inner sight? What regressive dimension of experience erupts alongside the creative capacity to remodel our understanding of ourselves, to re-make the world as we might imagine it to be?

The dual nature of remembering and forgetting which characterizes the traditionally religious imagination is perpetuated in these techno-horror narratives. The capacity for self-reflection is sustained, as well as collapsed under the weight of its own horrific revelation. This occurs at the moment in which the subject fails to realize that its monstrously othered imaginings are, in fact, the projected contours of the cracks and breakages of its own being. The confluence of regression and progress, transcendence and technology, permeates narratives of techno-horror. This confluence sketches out a map of the very real experiences bubbling beneath the surface, as the human subject strives to realize – whether through practices of transcendence or advances in technology – its own prosthetic deification.

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Maja Bondestam, ed., *Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture: Concepts of Monstrosity before the Advent of the Normal*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 201 pp, cloth. \$110.00.

Exceptional Bodies examines various different examples of exceptional bodies – meaning, in this case, those bodies which were considered by observers to be “both outstanding and extraordinary in a positive way, and, in a more negative sense, deviations from the general picture, ugly disturbing, frightening or simply irrelevant” (11). Similar to Daston and Park’s *Wonder and the Orders of Nature 1150 – 1750* but with greater focus on the human body, the individual chapters analyze the ways in which extraordinary bodies were related to ordinary ones – both positively and negatively – in the works of individual authors.

The subject of the first chapter is the *moresca*, an acrobatic, theatrical dance style that often had narrative and monstrous elements within it. Branded vulgar along with many dances by spiritual reformers in Counter-Reformation Rome, Kavvadia’s chapter argues that Girolamo Mercuriale’s *De arte gymnastica* places the *moresca* within a medical context (and thus salubrious for physical health and bodily temperance), an act which reveals tensions in perceptions of the body and how the desire to view exceptional bodies was placed in conflict with reformative impulses.

Moore’s chapter argues that previous scholarly perspectives on the “First Vision” in Johann Remmelin’s *Catoptrum microcosmicum* have missed the essential subversive and spatial nature of the work’s “fugitive sheet” medium, printed books with flaps that reveal the body and other subjects in layers. Previous research has suggested that the Medusa-like image covering the genitals of a pregnant torso reinforces the perceived monstrosity of the female reproductive system for its intended readers. However, Moore complicates this reading by suggesting that the layered images of the fugitive sheet are more complicated than their surface might suggest. For example, one image of the Tetragrammaton is layered underneath with a cherub, a bearded man in bishop’s garb, and finally – and most shockingly – a devil’s face! Moore concludes that the Medusa’s head is more complicated than it appears and could stand for multiple meanings, such as the power of the maternal imagination, knowledge, creation, and a warning for the male gaze.

“The Optics of Bodily Deviance” follows the life and work of Mexican playwright Juan Ruiz de Alarcón y Mendoza and his attempts to secure an administrative position in 17th century Spain. This attempt was complicated by the perception of bodies and authority in the Hapsburg administration, which viewed Ruiz de Alarcón’s body as “unfit” (Piñar argues on textual evidence that he suffered from hyperkyphosis). While he did not receive the position that he sought, the chapter argues that he was noteworthy for another reason: producing what may be the first disabled character written from the vantage of someone who was themselves disabled.

The *Divorced satyrique* proclaims Marguerite de Valois to be “the most deformed woman in France,” and the like named chapter argues that this deformity is articulated through essentializing Marguerite’s sexuality. As with many monstrous depictions of women, Marguerite’s deformity relies upon a notion of femininity that she either fails to live up to or superfluously exceeds.

The following chapter addresses the theologically useful figure of the hermaphrodite in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire*. Parker Cotton argues that this theological use is in the hermaphrodites ability to provide challenges to and reconsideration of the original and perfect state of humanity prior to the Fall.

Bondestam's own chapter – an evaluation of the work of Johannes Schefferus with particular attention paid to the “prodigious” elements of a fisherman's son – is one of the more thought-provoking pieces. In it, she argues that Schefferus neither normalized nor naturalized his monsters. Rather, the prodigies of which he wrote were intended as remarkable *exempla* that encouraged the reflection of the audience. This attitude may have been widespread in Sweden, calling into question the commonly deployed binary of wonder-nature for the time period.

The final essay in the collection – “Ambiguous and Transitional Bodies” – evaluates the birthing manuals of Johan von Hoorn, arguing that the transitional bodies of infants in instructive images are sharply contrasted by the descriptions of mothers: the former being passive and silent, the latter active and pleading for aid. This implicitly encouraged manual intervention to aid mothers in the birthing process, privileging the extent life over the possible.

Finally, though not necessarily an article unto itself, Kathleen Long's afterword links the contributions together. Long forges this connection by noting that all the bodies in the volume deviate from a perceived order of things to which the human belongs. The idealized body represents stability and structure, while the extraordinary body generates anxiety but also contemplation and reflection.

As with many edited volumes, there are questions of coherence that arise. The chapters on the *moresca* dance and stillbirth for instance – though excellently argued and well-written – do not connect to the ideas of “extraordinary bodies” to the same degree that the other chapters do. Bondestam's introduction – exceptionally focused on the issue of monstrosity – does little to remedy this connectivity. However, this is a rather small quibble, and the volume will certainly be of interest to those involved in monster studies and those interested in the period before the introduction of one of the most threatening terms in the English language: “normal.”

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Bell, Christopher. *The Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

In *The Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle*, author Christopher Bell has written nothing less than the biography of a god. A rich and exceedingly comprehensive book that combines extensive fieldwork, detailed historical analysis, and textual dissection from a dizzying array of sources, the book traces the rise of the protector deity Pehar and his accompanying pantheon, the creation and renovation of Nechung Monastery, and the eventual establishment of the institution of the Nechung Oracle. As part of this, Bell spends especial attention on the relationship between the Nechung institution and the Dalai Lama. Bell demonstrates how the Dalai Lama—traditionally viewed as an incarnation of bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara—had a central role in bringing the cult of Pehar to prominence. The relationship is one of symbiosis; as a political and religious leader, the Dalai Lama has historically relied on the Nechung Oracle, who channels Pehar or associated spirit Dorjé Drakden, for guidance. In this way, this book is also about, as Bell so beautifully puts it, “two immortals and the friendship they have shared for over a thousand years.”

The book’s seven chapters are arranged thematically around four general topics. Chapters 1 and 2 consider the narrative origins of the protector deity Pehar, as well the various deities who surround him either as emanations or as separate deities in the mandala. These chapters spend rely on Paul Katz’ theory of reverberation, which looks at diverse ideas, narratives, or beliefs as a form of cogeneration, to frame the diversity of myths surrounding Pehar’s origin and eventual move to Nechung. Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the various ritual activities that form the heart of Nechung’s liturgical calendar. First, Bell details the ritual manuals that provide the foundation for the monastery’s practices to demonstrate how these texts and practices accrued over the course of centuries from competing sources of authority. Especially interesting in this chapter is the role of the Nechung oracles themselves in shaping the tradition through requesting specific texts and working closely with authors. Chapter 4 then examines the calendar of annual rituals performed throughout at Nechung Monastery.

The third thematic section of the book looks at the place of Nechung itself, first with a symbolic exploration of the vertical and horizontal mandalas produced by the monastery’s architecture and chapels (Chapter 5) and then the monastery’s place in a larger ritual and institutional network of monasteries across central Tibet (Chapter 6). As explored by Bell, these monasteries worked together to ritually support the Fifth Dalai Lama’s burgeoning political control in the seventeenth-century and remained important locales of charismatically reproducing his authority in future incarnations. The final thematic section, Chapter 7, continues this discussion of the relationship between the Nechung Oracle and the Dalai Lama through looking at the person and practice of oracular mediumship itself. This chapter, one of the most important in the book, not only provides a detailed investigation into the nature of spirit mediumship and possession in Tibet, but also teases out how the Nechung Oracle became a crucial component of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s claims to authority when establishing political control in Lhasa.

While the book is rich with information about the Nechung Monastery and the history of its interactions with the Dalai Lama’s government, especially useful is Bell’s efforts to make a

functional typology of Tibetan spirit beings. Such an undertaking has not been attempted since the 1950s work of Czech Tibetologist René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz—in whose footsteps Bell very much identifies himself throughout the book. Bell here builds on Nebesky-Wojkowitz' work with the benefit of fieldwork and an improved historical focus to lay the groundwork for identifying the various types of spirits that inhabit the Tibetan world and their relationship to the buddhas and bodhisattvas more normative to Tibetan Buddhist institutions. Although only a small part of the book, such work is invaluable for nuancing the study of Tibetan Buddhism as it is lived and practiced outside monastery walls and will be of particular interest for those who work in the diverse field of “Monster Studies.”

This book is most suited for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, though I anticipate a beginning undergraduate motivated by a particular interest in the topic would find the text stimulating. Despite a dense web of names, texts, locations, and traditions, Bell makes particular effort to welcome in non-specialist readers with gentle reminders of where in the book previously one may have heard a given name or how one could connect a given text to the larger historical context of Tibet. That being said, some familiarity with the basics of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan history will make this book especially fruitful. The book's seven chapters are focused, making them particularly useful in the classroom, where one chapter may be appropriate for a larger unit. Each chapter ends with vignettes of Bell's time living in Tibet, and the book has dozens of detailed, black and white photos that provide cultural context. Both of these attributes are sure to excite student readers and provide excellent windows into the lived reality of Tibetan religion.

The book especially demonstrates Bell's easy facility with and skill for applying theory to think about the narratives, rituals, and institutions surrounding the Nechung Oracle. Such a turn is welcome in Tibetan Studies, which has sometimes shied away from the heavy employ of theory as an analytical tool. However, as a reader, I found myself craving the development of Bell's own theoretical thinking. The conclusion sees Bell analyze the relationship between the Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle across four themes: ancestral, transmissional, institutional, and incarnational. I would love to see a sustained development of such theory throughout the book—How does relationality between humans and divine beings contribute to the continuation of an institution like the Dalai Lamas? How do we theorize divine friendship in Tibetan systems of authority? Such critiques are not necessarily faults with this book, which is an excellent analysis of how the Nechung cult developed and supported the political expansion of the institution of the Dalai Lama, but rather concrete arenas for further research. In this vein, I eagerly await Bell's future work to explore this angle further.

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“I can’t shake the feeling that You must have saved me for something greater than this”: Faith, Meaning and Connection in *Saint Maud*
Saint Maud (2019). Written and directed by Rose Glass. Film4, BFI and Escape Plan Productions.

Rose Glass’s directorial debut, *Saint Maud*, is a disconcerting exploration of faith, doubt, and the need for human connection. Set against the dismal backdrop of a shabby seaside resort, it tells the story of Katie (Morfydd Clark), a healthcare worker who reinvents herself as the evangelical Maud after the bloody death of a patient in her care. When Maud becomes a private carer for terminally ill dancer Amanda (Jennifer Ehle), she takes it upon herself to ‘save’ the older woman and subsequently descends into a disorienting spiral of fervent faith, delusion and violence. The film’s religious themes are overt from the title and opening sequence alone – a blood-soaked Maud holds her palms aloft, stigmata-like to the heavens – and surface viewing presents a cautionary tale of obsession in the desperate search for salvation. Yet on deeper analysis, *Saint Maud* has much more to say about faith, about human relationships, and the interconnection between these foundational struts of existence. Although released in 2019, the movie was terrifyingly prescient considering imminent world events and its themes resonate more deeply within the context of lockdowns, distancing and social division.

We follow events through Maud’s perspective and her internal dialogue with God. From the outset, it is obvious that she exists on the lonely side of life: we see her staring wistfully into the bright warmth of a gaudy arcade, trying to ingratiate herself into the laughter of others, lurking in the Caravaggian shadows of a lavish party as staff rather than welcomed guest. Perhaps as an attempt to curb her loneliness, Maud casts herself as being on a militant mission from God, referring to her patients as ‘postings’ rather than jobs or caring endeavours, and while she seems to find comfort in the austere piety of this life, her dogged pursuit of meaning comes with great physical pain. She kneels on sharp objects, burns her hand, puts tacks in her shoes, seemingly as penance for the tragic events of her past or perhaps in attempt to sharpen her connection with God. Yet despite being a picture of virtue and abstinence, her road to salvation is riddled with confusion, doubt, and deep distress. Maud is lost and the little guidance she does receive from above is thrown into question by her tenuous interpretations and sharp mood shifts; a reliable narrator she is not and from early on, we start to fear for her sanity as well as her deliverance.

A key theme in *Saint Maud* is our inherent need for others. Maud’s suffering questions whether faith can be a comforting guide for the individual or if it requires the collective experience of community and connection. We do not see Maud enter a church, speak with a priest or a fellow believer; she communes with God alone, in her head and at her self-made altar. Her interactions with others are awkward or steeped in servitude and she sabotages all possibilities for the intimate connections she seemingly desires. The few tender moments in the movie are when she is with others – Amanda gifting her an artbook, requesting her company, laughing as she cheats at cards – and there is a fleeting moment of hope when we meet Joy, an ex-colleague who reaches out with heartfelt concern and regret that she had not been there when Maud/Katie needed her most.

Yet each opportunity for genuine connection is sabotaged by Maud’s jealousy, her pride, and a sanctimonious arrogance over others: we see this in her unbending efforts to convert Amanda

from the ‘indecent’ of enjoying what life she has left, an obvious revulsion toward Amanda’s lover and confidante, Carol, and a chilling lack of empathy for a man she encounters begging on the cold streets: “May God bless you and never waste your pain”. Her stubborn self-righteousness prevents her from seeing people, only sinful souls in need of saving and by pushing herself away from these avenues of hope, she spirals into old, destructive patterns of drinking alone in pubs and exploitative sexual encounters with strangers, obvious attempts to feel *something* through the presence of others.

Maud’s relationship with God is just as tenuous. There is an entitled petulance to her conversations, especially in moments of doubt: “If this is how You treat Your most loyal subjects, I shudder to think what awaits those who shun You”. Each point of her journey is punctuated with hesitation as she questions her calling, the motives of others, her own dedication. Maud’s easily wavered determination draws to mind Proverbs 3, 5-6: *Lean not on your understanding, in all your ways submit to Him, and he will make your paths straight*. Ironically, Maud’s fatal flaw is her intense *lack* of faith. Her final confrontation with Amanda demonstrates the sheer fragility of her belief, and whether the devil is real or just a hallucination, she succumbs to the temptation with very little push: “He isn’t real, you must know that?”. While spirituality is a personal experience, we are social animals by design and *Saint Maud* begs a timely question: if we rely on our isolated interpretation of signs and wonders in times of crisis, is redemption truly possible? Or is self-destruction a caustic inevitability?

Whether Maud does ‘see the light’ in the final scenes on the beach is open to interpretation. Although she bears the appearance of peace and fulfilment, with angelic wings and glowing, ghostly robes, this fleeting brush with sanctification is torn away with agonising terror, as the scales fall from her eyes to reveal the horrific reality of her act. A poignant moment that is almost lost in the chaotic dénouement, we hear a woman beg ‘somebody stop her, help her, oh my God’. If Maud had been able to embrace humility and accept the help of those who could see her for the lost, vulnerable soul that she was – Joy, a priest, a stranger on the beach – rather than seeking martyrous solace from those who would use and exploit her, she could have been saved. But instead, she leant on her own, terrifying understanding and lost all sight of redemption.

Saint Maud has been called a [crisis of faith](#) but at its heart the movie reflects the fundamental interconnectedness of self-acceptance through faith, and faith through our connections with others. We need to ask ourselves – as theologians and movie-lovers – can contentment be found outside of interactions which do not fall into trite patterns of servitude or exploitation? No woman is an island, regardless of the tenacity of our convictions, and *Saint Maud* is a frightening reminder of the dangers of placing ourselves as being above the need for others, our tribe, our community, especially at times of division and crisis. A message needed now more than ever.

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The Conjuring 3: The Devil Made Me Do It and the Evangelical Imagination

In *The Conjuring 3: The Devil Made Me Do It*, former Catholic priest Father Kastner (John Noble) reveals to Lorraine Warren (Vera Farmiga) that The Occultist (Eugenie Bondurant), the film's main antagonist, is indeed his estranged daughter. Being obsessed with understanding the occult himself, Father Kastner warns Lorraine and in tandem, the film's conservative Christian audience: "We must be careful how our obsessions are passed to our children." If the previous entries had advocated for taking the demonic seriously, this new entry is quick to caution its Christian viewers of the potential danger in occult curiosity. Set in the backdrop of the 1980s satanic panic, *The Conjuring 3*, like its predecessors, explores the horrors of the occult, the power of the Christian faith, and the lives of the Warrens. These films, along with this third entry, have an explicit agenda designed to reinforce existing conservative Christian beliefs. From secret satanic cabals to demonic forces, *The Conjuring 3* serves as a perfect example of how Christian horror, especially Evangelical horror, highlight the fear and anxieties of American conservative Christians.

In this recent sequel, *The Conjuring 3* continues to follow the cases of the American demonologists. This time Gerard Brittle's biographical book *The Devil in Connecticut*, exploring the case of Arne Johnson, serves as the film's inspiration. Adopting a new writer, David Leslie Johnson-McGoldrick, and *The Curse Of La Llorona* director, Michael Chaves, *The Conjuring 3*, while following much of the same ideas as the first two films, also diverts in key ways. Gone are former director James Wan's crafty and effective long suspenseful sequences that redeemed the infamous jump scare from cheap "gotcha moments" to an artistic feat. Instead, in the film's opening sequence, the sound design is turned up to an irritating degree as if to conceal the uninspired cinematography. On a technical level, *The Conjuring 3* is a constant reminder of how crucial James Wan's direction is to this franchise. While the *Conjuring* universe have spawned many imitators, they almost always pale in comparison.

The change of writer is, however, less drastic. Johnson-McGoldrick's script offers a more Lorraine-centric focus and considering she has always been the more compelling character, this is a welcome shift. Vera Farmiga and Patrick Wilson have always been the most compelling aspects of this universe and in this sequel, they are still delightful as the Warrens while adding a much-needed emotional heft. In addition, *The Conjuring 3*, with its newfound Catholic director, is more steeped in Catholicism than ever before. For the first time in the mainline series, the Warrens feel like they are a part of the Catholic institution. Surrounded by a broader network, this third entry shows not one but two Catholic priests performing exorcists. This is a stark contrast to the previous entry which make the unqualified Warrens perform the exorcists. While it is still the Warrens (this time Ed) that ultimately saves Arne, the Catholic institution has a more prominent role than in previous entries.

While some scholars might want to classify the *Conjuring* universe as Catholic horror, I suggest they are more appropriately classified as Evangelical horror. For one, these films' Catholicism are often constrained and decorative. Instead, the Christianity that is portrayed in the film is a mixture of various conservative Christian traditions, reminiscent of larger tent groups such as the Christian Right. While the real Warrens were conservative Catholics, in the *Conjuring* universe, their characters were created by evangelicals Chad and Carey Hayes and as a result, the Warrens espoused more Protestant understanding of Christianity. However, by no means do the *Conjuring* films have nothing to say about American Catholicism. In fact, this franchise has plenty to say about conservative Catholicism in the tradition of the Christian Right

or the subsections which adheres to Christian nationalist sentiments. In this sense, the term “evangelical,” as used in its post-Trump era political form, is an umbrella term that is highly malleable that includes a broad set of conservative Christian ideologies and in recent years, even non-religious conservatives that support Trumpian Christian nationalist ideals (Burge 2021).

As such, while still exceedingly relevant, the term becomes difficult to define and study. In lieu, scholars have insisted on studying the “evangelical imagination,” which is defined as: “a fairly narrow set of answers that are repeated within a broadly shared set of cultural forms, images and practices that usually organize themselves around basic narrative form of the testimonial or personal witness” (Paradis 2019, 230).

Moving away from the study of individual Evangelicals, the evangelical imagination posits that the vast library of evangelical media is indicative of the group’s politics, beliefs, and most importantly for this essay, fears and anxieties. Evangelical horror, like the broader horror genre, tends to reveal a given population’s repressed worries. By analyzing *The Conjuring 3* and other evangelical horror, scholars can uncover the fears and anxieties at the center of the evangelical imagination.

The Conjuring 3, like its universe, adopts, rather uncritically, the evangelical imagination. It creates a world dominated by magical thinking, one strongly aligned with conservative Christian ideology. For example, during the opening exorcist gone wrong, Ed is attacked by the entity. As it punches his heart, the demon says, “I’ll stop your heart old man!” For the rest of the film, Ed suffers from heart issues. The medical establishment, according to *The Conjuring 3*, can only help regulate his health issues since the cause is demonic. As for the case of Arne Johnson (Ruairi O’Connor), since the audience already understands the cause of the murder, the film is spent, not in the courtroom debating whether demons exist, but with the Warrens’ task of proving to the secular world (and in extension, to the viewer) that demons do, in fact, exist. Since the film adopts the evangelical imagination, their ultimate failure to prove Arne’s innocence via the demonic possession defense is assumed to be the film’s only possible ending. How else can secular American society, infested with demons and their worshippers, possibly be awoken to this hard truth? This victim-complex and illusion of minority is a reoccurring trope of the evangelical imagination, especially in the popular *God’s Not Dead* films.

Why? Why would a big budget horror film, backed by a mainstream distribution, tell such an explicitly conservative religious film? And why are these films still widely popular? Within these “why” questions are where scholars might find the most fruitful answers. The *Conjuring* films go to great lengths to portray powerful demonic forces, proper conservative Christian ethics, and drastic historical revisionism. As horror becomes more critically acclaimed and accepted in “arthouse” cinema, it ceases to play into such uncritical religious pandering and looks to deconstruct or critique this assumed worldview. Both *Saint Maud* and *The Witch* deconstruct religious fanaticism and the fear that comes with pleasing an ambiguous powerful entity. *The Conjuring 3*, and the rest of the *Conjuring* franchise, seem content to rehash many of the old clichés of 1970s and 1980s Christian/apocalyptic horror to fulfill their agenda. However, instead of dismissing its success as insignificant, scholars interested in the intersection between horror cinema and Christian ideologies might want to explore the reasons why these films continue to reinforce evangelical ideas, both political and theological, sequel after sequel.

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Review of *Suicide Forest Village*. Written by Daisuke Hosaka and Takashi Shimizu, directed by Takashi Shimizu. Toei Company, Ltd., 2021.

Suicide Forest Village (Japanese: *Jukai Mura*) is a Japanese horror film directed by Takashi Shimizu. It is the second film in Shimizu's *Villages of Dread* series, following *Howling Village* (Japanese: *Inunaki Mura*) (2020). The film creatively develops urban legends to construct a complex horror fantasy narrative centered on the themes of suicide, loss, and self-sacrifice, drawing audiences to reflect on the nature of human life and relationships.

The narrative world of the film integrates two urban legends. The first concerns a village in Aokigahara, also known as *Jukai* ("Sea of Trees"), a densely forested area at the northwestern base of Mount Fuji. The forest of Aokigahara is known in Japan as dangerous for getting lost and has a reputation as a site for suicide and supernatural occurrences. According to an urban legend, a village, *Jukai Mura* (which provides the Japanese title of the film), exists in this forest, not marked on any map and isolated from the rest of society. The second urban legend used in the film is that of a *kotoribako*, (lit. "child-taking box"). The *kotoribako* legend concerns a box in which a small part or parts from a human body or bodies have been placed (such as a finger). The box is infused with a curse that particularly affects children and women capable of bearing children, although in the film the curse proves to be further reaching. The box originated in a village (identified as *Jukai Mura* in the film) to be used against those by whom the village had been mistreated and marginalized, and it functions as a physical localization of the resentment of the village's people.

The film's story follows two sisters, Mei (Mayu Yamaguchi) and Hibiki (Anna Yamada) with their newlywed friends Teru (Fuju Kamio) and Miyu (Haruka Kudo) and Mei's boyfriend Shinjiro (Yuki Kura). After finding a *kotoribako* in the storage space of Teru and Miyu's new home, the continuing series of tragedies from the entanglement of the sisters, their friends, and family in the box's curse lead Mei and Hibiki to learn of the origin of the *kotoribako* and of the dependence of the souls of *Jukai Mura* on it, and to finally resolve their understanding of the death of their own mother, Kotone (Yumi Adachi), who died in the forest when they were young children.

While the *kotoribako* and its curse from the village serve as the prominent threats in the film's story, the anxieties the film most draws from its audience are the fear of loss and anxiety concerning helplessness in the face of death. As acknowledged in the opening lines of the film, we never know what will happen to people, nor when. Death, including through suicide, cannot be anticipated.

Loss in the film is not limited to suicide. Grief from loss through miscarriage (a form of grief often more difficult to express openly), accident, and unspecified cause also appear in the film. Nevertheless, the film's treatment of loss through suicide is the most developed. The portrayal of distasteful jesting at suicide, encountered by someone who grieves loss through suicide, confronts treating suicide lightly (even confronting the audience to self-reflexively consider whether it is watching this film simply to be entertained by a story in which suicide features prominently). The effects of suicide on loved ones are portrayed in their variety. Even after many years have past since Kotone's death, Mei remains embittered toward her while

Hibiki longs for her and wants to understand more about her death, even at the risk of her own life. Their grandmother (Hideko Hara) weeps over having not understood Kotone, blaming herself over her own failure to help Kotone as her daughter. The film resists simplistic relegation of suicide to a regrettable symptom of mental illness, considering instead how in some cases suicide could be an act of love and of self-sacrifice for the sake of others, while also showing that perceived suicide may not in fact always be suicide. The ability to handle suicide and loss to this extent in the film itself draws attention to the importance and value of human life, and thereby focuses attention on the uniqueness of humanity.

While not developed to the same extent as the themes of loss and suicide, a social-critical presentation of clinical psychology also appears in the film. The presentation of Hibiki's diagnosis as schizophrenic and the treatment of her and her friends by the psychiatrist (Muga Tsukaji) provides an implicit critique of psychological diagnosis and psychotherapy as an inadequate, coldly theoretical, and perhaps even abusive, means by which people are classified as weak. The film leaves ambiguous whether Hibiki truly is schizophrenic or if she receives a misdiagnosis due to her spiritual sensitivity, and thereby also leaves ambiguous how much of what the audience has seen is her genuine perception of spirits or schizophrenic hallucination. That she has a genuine spiritual sensitivity and perceives spirits is clear, but how much, if any, of her perception is illusory is left open. The revelation that those considered mentally unsuitable in the past were among those who were cast into the forest and became part of the village raises the question of how much psychiatric and clinical psychological institutions in present-day day society may differ from such abusive societal isolation and exclusion in the past.

Suicide Forest Village is a complex film rewarding multiple viewings with subtle details, leaving some unexplained in such a way that audiences can continue to analyze, discuss, and debate, leading to multiple interpretations. A longer discussion of the film could consider epistemological themes concerning truth, reality, and perception; the blurring of the borderline between plant and human; the combination of elements of traditional *kaidan* (lit., "strange tales"; a form of Japanese folklore traditionally transmitted orally and adapted in traditional drama [*noh* and *kabuki*]) and Western dark fantasy; and stylistic innovation within the context of Japanese horror. The remainder of this review, however, may offer some comments on viewing the film in consideration of religion (Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity).

Half-way through the film, the forest is explained as *kami no mori*, meaning, "forest of gods," "gods' forest." Such an association of nature, particularly a forest, and the sacred flows naturally from a traditional Japanese conceptual framework, in which various *kami* of Shinto are associated with the natural world. At the same time, in the film the people of the village are those who had been taken to the forest as offerings to the god or gods of the forest (*kami*, "god," may be either singular or plural), confronting use of religion to mistreat others and to justify prejudice and abuse.

The one religion that appears explicitly in the film is Buddhism. Shinjiro's father is a Buddhist priest. The bleached-haired Shinjiro, however, finds himself to be the object of a playful rebuke from Mei that he is not acting appropriately for a "temple son." The somewhat flashy manner (along with obvious wealth) of his father may seem more reminiscent of a religious television personality than someone whose devotion has stressed indifference to desire.

Nevertheless, the powerful resistance of the *kotoribako* to his exorcism attempt functions in the film's narrative not to present him as an unsuitable priest, but rather to reinforce the film's emphasis on helplessness against death. Additionally, as in several of Shimizu's films, including those of the *Ju-on* series, *Reincarnation* (Japanese: *Rinne*) (2005), and *Howling Village*, temporal non-linearity and locational transcendence in the film also draw from a Buddhist context.

Finally, although Hosaka and Shimizu may have made not conscious references to Christianity, two scenes of the film may easily evoke cognitive associations with Christian imagery or theology for viewers familiar with them. In the first of these scenes, Mei returns to consciousness in the forest and is surrounded by the souls of the people of the village. She is now strapped down on a tree by branches with her arms outstretched for her finger to be cut off with pruning shears, which will result in her absorption into the forest as one of the people of the village. The events that ensure in this scene are those of sacrificing oneself for the sake of another, which, when combined with Mei's cruciform position on a tree, evoke substitutionary self-sacrifice to save another.

The second of these scenes is the film's climactic death. As forest goblins pursue in a scene visually reminiscent of Dante-inspired portrayals of hell (particularly artwork based on the Wood of the Suicides in Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XIII), one character stands between another person and this foresty hell to take her own life, giving herself in place of the other person to save that person from the curse. The image of her standing with the tree growing around her with its boughs outstretched directly perpendicular to the trunk, shown from a low angle that focuses on her face, makes her appear suspended on a tree in a manner further evoking images of Jesus's crucifixion in art and film. This resemblance is strengthened by the twistedness of the branches by her lower body, similar to crossed legs on a crucifix, the twigs around her head, and the bright light that shines from behind her.¹

Suicide Forest Village is disturbing, as would be expected for a horror film. Its disturbance comes from gore and the grotesque, portrayal of physical pain, as well as from the subject matter of suicide itself. Its portrayal of grief makes the film painful to watch. The film leaves its audience, however, not only with how terrible the loss of human life is, but also with the beauty of love that extends even to giving one's life for another. As observed at the beginning of the film, we do not know what will happen to any person or when, but the film reminds those who still live to remember with gratefulness what others have done for them and to continue to live, in spite of tragedy, in that light.

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¹ The correspondence to Christian imagery may be unintentional. Shimizu stated in a YouTube interview for Kon Amimura's *Cinema Labo* on January 21, 2021 that he had in mind a "horror version" of the end of Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (Topraft, 1984): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnx91BGMJVM> (accessed 18 March 2021).