The Journal of Gods and Monsters

Special Issue: The Monstrosity of Displacement
Volume 4
Number 1
Winter 2024

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The Journal of Gods and Monsters

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On the Phenomenological Reality of Monsters

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Abstract: This article suggests that monster studies can benefit from a phenomenological approach. Namely, phenomenology provides a method for scholars to examine monster narratives as they are reported by experiencers, and then, to investigate what religious and moral frameworks might emerge from those reports. So, too, a phenomenological method can serve to challenge any social or academic attitudes that marginalize monster narratives (or beliefs in monsters) as nonserious. To that end, this article will neither reduce the subject of the monster as an illusional psychological experience, nor will it defer to the representational mode of monster studies that reads the monster as symbolic of a cultural crisis or condition. Rather, by approaching monster narratives phenomenologically, scholars of religion can investigate how new or revised religious frameworks sometimes emerge from monster encounters. This article will also interrogate why monster narratives are sometimes treated less seriously than other religious subjects, especially when monster experiences are coded and marginalized as paranormal in nature.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Mothman, Religious Experience, Jeffrey Kripal

AN INTRIGUING QUESTION

"What if we approach the field assuming that monsters are real?"

This was a question posed—not by a paranormal hunter in a room full of believers—but by a scholar of religion at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the *American Academy of Religion* in San Antonio, Texas. I was in the room that day, hoping to glean some insights for a new book project that I'm writing on paranormal beliefs, and how these might reshape religious and ethical frameworks in North America. The panelists did not disappoint.

And then *that* question was posed, "What if we approach the field assuming that monsters are real?" As I remember it, no one ridiculed the idea, but neither did the room immediately jump to answer. There was a notable pause. All in attendance seemed to consider the implications of the question itself—of which there are many. For example, in some sectors of monster theory, scholars have been quick to presume the opposite. Namely, that monsters do not really exist, and that where monster lore is present in a society, these narratives should be interpreted as signs or symbols of something else going on within that community— sociologically, politically, psychologically, and so forth. Or, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has suggested in his book, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, we can "read cultures from the

monsters they engender."[1] Without dispute, that is one illuminating approach to monster theory. A person might agree with Cohen that:

> The monster is born only at metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy…giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.[2]

Such insights are important; but they can also conceal or ignore what monster narratives mean to the people who believe in them. That's a problem.

Namely, reductive theories can be deployed in such a way that the scholar ignores the meaning of a subject from the perspective of the believer. I appreciate Steven Engler's recognition that "Scholarly methods too often surgically remove talk of religious entities (spirits, monsters, gods, etc.) from their native networks of semantic associations and graft them onto an alien web of scholarly concepts and categories."[3] Engler goes on to say, "[such methods] excise the monster from its home territory and relocate it on scholarly maps. This violent act of translation is what I call monstrous representation."[4] I agree with Engler that such is a monstrous representation, "because it distorts what the people we study intend when they talk about monsters."[5] What is more, when we look closely at a variety of monster narratives, I suggest that we will not only find earnest claims about "real life" encounters, but we will also find emerging religious beliefs and frameworks.

THE MONSTER ENCOUNTER AS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Certainly, there are monster narratives that are purely works of fiction, either to entertain or to serve as cautionary tales. So, too, one must be mindful of how to interpret the monsters of folklore and legend. Not every tale purports a real-world encounter. Even so, there are monster narratives that come from earnest reports of human experience. In these cases, when people report that they've encountered a species of vampire, werewolf, or some terrorizing flying cryptid, they are seeking to communicate an apparent sensory experience of *something* that does not quite fit within the (known) natural order of things. Thus, when they come out and dare to

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[1] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. *Monster Theory*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Steven Engler, "The Semantic Reduction of Spirits and Monsters," *Journal of Gods and Monsters*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2021): 6.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 7.

report their monster, they are giving voice to a phenomenon that—at the very least—was real to them.

Experiencers may draw on existing cultural lexicons to interpret or classify their monster encounter. But doing so doesn't mean they are simply "making up" the incident—it means they are trying to make sense of it.[6] For them, the werewolf was not simply a dog. The vampire was not just a shadow in the night. When such experiencers say that they have encountered a monster, to them, *it was a monster*, however it is that they define that term; whether as an unnatural or demonic evil, a hidden creature, an omen-bringing entity, or something else entirely.

Admittedly, many people find it easy to dismiss alleged monster encounters as products of psychiatric episodes, psychological projections born of social anxieties, or utter fiction. But for people who dare to report a monster encounter (as well as for those who believe in such reports), reductive explanations appear to willfully ignore the sincerity of the claim. When we do take such reports seriously, the monster encounter serves—in the language of Rudolf Otto—as a poignant moment of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (i.e., a mystery before which one is both fearful and fascinated).[7] Namely, the monster encounter reveals a great mystery: that the order of reality is one in which supernatural beings exist. Humans are fearful of that—not only in the sense of being immediately afraid; but also, in the sense of being overwhelmed and humbled by such a mystery. But in turn, that mystery and awe (or fear) can lead to fascination about the experience or about the entity itself. As a result, belief in the veracity of certain monster encounters also functions to open the door of contemplation about what kind of reality we live in, where such things are possible. This is important, as beliefs about ultimate reality very much concern religious perspectives, and therefore should be of interest to scholars of religion. Unfortunately, beliefs associated with monsters (not to mention other paranormal subjects and entities) have often been treated as non-serious by certain sectors of the academy, and sometimes ridiculed in the wider society. As a result, we can very well miss opportunities to analyze unique religious worldviews when we participate in the generic and conventional rejection of monster encounters as pure fiction, hoax, or absurdity.

What is more, various beliefs in monsters not only have the capacity to inform (or reform) religious beliefs, but they may also have the power to shape what one values in the here and now. This is otherwise the domain of social and moral reasoning. As scholars of ethics have observed, religious beliefs often function as defining frameworks from which intellectual and moral perspectives are formed.[8] Thus, the study of religion is not only about what people believe to be true about ultimate reality, it also includes how such beliefs shape the ways in which believers live their lives. For example, various beliefs in God as a purposeful creator have resulted in formulations of natural law thinking. These, in turn, have shaped influential models of social order and moral norms for practitioners and non-practitioners alike.[9] Given the relationship between religion and ethics, we should consider how belief in monsters—as an

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[6] See, for example: D.W. Pasulka. *American Cosmic*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 99.

[7] Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, Second Edition, 1950), 12-40.

[8] Charles Matthews. *Understanding Religious Ethics* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 21-37.

[9] For example, Thomistic natural law thinking in the *Summa Theologica* provided some of the building blocks for the marital and procreative norm in Catholic Christianity; as well as the invention of sodomy codes, which had serious implications for people (believers or not) in religion and state.

expression of religious belief—can shape personal values and social norms. Consider, briefly, existing evidence of such connections.

Take first, the Fae, or fairies. Belief in the Fae, and warnings about disturbing the fairy-folk, have literally resulted in contemporary concerns about where roads are built or what habitats are preserved.[10] Or, consider various lore about vampires. Beliefs about vampires have inspired communities to hypothesize about what human transgressions result in vampiric transformation after death. These hypotheses have included moral and religious concerns about what it means to live a good life and how to identify sin and evil. For example, John Michael Greer notes that some communities have believed vampires are people who once practiced sorcery or were excommunicated from a church (for heresy or willful sin), or who died by suicide.[11] In these cases, vampirism is a kind of spiritual consequence for moral and religious evil. What is more, belief in vampires has also resulted in changes in social practices, especially in terms of how certain communities engage in burial rites to keep the vampire from rising (e.g., keeping the vampire in place with wooden stakes, cages, and so forth).[12] All such responses to the vampire as a real monster have had observable influences on people's theological, social, and moral attitudes and values. Thus, as these examples suggest, there are good reasons to take a more serious look at claims of monster encounters. Belief in such encounters has the power to shape not only concepts about the order of reality, but also how people live their lives. I suggest we take this closer look by analyzing monsters as religious subjects through the phenomenological method.

PHENOMENOLOGY: A SUGGESTED APPROACH FOR STUDYING MONSTERS

To study monsters as religious phenomena, I encourage scholars of religion to take Steven Engler's invitation seriously. Namely, we need to deploy a methodology that does not "surgically remove monster narratives from their native frameworks." I do so with the specific invitation to dig more deeply into *phenomenological* accounts of monsters. In religious studies, the phenomenological method has a primary agenda to learn about a given religion (or religious subject) as it presents itself to us. Understood this way, I take Mircea Eliade's point as a valid one that "a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious." [13] To that end, the phenomenological method helps us to examine religious subjects, not as theologians looking for "the truth," but as scholars seeking to understand the shape and content of that which calls itself "religion."

However, my suggestion that we deploy the phenomenological approach to read monsters as religious subjects does require a caveat. Namely, it is not necessarily the case that every

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[10] See, for example: Amanda Palumbo, "The Fairy Tree; Ireland's ugly and mystical bush that rerouted a motorway," Stripes Europe, September 5, 2019. Online: https://europe.stripes.com/travel/2019-09-05/the-fairy-tree:-ireland%E2%80%99s-ugly-and-mystical-bush-that-rerouted-a-motorway-9169800.html

[11] John Michael Greer. *Monsters: An Investigator's Guide to Magical Beings* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2017), 37.

[12] See: Paul Barber. *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

[13] Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, Second Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006), 196-197.

person who reports a monster encounter understands that experience as a religious experience. So, we must be careful not to put words or concepts into the mouths of those who have experienced, or believe in, monsters. Even so, a phenomenological approach to monster studies—i.e., studying monster narratives as they present themselves to us—does reveal that at least some monster encounters inspire beliefs and worldviews that can be reasonably categorized as religious in nature. This is a matter of defining religion itself.

I take my definition of religion from Diana Cates, who suggests that religious perspectives "offer an account of the fundamental nature of reality and a vision of what is possible for humans, in life and death, given the way things [really] are."[14] This definition of religion illuminates why (in many cases) the word "religion" is meaningful across a wide variety of institutions, beliefs, and practices. Namely, what very often sets something apart as *religious* is its orientation to beliefs and concepts about ultimate reality (e.g., animism, atheism, monotheism, polytheism, apotheosis, Buddhahood, etc.), and how these concepts of ultimate reality inspire people to live their lives.

Defining religion this way, various monsters can be read as religious subjects. Namely, if people believe that Bigfoot is lurking in woodlands; or that Mothman is appearing before terrible disasters; or that vampires rise from the dead in ethereal bodies (not with the sultry looks of Hollywood, but as feeders of urine and feces and blood); or that Skinwalkers prowl certain geographies accompanied by ghosts, orbs, and UFOs; or that the Fae cross between worlds; and kobolds dwell in our homes; then such believed realities bear on how one frames what is possible in life and death given the way things really are.

Key here is that many people do believe such entities or phenomena are not only possible, but that they have been *encountered*; that the threshold between the natural and supernatural realms has been crossed. As a result, there are people who believe that monster experiences do, in fact, reveal or confirm the order of reality.[15] The phenomenological method allows us to analyze such monster narratives without needing to confirm the veracity of the report. So, too, the phenomenological method does not require us to "explain away" why certain people believe that they have, indeed, encountered a monster. Instead, the phenomenological method allows us to do the vital work of understanding and accurately describing the substance and contours of monster reports, insofar as we seek to understand how at least some of these incidents inspire new or revised religious perspectives.

What is more, the phenomenological method provides the necessary data to engage in comparative religious studies. Namely, as we accumulate more data on religious subjects, we can step from a phenomenological study to consider how various religious phenomena relate (or not) to one another.[16] This applies to monster studies as well. As we find and archive monster

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[14] The concept of the really real has been attributed to a number of scholars of religion, I note the work of John Reeder, Jr., with appreciation for Diana Cates' attribution and explanation of Reeder's concept of religion as one that is broader than conventional definitions usually support. See: Diana Fritz Cates. *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious Ethical Inquiry.* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 24-25.

[15] Or, that the 'natural' order is far more 'super' than what materialism suggest. See: Jeffrey Kripal and Whitley Strieber. *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York, NY: Tarcher | Penguin, 2016), 6.

[16] Jeffrey Kripal, *Comparing Religions*. (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 4. "1. The negotiation of sameness/difference in a set of observations; 2. The identification of patterns in that data set; 3. The

narratives, we can begin to consider categories of monsters and how experiencers interpret their monsters (e.g., as demons, cryptids, omen-bringers, etc.). Although a phenomenological study of religion can be engaged without also attending to comparative analyses, in many cases the scholar of religion will be curious to investigate how various religious phenomena relate to one another—as one part of making sense of- and understanding religion altogether. We will find this to be true with a phenomenological approach to monsters as well.

SELECTED PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNTS OF MONSTERS AND THEIR RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS

The invitation to engage monster studies through the phenomenological method does require us to collect narratives about monster experiences. I am especially interested in monster encounters that are relatively recent. To be sure, legends of antiquity also reveal how monster narratives can generate religious beliefs or frameworks. As we shall see, legends of antiquity sometimes inform how monsters are interpreted and classified. Even so, there is something about contemporary monster reports that challenge the perspective that monsters are merely the stuff of cautionary tales, mythology, or literary fiction. When we take people seriously, we will find that some beliefs about monsters have been forged by startling experiences, which in turn (can and do) generate various kinds of religious beliefs and interpretations. Gratefully, a considerable number of such contemporary reports have been collected by authors and documentarians interested in the domain of paranormal subjects. For the purpose of this article, I invite the reader to consider only a few contemporary monster encounters, from which we can reflect on the benefits of the phenomenological method.

An Unexpected Beast

Take first a peculiar monster experience narrated by Linda Godfrey in her book, *Monsters Among Us*. She calls this the case of "The Church Lady Monster." The story was sent to her in April 2015, but took place in 1992; allegedly with multiple eyewitnesses at "a Baptist church in a small Midwestern town, in the middle of a Sunday worship service."[17] Godfrey writes:

> A pleasant, religious couple in their sixties (I'll call them Ken and Sara [their real names withheld for anonymity]), witnessed this event from a close—almost too close—vantage point, along with more than two hundred congregation members. …Ken wrote, "What I want to tell you about is a creature that actually came out of a woman in a small church about twenty-five years ago in a morning service. The church was occupied with about 225 people, and the sermon was being given by a minister. He was on a stage approximately twenty feet from the front row of pews where this woman sat… For some reason, my eyes were drawn to this lady…I could sense there was something strange about her… she had this strange, very strange grayness about her…".

construction of a classificatory scheme that organizes these patterns into some meaningful whole; and 4. A theory to explain the patterns one sees."

[17] Linda Godfrey, *Monsters Among Us* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, LLC. 2016), 58.

The woman had dark hair and very ordinary features, said Sara. She wore a white shirt and black [pants]. Although there was nothing especially memorable about the woman's appearance, Sara noticed that she seemed to be fidgeting a lot. Suddenly, the unthinkable—the inconceivable—happened.

Ken continued, "Our minister had just wrapped up his ending and had closed the sermon and had left the podium to go sit with his wife and family. For him to do that, he had to walk past this woman. As he grabbed his Bible and papers, he stepped down off the stage and proceeded toward her when all of a sudden she stood up, let out a bloodcurdling scream, and began to literally contort her head and body. Now I had never believed in such things [Ken admitted], but on that day, right then, I saw the real thing taking place, as did my wife and everyone else who was in the morning service.

As she contorted, suddenly she just changed into a hideous creature. I mean she just transformed into this huge beastly creature similar to what people might call a wolf, but actually wasn't. This creature that came out of her was quite large. It stood on hind legs and roared a roar that would have made a lion cower. It had fur, it had legs like the Pan creature [of Greek and Roman religion], long teeth, and very long claws, and its growling and screaming echoed in every corner of the church from ceiling to floor." It also seemed to emit a foul odor that reminded [Ken] of sulfur.[18]

According to Ken and Sara, eventually some members of the church grabbed the woman-turned-beast and held her down on the pew. Not much later, she was instantly back in her human form, clothes and all. Ken and Sara report that the entire church was shaken by the experience. Curiously, it became a buried story within the church (or, perhaps, hidden), as no one seemed willing or wanting to talk about it again.[19]

While the church (now no longer in operation) avoided talk about this monster incident, Ken and Sara situated it within their given religious framework. Ken said, "…what it was, we still to this day do not know…It was not a guardian spirit and we knew that it wasn't human but a demon of some sort. The thing about this was, the woman it came out of, we didn't see her [physical body] after this thing came out of her…What I know is, whatever [these creatures] are, they're real. Either I'm nuts or they're real."[20]

Ken and Sara profess that this monster experience was indeed a real encounter in time/space, and one that was registered by a community through natural human senses. Reductive readings of this narrative might appeal to psychological projection or mass hallucination. Ardent skeptics might simply note that the church's closure means that the story not only has no possible means of verification, but that the "Church Lady Monster" is perhaps nothing more than a lie, or maybe fanciful storytelling born of religious zeal. But a phenomenological reading provides another approach. Namely, it not only collects the basic

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[18] Ibid., 59-61.
[19] Ibid., 62-63.
[20] Ibid., 65-66.

narrative—including the historical, ecclesiastical, and geographical contexts of the encounter—but it also reveals that a meaningful religious worldview was informed by this monster encounter.

In particular, the manifestation of the "Church Lady Monster" was interpreted as a confirmation of a specific Christian worldview, insofar as this brand of the faith affirmed the reality of demonic entities. Notice, again, Ken's words, "It was a demon of some sort." This classifies the monster by associating it with a known category of supernatural creatures. As such, Ken and Sara's story demonstrates a basic form of comparative analysis. Namely, Ken and Sara sorted the creature into the category of demons, instead of associating it with werewolf-like creatures—even though "the wolf" aspect of the monster was an identifiable trait. Thus, Ken and Sara interpreted the encounter through a theological lens. One can reasonably imagine that various New Testament references to Satan, or demonic possessions, informed that interpretation.

Traditional Christian theology often describes demons as evil, fallen angels. But even as people who believed in such entities, Ken and Sara appeared to be surprised about how this monster manifested. Their demonology (to the extent that they had one), didn't seem to anticipate the kind of creature that emerged from the woman in the pew. So, while their interpretation of the "Church Lady Monster" served as a confirmation of their religious beliefs—insofar as the monster was read as a demon—it also appears to have opened their concepts (and beliefs) about how such beings manifest. Recall Ken's admission, "…what it was, we still to this day do not know…it was not a guardian spirit and we know that it wasn't human but a demon of some sort…What I know is, whatever [these creatures] are, they're real. Either I'm nuts or they're real." Taking Ken's words seriously, this is a testimony of someone's earnest experience of a mystery—one that powerfully substantiated his religious beliefs, while also revealing that there is much about supernatural beings that humans will never fully understand. *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans,* indeed.

If this were the only reported case of a human turning into a monster, our phenomenological analysis of such a shape shifting creature would be limited to this one report, and the very particular religious interpretation that Ken and Sara offered. But as it turns out, "the Church Lady Monster" is not the only report of a shapeshifting, beast-like creature. When we seek out comparisons from other sources, we can find other reports of such phenomena, and in many cases, these have not relied on Christian demonology for an explanation or interpretation. Legends from antiquity provide a helpful resource for comparison. For example, in John Michael Greer's exploration of the shapeshifting nature of werewolves, he notes that "Norse werewolves… murmured a charm over a cup of ale and then drank it [to transform]…and among the Slavic peoples of the same period, the process involved rubbing a magical ointment all over the body and then donning a wolf's pelt or belt made of wolfskin;" and Greer further writes, "The Greek historian Herodotus mentions a nomadic tribe called the Neuri, each member of which turns into a wolf for several days each year."[21]

The phenomenological method does not allow us to conclude that "The Church Lady Monster" and Norse, Slavic, and Greek lycanthropy are all the same things. If someone *were* to

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[21] John Michael Greer. *Monsters*, Fourth Edition. (Woodbury, MN: Llewellun Publications, 2017), 80, 81. Greer, as self-described, is both an occult scholar and practitioner of magic and the Western mystery traditions; including initiation in occult and Druid orders.

draw that conclusion, it would function as a unifying theory. But what the phenomenological approach provides for are detailed accounts of monsters that can be compared with one another. From careful comparative analysis, we can construct classificatory schemes (e.g., werewolves, shapeshifters, demons, etc.). As we engage in these phenomenological and comparative analyses, we should be aware that people often make sense of unexplained phenomena from the resources of their own culture (as Ken and Sara did with Christian demonology). That said, in other cases, monster reports are not interpreted within an existing religious system. Sometimes, they provoke people and communities to revise or create new religious frameworks altogether.

A Monster Difficult to Define

For example, consider the narrative of the Mothman as told by John Keel. While the Hollywood film (by the same name) entertained and gave people spooky thrills, Keel's account in the book, *The Mothman Prophecies* revealed a narrative far more peculiar.[22] Namely, that in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, a large humanoid winged creature—dubbed "Mothman"—was appearing to residents and city officials alike in 1966. If we take Keel's narrative as a phenomenological study, this monster was believed to manifest in a material way. According to reports, the Mothman was almost seven feet tall, with large wings, and glowing red eyes.[23] In fact, one group of residents, reported that Mothman chased their car going 100 miles per hour.[24]

Keel also reported that Mothman wasn't alone. With this monster's appearance, other paranormal entities emerged: strange orbs in the skies, physical UFOs, extraterrestrial visitations, and men in black who would come to interrogate those who had seen such arial mysteries.[25] According to Keel, these paranormal phenomena attracted the interest of many people around the region, many of whom wanted to experience these things for themselves. All of that would end, however, when the Silver Bridge in Point Pleasant would collapse on December 15, 1967. After which, Mothman and the other paranormal occurrences ceased. It led many to believe that Mothman—and the attending phenomena—were omens of the coming devastation.

But more than that, it provoked a city (demographically Christian) to examine its beliefs in what is possible in life and death given the way things really are. Various explanations were offered. One cultural interpretation assigned to Mothman—and the accompanying high strangeness—relied on Christian demonology.[26] From this perspective, Mothman and the other strange creatures were indeed visiting Point Pleasant, and truly intersecting our space and time, but they were really only demons seeking to harm and confuse the faithful. Although not all Christian practitioners are quick to assign paranormal phenomena as demonic activity, it is a common interpretive strategy among many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians.[27] Another cultural interpretation (of a more skeptical sort) was to simply assign the Mothman as a mass

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[22] J. Keel. *The Mothman Prophecies: A True Story* (A Tor Book/Tom Doherty Associates, 1975, 1991).
[23] Ibid, 77.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 66-122.
[26] See Shayla Klein, "The Legend of Mothman—Paranormal W.Va.," 12WBOY.com, Online: https://www.wboy.com/only-on-wboy-com/paranormal-w-va/the-legend-of-mothman-paranormal-w-va/
[27] See, for example, demonic explanations of UFOS and extraterrestials in: Christopher D. Bader, Joseph O. Baker, and F. Carson Mencken, *Paranormal America, Second Edition.,* 120.

hallucination (or psychological projection), or perhaps just a captivating piece of modern folklore, but nothing more.[28] Even so, for many others in Point Pleasant, West Virginia the Mothman encounter has inspired new ways of thinking—and believing. Namely, to entertain the possibility that "reality" is quite mysterious; a reality in which omen bringing monsters are neither angel, nor demon; nor might ever visit again—and thus, that certain monsters are not so easy to classify.[29]

To my knowledge, there are no systematic studies concerning how the people of Point Pleasant either reformed or syncretized their existing religious views (where people held those) with the strange events of 1966. But what we can find are townspeople reflecting on the memory of the event at the annual Mothman festival; as well as recollections recorded and archived through a number of paranormal documentaries about the events.[30] In these, people seem willing to live in the ambiguity of mystery. And thus, for believers in Mothman, neither mainstream religion, nor science, have all the answers.[31]

What is more, the lingering deep questions that Mothman has created reveals how monster encounters can provoke new ways of thinking about religion and the order of reality. In particular, we find that some people regard the Mothman as revealing a more complex metaphysical world—one in which monsters like Mothman do not fit into traditional religious scripts. Rather, Mothman opens the religious imagination to consider that this entity (and perhaps others like it) has something to do with omens and perhaps the power to unleash wider paranormal phenomena.

In short, I do not think we can underestimate how new religious frameworks may be emerging from belief in monsters, like Mothman. Whether they are read as unnatural, demons, or perhaps even omen-bringers, monsters often inspire people to conceive or reconceive beliefs about the order of reality. The existence of such beliefs is not something we have to guess about. According to Bader, Baker, and Mencken, 52% of people in North America hold one or more paranormal beliefs simultaneously; and sometimes such believers also participate in mainstream religious traditions with some measurable frequency. Of these people, some have found a way to revise their existing (mainstream) religious worldviews with their paranormal beliefs—which include, in some cases, the belief in monsters.[32]

THE PARANORMAL AND THE ACADEMY

Analyzing monsters as religious phenomena not only widens the scope of religious studies, it also invites us to reflect on our academic perspectives. In particular, I want to push back on any presumption that monster studies or religious studies can only be taken seriously if we share a presupposition that we're not really studying anything ontologically or metaphysically real. Neither do I think we must share a presupposition that anything we study

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[28] Gwen Mallow, "An Ode to a Hometown Creature: Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia," Folklife, June 7, 2021, online: https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/mothman-point-pleasant-west-virginia

[29] Shayla Klein, "The Legend of Mothman—Paranormal W.Va.," 12WBOY.com, Online: https://www.wboy.com/only-on-wboy-com/paranormal-w-va/the-legend-of-mothman-paranormal-w-va/

[30] Gwen Mallow, "An Ode to a Hometown Creature: Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia," Folklife, June 7, 2021, online: https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/mothman-point-pleasant-west-virginia

[31] Ibid.

[32] Bader, Baker, and Mencken, 122, 164.

has ontological or metaphysical reality. I seek to inhabit a third space, one of intellectual spaciousness—in which we are able to respectfully consider a wide variety of religious phenomena without immediate judgment, and in which we don't participate in the marginalization of any one subject simply because it has been regarded as fringe, or unserious, by mainstream cultural norms. Scholars of religion especially need to be careful about participating in such value judgments. The history of our academy has been one of learning to widen the definition, scope, and extent of "religion." That effort needs to be one that is ongoing.

Of the wide variety of subfields in the academic study of religion, paranormal subjects and experiences (including those of monsters) appear to suffer from some professional trepidation about the category. As sociologists have noted, the categorization of the paranormal exists as "a cultural category that can shift across time and place" based on what is—and what is not—counted as reliable material science or mainstream religion.[33] In other words, the paranormal often exists as a designated category to marginalize what is considered fringe or bizarre.[34] Monsters are sometimes put in that categorical box by scholars who make uncritical associations of paranormal subjects with absurdity—even though monsters are not regarded as fringe, unserious, or absurd by given cultures or subsets of people. Where such an attitude exists in the academy, it's a problem.

Religious claims, in general, and monster narratives, in particular, can poke at the structure of our own beliefs and worldviews, not to mention our stakes in cultural or disciplinary conformity.[35] If we're not careful, scholars can perpetuate systems of privilege and marginality by deferring to conventionality in what we designate as serious subjects worthy of the academy's scope. In truth, it is sometimes difficult to discern where healthy skepticism and dispassionate scholarship might unconsciously slide into intellectual narrowness, especially when religious subjects are treated or dismissed as fringe. This can be true in the study of monsters, specifically, and paranormal subjects more broadly. My concern, here, is not a unique one.

In his book, *Authors of the Impossible*, Jeffrey Kripal narrates this reality well. He writes, "I do now suspect, however, that the study of religion as a discipline, as a structure of thought, as a field of possibility, has severely limited itself precisely to the extent that it has followed Western culture on this particular point, that is, to the extent that the discipline constantly encounters robust paranormal phenomena in its data—the stuff is everywhere—and then refuses to talk about such things in any truly serious and sustained way. The paranormal is our secret in plain sight too. Weird."[36] Kripal's comments are worth lingering upon.

Consider, in the academic study of religion, we have various subfields and program units devoted to humanism, technology, mysticism, sacred texts, sacraments, pilgrimage, music, food, and even denominationalism (to name a few). But we do not find, as readily, projects that study paranormal subjects as religious subjects unto themselves. Such research projects and subfields exist, by virtue of a cohort of intrepid scholars. But they appear to be less researched than other subfields—and one must consider the question if scholars of religion are merely deferring to the respectability of convention for fear of being seen as unserious.

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[33] Ibid., 28.
[34] Ibid., 178-180.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Jeffrey Kripal. *Authors of the Impossible.* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7.

As sociologists of religion who have investigated paranormal subjects, Christopher D. Bader, F. Carson Mencken, and Joseph Baker have noted, "people who are more tied to the conventional order will be more concerned with conventionality. People who have significant investments in conventional lines of action will be loathe to risk those investments."[37] We might consider how that sociological insight plays out in the chosen research projects of scholars of religion. In particular, if the field of monster studies is at all marginalized as paranormal, or "fringe," and thus as unserious, then scholars with high stakes in conformity (inclusive of such things as funding, respectability, tenure, etc.) might very well bypass this substantive area of religious studies out of fear of ridicule or losing privilege.

And yet, data of the paranormal is—as Kripal says—all around us: congressional hearings on UFOs and nonhuman intelligences; dozens of television shows devoted to earnest belief in ghost hauntings and monster sightings; pilgrimage sites to places disrupted by otherworldly visitors; paranormal conventions that attract thousands—the evidence for sincere belief in the paranormal is all around us. The failure to study these as religious subjects is one of our own making. After all, we have scholars who investigate Marian apparitions, Hindu temple phenomena, purgatorial artifacts, Pentecostal faith healings, Eucharistic miracles, and so forth. These are, from certain perspectives, no less "bizarre" than claims of vampire encounters in New Orleans, or ancient pelt rituals among Baltic lycanthropies. So, one has to wonder then, why there is sometimes an academic hesitancy towards the paranormal in general, and monsters more specifically. One might only surmise that this attitude will fade as paranormal subjects are demarginalized by wider social interest in the field. That said, academics need not wait for subjects to become mainstream.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON NEW WAYS FORWARD

Let me conclude, then, by returning to the opening question, "What if we approach the field assuming monsters are real?" By pursuing that question with the methodology of phenomenology, I believe we will discover new frontiers of study. On the one hand, taking the phenomenological approach allows scholars to shift beyond reductive analyses of religious traditions that have monsters as part of their existing religious frameworks. It also allows us to engage contemporary real-life reports about monster encounters, which in some cases are leading people (and sometimes entire communities) to create new visions of ultimate reality and religious truth. So, too, this invitation to engage in the phenomenological study of monsters requires us to examine and reflect on our own biases; to interrogate our own stakes in cultural conformity, and to sit with our own consciousness about what we take, personally, to be possible or really real.

And as I signaled in the introduction of this article, I believe we will find that religious frameworks informed by belief in monsters will sometimes yield revisions and innovations in *religious ethics*. For example, belief in monsters of the cryptozoological sort (like Bigfoot or Loch Ness) may result in new articulations of—and appreciation for—environmental ethics. Namely, if there are hidden creatures in our woodlands and lakes, those who believe in such creatures may find a new appreciation for protecting natural habits where such creatures (secretly) flourish. Consider, also, how belief in monsters (or otherworldly creatures) might serve to reconceive concepts of personhood. For example, contemporary discourses about

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[37] Bader, Baker, and Mencken, 179.

extraterrestrials, extradimensional, and non-human intelligences are heuristically requiring cultures to adjust their thinking about who (and what) we might count as a person. Such social and moral concerns may not seem like standard ethical inquiries, but where they are inspired by religious beliefs, we need to attend to them as scholars of religion.

To be clear, I am not arguing against the place of critical or reductive theories in monster studies or religious studies. I simply find that a robust study of monsters (and religious phenomena more generally) should not undersell the importance of phenomenological analyses. A phenomenological approach allows us to better appreciate why belief in monsters can function as one part of a religious worldview. And given that religious worldviews have the power to shape intellectual, social, and moral perspectives, belief in monsters is no small thing. Indeed, as the sociological data suggests, various beliefs in monsters (and other paranormal subjects) are meaningful to a wide variety of people. For that reason alone, monsters deserve our attention— and as a matter of professionalism, phenomenology provides an approach to study monsters that avoids ridicule and marginalization. But perhaps most intriguing of all, the phenomenological method allows us to study monsters from the perspective that they are, indeed, real.

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Say it Again: Belief and Narrative Repetition in the *Candyman* Stories

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Abstract: This paper examines the use of repetition in Clive Barker's "The Forbidden" and the four *Candyman* movies inspired by it. Using a folkloric lens rooted in the study of folk beliefs and the repeated rituals and narratives that emerge from them, it explores the power associated with Candyman and his stories. Of particular interest are the unofficial and lived experiences of those who share these tales and how they stand in contrast to the institutions, primarily academic and legal, that dismiss their validity and, consequently, the associated communities. Finally, this paper focuses on the subversive power of Candyman emerging from ritual repetitions to further destabilize official power structures and narratives as he seeks to negotiate his own identity.

There is no single Candyman. From Clive Barker's short story "The Forbidden"[1] to the four movies that it inspired, audiences have witnessed a myriad of re-tellings of this character. Encompassed by the overarching framework of the movie or story itself, within each there also exists the multi-layered narratives told and retold through each plot as characters share, conjure, and encounter the sometimes man, sometimes monster, sometimes victim, and sometimes protector that is Candyman. This repetition plays a critical role not only in the construction of such an entity, but also the contexts from which he emerges. This particular narrative pattern, mirroring the summoning rituals found in the movies themselves, is rooted in local knowledge and belief and sets up a notable tension between community-based worldviews and those of the institutions that operate within a different framework of knowing.

Questions of belief, disbelief, and half-belief in Candyman are frequently expressed through the repetition of his name and/or his story. Regardless of how they are constructed, the potential of his narrative and his presence serve to challenge institutional knowledge and the power imbalances between different groups. This paper utilizes the lens of unofficial or folk narrative, particularly emerging from belief, and the resulting informal knowledge (that which exists outside of institutional verification) to explore the presence and power of the Candyman stories. Moreover, it examines the points of conflict that occur when different systems of knowledge interact within an already imbalanced power structure. The unofficial and lived experiences of those who share these stories stand in contrast to the institutions, primarily academic and legal, that dismiss the validity of these narratives and, consequently, the contexts from which they emerge and the people who turn to them. Furthermore, this paper focuses on the act of ritual repetition itself. In particular, it examines the ways in which Candyman seeks to tap into this power while also subverting it to further destabilize official narratives as he works to reclaim his own story, even as it is bound to each retelling.

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[1] Clive Barker. "The Forbidden." In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988): 1-37.

INTRODUCING CANDYMAN

Candyman first emerges in the pages of Barker's short story, which revolves around Helen Buchanan, a university student studying graffiti. Her research takes her into spaces othered through poverty and class difference as she encounters the legend of Candyman and, ultimately, the figure himself. In the first movie, 1992's *Candyman*,[2] Helen (here with the last name Lyle) and the Candyman are brought into an American context that expands upon the character as it explores questions not only of class but also of race. In this version, the titular character is Daniel Robitaille, a 19th century artist and son of an enslaved man who is tortured and killed for his relationship with Caroline Sullivan, a white woman. Set loose by repeating his name five times in a mirror, Candyman is often responsible for the brutal deaths of those who encounter him. Here it is again Helen, a university student in this version as well, who encounters his legend in the process of conducting her research. Seeing in her a reincarnation of his lost love, Candyman pursues, torments, and seduces her until she eventually becomes her own incarnation of the legend after she dies rescuing a baby from a fire.

The second and third movies focus on women who are Candyman and Caroline's descendants and the tension between his desire to reclaim this lost family and the cruelty with which he pursues this goal. *Candyman: Farewell to Flesh*[3] focuses on Annie Tarrant, an art teacher who, among others, calls upon Candyman in an attempt to disprove the legend to her students, while *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead*[4] picks up 25 years later, following Annie's daughter, Caroline McKeever, as she too encounters and must grapple with the figure of Candyman. In 2021, the fourth movie in the series, although it was constructed as a direct sequel to the first, was released under the name *Candyman*.[5] It centers around the now-grown baby saved by Helen in the first movie, Anthony McCoy, as he slowly transforms into Candyman.

FOLK BELIEF

David J. Hufford writes that folk beliefs are the unofficial beliefs that "develop and operate outside powerful social structures."[6] Through them, a primary tension regarding the existence and experience of Candyman arises out of how narratives are treated by official institutions and unofficial groups. These divisions are further enhanced by how the processes of the former establish hierarchies of truth and value that are then imposed upon the latter, replacing the narratives that the informal communities have established and that they need. Most notable in relation to Candyman is the difference between the official narrative, which carries a fixed form, and the unofficial ones that are malleable and adaptable, emerging out of the desperate situations within which they are shared.

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[2] *Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose, released 1992, by Propaganda Films, accessed Jan. 7, 2022. Crave TV.

[3] *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*, directed by Bill Condon, released 1995, by Propaganda Films, accessed Jan. 11, 2022. Prime Video.

[4] *Candyman: Day of the Dead*, directed by Turi Meyer, released 1999, Artisan Entertainment, accessed Jan. 15, 2022. Tubi.

[5] *Candyman*, directed by Nia DaCosta, released 2021, by Universal Pictures, accessed Jan. 21, 2022. iTunes.

[6] David J. Hufford. "Beings without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits." In *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore & The Supernatural*. Edited by Barbara Walker. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995): 22.

The differentiation between official and unofficial narratives in the Candyman stories is not predicated on the former being historically accurate or rational, both of which are often articulated through the fixed nature of the information. It is, instead, simply the narrative that supports a power system. Terms such as rational and reasonable become affixed to them to mark this distinction and create a stronger sense of truth; a process which, in turn, creates an expert language that is often restricted in access. Hufford notes that the systems that allow for this establishment of official knowledge, including specialized equipment like microscopes and the training required to use and interpret them, separate it from the ordinary person.[7] The resulting expertise operates to cut off certain people and groups from connecting to or producing "true" knowledge and then positions them as inferior or ignorant because of it. Consequently, folk beliefs, especially around the supernatural (natural being defined by the institution), are not inherently part of anti-intellectualism but a process of rebalancing wherein "the intellectual work and insights of ordinary people must be acknowledged."[8] Candyman becomes part of this equalizing approach, emerging from within these communities and denying the static nature of narrative and the resulting facts that should mean he cannot exist. He does; the official structures are the ones that refuse to see him because their limited framework has already determined he is fiction.

In "The Forbidden" and the *Candyman* movies, the process of narrative repetition is part of the means by which Candyman is discovered and the truth of his existence is revealed, affirming the rationality of belief in him. The story of Candyman is teased out, told, and re-told until a "true" version emerges rooted in the facts of the community and embodied within the appearance of the character himself. Nevertheless, he remains folk knowledge, rooted in the group and gaining power from his position as legend and rumor. The stability of the singular narrative is fractured because it is dependent on the individual's lived (or killed) experience of him. Furthermore, the process begins again in the next movie, and his actions and their consequences are refolded back into the folk (or unofficial) narrative tradition. He is not static, but that does not undermine the truth of his presence; it reflects the changing realities and needs of the communities that speak of him.

Adam Ochonicky identifies at least five different versions of the Candyman who appears in the first film alone: "an urban legend, a gang leader, a historical figure, a supernatural entity and Helen's posthumous state of existence."[9] He also endures as a game – call his name five times when standing in front of a mirror and he will appear – and as the merging of the historical, supernatural, and legendary whose name, along with his hook, is wielded to instill fear. Each of these roles requires its own set of beliefs and worldviews, often revealing specific connections to or tensions between different communities and institutions.

Belief and need frame the narratives and their telling. Within these stories, it is rooted in the lived experiences of those who are regarded as marginalized, communicated through their placement in spaces of decay and crime that contrast sharply with those of institutional structures grounded in a different social status. In the first *Candyman* movie, this is clearly articulated by

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[7] Ibid. 24-25.

[8] David J. Hufford. "Beings without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits." In *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore & The Supernatural*. Edited by Barbara Walker. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995): 24.

[9] Adam Ochonicky, "'Something to be haunted by: Adaptive monsters and regional mythologies in 'The Forbidden' and *Candyman*." *Horror Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 112.

the juxtaposition between the home of Helen and her research site which were both built using the same floor plan. The treatment of the stories and worldviews that emerge from these spaces of cultural dismissal further this tension. They become sites of belief that stand in stark contrast to and in defiance of the disbelief that is regarded by institutions as a neutral position. It is from here that various professionals seek to puzzle out what they see as the errors that have led to a belief in the supernatural and uncanny.[10] In doing so, they discard the possibility of them being true because it is in direct contrast to their systems of knowledge, which results in associations between the "uneducated" and the "superstitious".

OFFICAL DOUBT AND UNOFFICIAL PROOF

The emergence of informal knowledge through lived experience is often central to the study of unofficial beliefs and is reaffirmed throughout the different films. Characters who begin from the framework of disbelief or potentially half-belief and summon Candyman come to experience his reality through their personal encounters with him. Their hypothesis that he does not exist is tested through the ritual of calling him, and it is found to be false. However, instead of challenging the institutional norms that dismiss him, these individuals and their trauma, and often gruesome deaths, are rewritten to fit the pre-existing narrative. Their experiences are labelled as irrational and false or the subject of "ordinary" violence, such as how the gangs in the first movie and a corrupt detective in the third one use the idea of Candyman to instill fear.

The official narrative is a powerful one. In the first *Candyman* movie, Helen encounters it when her story does not make sense to the external world, and she ends up institutionalized. These formal systems and the frameworks they produce do not always match onto people's experiences because they require a different form of storytelling that has been labelled as truth but is often its own interpretation of the events. Elaine J. Lawless, who spent time conducting research in a women's shelter, writes about how personal narrative has to be changed in order for it to fit within an institutional structure:

> And gradually, as we cajole and urge and support her [a woman in the shelter] through "the system," we facilitate the work of those who seek to create a coherent story, a story that will "fly" in court, that will gain her services, that will satisfy the prosecutor, that will be in the language others have devised – language that is far, far from the flesh-and-blood violence she still carries in and on her body, in her mouth, in her most private parts, on her head, in her ears.[11]

The positioning of the people, including potentially the audience, and their connections to institutions will influence the weight they give to Helen's narrative in the first *Candyman* movie. Is it the erratic behavior of someone detaching from reality, turning her into an unreliable narrator, or is she experiencing something that goes beyond the structures of social institutions and norms? She embodies the tensions between these different systems of knowledge and the

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[10] David J. Hufford. "Traditions of Disbelief." *Folklore* 8, no. 3 (1982): 47.

[11] Elaine J. Lawless. *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment through Narrative*. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2001): 38.

processes of moving from disbelief to belief, as she holds up a mirror to all of us to reflect on our own interpretation of her rapidly changing truths.

The Academic World

In "The Forbidden", when Helen finally encounters Candyman, he tells her that because she doubted him, because she was not "content with the stories, with what they wrote on the walls. So I was obliged to come."[12] Her doubt, in part, is driven by the pressures of the academic world she is attempting to join, even though she faces sexist dismissals from a range of individuals, including her husband Trevor. She is spurred on in her research because he doubts the validity of her project on graffiti, noting that it has been done before.[13] There is no room in academia for retelling a story; there is a demand for newness. At first, Helen tries to navigate this requirement. She wants to find a new story within the graffiti, even though it is a constant process of conflicting and overlapping narratives that come and go and that are often anonymous or coded. The one she seeks would make sense to her desired scholastic world, which only tolerates the intrusion of graffiti into its spaces for the purposes of academic exploitation. From the beginning, she recognizes the binding nature of academia with its "sociological jargon" such as "*cultural disenfranchisement* [and] *urban alienation.*"[14] She sees herself as doing something different. Instead of creating more labels, she strives to uncover "some unifying convention perhaps, that she could use as the lynch-pin of her thesis."[15] She is unable to fully remove herself from this desire to frame, to simplify, and to crack the code of belief for the approval of her intellectual peers.

The lure of the academic interpretation continues at a dinner party. Here, the inability to consider the reality of Candyman and the lives of those who turn to him, nor to accept that their belief may extend beyond externally verifiable facts to something more rooted in their communities and histories, is apparent. When Helen tells the story of Candyman to the other members of academia, they initially give her the attention she desires. Barker writes of the dinner guests that they "looked gratifyingly appalled at the story."[16] However, as the discussion continues, Helen finds herself in conflict with Purcell, an academic with a tendency to refer to her as "my sweet", suggesting that her witnesses are lying, and then concluding, when challenged by the use of the word "lie", that the stories are told for provocation, "merely titillation for bored housewives."[17] Throughout this exchange, questions of power are being explored and hierarchies are re-articulated and re-affirmed by the placement of the stories of women and of ordinary people into the realm of the dismissible, of gossip and distraction. They are not of the same stature as those of the male academic who can see the truth of the story where Helen cannot.

This tension between the academic and non-academic is a theme brought forward in the movies as well. Laura Wyrick writes of the first *Candyman* film that it "opens with dual sequences of narrative". The first is the folkloric version: a voiceover that tells the legend of

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[12] Clive Barker. "The Forbidden." In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988), 31.

[13] Ibid. 2.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Clive Barker. "The Forbidden." In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988), 17.

[17] Ibid. 18-19.

Candyman, while the second is what could be considered the "official history", contextualized within the academic setting.[18] It is important to note that within this film, the academic institution is not only rooted in male authority but also in whiteness. In order for Helen to find some placement within it, she utilizes one of the advantages that she has as someone belonging to "the white world of middle-class academia" that allows her to move into the spaces of the "African-American underclass" while regarding them as solely a research subject.[19] As she becomes more situated within the unofficial narratives, however, her position changes as her ties to the academic world weaken and she begins to become part of the audience for Candyman through lived experience.

The progression of narrative authority from academic institution to community is not just a process undertaken in the plot of the film but also in how the movies themselves tell and retell this story. In the latest incarnation directed by Nia DaCosta, the examination of academic authority begins by the re-situation of narrative voice. As DaCosta explained in an interview, "[t]he first film is very much from an outsider perspective, from a white point of view, and this movie is from the Black perspective and even more specifically from the perspective of Candyman."[20] Institutional structures still exist, but they are changing. At an art exhibit, the audience witnesses Anthony, who, like the first Candyman, is an artist, in conversation with a critic. During this scene, their language slips between artistic and common, recognizing and exploiting the pretentious as they discuss his work, inspired by his research into Candyman. He begins by trying to articulate his experience of engaging with this pattern of repetition: "I'm trying to align these moments in time that exist in the same place. The idea is to almost calibrate tragedy into a focused lineage that culminates in the now." Then he shifts to undermining his perspective and presence by noting that the art speaks for itself. The critic agrees but counters his message by describing the piece as speaking "in didactic knee-jerk cliches about the ambient violence of the gentrification cycle". They retell to establish what the narrative should be. They hover on the boundaries of what exists in the world of lived experience while still repeating the linguistic patterns of institutions that discuss suffering with curiosity but enact no tangible change. This pattern, however, has the potential to be broken by Anthony as finds himself increasingly pulled into these narratives, both in his growing artistic obsession and his own bodily transformation.

The possibility of institutional and individual change both exist in DaCosta's version. It is directly embodied in Anthony as he is transformed, like Helen in the first movie, into a version of Candyman. But it is also present in the official realms. Brianna Cartwright, Anthony's girlfriend, attends a dinner where she is being wooed by different gallery owners to come work with them, one offering the promise that "[y]ou can change the institution from the inside". By

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[18] Laura Wyrick. "Summoning Candyman: The Cultural Production of History." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 54, no. 3 (1998): 89.

[19] Lucy Fife Donaldson. "'The suffering black male body and the threatened white female body': ambiguous bodies in *Candyman*." *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 9 (2011): 33.
Mikel J. Koven further complicates these racial issues by considering questions of the "fear of white fetishization of African-American culture" and its relationship to the equally problematic issue of the idea of "going native" in relation to the first *Candyman* film (Mikel J. Koven "*Candyman* can: film and ostension." *Contemporary Legend* 2 [1999]: 159.).

[20] Sonaiya Kelley. "Reviving 'Candyman': How Jordan Peele and Nia DaCosta made more than a sequel." *LA Times*, August 26, 2021.

the end of the movie, however, it is apparent that this transformation cannot emerge from the official systems alone but will only take effect if also enacted within the communities that so desperately need it. It can only be accomplished by recognizing and employing their beliefs and worldviews. Otherwise, it remains another cycle of knee-jerk cliches.

The Legal World

One of the key tensions emerging from the official and unofficial narratives of *Candyman*, especially in "The Forbidden" and the first and last films, has to do with interactions between systems of power and the people who are attempting to live their lives while grappling with this level of oppression. These cycles were highlighted by DaCosta as being particularly important for the latest movie and its reflection on "racial violence and specifically police violence against Black people."[21]

In Barker's story, the issues are not rooted in race but economics and class; however, all of the versions address, in some capacity, the legal institution and its power, particularly as manifested in the police and detectives. In "The Forbidden", it is acknowledged that the police do not care. Anne-Marie, one of Helen's research subjects, snorts in disparagement as she tells Helen that "'[p]olice don't give a damn what happens here. They keep off the estate as much as possible. When they do patrol all they do is pick up kids for getting drunk and that. They're afraid, you see. That's why they keep clear."[22] The institution that is meant to protect people from danger is not willing to face their own fears when it comes to this community. Later, at the dinner party amongst academics, a possible conspiracy involving police suppression of the murders occurring in the poorer community is brought up. When Helen asks why they would cover it up, the response is that police procedures do not make sense.[23] Institutional narratives may be accepted as the "official" or "correct" ones, but fractures become apparent in this seemingly cohesive story when it is revealed that for those of this academic class, who belong to a different institution with its own language and logic, they do not always make sense. They are yet another version, another story, but they still hold power.

A significant change in the understanding of Candyman in this latest movie comes from the idea of the hive and how it expands the power of this figure, himself, and his ties to specific contexts. In this film, there is no single Candyman; he emerges out of each community and time period that retells his story.[24] As the character William Burke explains to Anthony, Daniel Robitaille, the Candyman of the first three movies, was the first one but not the last. William has his own one based on his experiences as a child when a local Black man who gave candy to the kids of the neighborhood was accused of hiding razor blades in them. Because of this, the police came and beat, tortured, and killed him. However, the razor blades continued to appear in the candy, exonerating him within community knowledge but not resulting in any justice for his death nor any change in the system that killed him. For William, the evil he encountered that day

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[21] Sonaiya Kelley. "Reviving 'Candyman': How Jordan Peele and Nia DaCosta made more than a sequel." *LA Times*, August 26, 2021.

[22] Clive Barker. "The Forbidden." In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988), 9.

[23] Ibid. 17.

[24] This repetition is expanded upon in the closing credits where the same style of shadow puppet show that opens the movie tells the story of the Candymen who have come before, beginning with Daniel Robitaille.

was in the police and their actions, not in a boogeyman called Candyman. This experience compels him to later initiate the story one more time through his role in transforming Anthony into Candyman, most notably by cutting off his hand and replacing it with the infamous hook.

While this newest version of *Candyman* serves as a direct sequel to the first movie, this repositioning of the hero and villain works well building off of the ending of the third film. It concludes with the defeat of Candyman through the demythologizing of him. Caroline, the protagonist of this movie, shifts the blame of his crimes onto the corrupt and racist Detective Kraft. Her motivation is to provide the official version that will destroy the legend and prevent the retelling and inadvertent summoning of Candyman. Without his story, there is no Candyman. However, it also serves to reflect the complexity of villainy within the community that extends beyond one supernature figure to include corrupted institutions and those who enforce them. The monster remains, but its identity is transformed through yet one more retelling into one that the institution can comprehend, even if they will do little to address their own role in his creation and power over the marginalized.

The beginning of the latest *Candyman* movie further reinforces this reframing of hero and villain by breaking a pattern of repetition. While all of the other movies open with a retelling of the making of the monster Candyman, this film begins with a shadow puppet show put on by a Black boy that tells the story of police arresting an innocent young Black man, highlighting from the very start who is the real monster of this story. It further demonstrates the tension between the police as an institution and that of the people who are forced to grapple with it. In this way, Candyman is recast from the beginning. He is not the monster but a victim, and, at times, also a possible protector.

This tension is again repeated at the end of the movie when Brianna is arrested after a cop shoots and kills Anthony, inadvertently hastening his transformation into Candyman. She is witness to the crime and is told by the police to change her narrative to fit with the official one that absolves them of any wrongdoing. In this way, stories are recognized as having great power to alter people's lives for better or worse and reconstruct what is accepted as truth altogether. Furthermore, the objective truth of the institution is shown to be a lie; it is just another story given authority because of who tells it. However, instead of accepting the police narrative, Brianna turns to another one, the one that comes from a different space that is outside of institutional norms and rooted in community knowledge, personal relationship, and urgent need. This story, therefore, holds greater power for her to wield. She summons Candyman as a protector to help her and, in doing so, this new version may even hold heroic potential.[25]

RITUAL AND PARADOX

Candyman serves not only as an embodiment of the tensions between different systems of knowing but also, from this position of liminality, works to manipulate people's beliefs, stories, and experiences to gain further power of his own. These beliefs often manifest within

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[25] Candyman's role as villain, hero, and anti-hero is heavily contextual and dependent on numerous factors including each viewer's own opinion. Donaldson, for example, argues that there is a connection between the Candyman of the film and that of the romantic gothic hero. (Lucy Fife Donaldson. "'The suffering black male body and the threatened white female body': ambiguous bodies in *Candyman*." *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 9 [2011]: 39)

and are expressed by the cyclical patterns found in ceremonies and rituals. Frequently, these performances are a means by which people take internal experiences, fears, and values and make them visible. When they do so in the movies by uttering Candyman's name, this action can reflect a variety of inner experiences ranging from disbelief when their summoning does not immediately result in the desired outcome to the curiosity of half belief to the deep need for belief that can grant an acknowledgement of or release from suffering and oppression. These rituals open up a space for individuals and groups to engage in a variety of different forms of narrative play.

The repetition provided through story and ritual provides opportunities to engage with both what is and what could be. Play itself invites such liminality, being "an example of multiple realities that human beings straddle; it is a close relative of ritual…and a site of human sociability and the imagination".[26] Figures of legend, ranging from Bloody Mary to Slender Man,[27] have long been a focus of folklorists exploring how individuals and groups engage with and use them for a variety of purposes. Legend tripping, for example, involves travel to the site of the story but also is "the enactment of ambiguity, the experiential affirmation of the weird or the unexplainable".[28] It is a means of experiencing what is frequently denied by institutional structures, both creating and affirming lived experiences. These narratives have also encouraged discussions around another form of legendary play, that of ostension or the acting out of the legend and the various forms that it can take,[29] including reverse ostension. As defined by Jeffrey A. Tolbert, reverse ostension is when "an iconic figure [is] produced through a collective effort and deliberately modeled after an existing and familiar folklore genre."[30] While he is using to in relation to Slender Man, it is equally applicable as one of the many ways in which characters and audiences alike can engage with a figure such as Candyman. All of these concepts point out different ways that individuals play with legends, whether bringing them forth or hunting them down, and how they become part of each person's experience and, therefore, their own developing story.

Specific objects within the legend and associated interactions also hold power. For the Candyman stories, the mirror and its role in calling forth this figure is of particular note. Mirrors themselves hold great power in folk traditions, and using them creates a variety of opportunities for both supernatural encounters and personal growth. In Elizabeth Tucker's examination of

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[26] Carole M. Cusack. "Play, Narrative and the Creation of Religion: Extending the Theoretical Base of 'Invented Religions'." *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14, no. 4 (2013): 362-363.

[27] Slender Man emerged online as a fictional, supernatural character who has inspired numerous retellings and has also been tied to real world violence. For a deeper discussion of this figure, especially how he connects to the larger legend tradition, see: Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill. "Fear Has No Face: *Creepypasta as Digital Legendry*." In *Slender Man is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*. Edited by Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill. (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2018): 3-23.

[28] Lynne S. McNeill and Elizabeth Tucker. "Introduction." In *Legend Tripping, A Contemporary Legend Casebook* (Logan, Utah State UP, 2018): 16.

[29] See: Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi. "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling." *Journal of Folklore Research* 20, no. 1 (1983): 5–34.
Lynne S. McNeill and Elizabeth Tucker. "Introduction." In *Legend Tripping, A Contemporary Legend Casebook* (Logan, Utah State UP, 2018): 11-12.
Mikel J. Koven "*Candyman* can: film and ostension." *Contemporary Legend* 2 (1999): 155-173.

[30] Jeffrey A. Tolbert. "'The Sort of Story That Has You Covering Your Mirrors': The Case of Slender Man." In *Slender Man is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*. Edited by Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill. (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2018): 27.

mirror rituals connected to legends such as Bloody Mary and Candyman, she notes that the stories told by college students who encounter apparitions in the mirror "reflect a search for affirmation of a complex, sometimes contradictory self"[31]. For those involved with Candyman, and for Candyman himself, such contradictions of self are apparent, as are the connections they strive to make with others. When linked to love divination games, these mirror rituals tease the participants with glimpses of a future relationship and the promise of love that can speak to another aspect of the complex self. These were the desires that caused Daniel's death in the first movie and continue to drive him in his role as Candyman.

In Bill Ellis' book *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture*, he devotes several pages to detailing some of the examples of this folk practice, especially as reinterpreted into early 20th century Halloween postcards. At their most basic, these are games that involve seeking out information about a future spouse and may include the presence of a mirror along with other objects connected to the supernatural, like candles, while occurring at potentially haunted times such as Halloween and midnight. Ranging from playful to threatening, several show a young woman holding a candle to a mirror while the postcard caption provides instructions such as: "Let this design on you prevail / Try this trick (it cannot fail.) / Back down the stairs with candle dim / And in the mirror you'll see HIM!"[32] The rhymes of such rituals parallel the repetition of others including summoning Bloody Mary and hint at some of the powers of Candyman himself to move his victims into a trance-like state that can undermine their, and the audience's, sense of narrative stability. In doing so, the expected gaze is further subverted, revealing that this is his ritual, not theirs.

Ritual perversion is a part of the Candyman lore as mirror summonings are reinterpreted through his own stories and motivations. In the first film, he is the one who is seeking his lost love in a future time, seeing her reincarnated in Helen, even while she is the one who unwittingly summons him. Her intent and his desire are at odds: she is performing a ritual that she does not fully comprehend; he is encouraging it to gain back some of what he has lost. He is a corrupting force, a demon lover figure[33] who lures her away from her life. His power, not bound by the institution, becomes a warning about the influence of repetition and ritual on identity development and the dangers of going outside of the official script and its accompanying linear framework of disbelief: the future such actions promise to reveal may not be a desirable one. Afterall, Candyman can only promise Helen the role of victim, of exquisite suffering as the key

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[31] Elizabeth Tucker. "Ghosts in Mirrors: Reflections of the Self." *The Journal of American Folklore* 118, no. 468 (2005): 188.

[32] As Ellis notes, the framing of this practice leaves it open as to who will emerge in the mirror: future husband or evil spirit. (Bill Ellis. *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture*. [Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004]: 147.)

[33] While there are numerous variations of and titles for this folk narrative, certain core plot points frequently emerge to form an expected framework: a young couple exchanges vows, but before they marry the man goes to sea and is reported dead. The woman marries someone else, and they build a life and family together. After a period of time, often seven years, the sailor returns and convinces her to leave her husband and children and come away with him, as she initially vowed. He tempts her with the promise of ships bearing treasures and a future of luxury until she finally agrees, only to change her mind once she is aboard the ship. But it is too late. The sailor refuses to return her to the shore and is, instead, revealed to be a demon come to punish her. The ship is destroyed, and she drowns. For versions in the classical ballad tradition, see Francis James Child's collection *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.

to her eternal future gained through intimate death.[34] However, as the movies progress, his attention turns from regaining his lost love, in the first film, to finding his lost family and creating a fractured or inverse version of it, in the second and third films, and in the fourth, as a new incarnation of Candyman saving his girlfriend.

Wyrick writes of the mirror gazing in the first film that "[t]he way gazes intersect through the mirror and Candyman's ability to materialize behind Helen, so they both stare at their doubled reflection, imply that the subject cannot come into existence alone, but only as an object of an/Other desire."[35] This results in the mirror becoming an example of "the deformative and fragmentary status of the narrative itself."[36] His appearance in it suggests a successful ritual, but he exists in the wrong order. He is not of the future but the past. Candyman is constantly attempting to find and maintain his story and to write or rewrite sections to break certain cycles of suffering that dominate the stories that survive about him. However, it is inherently fragmentary, and his power comes from being "the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom," and he, himself, admits that "without these things, I am nothing."[37] The constant retelling paradoxically grants him power to elude permanent death because his story belongs to the community tradition, but this means it also belongs, in part, to the community. It ensures he remains alive amongst his people, but only through their words and fears, not through any tangible and stable internalized identity. He is a reflection of their suffering as much as his own.

There are times when Candyman seeks, through these rituals of repetition, to gain power by mimicking the language of institutional religion. In the first movie, he refers to the ideas of faithful believers. In "The Forbidden", there are mentions of "Candyman's tabernacle" and those who summon him "with sweetness" as being his congregation.[38] Ochonicky notes that these housing projects where the short story and first movie are set become "a horrific site of coerced participation in the cultish worship of a monster."[39] Each of Candyman's attempts at ascension run up against individual rejection and institutional barriers. In the second movie, Annie seeks out a priest to discuss what is happening. His conclusion is that Candyman is a false god, and only the singular god of his monotheistic religion, rooted in a now-stable sacred text, can save them. However, in the third movie, Candyman does find his congregation, who look to his stories as myths that inspire their own murderous desires framed in the language of sacrifice. Nonetheless, it too cannot last since, as discussed above, the conclusion of the third movie revolves around disproving the myth or legend of Candyman by placing all of the blame on Detective Kraft.

The idea of repetition teases opportunities for stability; however, Jerri Daboo identifies a paradox found within ritual performances undertaken again and again. On the one hand, the repetition of actions, words, movement, music, and all other components that make up ritual "establish a sense of fixity and permanence," especially when it comes to a sense of "me" or self.

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[34] *Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose, released 1992, by Propaganda Films, accessed Jan. 7, 2022. Crave TV.

[35] Laura Wyrick. "Summoning Candyman: The Cultural Production of History." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 54, no. 3 (1998): 96.

[36] Ibid. 98.

[37] *Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose, released 1992, by Propaganda Films, accessed Jan. 7, 2022. Crave TV.

[38] Clive Barker. "The Forbidden." In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988), 35, 37.

[39] Adam Ochonicky, "'Something to be haunted by: Adaptive monsters and regional mythologies in 'The Forbidden' and *Candyman*." *Horror Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 108.

However, it also becomes "a means to understand and embody impermanence, change and transformation of the bodymind."[40] This tension emerges in part from the acknowledgement that perfect repetition is impossible. Within folklore, the interplay between that which stays the same among all versions or performances of an item of folklore and that which changes, whether due to need or desire, is of immense importance. [41] Among other things, it reveals what is of value in the moment and what is used to connect individuals and groups to others who have or will engage in their own version of the performance. It also serves as a reminder that there will always be points of variation, regardless of how small, because no two performances are perfect repetitions.

For Candyman, the mirror is always slightly flawed or skewed; he cannot be perfectly replicated. Through repetition, he seeks to reclaim his identity, especially as a counter to the erasure of himself and his story during his life. Jennifer Ryan-Bryant writes about the victims of lynching that "these aggressive social practices signal a total erasure of identity and personhood, an effective rejection of their right to exist."[42] He reasserts his right to exist but cannot do so without a community to support or fear him. Consequently, his story is always in flux. And so he remains in a state of struggle, trying to survive and rebuild what he can with the power of liminal space, while never able to achieve greater influence because his world is diminished in the eyes of the institution. While he speaks of the power of rumor, he is also constrained by it. Even his community can move on to another story, as suggested in *Day of the Dead*, and he will fade back into the nothingness of a forgotten legend. While this may seem to be a victory, it is also a tragedy, depending on which version of Candyman you hear.

Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, who plays Anthony in the latest movie, stressed his desire to tell the story of Candyman in a more empathetic way, particularly in emphasizing his complexity as an unwilling martyr.[43] He is not just a historical figure, and he is not someone who chose to suffer and die for others. He is the victim of a horrific crime who cannot find absolution and whose suffering has been used, subverted, and gamified throughout its retellings. The perception of him as unwilling martyr consequently stands in stark contrast to Helen's husband in "The Forbidden" who performs the role of self-martyr as a means of dominating his wife: "When, late on Saturday afternoon, Trevor found some petty reason for an argument, she [Helen] let the insults pass, watching him perform the familiar ritual of self-martyrdom without being touched by it in the least. Her indifference only enraged him further."[44] Helen finds herself pulled between two forms of martyrdom that paradoxically ask her to sacrifice herself for their desires: one is to the institution, the other is to the story.

Daboo, in reflecting on ritual performance, recognizes that repetition fulfills a particular need: "a way to find relief and release from the difficulties of lived circumstances through a

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[40] Jerri Daboo. "To be Re-Bitten and to Re-Become: Examining repeated embodied acts in ritual performance." *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 20, no. 5 (2015): 12.

[41] See Barre Toelken. *Dynamics Of Folklore*. Vol. Revised and expanded edition. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996): 39-43.

[42] Jennifer Ryan-Bryant. "The Cinematic Rhetorics of Lynching in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 53, no. 1 (2020): 92.

[43] Sonaiya Kelley. "Reviving 'Candyman': How Jordan Peele and Nia DaCosta made more than a sequel." *LA Times*, August 26, 2021.

[44] Clive Barker. "The Forbidden." In *Books of Blood: Volume 5*. (London: Sphere, [1985] 1988, 20.

culturally acceptable form" while also highlighting that such actions do not address the underlying causes for these difficulties; therefore, they perpetuate the cycle themselves.[45] This additional ritual paradox is a critical part of the latest movie, as explained by its director who wanted to highlight the ways in which narratives and trauma are cyclical and passed on from generation to generation.[46] Candyman is stuck, never able to resolve his issues, reflected in his unhealed stump where his hand was cut off and the hook attached. He remains trapped in the narrative cycle; each repetition keeps him alive but also keeps him ensnared. Therefore, he understands the power of this repetition and how to use it himself. In their final confrontation in *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*, he tells his descendant Annie that "you cannot resist what is in your blood, our blood; cannot fight what was meant to be." Nevertheless, she successfully resists. However, the final movie, with the reawakening of the legend of Candyman and the positioning of him as protector, if not a potential community or folk hero, hints at the promise of something more. His final words to Brianna, which he speaks after having transformed into the visage of Daniel, are to "tell everyone". In doing so, he encourages her to reclaim the power of their story, for her to repeat it again and again and, in doing so, to bear witness to its effectiveness against corrupt institutions. Perhaps it is in this story cycle that he finds his own redemption.

Repetition is powerful. It can offer comfort and stability in the knowledge of what is to come. It can also be an act of rebellion and subversion, a chant done in defiance of institutional authority and classifications of truth and fiction. The stories of Candyman reflect these struggles both as they are embodied in this character and in how others react in his presence. His story is one that ranges from the monster under the bed to the one who can defeat the monsters because he emerges out of the contexts within which his name is whispered, shouted, worshipped, or claimed. Yet he also carries within him his own identity formed out of social injustices that still remain, making him a potent but unpredictable figure for all who encounter him.

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Welch-Larson, Sarah. *Becoming Alien: The Beginning and End of Evil in Science Fiction's most Idiosyncratic Film Franchise.* **Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021. 144 pp. hardcover. $37.00**

In *Becoming Alien*, Sarah Welch-Larson addresses the main themes found in all six *Alien* films through the lens of Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep*.[1] While noting that each film individually has been read in many different - and valid - ways including commentaries on capitalism, war, and rape, *Becoming Alien* seeks to explore a wider perspective on the films as a whole.

Throughout the book, Welch-Larson tackles the issues of chaos, personhood, dehumanization, and Keller's concept of "discreation" — "creaturely relations that deny and exploit their own interrelation."[2] In this particular text, Welch-Larson is working with the idea of "discreation" as a theological denial of the worth of any created being, or a misuse of that creation for nefarious purposes. Working through the films in chronological order, Welch-Larson successfully adds layers to this concept, from the smallest kernel of *Alien* (1979) to the onion skin of *Alien: Covenant* (2017).

As Welch-Larson points out, it is difficult to easily settle on one main "evil" in the film series. The most obvious examples are the Xenomorphs (aliens) and The Company. The aliens act for reasons that are never fully clarified: do they have the sentience to be striking out for world domination? Are they functioning simply out of a biological drive to reproduce? The Company, on the other hand, repeatedly functions for profit and sacrifices anyone who stands in their way. Welch-Larson clearly summarizes the tension in each film between these "big bads," and how the other characters are trapped between the two.

Welch-Larson makes an argument for a larger story arc, an ongoing development of Keller's understanding of "discreation," tracing the move from creation out of chaos, to being, to un-being. In this imagined arc, the real tension lies between creation/personhood and subsequent dehumanization: the aliens and The Company (as well as many specific characters in-between) commit acts of evil by ignoring or actively attacking the ability of individuals to participate in determining their own existence. This evil might manifest in The Company sending the Nostromo on the initial rescue mission in *Alien,* or in the willingness of scientists to seed humans with alien embryos.

Though this theme permeates the films, the most difficult chapter of the book to tackle is the section on *Alien: Resurrection*. While labeling the film as a farce and reading it as an intentional reversal of the main themes she addresses elsewhere, Welch-Larson switches into a very different authorial tone. While the framework of Keller's theology remains, the chapter seems forced into the mold — perhaps much as the film itself feels forced into the series.

While the first four chapters make use of Keller's theology from *Face of the Deep* as needed, the connections are at times minimal: (1) *tehom*, the face of the deep in Genesis equates to the void/non-void of space; (2) The Company makes ultimately failed attempts to control that

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[1] Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
[2] Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 80, as quoted in Sarah Welch-Larson, *Becoming Alien: The Beginning and End of Evil in Science Fiction's most Idiosyncratic Film Franchise* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 12.

chaos; and (3) evil resides in the ways we dehumanize and "discreate" others. The final two chapters (*Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*) draw on Keller's theology more directly, though in many ways this is not surprising. Religious themes of chaos, creation, and the responsibility of the creator are blatantly present in the final two films, and it is nearly impossible to watch them without being aware of those ideas.

The final two chapters address in some detail the creation of the A.I. characters (Synthetics) whose personhoods are questioned, and more often than not rejected, throughout the series of films. One theme throughout *Becoming Alien* is an underscoring of Keller's repeated return to "In the beginning…", and her deep dive into the beginnings of A.I. is one of Welch-Larson's most successful reflections. Welch-Larson returns to Ash — the Synthetic of the original film — in a way that ties together her other arguments as well: the Synthetic of *Alien: Covenant* will create his own descendants, but create them as tools rather than as fully independent beings who might themselves create.

In this sense, the book wraps up the series of films by using the Synthetics as the best examples of Welch-Larson's take on evil. She argues that the concept of evil in the series is "exploitation, the act of overstepping the freedoms of another"[3] and that the reduction of a being to a useful tool is the epitome of Keller's "discreation." Often in the series the Synthetics are quite literally stripped down to their component pieces, and those pieces are used by the humans as tools. By returning to the "original" Synthetic in the final two films (David), this argument comes full circle — David is both originated by a human as a tool, and in turn creates other Synthetics who *he* will use as tools.

One of the main strengths of this book is the focus on addressing the series of films as a whole, while not ignoring the plethora of readings that have accumulated in the last six decades. In Welch-Larson's readings, each film might well encompass feminist critiques of power — or meditations on war, or on capitalism. Her approach of allowing multiple critical readings to co-exist, as well as acknowledging different directorial moods and intents, adds to the cohesiveness of her overview of the films.

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[3] Welch-Larson, *Becoming Alien*, xxiii.

Esther J. Hamori, *God's Monsters: Vengeful Spirits, Deadly Angels, Hybrid Creatures, and Divine Hitmen of the Bible.* Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023. 296 pp, hardcover. $28.99.

In *God's Monsters: Vengeful Spirits, Deadly Angels, Hybrid Creatures, and Divine Hitmen of the Bible* (henceforth *GM*), Hamori skillfully and even playfully navigates the dark humor and grotesque tales found throughout the Bible. Sometimes creepy, sometimes surprising, but almost always disturbing, Hamori examines episodes from both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, covering a range of time periods, languages, and fields of expertise.

Instead of losing readers in scholarly jargon, Hamori's accessible—not to mention witty, sharp, and sometimes sarcastic—writing style invites her audience to think *alongside* her. The bluntness she brings is purposeful and in line with the goals of the book. It is clear, and refreshingly so, that *GM* was designed with learning in mind. Indeed, it began as a class that Hamori teaches at Union Theological seminary titled "Monster Heaven." In the process of reviewing a work such as this, I've been inspired by Hamori's writing style and attempted to follow suit throughout my comments here.

Before turning to the structure and details of the work, it's worth emphasizing that *GM* is just as much about monsters as it is about monstrous violence. How much divine violence is acceptable? And what do our limits tell us about our own loyalties, to a deity or otherwise? Hamori's "monstrous readings" are important for both scholars and non-scholars alike and are disarming for any theologically encumbered view. To add to the author's own boundary-crossing approach, Hamori blends the sacred and profane by inserting pop-culture references in every section. Indeed, *Jaws* and *Poltergeist* share the same pages with angels and Leviathan.

Divided into three parts that each address a different category of monster in the Bible, *GM* covers a wide scope of creatures. From the well-known divine hybrids in the throne room to the Destroyer who murders the firstborn children of Egypt, Hamori manages to work through an incredible amount of biblical material without overcrowding. But don't misunderstand: the sheer amount of violent material with which she has to work with *is* overwhelming. And in that way, Hamori maintains a tension for her readers, one that oscillates between utter shock and insatiable curiosity.

Part one comprises more than half of the book and discusses the horrifying entities in what she calls "God's entourage." She begins with the beings that people perhaps feel most confident that they know something about: the familiar seraphim, cherubim, and the adversary. But then come the creatures that readers will likely be less acquainted with, including the destroyer, demons employed by God, and spirits that are not quite what they seem.

Hamori navigates both popular (like Job) and less discussed (David and his census) stories in the Bible, and offers new perspectives on the characters that readers may think they know so well. Moreover, *GM* highlights the relationship dynamics between God and his monsters, which reveal just as much as the character biopics themselves. One example of these dynamics is the "history of working as a team" shared between God and the Adversary as shown in the Balaam incident, Job's trial, Zechariah's vision of the high priest Joshua, and the two versions of David's census.

In addition to fresh readings, Hamori contributes insightful alternatives to long-held assumptions in biblical studies circles. One example from her discussion on cherubim undoes their association with primordial creation and the Edenic paradise. The cherubim's presence in

both the Tabernacle and Temple of Solomon has been largely grouped in with scholars' emphasis on these sacred spaces as creation centered: the garden of God on earth. But Hamori corrects this association by demonstrating that the cherubim's purpose is always about guardianship.[1] This guardian function of cherubim is not new, but its explicit reiteration as guarding the violent portal (the ark of the covenant) that unleashes death and destruction most certainly is.

Divine hitmen—also known as angels—stand out in Hamori's discussion as particularly frightening. They are realm-crossers and shapeshifters, and incite fear in every single person they encounter. Furthermore, Hamori demonstrates that killer-angels aren't just limited to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. They show up in Acts, the Gospels, and Paul's letters—not to mention the infamous book of Revelation—without discrimination. Periodically, Hamori offers psycho-theological insight as to why devotionally-inclined readers continue to accept the terror and violence in their sacred texts without question. Our loyalty to and defense of angels, she argues, perhaps comes from our identification with angels as the most human-like and the possibility of their protection at some point.[2] But in the end, angels are neutral mercenaries who obey their employer, whether it be the army of Satan or the army of God.

In the section immediately following angels, *GM* turns to demons and demon-like figures throughout the Bible including Dever (Pestilence), Qetev (Destruction), Mavet (Death) and more. Unlike angels, these characters have no other purpose than do harm (their names are them and they are their names), which is why a text like Psalm 91 was and continues to be popular as a protective charm against them. God vanquishes each of them, showing his supremacy over them. But then Hamori delivers the disconcerting blow. However much English translations attempt to obscure these Canaanite mythological parallels, each of these entities are later *deployed* by God himself. Demons, then, are not exempt from being drafted into the divine army.

Part two, albeit much shorter than the previous, is titled "The Monsters Beneath" and covers only three monster categories, each of which exist below the surface in some form or another. For the multi-headed Leviathan, the depths of the sea are both its abode and its battleground. It is simultaneously defeated and beloved, and receives an homage in Job 41 that Hamori likens to the poetry of Song of Songs, "an expression of intimate knowledge and passionate love."[3] Ultimately, this reading is about God's loyalty to and admiration of Leviathan's wildness, power, and untamable monstrosity—qualities that we've seen the Bible's god-monster embody over and over.

The other two monster categories are those that traverse the underworld (shades, ghosts, and other living dead) and those that unnaturally reach above it (giants). So, what's the "beneath" about these creatures? They both reflect—in the classic psycho-social understanding of what a monster is—humanity's underlying fears and anxieties. Being disembodied and forgotten in Sheol "reveals a deep discomfort with the notion of a hollow nothingness awaiting us all,"[4] whereas the category of giants becomes a slur for indigenous, "monstrous" others against whom we'd like to justify acts of divinely-approved violence. Part two, in many ways, makes explicit what Hamori has been implying all along. Monsters and monsterization in the Bible are not

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[1] Esther J. Hamori, *God's Monsters: Vengeful Spirits, Deadly Angels, Hybrid Creatures, and Divine Hitmen of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023), 58.
[2] Hamori, *God's Monsters*, 133.
[3] Hamori, *God's Monster*, 221.
[4] Hamori, *God's Monsters*, 239.

innocuous: they have real-life consequences and bear a violent legacy that biblical readers cannot ignore.

By the time one reaches part three—"The Monster of Monsters, the Wonder of Wonders"—an attentive reader will have picked up on the book's underlying thread. If the saying is true that "you become the average of the five people you hang out with most," then God in the company of his monstrous entourage is a troubling one. But God is not only guilty by association. The God in the Bible also checks a number of the boxes on the monster checklist such as having super-size, superpowers, varying forms, and his desire to be the literal embodiment of fear and terror. These monster qualities, Hamori reminds us, are intertwined with the feel-good narratives of love, patience, and mercy, painting a wondrously complicated divine image.

But what makes for a good story if not often its complex characters? They're sympathetic, complicated, have weaknesses, and are often flawed, prompting a reader to question their own perspectives and loyalties. We despise the Riddler in *The Batman* (2022) for his twisted and murderous acts, but then sympathize with his psychological trauma as an orphan and fight for the underdogs. In Hamori's words, monsters aren't just about fear and terror; they're also about "shaking our sense that we know what our world contains."[5] And in this way, the god-monster of the Bible stands firmly in this category.

For future studies, *GM* offers a number of promising contributions. Monster studies and animal studies will find countless points to build on, but other implications may be less obvious. For example, reading *GM* with a polytheistic worldview in mind has the potential to unravel the hegemonic monotheism-lens through which readers interpret biblical texts writ large. God alongside his monsters—such as the gods of the Canaanite pantheons—is really a god among gods fighting for supremacy, uniqueness, and a chance to write *his* own story. But as Xenophanes of Colophon posited, "if horses or oxen or lions had hands…horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as similar to oxen." Perhaps, then, the authors of the Bible wrote the god-monster according to their own complicated view of the world and themselves.

If one can stay unoffended at Hamori's fresh readings, they may be inspired like I was as at every chapter's turn. The stuff of *God's Monsters* makes for some of the best dinner conversations, if you can stomach it.

Megan Remington, University of California, Los Angeles

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[5] Hamori, *God's Monsters*, 103.

Resurrecting Dracula: A Review of *Renfield*[1] and *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*[2]

One of Dracula's most enduring qualities is that he always comes back. And, since horror films first started to adapt Bram Stoker's 1897 novel in the early twentieth century, this undead monster has been resurrected again and again across film and television. Though it is difficult to give an exact number of *Dracula* adaptations, to date Wikipedia notes 111 entries in the category "Dracula in film." Notable entries include offerings from Universal and Hammer Films – with icons of the genre Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee in the title role of Dracula – Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and with countless other series and standalone films. It is a hard undertaking, then, to create a new Dracula film that stands out among the already vast crowd of "Dracula" films, and even more so to conceive of a new interpretation of the vampiric count himself. Yet this is exactly what *Renfield* and *The Last Voyage of the Demeter* have done.

Renfield and *Demeter*, both released in 2023, each offer a fresh twist on a classic vampire tale. Moreover, while revamping Dracula's monstrosity, both films also present something of a return to older things. *Renfield* is one of the latest releases in the Universal Monsters series, and in fact it operates as a sequel to Universal's 1931 *Dracula.* Here, Nicolas Cage stars as the Count and Nicholas Hoult takes up the role of Renfield – a character created by Universal that merges the novel's English Lawyer Jonathan Harker and mental patient Renfield – and several scenes from the original 1931 version starring Bela Lugosi and Dwight Frye are reshot with Cage and Hoult. Despite this evocation of the earlier film, however, this is a twenty-first century nightmare. Cage's Dracula realizes that he must adapt his vampiric aims to align with the values of our contemporary capitalist society. Similarly, the film itself bleeds through genre boundaries to please a modern audience; and as an action-horror-comedy, it diverges from its 1931 predecessor with its addition of violently choreographed fight scenes and biting satirical humor.

In contrast, *Demeter* returns to the novel itself, and focuses on a single chapter often eschewed or only briefly featured in previous Dracula films. In Stoker's novel, the Captain's log details the nightmarish journey of a ship called the Demeter as its crew unknowingly transport Dracula from Romania to Whitby. One by one, the crew are preyed upon by Dracula until the Demeter dramatically crashes on British shores in the midst of a storm, and with the dead Captain tied to the ship's wheel. We already know how this story ends, then, but this film lingers on the hellish journey itself, introducing us to characters that we know are all doomed. Director André Øvredal has described the film as "*Alien*-on-a-ship in 1897,"[3] and – like *Alien* – it certainly plays on the claustrophobia inherent in being trapped on an inescapable vessel with a monster. The director has explored the single-location horror film before in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2019). This period horror is all the more terrifying: the horror of *Demeter* is not just that the ship's crew are trapped with a monster, but that perhaps, out at sea, even God has abandoned them.

Though *Renfield* and *The Demeter* offer vastly different interpretations of *Dracula*, they are united in their exploration of capitalism in relation to vampirism. As Nick Groom suggests, the vampire aesthetic is "inescapably capitalist."[4] In the eighteenth century, Voltaire famously described stock-jobbers, brokers and men of business as being vampires

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[1] Written by Ryan Ridley, directed by Chris McKay. Skybound Entertainment, 2023.

[2] Written by Bragi F. Schut Jr. and Zak Olkewicz, directed by André Øvredal. Universal Pictures, 2023.

[3] Clark Collis, "Dracula sets sail in trailer for horror movie The Last Voyage of the Demeter," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 13, 2023, https://ew.com/movies/the-last-voyage-of-the-demeter-trailer-andre-ovredal-interview/.

[4] Nick Groom, *The Vampire: A New History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 148.

who "sucked the blood of the people in broad daylight,"[5] while Karl Marx, in his foundational critique of capitalism, exploited metaphorical vampirism to characterize capital as "dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."[6] Stoker's Dracula embodies this capitalist practice and aesthetic: he sleeps surrounded by boxes filled with gold coins; his attempt to conquer Britain is partially realized through turning Lucy Westenra into a vampire, and partially through an expansion of his property portfolio in Britain; and, when he is shot, he appears to bleed gold. *Renfield*'s Dracula manifests similar notions of capitalist domination. Here, Dracula and Renfield have a typical master-servant, or a boss-worker, relationship. Renfield carries out Dracula's dirty work as he gathers victims to satiate his boss's appetite, while Dracula keeps his servant under his control by declaring "I am your only salvation." Satirizing America's privatized health-care system, Dracula even provides Renfield with his blood in lieu of a health-care plan: "His blood has the power to heal the injured. And there's not even a copay. Unless you consider my soul." God is absent in this film and for Renfield – and therefore other workers, too – salvation can only be achieved through work and servitude. Or at least, so it first appears. Renfield initially tries to subvert the system he is working within by feeding Dracula other people's bad bosses. Later, when Dracula teams up with the mafia in order to achieve his goal of domination in the modern world by dividing everyone into "followers or food," Renfield finally stands up to his boss and takes his own power back: "You didn't have to use your power to make me your servant, because I gave all my power to you. And I can take it back."

God is similarly absent in *Demeter*, and Dracula exploits this absence. Notably, the crew are forsaken by God because their decision to (unknowingly) transport Dracula for their own financial gain has caused their damnation. In a confrontation with Dracula that calls attention to their state of perdition, the ship's captain seeks God's protection as he holds up a crucifix and utters "I renounce you devil"; but this is not enough, and as God fails to intervene and offer protection, Dracula sinks his teeth into the captain's neck. Dracula is portrayed as an unnatural embodiment of evil, and his monstrosity is reflected in his physical appearance. Gone is the well-dressed gentlemanly monster we have become familiar with on film and as performed by actors such as Lugosi and Cage; instead, this is a nightmarish version of a winged, devilish creature more akin to Barlow in *Salem's Lot* (1979). At first, we see only glimpses of Dracula as he keeps to the shadows and feeds on livestock and the ship's dog. Yet, as the crew's source of sustenance is depleted, and as they start to fall victim to him too, they are faced with a choice: change course to seek food and medical assistance, or keep going and keep the bonus they have been promised to be paid upon early delivery of their cargo in England. It is only after they choose the latter option that Dracula fully reveals himself, and their fate inescapable. Dracula emerges from the shadows, no longer hiding himself and sparing no one.

"We're a doomed crew on a doomed ship," proclaims one Demeter crew member, "We don't plot our own course. The devil below does, and we all know where he plans to deliver us: to hell, one by one." *Demeter* is bleak throughout, particularly as those familiar with Stoker's novel or previous films already know this story will end not with the destruction of Dracula, but with the annihilation of the ship and every living being on it. For *Renfield,* however, the ending is hopeful. Dracula is the embodiment of vampiric capitalism in which an individual's value is seen only in terms of how they can contribute to a society built on selfishness and greed. Yet, as Renfield successfully overthrows his boss, his final

[5] François Voltaire, "Vampires," in *A Philosophical Dictionary* [1770], vol. 10, trans. William F. Fleming (Paris, London, New York, Chicago: E. R. Dumont, 1901), https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35630/pg35630-images.html.
[6] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* [1867], vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Champaign: Modern Barbarian Press, 2018).

voice over narration ends with a call to action: if Renfield can find the power to face his demons, then maybe everyone can.

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"The Monstrous in our Techno-Social World"

***Black Mirror* Season 6. Produced by Charlie Brooker and Annabelle Jones. Netflix, 2023.**

The sixth season of the technologically-dystopian anthology series, *Black Mirror*, was released on Netflix on June 15, 2023. The five new episodes, or *films* as producers Charlie Brooker and Annabelle Jones prefer to call them, were the first offerings of *Black Mirror* to appear on our respective "black mirrors" since before the start of the global pandemic. In the latest installment of eerie reflections about how technology saturates and shapes our social worlds, the showrunners both provide vintage *Black Mirror* and a new trajectory of what is possible for the series, even to the point of ostensibly breaking some of their own rules.

A number of features make this season feel like a classic expression of *Black Mirror*. Most notably, the show remains timely and prescient in its social commentary on technology. With respect to prescience, *Joan is Awful* begins season 6 addressing concerns central to the Hollywood strikes of 2023 that corporations would replace actors and writers with artificial intelligence. The film does so by imagining a Netflix-esque streaming service called Streamberry that produces tailored content about its users with celebrity avatars reenacting the user's day in the worst possible light to "drive engagement." The season also features some recurring actors from earlier seasons (e.g., Wunmi Mosaku, Monica Dolan), as well as multiple easter eggs that help connect the new season with the rest of the series.

At the same time, season 6 is the most *unlike* any other season of the show. The reason is because *Mazey Day* and *Demon 79*, the final two films, together introduce the series to monsters and the supernatural for the very first time. Unlike *Playtest* (S3.E2), the monstrous elements in these episodes are not part of a computer-generated simulation or virtual reality, but that transgresses the basic metaphysics of the show. As Brooker has described *Black Mirror* in the past, it is like a modern version of *Twilight Zone* that replaces the supernatural with the technological.[1] Even as such a claim attempts to establish *Black Mirror* as *a-theological*, it does so by making an explicit theological association, reflecting how, for many, technology has supplanted the supernatural and filled in the gap that it left behind. This orientation towards the series suffuses the volume that I co-edited, *Theology and Black Mirror*,[2] which covers the first five seasons of the show. Even the season opener reestablishes this same connection in *Joan is Awful*, when the CEO of Streamberry, Mona Javadi (Leila Farzad), says about the "quamputer" that creates the fictive levels for their user-based show, "We barely know how it works, it's basically *magic*" (emphasis added). Yet, season 6 goes beyond this and fully introduces the supernatural into the series, adding a new wrinkle, I contend, to the show's commentary on technology.

Black Mirror has chosen to engage the monstrous and the supernatural under the umbrella of its new horror-themed branding of "Red Mirror." *Demon 79* is explicitly labeled as "a Red Mirror film," but *Mazey Day* does not have the same branding. Brooker has addressed how he oscillated back and forth on whether to use it for *Mazey Day*, and decided that he

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[1] Sam Wollaston, "Charlie Brooker: 'Happy? I Have My Moments,'" *The Guardian*, June 1, 2019. Accessed December 13, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/01/charlie-brooker-interview-annabel-jones-black-mirror

[2] Amber Bowen and John Anthony Dunne (eds.), *Theology and Black Mirror*, Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books / Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Academic, 2022).

preferred to leave it off to preserve the twist ending.[3] In *Mazey Day* a team of paparazzi try to hunt down a famous actress named Mazey (Clara Rugaard), who has been missing from the spotlight for several weeks after a hit and run has left her rattled and has (presumably) led her to substance abuse. Viewers realize later through a flashback, however, that she drove into a werewolf, whose saliva entered her bloodstream through a fresh cut on her finger when she stopped to check on it, and so she has been ravaged by the recent full moon. When the encroaching paparazzi find her chained to a bed at a private retreat center, she transforms into a werewolf and begins a violent rampage that leaves only one member of the paparazzi left to "shoot" her and capture her on camera. *Demon 79*, then, is a story about a young woman named Nida (Anjana Vasan), who stumbles upon an enchanted talisman (engraved with the familiar y-shaped symbol from *Bandersnatch*) that summons a demon in the guise of a 1970s pop star from Boney M. named Gaap (Paapa Essiedu), who promises the complete annihilation of the world if Nida does not commit three ritual murders within the allotted timeframe. After Nida is unable to kill her third and final target – the ascending politician, Michael Smart (David Shields), who will one day usher in a techno-fascistic regime – an apocalyptic catastrophe ensues and the credits roll.

  Mazey Day and *Demon 79* certainly take *Black Mirror* into a new register, but they nevertheless retain their commentary on technology. In particular, these episodes ask viewers to reflect on what constitutes the monstrous and the demonic in our tech age. In *Mazey Day*, what is monstrous is not the woman who becomes a werewolf (or even the roommate sensitive to garlic that I suggest is secretly a vampire), but rather the paparazzi who voraciously try to capitalize on Mazey's misery, using the technology of their cameras with utter insatiability. Viewers are primed for this interpretation in the opening sequence when Bo (Zazie Beetz) captures compromising images of an actor at a remote motel, who cries out "F—ing animal!" as she drives away. Similarly, the titular demon in *Demon 79* is not Gaap, but the politician who abuses his power to control society, as we see through images of the robo-dogs from *Metalhead* (S4.E5) in a montage of a futuristic vision of his political accomplishments, which leads Nida to declare, "He's f—ing Satan!" In some ways the dynamic present in these episodes is similar to how *Black Mirror* has compared tech developers to deities in *USS Callister* (S4.E1) and *Smithereens* (S5.E2),[4] though making a comparison to the supernatural through juxtaposition with actual paranormal figures takes this to a new level.

  In the light of the monstrous and the demonic in season 6, two additional themes emerge regarding technology that add cohesion to all five episodes. The first theme pertains to the monstrous way that technology is deployed to commodify tragedy for our collective media consumption. In addition to *Joan is Awful* and *Mazey Day*, this theme is prominent in *Loch Henry*. Biting the hand that feeds even deeper than *Joan is Awful*, *Loch Henry* interrogates Netflix's popularization of true crime documentaries. The film is a tragic story about a documentarian named Davis (Samuel Blenkin) who discovers that the torturous murders that led to his hometown's financial hardships were actually perpetuated by his parents. As it tells this story, the film draws attention to the corporations, producers, and local industries that benefit

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[3] Harrison Brocklehurst, "Black Mirror's Charlie Brooker Has Explained Why Mazey Day Wasn't Classed As Red Mirror," *The Tab*, June 28, 2023. Accessed December 14, 2023. https://thetab.com/uk/2023/06/28/black-mirrors-charlie-brooker-has-explained-why-mazey-day-wasnt-classed-as-red-mirror-314724

[4] Cf., e.g., John Anthony Dunne, "*Smithereens* as Technological Theodicy: Addiction, Emergence, and Resistance," in *Theology and Black Mirror*, ed. Amber Bowen and John Anthony Dunne, Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books / Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Academic, 2022), 81–97.

from turning real-life suffering into binge-worthy media. Davis originally intended to make a documentary with his girlfriend Pia (Myha'la Herrold) about an "egg guy" who protects endangered eggs, a story Davis says will feature "the last holdout against the commodification of nature," which stands as a sad and ironic contrast to the "successful" film he made in the end.

The second additional theme that emerges is how our technological environment untethers us from our basic humanity. This is further portrayed in the third film of the season, *Beyond the Sea*, which is set in an alternate version of 1969. The film showcases two astronauts, David Ross (Josh Hartnett) and Cliff Stanfield (Aaron Paul), who interface with life on earth through lifelike replicas while their natural bodies travel in space on a mission testing the limits of life and survivability. Tragically, David loses his family and his replica in a brutal homicide enacted by a gang decrying the "unnatural" life the astronaut is living. With David left deeply depressed, they arrange to alternate using Cliff's remaining replica so that David can enjoying some fresh air and his hobby of painting. Due to mounting suspicion and jealousy, Cliff eventually rescinds the privilege from him, leading David to murder Cliff's family so that the two of them are on equal footing for the remainder of their multi-year mission in space. Viewers may interpret the ending differently (i.e., perhaps the "blood" on the walls was red paint mixed with linseed oil, given the focus on the latter), but the monstrous nature of human cruelty here coheres with the twist of *Loch Henry*, and sets up the transition to proper monsters in the remaining two films.

What invites this kind of integrated interpretation further is the fact that the season incorporates *prospective* easter eggs, rather than merely *retrospective* ones. Prospective easter eggs are seen most notably in *Joan is Awful*, when Joan (Annie Murphy) and Krish (Avi Nash) scroll through film options on Streamberry, discussing the documentary *Loch Henry* and also passing over a documentary about Michael Smart, the politician from the last film of the season, *Demon 79*. Similarly, at the BAFTA awards ceremony in *Loch Henry*, we hear about a documentary called, *Suffer the Children: The Tipley Pedophile Ring*, which is another true crime documentary about the fictional town of Tipley from *Demon 79*. Folding the story of *Demon 79* into the commodification of tragedy seen in both *Joan is Awful* and *Loch Henry* further underscores this integrative theme. These prospective easter eggs, therefore, help to reinforce the cohesion of season 6's common themes—something not previously attained in *Black Mirror* given its anthology style.

Black Mirror season 6, then, reflects back to viewers the monstrous and demonic powers at work in our present technological society. Rather than *demythologizing Black Mirror*'s new supernatural elements, I contend that the new season has the effect of *remythologizing* the supernatural framework within which technology now operates.

John Anthony Dunne, Bethel Seminary

***Kisaragi Station*. Written by Takeshi Miyamoto, directed by Jiro Nagae. Aeon Entertainment Co., Ltd., 2022.**

Kisaragi Station (Japanese: *Kisaragi Eki*) is a Japanese horror film written by Takeshi Miyamoto and directed by Jiro Nagae. Although differing in many respects from classic "J-horror" in the Konaka Theory tradition, *Kisaragi Station* continues the common use of urban legends in Japanese horror films, exemplified recently in Takashi Shimizu's village series (*Howling Village* [2020], *Suicide Forest Village* [2021], *Ox-Head Village* [2022]). Through its unique combination of audience-perspective first-person storytelling and other elements from gaming, juxtaposition of the mundane and the other worldly, and deliberate ambiguity, it leads audiences from their fascination about other worlds, through fear of such worlds and the unknown in them, to the final realization that the deception, betrayal, and selfishness within ourselves provide plenty of reasons for fear even in the world in which we now live.

Kisaragi Station, like Nagae's earlier *2Channel no Noroi Gekijouban* (2011) and *Shin Samejima Jiken* (2020), is based on an urban legend originating from Japanese internet bulletin board 2channel (popularly known as "2chan"). In a thread extending in the night from January 8 to January 9, 2004, a woman under the handle "Hasami" wrote that she was returning home from work by train as usual but that the train had not stopped for about 20 minutes. Aside from her, only 5 other people were on the train, all asleep. After other 2chan users interacted with her initial posts, she posted that the train stopped at "Kisaragi Station," where she got off the train but found no one, much less a taxi that she could use to go home. Readers of the thread, seeking to help her, soon found that internet searches for "Kisaragi Station" provided no results. Continuing to post, Hasami walked along the train tracks, began to hear taiko drums in the distance, encountered a one-legged elderly man who warned her not to walk on the tracks and then disappeared, and came to a tunnel with a sign "Isanuki Tunnel." Going through the tunnel, she could see someone standing ahead. The person offered to give her a ride to the nearest station, but after getting in the car, the person stopped speaking. Hasami's last post was that her phone battery was about to run out. An urban legend concerning a late-night train becoming a portal to another world and stopping at "Kisaragi Station" resulted from these posts, and it has been used in various media, the best-known outside of Japan of which may be the video game *The Ghost Train* (Japanese: *Yūrei Ressha*; Chilla's Art, 2020).

In Nagae's film, university student Haruna Tsutsumi (Yuri Tsunematsu) visits Sumiko Hayama (Eriko Satō), who posted as "Hasumi," to interview her as part of her research for her graduation thesis for a degree in folklore studies. Hayama narrates to Tsutsumi her experience in the other world, shown to the audience in first-person in the manner of an FPS video game, including how she returned to the normal world and her

failure to save high school student Asuka Miyazaki (Miyu Honda), another passenger on the train. Tsutsumi, through analyzing old messages on Hayama's phone, deciphers how to enter the other world and goes to Kisaragi Station herself. The actions and events in the other world repeat in exactly the manner as Hayama encountered them, allowing Tsutsumi to manipulate differing outcomes through her knowledge of what will happen.

The appeal and attraction of the film *Kisaragi Station*, as well as the urban legend on which it is based, may be considered human curiosity and imagination about other worlds, and it raises the question of the reasons for such fascination. This attraction of other worlds is often manifested in entertainment, such as through the genres of science fiction and fantasy, including the recently popular *isekai* ("other world") genre of manga and anime. Fascination with other worlds and speculation about them are not, however, exclusive to entertainment. They are also manifested in mythology, folklore, and the manner in which religion imagines worlds other than the one of current experience, including, for example, in Christian tradition, speculating about heaven and hell beyond scriptural description. Although *Kisaragi Station* does not develop the relationship of other worlds to religion, echoes of such a relation emerge through the location of the portal of light at a Shinto shrine. The term for disappearance into another world is, after all, *kamikakushi* ("hiding by the gods") and such disappearance has sometimes been associated with particular shrines, such as Shirazumori Shrine in Ichikawa.

The dangers of the other world in *Kisaragi Station* suggest that other worlds, as fascinating as they may be, may also be reason for fear. On the one hand, many of the dangers of the world beyond Kisaragi Station do not surprise audiences who know they are watching a horror film, aside from the mild surprise of occasional jump scares. Nevertheless, the audience knows of only Hayama's return to the normal world and therefore feels anxiety for her companions as they are gradually eliminated by the unexpected variety of dangers by which the other world seems to wish to either destroy them or prevent them from escaping back to the normal world. This anxiety is lessened when Tsutsumi makes her own run through the otherworld. She displays an appearance of control over the strange world through her ability to navigate her companions through it, sometimes comically, without losing them to as many of the dangers that Hayama had. Hayama's distressed exclamations when she is finally unable to manipulate outcomes as she anticipated, however, are a reminder that worlds, whether the one in which we now live or other worlds, are more powerful than the humans who inhabit them. The unexplained giant eye that appears in the sky at this point in the film also suggests the terrifying supernatural (divine?) personhood lying behind the world that has trapped those unfortunate enough to enter it and seeing the evil they commit. While some viewers of the film may feel frustrated by the absence of explanation for the world beyond Kisaragi Station and the dangers that inhabit it, this very absence highlights that neither the present

world nor others may be as we would want to imagine, and they cannot be tamed by our desires and attempts to manipulate them.

Tsutsumi's failed plan for escape is, however, not simply a matter of powerfulness in an unfamiliar world. Both her plan and its failure direct the audience to dangers greater and more sinister than a vein-like thing that haunts train tracks, a weird old man that ignites and explodes on contact, or zombified traveling companions: human deceit, selfishness, and betrayal. Characters in the story have deceived and betrayed each other. Regret, selflessness, compassion, and trust were merely pretend, devices for gaining one's own desire before throwing one's relationship with another person in the trash and leaving the person to die in another world. Those whom humans have pretended to care for may in the end have been mere tools disposed once they have served the roles secretly devised for them. The audience of the film, who has sympathized with these characters (even more so because of the film's FPS viewpoint), has likewise been deceived and betrayed by them, and the film, with its last laugh at the audience, mocks the audience for being so trusting all along. The characters' own ability to predict deception, their use of the deception of others to their own advantage, and even the cosmic watching eye that looks down on Tsutsumi's failure remind that, as much as we may wish to deny human selfish predilection for deceit, it is neither unseen nor to be unexpected. It is too much of who humans are. Audiences who watch through the post-credit scene are left with the sinking dread of what will happen after the film's end when two deceived people encounter each other and attempt to betray each other through self-interest.

These themes of human deceit and betrayal in *Kisaragi Station* are highlighted further if the film is viewed alongside Shimizu's village series as a parody. *Kisaragi Station* shares many elements with the films in the village series, including use of urban legends, a young intelligent female protagonist, a non-urban setting, a timeslip, cyclicism, and a post-credit scene showing that not all has ended. Even some of the visual effects could be considered cheap parodic imitations of those used in the village series. In each film in the village series, however, a character, understanding the inescapable fate by which someone must die, performs a climactic act of self-sacrifice for the salvation of another. *Kisaragi Station* climaxes instead with an act of selfish betrayal that reveals the layers of deceit that extend all the way to the film's beginning. One could imagine Nagae saying to Shimizu that humans are often not the loving, self-sacrificing beings that Shimizu has portrayed them to be.

Kisaragi Station entertains by appealing to the fascination of other worlds, yet it reminds that neither this world nor the worlds beyond the grave can be imagined as a video game to be played and manipulated by our own desires; they must be taken much more seriously. While many of the mysteries of this world and other worlds, as well as the supernatural are left unexplained, the proclivity to selfishness, deception, and betrayal in

ourselves are clear reasons for fear even in our experience of the world in which we now live. We are monsters enough ourselves even if we have not encountered anything monstrous while trying to escape to another world.

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