

Sadism, Alienation, Disintegration: Lowbrow Horror Films and Existential Thought in

Postwar America, 1955-1968

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October, 2022

Word count: 100,000

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Abstract

Postwar American horror films were frequently preoccupied with existential questions about the Outsider, anxiety, intersubjectivity, and meaning. This thesis demonstrates, through textual analysis of a selection of case studies from the films of producers William Castle and Roger Corman, that lowbrow horror mediated on the existential themes and debates that saturated postwar American culture, particularly youth culture, often through means ridiculed and celebrated as “bad” by later critics and scholars. Textual analysis is supported by a cultural studies approach, drawing on Barbara Klinger’s work, arguing meaning is negotiated by contextual factors and historical reception. The present research concludes that these films drew potential existential meanings, especially for young audiences who made up the bulk of regular cinemagoers by 1960, through participation within contemporary existential debates around identity and meaning. Postwar industry trends (the package-unit system; audience diversification; independent producers) meant greater emphasis was placed on distinguishing film features for target markets. Many lowbrow horror films were aligned with the existential debates that registered with youth culture, even as the genre was upscaled in the 1960s and targeted more legitimate, middle-class attitudes through mediation on psychological problems which were often read at the time as existential concerns (drawing associations with prestigious 1940s psychological melodramas). These strategies contributed to the rise of a “New” Hollywood of commercial art-films and blockbuster in the late-1960s, wherein play association with existentialism is often taken for granted. This research offers a fresh approach to the period that links alignment with existential ideas to broader developments within American film, and two periods (1940s psychological melodrama and New Hollywood) in which existentialism is taken for granted that provides a model for future research into the cultural-historiographical relationships between popular film and philosophical ideas.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my immense gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Mark Jancovich and Dr Sophie Scott-Brown who guided me through the PhD process, for strengthening me as an academic, and for going above and beyond to support me both professionally and personally through these years. None of this would be possible without them. They have been the greatest of mentors and the warmest of friends. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Richard Hand, Dr Filipa Antunes, Professor Jon Mitchell, Professor Duncan Large, Dr Fi Roxburgh, Dr Rupert Read, and Dr Davide Rizza, for their support, advice, guidance, and friendship over these years. Additionally, to those who have peer-reviewed and supported my publishing efforts, thank you for helping to make this work the strongest and best it can be, and for welcoming me into this community.

Thanks as well to my family for not just their support for me and my work, but for getting me into these kinds of films in the first place when they bought me *House on Haunted Hill* on DVD when I was 10, and forever changed my life. I would also like to acknowledge Shanice for standing by and supporting me through these long years of study, for tolerating many of the films now discussed here, and for her questions and observations in response to being subjected to *The Tingler* that in many ways inspired the current work. She is my bedrock, my source of wisdom and strength and will to carry on, and I dedicate this work to her.

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Introduction

The association between existentialism and American film noir in the 1940s and 1950s is often well taken for granted in film studies, as is their play with existential motifs of anxiety, dread, negation, and alienation.¹ However, the strong association between film noir and the horror genre goes frequently overlooked, despite many such films often being read as psychological horror films in this period.² The present research demonstrates that, as is taken for granted with film noir, many 1950s and 1960s American horror films, particularly lowbrow independent

¹ Paul Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 229–42; Robert Porfirio, 'No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir', in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by James Ursini and Alain Silver (New York: Limelight, 1996), 77–94; James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); James Naremore, 'American Film Noir: The History of an Idea', in *The Film Studies Reader*, ed. by Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings, and Mark Jancovich (London and New York: Arnold, 2000), 106–13; James Naremore, *Film Noir: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); William Brevda, "'Is There Any Up or Down Left?'" Noir and Existentialism', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 89.3 (2006), 321–46; Steven M. Sanders, 'Film Noir and the Meaning of Life', in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. by Mark Conrad (Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 91–105; Vivian Sobchack, 'Lounge Time: Postwar Crisis and the Chronotope of Film Noir', in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. by Nick Browne (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 129–69; Alan Woolfolk, 'The Horizon of Disenchantment: Film Noir, Camus, and the Vicissitudes of Descent', in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. by Mark Conrad (Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 107–23.

² Naremore, *More than Night*, n13, 281; film noirs were effectively seen as horror films, and the term film noir itself comes from *roman noir* which referred to the Gothic novel. Additionally, in the 1940s, horror films were often discussed interchangeably with crime thrillers, woman's films and what critics would now call film noir, often using terms such as "melodrama" and "psychological/psychoanalytic" film – though by the late-1950s, such terms had diverged, with horror referring to fantasy (such as SF) and/or Gothic films versus thrillers' emphasis on "realism" (however there remained some conflation); Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 170–175; Borde and Chaumeton, *Ibid*, 25; Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Mark Jancovich, "'Thrills and Chills': Horror, the Woman's Film, and the Origins of Film Noir', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 7.2 (2009), 157–71; Mark Jancovich, "'Frighteningly Real": Realism, Social Criticism and the Psychological Killer in the Critical Reception of the Late 1940s Horror-Thriller', *European Journal of American Culture*, 31.1 (2012), 25–39.

films, mediated on existential themes and concepts that circulated widely in postwar American culture, such as absurdity, negation, inauthenticity, freedom, intersubjectivity, sadism, disintegration, and alienation. By grounding textual meanings in contexts and intertexts, this research aims to show that a possible set of existential meanings (among a heterogeneous and often competing set of meanings) of postwar lowbrow American horror films were mediated and made available in the contexts of their original production and reception. It will look at these texts in the context of contemporary socio-cultural thought, suggesting a series of existential meanings that resulted from the industry responding to and participating within contemporary existential debates and discourses. It will consider important contexts such as the alignment of the lowbrow horror films with youth audiences demographics (teenagers, students, and young adults) in the wake of audience diversification and the movement towards a package-unit system in the industry prompting a greater need to appeal to (and shape) audience tastes, as well the broader intertextual alignment of the lowbrow horror genre with the “psychological” (which in many ways overlapped with existentialism in postwar America) – the development of “psychological horror”. It will be argued that this mediation of existential themes constituted a trend within this discursive shift that proved hugely influential within a broader industrial shift in the American film industry: the transition to a “New” Hollywood. This also points to a wider consideration of the relationship between film and contemporary ideas in postwar America.

Recent research in film studies has attempted to take lowbrow horror films seriously, to overcome ‘taste-based critical assessments of [popular horror’s] questionable aesthetics’, according to Blair Davis, and consider their place in developments within the industry and the impact of reception on their meanings.³ An approach to these films that considers their

³ Blair Davis, *Battle for the Bs* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 15.

connections with socio-cultural thought (in this case, existential philosophy) in light of industrial and cultural dimensions and conditions has much to offer, looking at how popular film engages with philosophy (or ideas) precisely because both are cultural productions that occupy similar contexts.⁴ Like Louis Menand in his intellectual and cultural histories of America, the present thesis views philosophical ideas not as “out there” waiting to be discovered’ but as ‘tools – like forks and knives and microchips – that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves’.⁵ Like ideas, films are, to use Menand’s term, ‘soaked through’ by the ‘situations in which we find them’, in this case, within the context of the existential ideas that were circulating in popular and intellectual discourses in the postwar years. Existentialism ‘flooded the cultural field’ in the postwar years, according to Menand, and Martin Halliwell wrote that ‘European existentialism strongly influenced American social and psychological thought in the 1940s’.⁶ However the embeddedness of existential thought within postwar American culture went further than mere influence, as George Cotkin wrote in his intellectual and cultural history of existentialist ideas in America: ‘American existentialism should be seen as more than a case study in the diffusion of European ideas’; his book attempted to ‘trace expressions of existential thinking as both received from European sources and as growing from existential minds’.⁷ They were ideas discussed and debated by a range of intellectuals and writers across the cultural field, many of whom were not “existentialists” but were nonetheless interested in existentialist ideas and questions. While Cotkin focused on

⁴ This is as opposed to considering how film reflects on philosophical ideas on a more abstract level.

⁵ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), xi; see also: Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (London: 4th Estate, 2021).

⁶ Menand, *The Free World*, 91; Martin Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions: Medicine, Psychiatry, and American Culture, 1945-1970* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 242.

⁷ George Cotkin, *Existential America*, Reprint (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 9.

American intellectuals, sociologists, cultural critics, and writers like Richard Wright, J. D. Salinger, William Barrett, and Hazel E. Barnes, the present research considers how such ideas are toyed with in low-budget popular horror films, following from Cotkin's claim that 'American existentialism... "has ways of *boiling over*," of escaping from the pages of any volume'.⁸

The present research is interested in how a consideration of these films as playing with existentialism may impact our view of the trends within the horror genre in the 1950s and 1960s, in particular the well-established movement towards "psychological" horror cinema and impact on "New" Hollywood. The notion that *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) was a watershed moment of change in horror has been routinely challenged by critics such as Jancovich and Tudor, who showed that *Psycho* and the "psychological" horror films of the 1960s that followed were actually drawing on trends of the 1950s established by low-budget independent horror, as well as imported art cinema.⁹ It will be suggested that play with existential themes and motifs was an important and overlooked part of that trend, particularly given the genre's orientation towards teenagers and students. Indeed, as with film noir, existential concepts are often a taken-for-granted feature of the prestige horror films of the 1960s, such as *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968), art-horror films like *Repulsion* (Polanski, 1965), and in the "art-films" of New Hollywood, such as *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1968) and *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976).¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 4; Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Film* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 49–50.

¹⁰ Douglas Gomery defines the prestige film accordingly: 'product prestige can be thought of as the extent to which the films of a studio are perceived to be of "quality" by contemporary moulders of public opinion about films – commentators and critics in the trade and general press'; Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, reprint (London: BFI Publishing, 2015), 39; see also: Mark Jancovich, 'Beyond Hammer: The First Run Market and the Prestige Horror Film in the Early 1960s', *Palgrave Communications*, 3.17028 (2017), 1–14 <<https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.28#>>, 4–6.

Both these prestigious horror films and the films of New Hollywood, are valued for what is seen as their innovative modernism and toying with aspects such as genre, a formal subversion of cinematic expectations, and a reference to art-cinema, crafting what is often considered an American art-film renaissance that dealt with many complex philosophical themes. But it is also acknowledged how such films were indebted to B-films and low-budget “schlock” from the 1950s and 1960s; look no further than the fact that many of the key auteurs of New Hollywood (Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Bogdanovich, Jack Nicholson) were alumni of Roger Corman’s low-budget exploitation films, or that *Rosemary’s Baby* was produced by William Castle. Additionally, it is taken for granted that imported “highbrow” art films from the 1950s – for instance, *Les Diaboliques* (Clouzot, 1955), *The Seventh Seal* (Bergman, 1957), and the various films of Akira Kurosawa such as *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950), *Ikiru* (Kurosawa, 1952) and *Kumonosu-jo* (Kurosawa, 1957) – overtly toyed with existential concepts and motifs.¹¹ But not only did such films have an important impact on low-budget horror producers in the 1950s and 1960s, in particular William Castle and Roger Corman, but those films routinely traded in the same imagery and style as these horror films. As Joan Hawkins significantly argued, there is ‘an aspect of art cinema that is generally overlooked or repressed in cultural analysis; namely, the degree to which high culture trades on the same images, tropes, and themes that characterize low culture’.¹² Those films to which these more “prestigious” films are indebted to are very much playing with those same themes

¹¹ For Clouzot, see: Susan Hayward, *Les Diaboliques* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1955). (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2005); for Bergman, see: Charles B. Ketcham, *The Influence of Existentialism on Ingmar Bergman: An Analysis of the Theological Ideas Shaping a Filmmaker’s Art* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); Mary M. Litch, *Philosophy Through Film*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2014); for Kurosawa see: Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 3rd edn (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

¹² Hawkins, *Ibid*, 21.

and concepts, in particular those found in existential thought, which points to a wider saturation of existential ideas throughout American popular culture during the postwar years.

This is by no means to suggest these popular horror films as underappreciated works of filmic art, because they were not. These films were products of an industry in transition, an industry that was attempting to reorganize its strategies to pursue the central goal of profit through reaching and creating audiences. These films were popular; in the late-1950s, producers cultivated and constructed a new teenage/youth market and in the 1960s, producers tried to upscale them, appealing to the guaranteed youth audience whilst also attracting a more legitimate, middle-class adult audience through markers of “quality” like psychological themes. Popular film can be seen as a different means of engaging with and mediating ideas in culture and a means by which the industry entered, exploited, and even constructed a market of ideas in postwar America, in this case, constructing a market for existential horror films.¹³ This approach considers the crucial cultural linkage between ideas as cultural productions and popular texts, both of which can inhabit shared conditions and cultural landscapes as is the case with existential thought in American and popular horror films.

¹³ Indeed, in the postwar years, French Existentialism was a fashion (part of a wider Francophilia) and as such industries were quick to try and exploit it, such as in fashion magazines, clothing companies, and publishing which rushed to get as many popular books on existentialism on the market as possible; Cotkin, *Ibid*, 142; Menand, *The Free World*, 91. For popular texts during the 1940s existentialism vogue, see: Helmut Kuhn, *Encounter with Nothingness: An Essay on Existentialism* (Hinsdale, Illinois: Henry Regnery, 1949); Marjorie Grene, *Introduction to Existentialism (Dreadful Freedom)*, 1948. Seventh Impression (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); James Collins, *The Existentialists: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952); William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existentialism*, 1958. Reprint (Garden City, New York: Double Day Anchor Books, 1962); Ralph Harper, *Existentialism: A Theory of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948); Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956. Revised and expanded edn (New York, NY: A Plume Book, 1975); Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, [1950]. 1976. 4th edn, reprint (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Research Aims and Methodology

The principle aims and questions of the present project are:

- *To demonstrate that many lowbrow horror films from the 1950s and 1960s (1955 to 1968) were playing with existential themes and concepts such as anxiety, alienation, absurdity, subjectivity, freedom, and the Other.* This will be shown through case studies selected from the productions of William Castle and Roger Corman. A key part of the present study will consider how those strange, surreal aspects of “bad” horror films in the 1950s and 1960s which often draw criticism and ridicule can in fact be read as meaningful and alternate ways of mediating certain existential ideas that were widely diffused and saturated within the culture of the times. This aim raises questions about how meanings are produced in film. This aims not to argue that these films are “actually” underappreciated existential texts, but that existential thought constituted certain contexts (social, cultural, institutional) against which such texts were produced (for a market) and intended to be read (by critics and intended audiences), that they were (at least in part) alternate engagements with popular ideas.
- *The present research aims to demonstrate that existentialism in low-budget independent horror is an overlooked (or even taken for granted) trend within the wider industrial development towards New Hollywood, such as in the discursive shifts towards “psychological” and adult horror.* As specific markets became important to producers during these transitional years (the movement to a “package-unit” system), the present project will demonstrate that the exploitation of existential ideas and themes was one trend mobilized as part of an attempt to appeal to target audience demographics. Such strategies became integral to later, more prestigious (and artistic) films. This will be shown this using intertextual materials (reviews, advertisements) which attempted to construct an existential identity for these films (among other,

sometimes conflicting identities). The wider impact of these films on later developments in terms of existentialism – such as adult horror and the art-films of New Hollywood in which existential themes are more taken-for-granted – will also be demonstrated. What this points to is the intersection of existential ideas (as cultural products) and the American film industry – the exploitation existential ideas as an industry strategy during these transformative years that has become a taken-for-granted feature of more prestigious, legitimate films from the New Hollywood era.

- *The present project aims to address the relationship between film and philosophy, showing how philosophical ideas can be seen within popular film when both are considered along more cultural lines (as cultural products).* This will be discussed further below.

The present project draws on work in cultural studies to address the relationship between film and ideas. A cultural studies approach to film considers the socio-cultural conditions that accompanied and provided the contexts for consumption and interpretation of media texts for audiences, and explores ‘the significance of these texts in relationship to the wider cultural context which these texts mediate’.¹⁴ In particular, the project draws on notions of culture developed by cultural scholars such as Raymond Williams, for whom culture was better understood as a ‘whole way of life’, in which ideas are means of grasping and understanding “reality”: ‘What we have... is a grasping of this reality through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity...’.¹⁵ As Barbara

¹⁴ Andy Willis, ‘Cultural Studies and Popular Film’, in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. by Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 174–175; Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings, and Mark Jancovich, ‘Cultural Studies’, in *The Film Studies Reader*, ed. by Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings, and Mark Jancovich (London: Arnold, 2000), 265.

¹⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 1979. Reprint (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 27; see also: Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Raymond Williams, *Culture*, 2nd edn (Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks,

Klinger states, film ‘pass[es] through culture and history... subject to systems of signification that lie outside textual boundaries, systems largely responsible for negotiating their public identity’.¹⁶ Like ideas, films are cultural products and subject to the same processes that saturate culture and history, and, as a result, their meanings may often be shaped by them.¹⁷ In the present project, it will be argued that many postwar lowbrow horror films were saturated by the existential ideas that became a particular means of grasping reality for Americans, and that they also actively participated with those ideas, both of which negotiated an existential meaningfulness for these films at the time. As will be demonstrated, the lowbrow horror film was one such way in which core concepts and ideas in existentialism were presented to postwar audiences; these films were popular mediations of existential ideas. This research centres on textual analysis (looking at existential meanings in the films), but always refers to the film texts within the contexts of socio-cultural existential thought, particularly how the films were mediated within those discourses (such as through marketing), that made them meaningful in this respect.

The present project draws heavily on the exhaustive intellectual histories of existential philosophy and thought in America, such as Cotkin’s *Existential America*, Ratner-

1982); Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 1976. New edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 37.

¹⁶ Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), xvi.

¹⁷ Marx and Engels: ‘Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., – real, active men, as they are conditioned by definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these...’; Williams: Ideas are ‘from the beginning social processes... that become accessible only in unarguably physical and material ways’; see: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Student Edition*, ed. by C. J. Arthur, 1970. Reprint (London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1991), 41, 47; Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 61–62. Furthermore, as semioticians like Valentin Volisninov state, language is never fixed, but is subject to active participation and change by social agents; Valentin Volisninov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Seminar Press, 1973); John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 1–6.

Rosenhagen's *American Nietzsche*, and Menand's *The Free World*. These sources show existentialism in America as an active and changing intellectual and popular discourse that saturated American culture throughout the 1950s and 1960s, one that also predated the importation of European ideas, within which agents across culture participated. The present thesis is interested in demonstrating how those ideas were diffused throughout horror films which mediated on existential themes and concepts and in many ways contributed to existential debates. Moreover, in playing with familiar ideas, the lowbrow horror genre became heavily aligned with existential ideas (which were similarly held to be lowbrow in their association with Europe and youth) by audiences, critics, and the industry itself. Lowbrow horror films and existential ideas were not isolated or distinct. As part of culture (cultural products within a "whole way of life") they can be seen to be mediating on the same ideas (the same ways of grasping reality) and actively participating with one another. Moreover, this intersected with the practices of the industry.

Key Terms

As a continuous language that has been diffused throughout cultural products, it is hard to pin down a single definition of what an existentialism is or looks like. Existentialism is loosely defined by shared attitudes, ideas, philosophies, repeated themes, and common interests and threads. Its usage in this research refers more to existentialism as a set of similar, overlapping ideas. In American (as well as European) thought existentialism was closely associated with psychology; existential ideas related to psychological ideas (both looked at the psychic and experiential processes that made the world meaningful for the individual), and existentialism as a movement was posited as a more humanistic alternative to the dominant models of

behaviourism in American psychology.¹⁸ Existentialist philosophies frequently take the problem of existence as their core, that the human being is thrown existing into this world without essence or meaning and is condemned to freedom and forced to make choices. A series of specific terminologies have been employed by various thinkers and writers across multiple forms to address the problem of existence. It will be helpful to provide a glossary of useful themes, terms, and operationalized concepts which will be utilized in the analyses of this project's case studies.¹⁹

- **Anxiety** (or **angst** or **dread**): a fear of nothing, a dread at the prospects of human possibility, a gloom about the unknowable and the inevitable.

¹⁸ See: *A Social History of Psychology*, ed. by Jeroen Jansz and Peter van Drunen, reprint (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 37, 111–122; Dai Jones and Jonathan Elcock, *History and Theories of Psychology: A Critical Perspective* (London: Arnold, 2001), 50–54; R. D. Hinshelwood, 'Convergences with Psychoanalysis', in *Psychology and Society: Radical Theory and Practice*, ed. by Ian Parker and Russell Spears (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 93–104; Keith Tudor, 'From Humanism to Humanistic Psychology and Back Again', in *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects*, ed. by Richard House, David Kalisch, and Jennifer Maidman (London: Routledge, 2018), 222–36; Keith Tudor, 'Humanistic Psychology', in *Handbook of Critical Psychology*, ed. by Ian Parker (London: Routledge, 2015), 127–36.

¹⁹ To clarify, existentialism refers to ideas, and Existentialism refers to the postwar intellectual movement in France, consisting of scholars such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (among others), and perhaps unofficially, Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon.

For good introductions and further analysis of these themes, see the following: Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Existentialist Revolt*, new enlarged edn (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1960); Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*; Barrett, *Irrational Man*; David E. Cooper, *Existentialism*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999); Richard Appignanesi, *What Do Existentialists Believe?* (London: Granta Publications, 2006); John MacQuarrie, *Existentialism*, 1982. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1972); Mary Warnock, *Existentialism*, revised edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); *The Bloomsbury Companion to Existentialism*, ed. by Felicity Joseph, Jack Reynolds, and Ashely Woodward (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Kevin Aho, *Existentialism: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

- **Death** (or **finitude** or **negation**): related to anxiety, a dread of the inevitable negation of existence, of our unconquerable finitude.
- **Absurdity**: a state of disharmony with the world; a confrontation with the meaninglessness of existence and of one's being; an unresolvable tension between one's pursuit of meaning in the world and the refusal or impossibility for the world to provide it. This is also related to **disintegration**, when the expected, rational world of meaning collapses.
- **Subjectivity** (and **phenomenology**): the world is apprehended by subjective consciousness, and this consciousness renders the apprehended world meaningful, but these meanings are entirely subjective (they do not necessarily line up with the "real") and are also prone to contamination and manipulation (perceptual alienation). Phenomenology is the philosophy of how phenomena is revealed to consciousness.
- **Freedom** and **choice**: the responsibility thrust upon human beings in a meaningless world where existence precedes essence, where they are thrown into this world without any essential or guaranteed meaning, where they must construct those meanings via choices made. Decisions made **authentically** (**authenticity**) do not rely on external ideas or justifications – they are choices made freely.
- **Inauthenticity** (or "**Bad Faith**"): a flight to 'determinants', the avoidance of making decisions, excuses that remove responsibility for one's own freedom.²⁰
- **Alienation**: a sense of disconnectedness from the world, of homelessness and loneliness, of being unable to impact the world or situation around us.

²⁰ Brevda, "“Is There Any Up or Down Left?”", 331; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, [1943] 1957. Reprint (London: Routledge, 2003), 78, 83.

- **The Other** (and “**The Look**”): the problem of being seen and of having one’s meanings constructed for one by those who perceive the individual; being made object by the consciousness of the Other. The Other was frequently configured as a **sadist**. **Intersubjectivity** (and **being-with-others**) refers to the state of relating to Others, other subjectivities.

This glossary has taken into account the terms, themes, and concepts that were saturated throughout American culture and discourses; it will be demonstrated how the horror films of the 1950s and 1960s mediated and became aligned with these themes and concepts.

Horror and Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s

The 1950s and 1960s are considered an important site of industrial transition in American film; the development towards a new studio system of media conglomeration that continues to define the industry to this day. Following the boom years of the Second World War, audiences steadily declined as affluence and suburbanization took core middle-class audiences away from the first-run theatres that upheld the industry oligopoly of the fully vertically integrated Big Five studios. Furthermore, the Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that the majors were operating an illegal monopoly over exhibition and were ordered to divest themselves from their profitable theatre chains. The studios tried to adapt, including exploiting “new” technologies (such as 3D and Widescreen), making more extravagant event A-pictures aimed at attracting middle-class suburbanites, financing independent production, and associations with television – the latter of which marked the direction of the new studio system: media conglomeration.²¹ Additionally,

²¹ The film industry was forced to adapt to the *Paramount* decision of 1948 that brought an end to vertical integration (in which studios dominated the production, distribution, and exhibition sectors of the industry, creating a studio oligopoly) and practices such as “blockbooking” which had defined industry practices since the 1920s. During this period, Hollywood transitioned from what Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson called a “producer-unit” system under the Studio

System to a “package-unit” system of deal-making which ‘intensified the need to differentiate the product on the basis of its innovations, its story, its stars, and its director’ as audiences (and profits) were no longer guaranteed. Each film became a risk, which altered how films were distributed, with more emphasis being placed on “exploitation” as a marketing strategy. These contexts saw the rise of the independent producer who made deals with the studios as the industry norm. Independent filmmakers (those not directly employed by a studio) who had historically been locked out of first-run theatres by the studio oligopoly, exploited the shortage of product that resulted in the movement towards A-pictures and the studio retreat from the first-run market. The rise of the independent is perhaps the most important development in American film in these years. As the majors moved away from functioning as mass production factories for films, they became distributors and financiers, often investing in and buying films made by independents (cheaper and less risky than employing an in-house production team). By the late-1950s, this “package-unit” system became established practice in the American film industry, with a majority of films being made by independents.

By the 1960s and 1970s, after the notable failure of roadshow A pictures to make profits, the major studios noticed the profits of cheaper independent films and entered the independent and exploitation market, producing their own big-budgeted takes on these popular independent films – resulting in films such as *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Godfather*, *The Exorcist*, and *Jaws* – which utilized many of the same strategies as their lower-budgeted cousins such as exploitation, saturation distribution, and courting of the youth market. Such films also employed saturation advertising, with much of *Jaws*’ success being down to how it was promoted using TV. Scholars call this the start of the “New Hollywood” period, marked by increasing media conglomeration and horizontal integration with television. The studios also threw their weight behind independent production, acting primarily as distributors and financiers for independent producers, which in turn helped to facilitate a “Hollywood Renaissance” (confusingly also called New Hollywood). By the 1970s, film no longer sat at the centre of the industry; films were and continue to be just one product among many in a multi-media landscape.

For important histories of this period, see: Tino Balio, ‘Retrenchment, Reappraisal, and Reorganization, 1948 -’, in *The American Film Industry*, ed. by Tino Balio, revised edn (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 401–47; David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, 1985. Reprint (London: Routledge, 1994); Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 198–287; Paul Grainge, Mark Jancovich, and Sharon Monteith, *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader*, reprint (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 279–351; Peter Lev, *Transforming the Screen: 1950-1959*, History of the American Cinema (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), vii; Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 159–187; Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960-1969*, History of the American Cinema (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2001), viii; Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, History of the American Cinema, 6 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1997); Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film Making and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981); Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (Boston: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 2010); Kevin Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1–15; Davis, *Battle for the Bs*, 19–42; Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film and History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1985); *Moviegoing in America*, ed. by Gregory A. Waller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); *Kings of the Bs: Working Within the*

the youth demographic (aged ten to thirty-five), became the primary cinema-goers, with teenagers (aged twelve to nineteen) and young adults (aged twenty to thirty-five, often students) making up seventy to eighty per cent of the total film audience in the 1950s.²² The emergence of the teenager as a distinct cultural market motivated independents to directly market their cheap, lowbrow films to this demographic for a slim though sometimes relatively sizable profit, and the industry as a whole soon adopted such strategies, leading to what Doherty called the “juvenilization” of American movies.²³

Within this period of industrial and social change, a series of well-discussed shifts and changes (narrative, aesthetic, generic, etc.) were taking place in the American horror film, most notably the narrative shift from SF-horror narratives to psychological horror narratives; shifts which have been conventionally been related to the changing sites of cultural anxiety and fear (the shifting “landscapes of fear”) by scholars, but which have also more recently been tied to broader changes in the American film industry by important industrial scholars such as Kevin

Hollywood System: An Anthology of Film History and Criticism, ed. by Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1975).

For New Hollywood and Independent Cinema, see: David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate, 1970-1979*, *History of the American Cinema*, 9 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000); Peter Kramer, *The New Hollywood from Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005); Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2002), 136–183; Thomas Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art, and Industry* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983); Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood* (New York: Continuum, 1992); Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Greg Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000); *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jim Hillier (London: BFI Publishing, 2001).

²² Tzioumakis, *Ibid.*, 136; Linda May Strawn, ‘William Castle’, in *Kings of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System: An Anthology of Film History and Criticism*, ed. by Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1975), 291.

²³ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

Heffernan and Blair Davis.²⁴ Such shifts have traditionally been seen by many scholars as the point in which the horror film attained a degree of aesthetic legitimacy, heralding a period of important, thematically rich art-horror films (such as innovative films like *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960), big-budget adult horrors like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), and underground cinema auteur horror like *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968, and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974)).

Notably, many scholars discern a significant narrative shift in the horror genre during the late-1950s and 1960s which was central to these above transitions; Andrew Tudor called this a 'macroscopic' change in the horror genre, the passage between two 'distinctive horror discourses', from 'secure' to 'paranoid' horror.²⁵ This is frequently seen as a shift away from science fiction (SF) narratives that were seen to have replaced traditional horror content in the 1950s (i.e. Gothic horror), with examples such as *Them!* (Douglas, 1954) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956), films which many scholars saw as reproducing the 'collective concerns with invasion, communism, and the atomic bomb' of the 1950s.²⁶ The shift is seen to

²⁴ Tudor, *Ibid.*, 4; Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

²⁵ Andrew Tudor, 'Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre', in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. by Mark Jancovich (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 52; see also: Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*.

²⁶ Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 47; see also the following literature: Victoria O'Donnell and Peter Lev, 'Science Fiction Films and Cold War Anxiety', in *Transforming the Screen: 1950-1959, History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), VII, 169–96; see also: Steffen Hantke, 'Bush's America and the Return of Cold War Science Fictions: Alien Invasion in "Invasion", "Threshold", and "Surface"', *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 38.3 (2010), 143–51; Steffen Hantke, 'A Sick Mind in Search of a Monstrous Body: William Castle and the Emergence of Psychological Horror in the 1960s', in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*, ed. by Murray Leeder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 153–70; Cyndy Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999); Melvin E. Matthews, *1950s Science Fiction Films and 9/11: Hostile Aliens, Hollywood, and Today's News* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2007); Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies!: American Science Fiction Movies of the Fifties, the 21st Century Edition* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010); Carlos Clarens, *An Illustrated History of the Horror Films* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 147–168; Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film', in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*,

be towards what are known as “psychological” or “paranoid” horror films of the 1960s that, following on from *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* as watershed moments, drew on Gothic and crime melodrama traditions and resituated the site of horror away from monsters and supernatural beings and ‘located horror firmly and influentially within the modern psyche, the modern world, modern relationships, and the modern (dysfunctional) family’, the meeting of horror and psychological thriller, according to Steve Neale.²⁷ According to Mark Jancovich, it was ‘1950s horror... which moved the genre away from its concern with exotic locations and began to place it firmly within the context of modern American society’.²⁸

This points more broadly to debates as to how genre history, and film history, is to be conducted, and how a shift in genre relates to the meaningfulness of film texts. Kevin Heffernan identified three approaches to the history of the horror genre that have been adopted throughout horror scholarship: social, aesthetic, and economic.²⁹ Aesthetic historians attempt to ‘chart the evolution or devolution of the genre in terms of iconography, narrative conventions, or

ed. by Barry Keith Grant and C. Sharnett, revised edn (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 29; Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or Paradoxes of the Heart* (Oxon: Routledge, 1992), 208.

²⁷ As a result, psychoanalytic approaches to horror have been common, with these films taken to be meaningful as collective dreams or expressions of psycho-sexual angst; Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 96; for psychoanalytic readings of horror more generally, see: *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. by Andrew Britton and others (Tononto: Festival of Festivals, 1979); Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Charles Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film from the 1950s to the 21st Century* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009); Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films*; Reynold Humphries, *The American Horror Film: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002); Bruce F. Kawin, *Horror and the Horror Film* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2012); Steven Jay Schneider, *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud’s Worst Nightmare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*; Robin Wood, ‘The American Nightmare: Horror in the 1970s’, in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. by Mark Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 25–32; Robin Wood, ‘An Introduction to the American Horror Film’, 107–41.

²⁸ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 304.

²⁹ Kevin Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 6.

representations of violence’ and often focus on the pleasures that come from viewing horror.³⁰ Social (or cultural) historians ‘chart a reflection of a larger social reality in the movies themselves’.³¹ Economic historians consider the economic and industrial conditions of the film industry and how changing genre conventions are both a response to and catalyst for changes in the industry and society at large. These three approaches are evident throughout scholarly horror discourse, with Heffernan marking the most important intervention into the history of the horror genre in the last two decades with an approach that combines the three. The following review will discuss social (or cultural) and economic (or industrial) approaches to the genre which have proved foundational to the present research.

The 1950s horror film has often been dismissed or considered degraded, narratively, thematically, and aesthetically, in comparison to the more “legitimate” psychological horror films of the 1960s. 1950s horror is commonly associated with SF narratives and is generally considered reactionary, formulaic, and wedded to Cold War hysterias and anxieties. The horror film of the 1950s traditionally occupied a disregarded status in scholarly horror literature. According to Jancovich, ‘most critics have written it off as trashy and sensationalist’.³² Other critics, such as Hendershot, Booker, and those who subscribe to “trash aesthetics” and “paracinematic” discourses have valued these films for those very properties.³³ The 1950s

³⁰ Ibid., 6; see the following aesthetic histories of horror, a number of which Heffernan mentions in his book: Carlos Clarens, *Illustrated History of the Horror Films*; S. S. Praver, *Caligari’s Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1980); Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*; Cynthia A. Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000); Jonathan Rigby, *American Gothic: Six Decades of Classic Horror Cinema*, reprint (Cambridge: Signum Books, 2018); *Focus on the Horror Film*, ed. by Roy Huss and T. J. Huss (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

³¹ Heffernan, Ibid., 6.

³² Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 1.

³³ For paracinema and cult theory, see: Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style”, *Screen*, 36.4 (1995), 371–93; Becky Bartlett, “‘It Happens By Accident’: Failed Intentions, Incompetence, and Sincerity in Badfilm”, in *The Routledge Companion to Cult Film*, ed. by Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton

horror film was considered degraded, neither culturally nor artistically significant; ‘most studies of the horror genre ignore any detailed analysis of the 1950s in favour of other, more legitimate periods... the 1950s, it is assumed, constitutes a period of conservatism within horror, whether this conservatism is conceived of in aesthetic or political terms’.³⁴ Since the 1990s, critics and scholars have re-evaluated the horror cinema of the 1950s and key creators as worthy of in-depth analysis, not only as historically interesting cultural products, but as thematically and aesthetically intriguing individual texts, often because of those very trashy, “lowbrow” elements that were intentionally intended to appeal to sensation-craving teenagers by producers. Jancovich’s work on the era is of great significance. He suggested convincingly that those so-called more legitimate psychological horror films of the 1960s and 1970s were not a break from the 1950s, but a development of trends established within it, with the previously disregarded horror films of William Castle, Roger Corman, Jack Arnold, and others in the 1950s maintaining a formative influence; Steffan Hantke agreed, indicating that figures such as Castle provided the model for the 1960s psychological horror film.³⁵ The literature of the last few decades shows that 1950s horror films were far from the reactionary, conservative films that they are conventionally read as; they are worthy of deeper aesthetic, thematic, and narrative analysis, often *because* of their trashier elements, and that they are important within the development of legitimate periods of horror cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. Both Heffernan and Davis have added that not only did later, “legitimate” cinema (that is, both those New

(Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 40–49; *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. by Mark Jancovich and others (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Ernest Mathijs, “‘Nasty,’ ‘Naughty,’ ‘Culty’: Exploitation Film”, in *The Routledge Companion to Cult Film*, ed. by Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 11–23; Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011); Julia Mendenhall, ‘Cult Cinema and Camp’, in *The Routledge Companion to Cult Film*, ed. by Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 190–97.

³⁴ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 266–267; see also Hantke, ‘A Sick Mind in Search of a Monstrous Body’, 159.

Hollywood art films and studio prestige films) draw on the themes, they also adopted many of their industrial strategies. With this in mind, the present research seeks to display that not only were the trashier, low-budget horror films of the 1950s and 1960s playing with existentialism themes and concepts, but to suggest that that this was one of the many trends that were developed and “legitimized” by later adult horror films.

Tudor’s significant cultural history of the horror genre challenged purely aesthetic histories by attempting to more accurately ground the development in the genre in a social phenomenology.³⁶ Tudor saw genre as a ‘distinct reservoir of cultural resources, drawn upon

³⁶ Social historians of genre adopt methods akin to Thomas Schatz’s “ritual approach”, which saw genre films as forms of ‘collective cultural expression’, as what Neale called ‘vehicles of and for the exploration of ideas, ideals, cultural values and ideological dilemmas central to American society’; For literature on ritual approaches to genre evolution, see: Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 13; Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 220; for older writings on the “ritual” approach, see: John Cawleti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1970); John Cawleti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as an Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976); Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1976); Frank D. McConnell, *The Spoken Seen: Film and the Romantic Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976); Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood*; Vivian Sobchack, ‘Genre Film: Myth, Ritual and Sociodrama’, in *Film/Culture: Explorations of Cinema in Its Social Context*, ed. by S. Thomas (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1982), 147–65; Michael Wood, *American Movies; or ‘Santa Maria, It Had Slipped My Mind’* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); Will Wright, *Six-Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975).

Social histories of the horror film include: Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*; Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0*; Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*; Joseph Grixti, *Terrors of Uncertainty: The Cultural Contexts of Horror Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989); Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films*; Cyndy Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism and the Cold War Imagination* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001); David J. Hogan, *Dark Romance: Sexuality in the Horror Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1986); Humphries, *The American Horror Film: An Introduction*; Darryl Jones, *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* (London: Arnold, 2002); Jonathan Lake Crane, *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film* (London: Sage, 1994); Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2005); David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993); Carrol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

by both filmmaker and audience, but transcending them individually...'.³⁷ Genre is meaningful in how it was tune with the 'audiences' interpretative apparatus', which exist on the level of 'practical consciousness', that is, those things that social actors may know to be going on within the contexts of social life.³⁸ It is often assumed by critics, particularly Tudor, that the principal aim of the horror film is to scare the audience.³⁹ For Tudor, the meanings of the various conventions of the horror genre will be understood according to what was culturally decided to be fearful at a given point, within cultural 'landscapes of fear'.⁴⁰ It is taken for granted, for instance, that the SF-horror films of the 1950s responded to Cold War fears of atomic warfare and totalitarianism. The shift towards modern psychological horror for Tudor and other critics, reflected this changing landscape of fear, drawing energy from a collective 'profound insecurity about ourselves, and accordingly the monsters of the period are increasingly represented as part of an everyday contemporary landscape'.⁴¹

Social histories of horror have been useful in charting the wider social and cultural contexts of horror cinema, indicating how horror films could have resonated with contemporary audiences and acted, as Kendall R. Phillips suggests, as 'an important barometer for the

³⁷ Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 5–6.

³⁸ Ibid., 3–4; 'Practical consciousness' is a term taken from the sociological work of Anthony Giddens; Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

See also Barry Keith Grant, who suggested that genre films actively invited readings which emerged from how such films actively resonated with the experiences and situations of the audience; genre films, he argued, were reliant 'on communally shared conventions that bring genre films so close so often to our continual negotiations between the self and world'; Barry Keith Grant suggested that genre films actively invited readings which emerged from how such films actively resonated with the experiences and situations of the audience; genre films, he argued, were reliant 'on communally shared conventions that bring genre films so close so often to our continual negotiations between the self and world'; Barry Keith Grant, 'Experience and Meaning in Genre Films', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant, 3rd edn (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 116–118.

³⁹ This is of course, up for debate (what of comedy horror?) and can be construed as essentialist.

⁴⁰ Tudor, Ibid., 5.

⁴¹ Tudor, Ibid., 48.

national mood'.⁴² However, as Neale points out, claims that films tap into a national mood are vague when devoid of thorough historical study.⁴³ Tudor notes the deficiencies in such claims also, suggesting that more in-depth work in sociology and ethnography are needed in order to come to such claims. Given the heterogeneity of both genre films and audiences, arguing that genres reflect the national mood risks essentializing and overstating various cultural trends. Phillips himself notes that films may only resonate with certain specific trends within culture, and even then, this can be only 'informed speculation' about given cultural contexts.⁴⁴ Tudor comments that he operates within the realm of healthy speculation, as accurate knowledge is hard to come by particularly when looking at 'yesterday's' practical consciousness.⁴⁵ His work 'spiral[s] "outwards"' from the 'kinds of conceptions and terms that would be intelligible to any genre audience', 'concepts used and usable in the everyday context of the genre'; rather than looking at abstract ('esoteric') notions of genre, Tudor tries to ground his analysis in the sorts of things and terms that contemporary audiences would have been familiar with on some level (a 'prosaic' level) – generic conventions as they were constructed and agreed upon within their socio-historic circumstances, and how such things may have been meaningful given those contexts.⁴⁶ Barbara Klinger's work on the 1950s melodrama has been influential on the present research. She argues that film meaning is constituted by a range of sources and contexts. Through a cultural and historiographical approach, Klinger demonstrated how melodramas meanings were regulated and mediated by institutions associated with cinema (marketing and reviewing), and how meanings can change over time, such as through scholarship and "camp" reading; that 'historical and intertextual environments shape meanings that circulate at the time

⁴² Phillips, *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴³ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 157.

⁴⁴ Phillips, *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵ Tudor, *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, 7.

of reception'.⁴⁷ The text does not predetermine a viewing position and set a fixed meaning (preferred reading); meanings are determined and negotiated often through engagement with the socio-cultural contexts in which the film is viewed.⁴⁸ Klinger's work suggested that the meanings of 1950s melodramas were mediated by their cultural alignment to contemporary ideas about consumption and sex.

The present research considers the problems of more sociological genre histories of horror and as such avoids attempting to draw simplistic connections between horror films and contemporary social and cultural contexts. There is a precedent for this in the important work on the horror films of the 1950s and 1960s by Mark Jancovich. Jancovich effectively challenged many of the assumptions that 1950s horror was fixated on fears of communism and nuclear weapons, instead showing how such films were perhaps to a greater degree motivated by concerns with growing totalitarianism within post-war American society, in which the economy and society was increasingly being rationalized (Jancovich relates these films to Fordist economics).⁴⁹ Jancovich's work presents horror film texts not as simplistic reflections of cultural trends and anxieties, but as active cultural participants within contemporary conversations; film texts mediate prominent cultural trends. Literary forms mediate (sometimes conflicting) cultural trends, "reality" passes through an active process of mediation as opposed to being passively reflected.⁵⁰ Jancovich argued that these films can be viewed as participating within and mediating mass culture criticism which was pervasive within American intellectual culture at the time, from which they drew critical meanings. Jancovich's work sets a precedent

⁴⁷ Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, 160.

⁴⁸ See: Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in *Culture, Media Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. by Stuart Hall and others (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–138.

⁴⁹ Mark Jancovich, *Horror* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1992), 62–82; Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 1–5.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 98.

to the current research, which similarly suggests that low-budget horror films mediate existential themes and concepts which saturated American culture.

Heffernan and Davis, while not disputing the important work done by those who employed such approaches, argued that more attention was needed on the role played by industrial and economic factors, given that after all, film – especially exploitation film – exists as part of a capitalist industry with the primary intent of making profit. According to Heffernan, ‘a cultural or aesthetic account unmoored from its economic history seems to me wholly inadequate... topical and sensationalist genre films often serve very particular economic functions within the industry, and cultural analysts that do not take into account these particular functions miss a vital part of the film’s historical dimension’.⁵¹ Heffernan rightly identified a notable gap in both film history and studies of the horror genre. Those interested in horror films were busy trying to work out an important cultural link between the horror film and social and cultural contexts around them, both as a means of “explaining” why certain films would have been considered scary or frightening within particular contexts, and as a means of explaining why the genre as a whole shifts from SF narratives in the 1950s to psychological horror narratives in the 1960s – narratives which are considered more mature and legitimate in a critical sense, and which are considered aesthetically superior. More important broader developments are overlooked in favour of individual works of “genius” (namely, Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Powell’s *Peeping Tom*) which ignores the contexts and trends to which those more famous films belong. Likewise, many important histories of film spend little energy discussing these films, despite an apparent scholarly consensus that rise of the independent is perhaps the most important development in the American film industry during the post-studio era.⁵²

⁵¹ Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 6.

⁵² Grainge, Jancovich, and Monteith, *Film Histories*, 340–347; Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 160–163; Lev, *Transforming the Screen*, 206.

Heffernan's seminal monograph, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968*, relates the rise of low-budget independent horror cinema in the 1950s and 1960s to important transitions and developments within the film industry following the *Paramount* decision of 1948 and to social changes more widely – how shifts in the horror film were central to how the industry organized itself around changing trends in production, distribution, and exhibition (the three important pillars of the American film industry), and how it adapted to a changing socio-cultural landscape following the Second World War.

Heffernan and Davis convincingly assert why it is important to discuss the horror film, in particular the independent low-budget horror films of the 1950s and 1960s. Heffernan shows via analysis of markets, industries, intertexts, and audience reception, as well as the films themselves (in both an aesthetic and cultural sense), that the horror genre was integral to significant changes and trends within Hollywood and that the changing dynamics of the genre both responded to and affected those trends. Heffernan's work is significant in that it places the horror film at the centre of developments in the American film industry, not only constructing a history of how such films came to be (that is, linking thematic, narrative, and aesthetic changes in the genre to wider industrial, economic, and social contexts), but also arguing that these films in fact contributed to those changes. Such films were subsequently influential on the strategies of the studios in the 1960s who replicated and “upscaled” them in an effort to recapture lucrative first-run markets.⁵³ Films like *Psycho*, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, and *Rosemary's Baby* were effectively upscaled versions of the low-budget fare

⁵³ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 7; the present thesis suggests that existential preoccupations of these independent horror films have been overlooked, and that considering them may be of importance when considering the place of these films within these larger significant shifts, for instance, in influencing similar ideas and thematic structures that are taken for granted in those more prestigious films.

being produced by the likes of William Castle and Roger Corman – such that those commonly disregarded films were embedded within American cinema within an important site of generic, industrial, and cultural transition. Davis argued that by ‘the end of the decade... it was the independent B-filmmakers who would prove to be the industry’s trendsetters, with major studios frequently attempting to imitate their success’.⁵⁴ The low-budget film, Davis continues, ‘would be a key industry player by the end of the 1950s influencing both the major studios and underground filmmakers alike’.⁵⁵ The independent horror film, which towards the late-1950s gradually set the trends for the psychological horror film of the 1960s, was central to many of these industry changes. According to Heffernan, ‘the horror film of the fifties and sixties... was part of a huge shift in the way popular culture was financed, produced, distributed, sold and received [sic]’.⁵⁶ The present research builds on Heffernan, seeing the relationship between existentialism and lowbrow horror less a matter of merely connecting with existential ideas, but a matter of business, with the industry actively exploiting popular ideas in order to reflect and shape the market tastes of teenagers and students, followed by attempts at upscaling in order to attract the middle classes.⁵⁷

The present research draws to varying extents from these approaches to the history of the horror film and aims to make an original contribution to key topics in the study of the horror genre (and film more generally) in these formative years in the American film industry, discussing the overlooked existential themes at work in the horror films of the 1950s and 1960s. The present research considers these films in the contexts of a culture within which existentialism was well diffused both as a popular import from European sources and more

⁵⁴ Davis, *Battle of the Bs*, 67.

⁵⁵ Davis, *Ibid.*, 13; see also: Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*.

⁵⁶ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁷ See Thomas Austin for a broader discussion of this industry strategy; Thomas Austin, *Hollywood, Hype, and Audience: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 2.

generally saturated within American cultural sources (such as novels, sociology, and intellectual criticism). There is already a rich intellectual history of existentialism and its embeddedness within postwar American culture, with George Cotkin's monograph, *Existential America*, being an exhaustively researched intellectual history of existentialism in America.⁵⁸ 'Existential concerns', namely '[d]read, despair, death, and dauntlessness', according to George Cotkin, 'have long colored the American intellectual temper'.⁵⁹ Through extensive research, Cotkin showed that:

existential modes of thinking had long before sunk deep roots in American thought and culture. The very notion of America as bereft of anguish is absurd. Death and despair appear as much in the American collective consciousness as does the luck-and-pluck optimism of Horatio Alger's heroes.⁶⁰

'American culture', for Cotkin, 'faced existential realities of despair, absurdity, and contingency. It did so without any influence from European philosophy', and these realities were mediated through a range of cultural products.⁶¹ In the 1960s and 1960s in particular, existential terms and concepts such as "alienation", "absurd", "anxiety", and "authenticity" were popular among those describing and critiquing various aspects of modern American society.⁶² The Cold War culture was itself figured as an existential crisis of choice between two

⁵⁸ Cotkin, *Existential America*; Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being & Apricot Cocktails* (London: Vintage Books, 2016); Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *The Ideas That Made America: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); see also; Stanley Corngold, *Walter Kaufmann: Philosopher, Humanist, Heretic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Ann Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945-1963* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999); T. H. Adamowski, 'Out on Highway 61: Existentialism in America', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 74.4 (2005), 913–33; Menand, *The Free World*.

⁵⁹ Cotkin, *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶² There was an attempt by a number of academics (Hazel E. Barnes, William Barrett, Walter Kaufmann, Rollo May, and Hannah Arendt) to build a base for a more systematic existentialism in the States – through journals, translations, and monographs – and these helped to facilitate

ways of life, between “freedom” and “totalitarianism”.⁶³ Existential concepts and terminology permeated American culture. Moreover, Cotkin demonstrated that in the 1960s:

An existential perspective, whether enunciated by Camus or by Sartre, proved to be the philosophy of choice of a generation of college students. Existentialism spoke to their feelings of alienation, their rebellion against authority, their frustration with absolutes, and their concerns about a culture of conformity.⁶⁴

The concepts and themes of existentialism were widely discussed and debated and were diffused throughout American culture. Bakewell also argued that the popularity of existentialism in America in the postwar years arose as a cultural response to the changing American society:

[existentialist] movements drew energy from a more general desire for meaning and self-realisation among the young... After the war, many people had settled into as peaceful a life as they could manage, recognising the value of a steady job and a house in the suburbs with greenery and fresh air... Their children grew up with the benefits of this, but then, entering adolescence, wondered whether there was more to life than mowing the lawn and waving to the neighbours. They revolted against the narrow-minded political order of Cold War America, with its blend of comfort and paranoia.⁶⁵

existentialism within university courses. See: William Barrett, ‘Talent and Career of Jean-Paul Sartre’, *Partisan Review*, 13.2 (1946), 237–46; William Barrett, ‘Dialogue on Anxiety’, *Partisan Review*, 14.2 (1947), 151–59; Barrett, *Irrational Man*; Hannah Arendt, ‘What Is Existenz Philosophy?’, *Partisan Review*, 13.1 (1946), 34–56; Hazel E. Barnes, *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1959); Hazel E. Barnes, *An Existentialist Ethics*, 1967. Reprint (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978); Reinhardt, *The Existentialist Revolt; Existence*, ed. by Rollo May, Ernest Angel, and Henri F. Ellenberger, 1958. Reprint (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).

⁶³ See: Menand, *The Free World*, 6; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, 1949. Reprint (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1988), 8.

⁶⁴ Cotkin, *Ibid.*, 229.

⁶⁵ Bakewell, *Ibid.*, 282.

The preoccupations of existentialism, as Cotkin notes, were already central to the debates of American culture, but it was in the postwar period that those debates took on greater significance in the wake of large changes within the economy (affluence and fears of depression), society (the rational reordering of society, suburbanization), culture (teenage subculture), and in developments abroad (the Cold War).

However, there is little work into how such ideas are mediated by contemporary popular film, let alone horror film, despite the fact that such themes are often taken for granted in film noir and the films of the Hollywood Renaissance. Cotkin argued briefly that American films like *Cool Hand Luke* and *The Graduate* played with existential themes precisely because those themes of ‘despair, absurdity, and contingency’ were already present within American youth culture: ‘existential films of the 1960s did not have to invoke French theory to drive home their point. They developed ideas already central to the youth culture of the 1960s’.⁶⁶ Rather than considering these horror films as simplistic reflections of existential feeling in America, the present research posits them as mediations on those existential ideas and concepts that similarly occupied other, more “legitimate” cultural sources; how existential concepts and ideas were not just contained to the writings of famous names, but were diffused and saturated throughout culture, how, to paraphrase Cotkin, these horror films developed existential ‘ideas already central’ to American culture in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁷

As film is a commercial medium (and this is especially the case for exploitation films), this is tied to the industrial conditions and transitions at the time. The identification of such themes may have some importance in an economic and industrial sense. Here was a popular trend that was clearly exploited by low-budget independent horror cinema in the mid-1950s, particularly by the influential horror films of William Castle and Roger Corman. This trend

⁶⁶ Cotkin, *Ibid.*, 28, 251.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

was developed throughout the 1950s and 1960s within the genre as it moved towards “psychological horror”. Additionally, existential themes are a taken for granted feature of the American New Wave films and blockbusters which, as Heffernan and Davis show, was an outgrowth of independent lowbrow horror cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. The present research posits the exploitation of existential themes as a trend within the changing American horror genre as it developed towards the adult horror films of New Hollywood such as *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Exorcist* and beyond, a trend more broadly related to transitions in the American film industry (the intersection of philosophy, culture, and industry).

The present project also offers a fresh approach to studies into the relationship between film and ideas by considering the economic, industrial, social, and cultural conditions and contexts of these films outlined above. It will discuss the historical interaction of ideas and popular film texts, specifically the horror genre in the postwar years by demonstrating how popular horror films were both saturated by and mediated ideas that were pervasive in contemporary existential discourses. By taking into account the economic, industrial, social, and cultural conditions and contexts of these films outlined above, the present project offers a novel approach to the study of film and philosophy; philosophical ideas are, like films, cultural productions diffused throughout the cultural landscape of the period and as such, similar ideas can be found even in popular texts such as lowbrow independent horror films. Additionally, as popularly diffused ideas, there is always the possibility that such ideas may have been deliberately exploited by the industry; especially given the affinity for existentialism among the primary audience demographic of horror films in the 1950s and 1960s. This aims to show that film and philosophy should not be seen as distinct, and that within postwar consumerist society, there is certainly an intersection between such ideas and the strategies of the film industry. Both the horror film and contemporary existential ideas had a tangible historical-cultural relationship in the postwar years.

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Structure

The proposed research questions will be answered through a series of textual analyses in the context of broader existential discourses (socio-cultural thought) and industrial contexts, with a view to demonstrating how these films mediated the existential ideas produced and reproduced in American culture. Roger Corman and William Castle have been chosen as case studies for their centrality within these wider industrial contexts, as leading producers of lowbrow horror films which in turn were significant in the discursive shift towards psychological horror and the development of New Hollywood. Intertextual materials such as film reviews and industry practices (such as advertisement and exploitation) will be used in this investigation. How these films were positioned within the changing film industry will also be considered, with the aim of displaying an intersection between existential themes and broader industrial developments such as a discursive shift towards psychological horror and prestigious, adult horror films.

The first section will consider the films of William Castle, looking at how they mediate on existential thought by playing with the horrors of unreliable perception, alienation, the threat of the Other, and the problem of secure identity, and the inability to properly know the world. It will discuss Castle's promotion and reception as a major force in both lowbrow and upscaled psychological horror, culminating in his production of *Rosemary's Baby*, and how his horror films were directly aligned with existential ideas. Chapter One will consider how during the horror revival of the mid-1950s independent horror producers exploited the existential (and phenomenological) themes of *Les Diaboliques* and aligned the horror genre with themes such as unreliable perception, alienation, and sadistic manipulation. It will look at these themes within William Castle's gimmick-horror cycle (*House on Haunted Hill* (Castle, 1959) and *The*

Tingler (Castle, 1959)) and their promotion through audience participation gimmicks. Chapter Two will consider Castle's elevated psychological horror films, *Homicidal* (Castle, 1961) and *Mr Sardonicus* (Castle, 1961), and their mediation on psychological themes associated with existential psychology such as problems of secure identity, sadism, and the fear of Others. Chapter Three will discuss Castle's mid-1960s psychological horror films, *Strait-Jacket* (Castle, 1964) and *I Saw What You Did* (Castle, 1965) and how they were associated with the legitimate psychological women's melodramas 1940s through the casting of Joan Crawford and play with themes of psychological manipulation, madness, and the crisis of selfhood and knowing. This chapter will also discuss how *Rosemary's Baby*, which Castle produced, was directly associated with these and prior Castle films – and that Castle's involvement was seen as logical and unsurprising within the industrial trend of upscaled horror, linking his lowbrow films with wider developments in New Hollywood where associations with existentialism were taken for granted.

Part Two will focus on Roger Corman, who in the 1950s and 1960s was the market leader in lowbrow exploitation cinema and is strongly associated with the horror film. Corman also had many associations with existential thought (not only through his own links but through his links with key figures who were explicitly dabbling with existential ideas). This section looks at how the horror films which Corman produced play with existential themes such as alienation, freedom, meaning, and death, which were seen as lowbrow and often aligned with young consumers, as well as the impact of Corman's films on the work of New Hollywood of the 1960s and 1970s in which such themes were explicit. Chapter Four will look at the themes of meaninglessness and disintegration in Corman's mid-1950s SF-horror films (*The Beast with a Million Eyes* (Kramarsky and Corman, 1955), *Day the World Ended* (Corman, 1955), and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (Corman, 1957)), and consider how the new wave of lowbrow, independent exploitation horror films that Corman led became aligned with existential

concerns (which had lowbrow associations) with the relationship between humanity and the meaningful world particularly under the shadow of atomic annihilation. Chapter Five will consider the figure of the Outsider in Corman's lowbrow black comedies (*A Bucket of Blood* (Corman, 1959) and *The Little Shop of Horrors* (Corman, 1960)) and how those films mediate on alienation, individuality, and authenticity, existential concerns which registered with youth culture in the late-1950s, and which were also associated with contemporary absurd/existential drama. The final chapter will consider the themes of freedom, fate, and the death of God at work in Corman's upscaled 1960s Gothics (*The Pit and the Pendulum* (Corman, 1961) *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* (Corman, 1963) and *The Masque of the Red Death* (Corman, 1964)) which tried to expand the range of audiences, and Corman's link with horror writers who had been aligned with existential thought (Ray Russell, Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont). It will also explore further links between Corman and New Hollywood, which he facilitated, and in which play with existential themes is taken for granted.

Part 1: “The Abominable Showman”: William Castle

Chapter 1: “GUARANTEED, The Tingler will break loose in the theatre when *you* are in the audience”: The Horrors of Perception in William Castle’s 1950s Gimmick Cycle

The prolific producer and director, William Castle, is now well established in American film history as a central force within many of the major transitions taking place within the postwar film industry.¹ His films have also undergone scholarly re-evaluation that looks past many of the cult celebrations and fan mythologies that have dominated his legacy, that seriously considers them from a variety of approaches which reveal their richness, contested meanings, and historical importance.² Castle is now rightly seen as a leading exploitation film producer who, from a long career in B-pictures, navigated a changing industrial and sociocultural marketplace, producing and exploiting successful films which would go on to become influential on later cinematic developments such as the adult psychological horror film and the strategies of conglomerated New Hollywood.

Castle scholarship has often overlooked the clear existential themes at work in Castle’s films and the ways in which they were mediated; this is despite that fact that Castle’s

¹ Murray Leeder, ‘Introduction: The Many Castles’, in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*, ed. by Murray Leeder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 1–17; Beth Kattelman, ‘Ghost Show Ballyhoo: Castle’s *Macabre* Will Scare You to Death’, in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*, ed. by Murray Leeder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 99–114; Murray Leeder, ‘Collective Screams: William Castle and the Gimmick Film’, in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*, ed. by Murray Leeder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 76–98; A. T. McKenna, ‘He Earned Our Forgiveness: William Castle and American Movie Showmanship’, in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*, ed. by Murray Leeder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 57–75; Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 90–112, 180–201; Davies, *Battle for the Bs*, 63–65, 79–82.

² Catherine Clepper, “‘Death by Fright’: Risk, Consent, and Evidentiary Objects in William Castle’s *Rigged Houses*”, *Film History: An International Journal*, 28 (2016), 54–84; Mikita Brotzman, ‘Ritual, Tension, and Relief: The Terror of “*The Tingler*”’, *Film Quarterly*, 50.4 (1997), 2–10; Peter Marra, ‘Homo/Cidal: William Castle’s 1960s Killer Queens’, in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*, ed. by Murray Leeder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 219–36; McKenna, ‘He Earned Our Forgiveness’; Joe Jordan, *Showmanship: The Cinema of William Castle* (Albany, Georgia: Bear Manor, 2014).

associations with *Les Diaboliques* (Clouzot, 1955), written and directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot, a filmmaker with a number of connections to the father of French Existentialism Jean-Paul Sartre, are well known. This is among other associations, such as his connection to Orson Welles through both theatre and as assistant director on *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1947), who was himself connected to existentialism.³ Moreover, despite it being well-established that Castle's strength lay in his knowledge of the marketplace and how best to exploit it, Castle's play with themes such as intersubjectivity, perception, and absurdity is rarely placed within contemporary cultural contexts of existentialist discourse in which those themes circulated; in continually referencing *Les Diaboliques* through both narrative and the extra-cinematic image of himself and his films, it is clear that Castle exploits associations with such themes and constructs a particular image precisely to exploit the intended markets of young people who had flocked to see the French film.

The following chapter aims to demonstrate how Castle's films, and the intermedial means by which their identity was constructed (such as through gimmicks and marketing), play with existential themes of alienation, perception, intersubjectivity, and absurdity, similar themes that saturated contemporary cultural discourses, with Castle's films actively participating within such discourses. Additionally, it will be shown that Castle's films present similar ideas to more highbrow existential literary and philosophical forms, such as the work of Sartre whose work had considerable cultural currency in 1950s America. More broadly, the current chapter aims to show the intersection of philosophy and popular horror film in America;

³ Welles was a culturally rich figure who directed many psychological crime melodramas which were associated with existentialism, such as *The Stranger* (Welles, 1946). He even scripted an Argentine adaptation of Sartre's play *No Exit*. Additionally, his films were often reviewed and discussed by the French existentialists. According to Jancovich, Welles was also strongly associated with horror by critics; Mark Jancovich, 'Shadows and Bogeymen: Horror, Stylization and the Critical Reception of Orson Welles during the 1940s', *Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 6.1 (2009), 25–51.

how exploitation of popular philosophical themes was a strategy of an industry in transition, one which tried to cater to specific markets.

Much has been written about Castle's links to the French film *Les Diaboliques* (released in the US as *Diabolique*); Castle described feeling 'a strange sensation – a reawakening of some sort' when he saw the film with his wife and notably the long lines of teenagers eager to see a film which, they had heard, 'really scares the shit out of you'.⁴ Castle professed his desire to 'scare the pants off America', becoming an independent in 1957 to produce horror films.⁵ As Hugh S. Manon's significant re-evaluation of Castle's "pre-gimmick" noir film, *When Strangers Marry* (Castle, 1944) suggests, Castle was already mediating on themes central to *Les Diaboliques*, which continually references the tradition of "gaslight melodrama" and American film noir.⁶ Like many postwar French films, *Les Diaboliques* develops motifs in Hollywood and Weimar cinema. *Les Diaboliques* draws on crime thrillers and "gaslight" melodramas, such as *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944) and particularly Hitchcock films like *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943), and classic German and Hollywood Gothic horror such as the work of F. W. Murnau, Robert Wiene, and James Whale. *Les Diaboliques* mediates pervasive philosophical questions and central anxieties in postwar France, particularly those of the Existentialists who provided the dominant postwar philosophy in France, such as insecurity of perception and consciousness, alienation, and the horror of intersubjectivity.⁷

⁴ William Castle, *Step Right Up! I'm Gonna Scare the Pants Off America: The Memoirs of Hollywood's Master Showman* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), 133–134.

⁵ Castle, *Ibid.*, 133–134.

⁶ Manon, 'When Strangers Marry', 31.

⁷ See my own forthcoming paper for a fuller discussion of *Les Diaboliques* as existential phenomenology; Daniel Tilsley, 'Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955) as an Existential Phenomenology of Horror', *Journal of Film and Video* (forthcoming).

Clouzot was friends with Sartre and the two even worked together on an unmade screenplay; such associations, for Susan Hayward, means that it becomes ‘quite helpful to think of *Les Diaboliques* in phenomenological terms’.⁸ This is appropriate, considering the focus on the protagonist’s fractured and corrupted perception, which leads her to apprehend the world around her as in defiance of natural, deterministic rules, a place of horror. Moreover, the way in which her abusive husband and friend manipulate her by controlling her emotions of fear point to the problems of intersubjectivity, of being able to know and resist the domination of the Other. There are many similarities here between *Les Diaboliques* and Sartre’s theories of the emotions (in particular, fear and horror), concerning horror as a state of consciousness affected by a world that appears to defy expectations and sense. Sartre wrote that horror occurs in moments when the world ‘reveals itself to consciousness as magical just where we expect it to be deterministic’.⁹ For Sartre, the world was fundamentally horrible, nauseating, and disgusting; Being-itself was considered ‘slimy’ and ‘viscous’, with horror resulting from a ‘failure of the power of language to control reality; to keep... objects in their place’, to control a world that appears irrational.¹⁰ Sartre theorized his own personal experience of horror in works such as *The Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* and fictionalized it in his novel, *Nausea*, as the feeling of disgust when the “absurd” (disharmonious) quality of objects is apprehended by consciousness.¹¹ In response to horror, the body may undergo a psychosomatic change, such as screaming, fainting, or flight.¹² Emotional consciousness changes the way in which we

⁸ Hayward, *Les Diaboliques*, 111–112.

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions (Esquisse d’une Théorie Des Émotions)*, trans. by Philip Mairet, [1946] 1962. Reprint (Cambridge: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), 84; Andreas Elipidorou, ‘Horror, Fear, and the Sartrean Account of the Emotions’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 54 (2016), 209–25, 213.

¹⁰ Carole Haynes-Curtis, ‘Sartre and the Drug Connection’, *Philosophy*, 70.271 (1995), 91, 104–105; Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 264.

¹¹ Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea (La Nausée)*, trans. by R. Baldick, [1938] 1965. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1973).

¹² Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 62, 65.

apprehend the world, with the intent of escaping from the difficulty that faces us, such as fainting to ‘annihilate’ fearful consciousness of ‘a ferocious beast coming towards me’.¹³ Sartre’s term ‘magic’ refers to when consciousness apprehends phenomena as in defiance of what one believes to be rational determinants; the superstructures that make our world appear to the subject as rational and meaningful, become ‘ephemeral and unstable’.¹⁴ “Magic”, to the horrified consciousness, is a way of explaining this apparently irrational world apprehended in horror, the world is apprehended as a horrific, magical place.

The similarities between the two (and Clouzot’s direct association with Sartre) suggest *Les Diaboliques* as a mediation on the same symbolically central issues taken up by Sartre’s own philosophical and fictional writings. Castle, like many horror filmmakers, was inspired heavily by *Les Diaboliques*, drawing on its themes and narrative within his own horror films, in particular the “death by fright” narrative and the manipulative figure who distorts and deceives the perceptions of a vulnerable (often female) character. Moreover, the focus on the psychological processes that determine reality for the individual that both Sartre and *Les Diaboliques* explore and which became central in American psychological horror and popular understandings of psychology more generally. In drawing on *Les Diaboliques* – and by extension the noir, Expressionist, Gothic and cinematic genres and styles that the French film situated itself in relation to – Castle’s horror films mediate many of the same existential (phenomenological) ideas and themes that are taken for granted within the film.

Similar ideas and concepts raised in these films and existential philosophy also saturated contemporary American discourses.¹⁵ Many 1950s critics, like Mills’ discussion of a

¹³ Ibid., 63, 66.

¹⁴ Ibid., 85; Elpidorou, Ibid., 213.

¹⁵ See the following: Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1955); Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961); Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, 1949. Reprint (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1975); Dwight Macdonald, ‘A Theory of Mass Culture’, ed. by

“power elite”, or Vance Packard’s research on the advertising industry, raised questions and anxieties about how individual human emotions were being ‘increasingly organized and controlled through the new consumer culture’; they pointed to invisible puppet masters who manipulated and controlled emotions, making it harder to properly and accurately perceive a “real” world, alienating them from their perceptual capacities and giving them limited control over their world.¹⁶ Existential ideas and concepts such as anxieties concerning perception, alienation, intersubjectivity, and the problem of the knowability of the self and world, pervade contemporary cultural discourses. The following will demonstrate how such themes are clearly toyed with in popular film through an analysis of Castle’s gimmick horror films which are primarily about how emotions change one’s conscious relationship to the world, and how those emotions (particularly fear) are manipulated by others (the Other) in order to control the individual. Additionally, as well as the inability to know the world there is also a failure to properly know the intentions of the Other (problems of intersubjectivity), rendering being-with-others a horrific experience. Castle’s horror films mediate these themes which were central to wider cultural and intellectual, and also popular with young cinemagoers who queued for *Les Diaboliques*; actively participating within them by selling them this trend.

This selling of existential anxiety is clear in the intertextual mediation of Castle’s films which appears to actively construct an identity for films like *The Tingler* and *House on Haunted*

Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Free Press, 1957), 59–73; Dwight Macdonald, *Against the American Grain* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963); Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 1964. Reprint (Oxon: Routledge, 2002); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, 1956. Reprint (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Class*, 1951. Reprint (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); C. Wright Mills, ‘Letter to the New Left’, in *Takin’ It to the Streets*, ed. by Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 75–81; Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers: An Exploration of Class Behaviour in America* (London: Penguin Books, 1959); Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, 1956. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1963).

¹⁶ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 231.

Hill as films which are directly concerned with themes of perception and the blurred lines between reality and fear-induced fiction, such as how terms like “PERCEPTO” and “ILLUSION-O” adorned posters, ads, and the marquees. Moreover, Castle would frequently appear in-person as his constructed identity as peddler of the strange and the horrific, and in a reference to his idols Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, he positioned himself as the master manipulator of the senses and of perception. Many scholars fixate on Castle’s lack of critical appreciation, showing how Castle scholarship has often remained trapped within a need to defend (or doubt) his films’ aesthetic merits, with cult appreciations of Castle often seeking alternative taste-based aesthetic evaluations of his work as an auteur. While this is true in the case of the more “legitimate” cultural guardians like *The New York Times* (the foremost tastemaker in American culture), trade publications were often full of praise for Castle’s films and their gimmicks; it is also here that we can see an existential identity being constructed for the films. Reviews in trade publications like *The Hollywood Reporter* – a publication aimed at exhibitors that highlighted aspects of the film to exploit for good box-office – would frequently raise themes of perception both within and beyond the film text, often within the gimmicks.¹⁷ Jack Moffitt, in a review titled ““TINGLER” HORROR TICKLER: Wm. Castle Prod’n Humorously Jabs Seat of Emotions”, likens gimmicks in *The Tingler* to ‘Kafka funerals’, associating the experience of the film to the work of surrealist author Frantz Kafka; as the title also suggests, audiences should expect toying with emotions and sensation when seeing *The Tingler* (a film which, like Kafka, involves at least one body part morphing into a hideous,

¹⁷ See: Ron., ‘Film Review: Macabre’, *Variety*, 210.2 (1958), 7; Ron., ‘Film Reviews: The Tingler’, *Variety*, 215.10 (1959), 6; Bosley Crowther, ‘ON MAKING SCENTS: AromaRama Turns Out a Movie Stunt’, *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 13 December 1959), X3; Howard Thompson, ““Tingler” On Double Bill’, *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 10 March 1960), 36; Jack Moffitt, ““TINGLER” HORROR TICKLER: Wm. Castle Prod’n Humorously Jabs Seat of Emotions’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 156.7 (1959), 3, 5; Jack Moffitt, ““Haunted Hill” Good Spook Film-Plus Ballyhoo Gimmick: “HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL””, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 152.37 (1958), 3–4.

almost insectoid creature).¹⁸ One *Variety* review talks about ‘sensations’ and calls the Percepto gimmick ‘effective, not so much because of the “tingle” but because it “menacingly” moves closer and closer in waves and, coupled with a whirring noise and soundtrack heartbeats and screams, puts the filmgoer in the midst of the horror’.¹⁹ In a positive review for *House on Haunted Hill*, Moffitt writes that the film ‘establishes a background where any occult manifestations can happen – a place where the borderline between the material world and the spirit realm is gruesomely thin’.²⁰ Reviews, even negative ones, place the existential themes of perception and experience that are mediated within the film at the forefront, and interestingly connect the gimmicks with those themes.

What this points to is Castle’s centrality within wider industrial contexts and the importance of mediation and advertising with changing audience demographics and tastes. In demonstrating how Castle’s films play with existential ideas not only within the narrative but through marketing and advertising, this indicates that, as an exploitation producer, Castle mobilized recognizable philosophical (existential) themes that saturated culture to better sell a clearly defined product that appeared in-tune with wider discursive contexts. The courting of more intellectual or cultural themes displayed the aim of producers like Castle and Hitchcock to simultaneously appeal to popular audiences while maintaining some level of legitimacy – to be seen to be participating within wider conversations of note – a duality which motivated many of the psychological horror films of the 1960s. Though of course, as is well established in cultural-intellectual histories of America, by the late-1950s, it was clear that it was the young (particularly educated young adults) who were most interested in the ideas of existentialism;

¹⁸ Moffitt, “‘TINGLER’ HORROR TICKLER’, 3, 5.

¹⁹ Ron., ‘Film Reviews: The Tingler’, 6.

²⁰ Jack Moffitt, “‘Haunted Hill’ Good Spook Film-Plus Ballyhoo Gimmick’, 3–4.

Castle's mediation of existentialism was part of a larger appetite for existential products in youth-orientated popular culture.

1) **'...the management of this theatre are deeply concerned for your welfare':**

Macabre

William Castle was determined to 'find a book more frightening than *Diabolique* [sic]' to capitalize on the renewed interest for horror within American popular culture, particularly among the young.²¹ Forming the independent studio, Susina Associates with writer Robb White in 1957, *Macabre* was an adaptation, released through Allied Artists, of *The Marble Forest* (1951).²² The film, like *Les Diaboliques*, featured a death-by-fright narrative in which a local doctor tries to scare his wealthy father-in-law to death by faking a kidnapping and live burial; the title is also a clear allusion to *Les Diaboliques*'s "death-by-fright" narrative.²³ The ending, in which the elderly Jode Whetherby dies from a fright-induced heart attack, pays direct reference to *Les Diaboliques*, in which the (deliberate) misdirection of perception results in an unbearable tension which is finally released in death by a sight that horrifies the subject.

The mediation of the film clearly demonstrates an attempt to appeal to those youngsters who had been attracted to *Les Diaboliques* for its fright appeal. In response to that film, Castle (with screenwriter Robb White) attempted to weave a similar tale and identity for *Macabre*, which involved associating it strongly with *Les Diaboliques*' emphasis on faulty perception and manipulation. The title mediates the film's association with emotional perception, one identified by a *Variety* reviewer who wrote that 'White's screenplay... moves along with the single emotion of fear'; before heading in to the theatre, the audience knows that they will

²¹ Castle, *Step Right Up*, 150; McKenna, 'He Earned Our Forgiveness', 63.

²² Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 96.

²³ *Ibid.*

experience feelings of disgust, of revulsion, at the macabre atmosphere of the picture, they will feel *horror*.²⁴ Trade ads mediated this, with one declaring that ‘We hung the camera man to keep him from disclosing the terrifying surprises’ of *Macabre*; the ad also declares the film as ‘The HEIGHT of HORROR [sic]’.²⁵ The narrative is one of psychological horror, in which characters are subjected to an unstable world where an excess of emotions prompts a distorted sense of reality; as in Sartre’s theory of the emotions, mounting fear prompts a transformation of the deterministic world into a place without rules, security, and stability, prompting an active threat to the subject. Significantly, these emotions are manipulated by a puppet-master villain (a key feature of the Gothic).

These themes were also mediated through the film’s gimmick. Castle’s gimmick, an insurance policy with Lloyds of London of \$1000 should any member of the audience die of fright by fright, for Beth Kattelman, was an extension of *Les Diaboliques*’ “death-by-fright” narrative, taking ‘this idea one step further and expand[ing] it beyond the screen’.²⁶ The publicity and ballyhoo for *Macabre* heavily emphasised the risk to life it posed. A fixation on the real threat of death mediated on this idea of perception being impacted by emotion, a promotional campaign which made *Macabre* into a big hit. According to Clepper, as ‘the film gained attention and popularity, Castle’s personal appearances became more ghoulish to fit the mood, themes, and promised dangers of the film itself’, including turning up to some theatres in a hearse and emerging from a coffin.²⁷ Castle’s public identity itself mediated *Macabre*’s horrific existential identity. The horror of *Macabre*, which was presented as part of a trend towards the ‘rebirth of the horror film’ (as it was associated with the Gothic), was associated with the psychological-existential theme of perception (psychological processes) determining

²⁴ Ron., ‘Film Review: *Macabre*’, 7.

²⁵ ‘Advertisement: “MACABRE”’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 148.36 (1958), 7.

²⁶ Kattelman, *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁷ Clepper, *Ibid.*, 64; Castle, *Step Right Up*, 144–145.

reality and the prospect of perception being manipulated (often by an unseen Other), themes which would continue to be central in the narrative and identity of Castle's horror films.²⁸

2) **'If I were gonna haunt somebody this would certainly be the house I'd do it in':**

House on Haunted Hill

William Castle and Robb White followed *Macabre* with *House on Haunted Hill*, distributed by Allied Artists. The "old dark house film" was a popular fixture of the 1920s and 1930s stage and screen, blending horror and comedy; "old dark houses" were also prevalent in contemporary popular culture through television (such as in the "Shock!" theatre). Drawing on the interplay of horror and comedy, *House on Haunted Hill* was played with a great degree of self-awareness, including the self-conscious starring of Vincent Price in the lead role. Price adapted the British 1938 production *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton into *Angel Street* in 1941, in which an abusive husband attempts to drive his wife insane.²⁹ The play mediated a series of motifs that came to be associated with existentialism, such as sadism, psychological domination, and manipulation. Price was, in the 1940s, strongly associated with his role as a sadistic man who psychologically tortured his wife in the play; he also starred alongside Judith Evelyn (the two would be reunited in *The Tingler*). His association with *Angel Street* preceded and had a more powerful influence on his reception as horror star than his roles in films like *House of Wax* (Wilcox, 1953) and *The Fly* (Neumann, 1958); his horror roles were seen as an extension of *Angel Street*. Price also starred in the thriller *Shock* (Werker, 1946), where he played a psychiatrist, Dr Cross, who manipulates his patient, a woman who witnessed Cross

²⁸ Castle, *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁹ Victoria Price, *Vincent Price: A Daughter's Biography* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1999), 135–140.

murder his wife; a manipulative psychiatrist also appears in *House on Haunted Hill*.³⁰ *House on Haunted Hill*, clearly drawing out these associations, mediated on the complex relationship between appearance and reality, the corruptible psychological processes that make up reality, and the psychological and existential crisis prompted by the impossibility of objective truth. *House on Haunted Hill* also mediates on the existential problems of intersubjectivity – of being to properly know the Other – framing the wealthy as deceptive individuals who dominate and control the perceptions of those on the lower end of the social spectrum; themes which more broadly point to the idea that one cannot properly know the world.

In *House on Haunted Hill*, eccentric millionaire industrialist, Frederick Loren (Vincent Price), throws a birthday party for his fourth wife, Annabelle (Carol Ohmart), in a supposedly haunted house where seven people have been murdered. Loren invites five strangers, offering each ten thousand dollars if they can survive the night. Loren is an ‘insanely jealous’ husband; three of his previous wives have already died in “mysterious circumstances”. As with *Les Diaboliques*, the characters (and by extension the audience) are led to suspect one thing when a far more intricate plot is unfolding in the background. It appears that Loren is trying to kill his wife and that the neurotic working-class typist, Nora (Carolyn Craig), is both the target of Loren’s murderous impulses and of the resident ghosts. But, in fact, it is Annabelle who is conspiring with one of the guests, the psychiatrist Dr Trent (Alan Marshal), to push Nora to a state of ‘absolute hysteria’ so that she will shoot Loren with one of the guns provided as a party favour. With Loren dead, Annabelle will inherit his fortune. However, Loren is playing a game too; it is revealed that he faked his death and is “resurrected” as a skeleton which he uses to scare Annabelle into the vat of acid kept in the cellar.³¹ The audience is “tricked” into believing

³⁰ Price also played a manipulating Gothic villain in *Dragonwyck* (Mankiewicz, 1946).

³¹ The gimmick of Price as a red herring in a murder plot was also used in the same year with *The Bat* (Wilbur, 1959), also distributed by Allied Artists.

that they are watching a haunted house film, though Castle's sophisticated young audience would certainly have seen through the ruse, given the film's overt self-awareness and intertextuality.

The House and the Cult of Celebrity

The following section discusses the titular house itself and how it mediates on this complex relationship between truth and reality prominent in contemporary discourses. The Ennis House in Los Angeles, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built in 1924, was used for the exterior shots of the house; this was a striking decision, considering its modernist Mayan Revival Style. Aside from *The Black Cat* (Ulmer, 1934), the old dark house of the American horror film was typically "old world" – often made of oppressive stone or being of distinct Victorian/Edwardian heritage. This latter style characterizes the self-conscious interior. The juxtaposition between the modernist exterior and decaying Gothic interior can be seen meaningful within the contextual concerns about appearance and reality.

As well as being central sites of angst in existential literature, concerns about appearance and reality saturated late-1950s cultural discourses more broadly, which were related to critiques of wealth and power and had deeper roots in American criticism. According to Edgar Allan Poe, in his essay on interior decorating:

We [Americans] have no aristocracy of blood, and having therefore as a natural, and indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars, the *display of wealth* has here to take the place and perform the office of heraldic display in monarchical countries.³²

³² Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Furniture', in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, by Edgar Allan Poe, ed. by David Galloway [1840] (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), 414.

Poe blamed the pursuit of wealth in America for what he considered a lack of taste in interior decorating. Wealth is equated with deception, producing merely a ‘parade of costly appurtenances... to create an impression of the beautiful’.³³ A conservative, Poe further wrote that it ‘is an evil growing out of our republican institutions, that here a man of large purse has usually a very little soul which he keeps in it’.³⁴ The wealthy American is constructed as a deceiver and manipulator. This figure recurs throughout American culture and can be seen within intellectual and popular culture during the 1950s, which was more overtly concerned with the manipulation of perception and the blurring of the lines between appearance and reality in a period where a highly rationalized capitalism became more deeply ingrained in everyday life. Evocative of the above-quoted line from Poe, C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite*, a popular 1956 commentary on mass culture and power, argues that the wealthy ‘national elite’ – industrialists, business leaders, politicians, the military industrial complex – have ‘taken the spotlight of publicity and become subjects of the intensive build-up’.³⁵ Celebrities, for Mills, are the ‘Names that need no further identification’; they are instantly recognisable and talked about personalities.³⁶ This national elite, in an age of mass media and consumption, would become publicised, discussed, gossiped about, for they are the “somebodies”. They needed to compete with the ‘professional celebrities’ to be celebrated.³⁷

Members of the power elite are celebrated because of the positions they occupy and the decisions they command. They are celebrities because they have prestige, and they have prestige because they are thought to have power or wealth. It is true that they, too, must enter

³³ Ibid., 414.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mills, *The Power Elite*, 71; M. Keith Booker, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Post Modernism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 12.

³⁶ Mills, *Ibid.*, 71–72.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

the world of publicity, become material for the mass media, but they are sought as material almost irrespective of what they do on and to these media.³⁸

The members of the power elite need to broadcast their power by displaying their carefully cultivated public appearance to others to manipulate mass acceptance or fascination with the power elite. The power elite are, for Mills, a distinctly American aristocracy defined not by blood or heritage, but by material wealth and media visibility.

While Mills' conceptions of the power elite can and indeed have been interpreted merely as bogeymen of mass culture constructed by a paranoid conspiracy theorist, Mills in fact targets more pervasive cultural (and existential) anxieties in his attack on this clique. The power elite represent the extent to which self-control of perception was undermined in the 1950s. According to Mills, the 'powers of everyday men... often seem driven by forces they neither understand nor govern'.³⁹ While the body could be controlled, the human mind was viewed as an unconquered realm. The existence of a power elite represented this attempt to conquer and mould perception, to dominate the will and thoughts of others more thoroughly. According to Booker, the fear of a power elite 'arises from a firmly American perspective, its most serious concerns being based on a loss of individualism in the face of the increasing power of institutions and the elite who run them'.⁴⁰

A similar position is mediated by *House on Haunted Hill*. Moffitt's review deserves re-quoting here: 'a place where the borderline between the material world and the spirit realm is gruesomely thin'.⁴¹ *House on Haunted Hill*, being drawn from the "gaslight melodrama" traditions and alluding to *Les Diaboliques*, mediates this complex duality of "reality" where there appear to be two worlds at play. The duality of the house is clear in how the decaying

³⁸ Ibid., 83.

³⁹ Ibid., 304.

⁴⁰ Booker, Ibid., 12.

⁴¹ Moffitt, "'Haunted Hill'", 3–4.

interior of the house is juxtaposed with the aesthetic exterior. The house is even falling apart from the moment the guests step inside, as a chandelier almost crushes Nora to death. Furthermore, it is revealed in the opening introduction by the owner of the house, Watson Pritchard (Elisha Cook), that ‘seven people including my brother have been murdered in [the house]’. Here, and in his guided tour of the house, he details the grizzly and macabre history of the house. It is an appropriate space for Annabelle and Loren to murder each other in, using the prestigious party as cover. The haunted murder house becomes the playing field for the battle for wealth and status. The house mediates the character of the superrich, the celebrities, and the capitalists. The Gothic *mise-en-scène* is juxtaposed with the prestige of modern material wealth to expose the secret lives of the rich; the murderous, jealous, possessive, and corrupt reality that lies beneath the veneer of wealth, power, and prestige. The image of projected wealth is an inauthentic sense of self intended to deceive and manipulate opinion and create a sense of worth and importance; but beneath this exterior is the corrupted, authentic interior which discloses the true character of a system that propels wealth and celebrity to positions of power and visibility.

The Lorens are members of this American aristocracy of dollars that Poe laments, reflected through their outward display of wealth and their attempt to court and manipulate perceptions of themselves. The House perfectly encapsulates the Lorens’ character and worldview: that the appearance of wealth is primary in American culture to conceal the corrupted reality. This mediates contemporary existential anxieties concerning appearance and reality and a wider manipulation of perception by the Other, with the distinctly aristocratic Price as the decadent manipulator and master of ceremonies. The American aristocrat – in this case, a wealthy industrialist, and his glamorous wife – manipulates and controls the unbeknownst individual on a perceptual level, depriving them of a sense of freedom and

ultimately of sanity, further undermining the capacity to distinguish between ideal fantasy and dark reality.

‘Would you care for a sedative?’: Perceptual Manipulation and Psychiatry

This anxiety concerning unreliable perception and truth is further mediated through the conspiracy of the psychiatrist Dr Trent and Annabelle to manipulate Nora into hysteria. *House on Haunted Hill* draws heavily from *Les Diaboliques* in the theme of perceptual anxiety and the ensuing alienation through the Gothic trope of the female protagonist being manipulated into perceiving a situation to be other than what it really is. The ways in which extreme emotion transforms the world, blurring the lines between perception and reality is a key theme of *House on Haunted Hill*; in a similar sense to Sartre’s theories of the emotions, Nora’s hysteria creates for her a world of horror.

In the film, Nora is presented in an increasingly heightening state of anxiety, and “aware” of both an earthly (Frederick) and supernatural (the domestic ghosts) threat to her life. Lance perpetuates the former, because he too seems convinced that Frederick is out to get her but denies the latter. The latter is perpetuated both by Pritchard’s incessant ‘spook talk’ and the ghostly apparitions (the hanged Annabelle at the window, the severed heads, the piano that plays itself). Nora is given a big clue as to the artifice of these apparitions in her encounter with the caretaker, Mrs Slydes, who appears in a jump-scare early when Nora and Lance explore the wine cellar. Nora immediately apprehends Mrs Slydes as a ghost, but it is later revealed that she is merely the old blind caretaker. Nora’s apprehension of the house as haunted is immediately called into doubt, indicating the unreliability of her perception. It is in these emotional states that Nora confers upon the house and the objects within, a quality of being horrific or supernatural. Like the Sartrean scene of the grimacing ghostly face at the window

in *Les Diaboliques*, Nora has her own window encounter when the apparition of the hanged Annabelle floats outside her window, the noose coiling around Nora's feet, sending her into a horrified frenzy; the world is revealed to her as a supernatural place of horror.⁴²

Of course, this is all misdirection designed to manipulate Nora into thinking that the house is haunted. Nora's experiences again raise the dualities inherent to 1950s American society and culture. Americans were offered a choice between accepting a highly artificial, constructed set of appearances, or conceding the inability to accurately perceive and apprehend truth; either choice presented a deeper, horrific reality that individuals had limited control over their perception. This is mediated through the choice that is offered Nora: the existence of ghosts or the existence of a human conspiracy against her? Or is the prospect that both are merely the product of individual madness? These are terrifying prospects, because of the existential implications. Things are either as they appear to be – in defiance of rational laws and deterministic expectations – or we must be prepared to accept a deeper, hidden, malignant reality of which we have little to no objective knowledge. Positioned within the broader contextual cultural anxieties concerning the manipulation of the 'opinions of the populace, [and] the inability of ordinary citizens to influence the decisions that affected their lives', *House on Haunted Hill* presents a view of the normal, everyday individual as increasingly alienated, gaslit, and ultimately controlled by hidden, institutional forces.⁴³

Both an earthly or supernatural conspiracy threaten Nora and she becomes anxious about her corporeal and mental security. Nora herself creates the ghosts that supposedly haunt her through her anxious way of relating to the house and the inhabitants within it. Specifically,

⁴² See Sartre's example of the grimacing face at the window that reveals to the horrified consciousness the horrific structure of the world; Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 84.

⁴³ Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s & 1950s* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), 249.

she imbues the absurd ghost-ride machinations with the qualities of the supernatural. Her emotions transfigure them as supernatural phenomena that defy the rational laws which govern the normal world. It is this which obscures the real conspiracy at play; that Nora is merely the plaything of competing elites (Frederick the capitalist; Annabelle the socialite; and Trent the psychiatrist). The horror, for Nora, emerges because of the apparent breakdown in reality, the sudden appearance of a world that defies rational expectations; this on top of her belief that Loren, a powerful individual she has never met, is out to murder her. Likewise, Annabelle is terrified into falling into the acid by the skeletal “resurrection” of her husband, offering her a choice between the reality of ghosts or the fact that she has walked right into his trap. Nothing is as we expect it, and everything is other than what it appears. Ghosts or conspiracy, both represent a fundamental crisis; that of the inherent unknowability of the world around us.

Trent’s occupation as a psychiatrist serves to further mediate anxieties about institutional sites of control and manipulation in postwar America, and situates the film within debates about psychology as a means of controlling and adjusting, people, particularly women, to socially prescribed roles in the postwar era (as Betty Friedan would discuss in *The Feminine Mystique*).⁴⁴ The rise of psychiatry and behaviouristic psychology in postwar America has been well discussed in cultural histories, and many have shown how popular culture often mediates pervasive anxieties around them.⁴⁵ Anxieties about psychiatry were integrated within wider concerns about a highly organized mass society identified by the likes of Reisman, Whyte, and Mills in the 1950s, according to Martin Halliwell, and were connected to broader existential

⁴⁴ Janet Walker, ‘Couching Resistance: Women, Film, and Postwar Psychoanalytic Psychiatry’, in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 143–62; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963. Reprint (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997).

⁴⁵ See: Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions*; Lev, *Transforming the Screen*, 73–74; Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster*, 93–104.

anxieties in mass culture theory about the loss of individual identity.⁴⁶ Psychiatrists were increasingly being hired by companies to deal with workplace stress and mental illness, ensuring greater efficiency and rationalization.⁴⁷ The psychiatrists in popular culture were frequently seen as devious agents and puppet masters intent on forcing conformity on unwitting individuals.

Dr Trent is described in the script as ‘a keenly intelligent-looking man with a rather cold expression... in his early 1940s and is somewhat arrogant in his appearance’.⁴⁸ A running theme is Trent’s keenness to prescribe drugs to control Nora’s emotional behaviour. Trent’s detached and arrogant composure radiates through his interaction with the other characters, holding himself aloof via his expertise and scepticism. He is often framed above other characters or in their spaces in the film, signifying control and power. In having him as the architect of a plot to control Nora’s perception and behaviour, the film mediates many of the typical anxieties related to psychiatry and psychoanalysis in American culture. There is a parallel with the later Castle fantasy film, *Zotz!* (Castle, 1962), in which the absent-minded Professor Jonathan Jones (Tom Poston) – who has come into possession of a magical coin which grants him powers – realises he is about to be psychoanalysed in his workplace and says: ‘Oh, you’re *that* kind of doctor’. Jones is immediately suspicious of the psychoanalyst who tries to get Jones to doubt his own perceptions: ‘Delusion? Why, I’ve seen it with my own eyes!’. In both films, the psychiatrist/psychologist is a negative figure who threatens to negate pre-existing worldviews, supplementing them with their own through jargon about “hysteria” and repressed hostilities. The psychiatrist undermines one’s ability to apprehend the world

⁴⁶ Halliwell, *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 116; Donald Napoli, *Architects of Adjustment: The History of the Psychological Profession in the United States* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1981), 138.

⁴⁸ William Castle, *House on Haunted Hill: A William Castle Annotated Screamply* (USA: William Castle Productions, 2011).

accurately by controlling the narrative and denying access to truth; Castle's psychologists are often clueless and deluded themselves, or deliberately deceptive and manipulative (as with Trent – and, while neither are psychiatrists, Dr Rodney Barrett of *Macabre*, Dr Warren Chapin of *The Tingler*, and Dr Sapirstein in *Rosemary's Baby*).

As we see in Mills and other cultural critics, broader existential anxieties about perception, consciousness, and subjectivity saturated American discourses about contemporary society. Vance Packard's popular 1950s exposé of the advertising industry's employment of psychologists and use of research that 'manipulates human motivations and desires and develops a need for goods with which the public has at one time been unfamiliar – perhaps even undesirous of purchasing' argued that capitalists could 'more effectively manipulate our habits and choices in their favour'.⁴⁹ By the late-1950s, as Jancovich argued, cultural and social critics saw that 'sexuality and emotion were no longer simply a threat to rationalisation, but that they were actually increasingly organised and controlled through the new consumer culture'.⁵⁰ According to Halliwell, Packard's popular work helped to foster an impression that America, dominated by liberal capitalism and consumerism, had become a 'culture of deception... run by a power elite intent on hoodwinking consumers'.⁵¹ Packard's exposé raised broader existential concerns that saturated American cultural discourses, anxieties relating to choice, freedom, and subjectivity within American society, particularly concerning how one could truly know that they are in control of the way they perceived the world, that perception

⁴⁹ Similar ideas are seen in the contemporary Theatre of the Absurd; Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1980); Packard, *Hidden Persuaders*, 29, 12; Daniel Horowitz, *Vance Packard & American Social Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 107.

⁵⁰ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 231.

⁵¹ Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 22.

and consciousness was truly “mine”. Moreover, this revealed wider concerns with the manipulative Other that pulls the strings, one who determines the self for the individual.

In the depiction of Trent’s character and his integration into the narrative as a manipulative and deceptive antagonist and through the film’s general mediation of American society, we see the diffusion of those similar discourses within *House on Haunted Hill*; and in a similar way to how contemporary absurdist and existential dramas mediated anxieties within wider society, it presents characters as puppets manipulated by invisible forces and raises ideas very similar to familiar absurdist and existential concepts such as that of “no exit”, hell is other people, and estrangement and alienation. Moreover, like those dramas, *House on Haunted Hill* uses limited sets and often sordid sets. The film foregrounds the sense that the guests are representative of American (capitalist) society when Loren says: ‘I had a reason for inviting each of our guests. I wanted a cross-section – from psychiatrist to typist, drunk to jet pilot. They share one thing – they all need money. Now let’s see if they’re brave enough to earn it’. The party becomes a microcosm of contemporary society. Loren’s references to money cement this, suggesting the competitive aspects of capitalist society and equally suggests the contempt Loren has for those within it; that they must perform for him (like puppets) if they deserve to share his wealth. In his first proper scene, he is framed above the protagonists looking down on them. There is also literally no exit from the house due to the doors being locked and the windows barred. Most of the guests are, in both Ruth and Lance’s words, ‘strangers’ to each other, suggesting social agents to be alienated from each other.⁵² Nora has not even met the man that she is supposed to work for (alienation within her workplace) and yet, godlike, he looks down on her and controls her movements (along with Trent) like a puppet; Loren’s role as puppeteer is referenced directly when he emerges from the shadows at the film’s conclusion

⁵² Incidentally, Richard Long, who plays Lance, starred in Welles’ *The Stranger*.

with the skeleton puppet. There is also the sense that hell is other people, a theme of both Sartre's play *No Exit* and other existential and absurdist dramas and fictions (such as the work of Harold Pinter). In *House on Haunted Hill*, hell becomes other people in the literal and existential sense; the possession of (supposedly) dangerous firearms makes each guest a danger to the other, particularly as their suspicions paint each other as a murderer ('have you finished trying me... and is the verdict guilty?'). The latter points to this more existential hell, where the individual is no longer in control of their identity, the other people construct it for them, stealing their sense of subjectivity (that Trent and Annabelle want to convince Nora that Loren is a murderer so she will kill him presents a corporeal threat to the self).

The guests are deprived of subjective power to determine themselves and to access a level of objective truth (a level which increasingly seems impossible), often by a larger conspiracy hidden within the familiar. Trent's manipulation of Nora transforms and objectifies her. Nora, for Trent – who feigns care for her well-being throughout the film ('I don't believe in frightening women!') – is merely an object to be studied, his to do with what he wishes. Nora, for Trent (as well as Annabelle), is simply an object to be utilized towards his own projects (his research and the Loren fortune).⁵³ Nora is alienated from her perceptions and autonomy by Trent's machinations. Furthermore, Nora is unaware that she is being manipulated by Trent, trusting the doctor to some extent. Trent consistently gaslights Nora ('You seem a little upset. Would you care for a sedative?') to convince her (and others) that she is going insane. The defining trope of "gaslight melodramas" is the villain forcing the victim into doubting their own perceptions, steadily driving them insane.⁵⁴ On the gaslighting

⁵³ There is a parallel with Frederick in this. As stated, Annabelle is for Frederick a mere trophy wife; a means to an end in the sense that she guarantees him visible prestige. In both senses, women are mere utilizable objects to men.

⁵⁴ See: Guy Barefoot, *Gaslight Melodrama: From Victorian London to 1940s Hollywood* (New York and London: Continuum, 2001).

of women, Adrienne Rich wrote that ‘Women have been... “gaslighted,” for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts... The truth of our bodies and minds has been mystified to us’.⁵⁵ Nora’s body is transformed by manipulation; her autonomy and self-determination are negated. She becomes a puppet in this regard, compelled to dance to Trent and Loren’s machinations. As Trent foreshadows: ‘fear can make people do amazing things’; Nora quickly loses control of her emotions and is prompted into doing irrational things. The psychoanalyst of *Zotz!* similarly does the same with Prof. Jones: ‘You can’t distinguish between reality and the imaginary’, the doctor says. Reality is fleeting, ephemeral. Reality is what the abuser wants it to be. *House on Haunted Hill* mediates many of the same existential anxieties over perception and manipulation that saturate contemporary critiques of society in the late-1950s through a lowbrow old dark house melodrama that in many ways is doing the same things as those more highbrow absurdist and existential dramas and literature.

Spook House

At the film’s climax it is revealed that Loren, aware of the Annabelle/Trent plot, has also been playing his own game of murder. Tricking Trent into believing that he is dead, Frederick pushes him into the acid vat, soon followed by Annabelle. This directly connects the events on screen with Castle’s extra-diegetic “Emergo” gimmick, in which a plastic skeleton would be released into the auditorium at a specific moment in the film. As with *Macabre*, much has been written about the Emergo gimmick of *House on Haunted Hill* in regard to how the appearance of the skeleton in the auditorium when the diegetic skeleton emerges from the acid bath collapses the distance between the narrative onscreen and the bodies of the audience; for Leeder, ‘what we

⁵⁵ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, Selected Prose 1966-1978* (London: Virago, 1980), 90.

have is a certain fluidity between screen and audience, a collapse of the House on Haunted Hill and *House on Haunted Hill*.⁵⁶ Emergo mediates the theme of artifice that is raised by both the diegetic and non-diegetic skeleton, and within the film more generally.

Leeder rightly points out the intended narrative connection between the skeleton on screen and the Emergo gimmick: the diegetic skeleton ‘is a fake, a gimmick, just like Emergo’.⁵⁷ The Emergo skeleton, by all accounts, was especially fake and often did not work as intended and as such attracted the aim of slingshots.⁵⁸ This extends to the various apparitions encountered throughout the film which are ultimately ghost-ride gimmicks designed to tip the guests over the edge. The deliberate clichés, like the piano that plays itself, the monstrous hand, and the fake-looking severed heads, are deliberate and reflexive, signifying artifice. The artificiality of the film (which is almost entirely set-bound) is quite clearly self-conscious; it is not a failed attempt at representation, but a successful one. The “reality” of the film is not hidden behind cinematic trappings, it is immediately held within them; the diegetic world as it appears to characters such as Nora *is* artifice. Castle was no doubt aware of the artificiality of his effects, having already constructed himself as this reflexive showman who, according to McKenna, invited his sophisticated audience to see through his carnivalesque tricks.⁵⁹ Moreover, young audiences often expected (and even demanded) their films to look on the cheap. Leeder also discusses the ‘struggle for authorship’ at the heart of the film, with Price’s character being Castle’s diegetic representative.⁶⁰ The “badness” (or clichés) of the film’s “ghost-house” effects, and the integration of Emergo with the narrative, mediates on those wider themes of artifice and manipulation that recur throughout postwar culture, that

⁵⁶ For the most significant accounts, see: Leeder, ‘Collective Screams’, 84; Clepper, *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁷ Leeder, *Step Right Up*, 85.

⁵⁸ Castle, *Ibid.*, 148–149; John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*, 1983. Reprint (New York, NY: Scribner, 2003), 16; Leeder, *Ibid.*, 84–85; Law, *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁹ McKenna, ‘He Earned Our Forgiveness’, 67.

⁶⁰ Leeder, *Ibid.*, 84.

appearances are not always all that they seem and often there is a puppet master in the wings, or more often than not in plain sight, manipulating how the world appears.

3) **'Scream for your lives!': *The Tingler***⁶¹

The Tingler has gained a large cult following and attracted considerable scholarly interest, particularly from psychoanalysts; Mikita Brottman's seminal psychoanalytic reading, for instance, marked a turning point towards serious scholarly consideration of Castle.⁶² *The Tingler* follows Dr Warren Chapin (Vincent Price), a pathologist who discovers that human fear generates a lobster-like creature that grows along the spine. Unless the 'fear tensions' are released through screaming, the creature dubbed "the tingler" will shatter the spine, killing the host. After an autopsy on the deaf-mute Martha (Judith Evelyn) who died of fright, a tingler gets loose. *The Tingler*'s messy and often disjointed logic, its absurd visual images (that resulted from its motivations as a relatively low-budget exploitation horror film that emphasises horrific spectacle and shock at the expense of narrative coherence or sense) and references to LSD, mediated ideas about perception, subjectivity, and "reality", and displayed a number of overlaps with Sartre's theories of horror. Such themes were also mediated through the famous "PERCEPTO" gimmick in which individual theatre seats were rigged with electronic buzzers.

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⁶¹ A version of the following section has been published as: Daniel Tilsley, "'Scream for your lives!': The Philosophy of Horror in William Castle's *The Tingler* (1959)", *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (forthcoming).

⁶² Clepper, *Ibid.*; Mikita Brottman, *Ibid.*

‘The walls... the waaaaaalls!’: LSD, Fear, and Perception

The Tingler was the first American film to represent an LSD trip on-screen, exploiting the timely cultural resonance of hallucinogens in American discourses.⁶³ Additionally, hallucinogens had a number of associations with philosophy. These associations with perception-altering drugs are tied with the film’s core themes of perception, how *The Tingler* plays with ideas of the horrific failure to properly apprehend or control the objective world that are raised in both philosophy and other discourses.

LSD was commercially available in America during the 1950s, seeing CIA-subsidized experimental usage in hospitals and universities, before becoming a coveted artefact of 1960s counterculture.⁶⁴ LSD profoundly alters conscious perception of phenomena. According to one MK-ULTRA agent, ‘Something had turned loose in me, and all I had done was shift my attitude. Reality hadn’t changed, but I had’.⁶⁵ John Marks claimed that ‘a speck of LSD could take a strong-willed man and turn his most basic perception into willowy shadows’.⁶⁶ Hallucinogens also occupied a culturally significant status. Prior to its countercultural significance, they were the topic of academic, literary, and philosophical interest. A mescaline trip was described in Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* in 1953, detailing his altered experience in which he was able to supposedly perceive the pure Being of objects in the world: ‘The other world to which mescaline [sic] admitted me was not the world of visions; it existed out there, in what I could see with my eyes open’.⁶⁷ Sartre also experimented with large doses

⁶³ Ken Hollings, *Welcome to Mars: Politics, Pop Culture, and Weird Science in 1950s America* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2014), 240; Joe Jordan, *Showmanship: The Cinema of William Castle* (Albany, Georgia: Bear Manor, 2014), 243.

⁶⁴ John Marks, *The Search for the “Manchurian Candidate”: The CIA and Mind-Control*, 1979. Reprint (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), 74.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 73–74.

⁶⁷ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven Hell*, 1954. Reprint (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 14–15.

of mescaline, described in Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs.⁶⁸ For these philosophers, mescaline induced a horrific experience of worldly phenomena. For Huxley: 'It was inexpressibly wonderful, wonderful to the point, almost of being terrifying... The fear... was of being overwhelmed, of disintegrating under the pressure of a reality greater than a mind, accustomed to living most of the time in a cosy world of symbols, could possibly bear'.⁶⁹ Haynes-Curtis writes that Sartre's fixation with predatory crustaceans originated from his mescaline experience.⁷⁰ These lobster-like crustaceans became Sartre's means of representing the absurd, nameless world that appeared as 'slimy' and 'viscous'.⁷¹ *The Tingler* also features a lobster-like creature that emerges because of a horrific LSD trip. Castle himself used similar terms to describe *The Tingler* in pre-production: 'Sort of like a lobster... instead of claws it has long, slimy feelers'.⁷² Various critics also called the tingler a 'lobster'.⁷³

Huxley was friends with *Tingler* screenwriter, Robb White. It was Huxley who directed White to LSD.⁷⁴ For Sartre and Huxley, hallucinogenic drugs granted access to the horrific, overwhelming Being-itself, suggesting that LSD corrected a distorted vision. Hallucination is figured differently in White's script, however, though the underlying preoccupation with distorted perception remains similar. LSD distorts perception of the world. The world is not revealed in its essence; the characters who take LSD are alienated from the real. LSD transforms the world into something irrational, uncontrollable, and as a result horrific; it becomes something that cannot be controlled via ordinary language and means. As in Sartre,

⁶⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. by Peter Green (London: Penguin Books, 1965); Haynes-Curtis, 'Sartre and the Drug Connection', 87.

⁶⁹ Huxley, *Ibid.*, 36–39.

⁷⁰ Haynes-Curtis, *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷¹ Haynes-Curtis, *Ibid.*, 105; Sartre, *Nausea*, 20, 116, 178.

⁷² Castle, *Ibid.*, 150.

⁷³ Ron., 'Film Reviews: The Tingler', *Variety*, 215.10 (1959), 6.

⁷⁴ Joel Eisner, *The Price of Fear: The Film Career of Vincent Price in His Own Words* (Antelope, CA: A Black Bed Sheet Book, 2013), 89.

horror is induced when the rational world collapses around the individual; horror is an extreme response to perceptual alienation from the world.

Dr Chapin believes that, as a scientist who perceives the world as ordered and rational, 'nothing scares' him. Chapin wants to use LSD to invoke true fear (he is seen reading a report into "FRIGHT EFFECTS INDUCED BY INJECTION OF LYSERGIC ACID LSD25"). For Chapin, LSD breaks down those ordered, rational barriers by altering his perception. His distorted perception replaces the real with unreal things over which he, in his mind, has no control. This is shown in his extreme terror. Chapin's assistant, David (Darryl Hickman), describes the experience of LSD as akin to being 'wide awake but having nightmares'. The tripping Chapin describes the walls of his laboratory as closing in, bemoaning his failure to open a window, indicating his failure in his mind to properly influence the world. As David says, 'He's only suffering in his mind'; the world remains the same, but Chapin's apprehension of it is radically altered. Through the trip sequence, *The Tingler* mediates on similar ideas to Sartre, suggesting that horror is a response to a world that defies expectations and habitual assumptions, a world in which previously secure concepts become insecure and no longer meaningful. In distorting his perception through LSD, Chapin's world is rendered horrific, stripped of its secure meanings and rational expectations. The horror that follows is a result of alienation anxiety, a disharmony between distorted subjective consciousness and the objective world that becomes no longer meaningful. "Reality" is revealed as merely individual, as only that which subjective consciousness creates; subjectivity is dislocated from objective reality. Because the tingler is a monster of consciousness, it is perhaps a manifestation of this, of the horrific subjective reality created by distorted horrified consciousness. Increasingly constricted by the monstrous tingler, Chapin is compelled to scream, an admission of rational failure and a descent into the irrational.

This logic is strongly invoked when Martha, the deaf-mute owner of a silent movie theatre, is slipped LSD (it is implied) and scared to death. Martha, who faints at the sight of blood, is a miserly character anxious about the security of her money. Chapin says: ‘Because she has no vocal cords, she can’t release her fear tensions vocally as we can, so they continue to mount until at last she can’t endure it’; in other words, Martha cannot scream. In her trip, she is confronted by various “monsters” which, similar to *House on Haunted Hill*, really turn out to be the machinations of her husband, Oli. Like Chapin’s skeleton, these otherwise fake creatures terrify the tripping Martha, because her fear is exaggerated by distorted perception. According to Sartre, in such a state of horror, we have conferred properties upon an object in the world which ‘infinitely transcends it’, that is, we apprehend the object as beyond that which it actually is, existent in reality.⁷⁵ Likewise, in a state of fear, Martha transforms the banal, ordinary objects around her into transgressive, supernatural things. The most significant scene occurs in the bathroom (referencing the bathroom climax in *Les Diaboliques*), when the taps spew out vivid red blood, in a black-and-white film. This is a rare moment in the film when the distorted subjective is screened. Huxley’s description of his trip describes how a hallucinogen ‘raises all colours to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind’; our perception of colour is made more immediate and striking.⁷⁶ But *The Tingler*, in deviating from B&W, does not screen “real” colour, only Martha’s subjective distortion of the B&W diegetic world. Martha, as stated, is terrified by the more immediate sight of blood, which transgresses the ordinary B&W diegetic world, and which sends her into ‘psychosomatic shock’. The contrast between colour and B&W signifies Martha’s dislocation from the world, the sense in which her distorted

⁷⁵ Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 81.

⁷⁶ Huxley, *Ibid.*, 23.

perception alienates her from the real, rendering impossible her perception of a secure, objective world.

Yet, aside from the blood, the objects of which Martha is afraid are not subjective manifestations; they are all objects that exist objectively in the diegetic world. Like in *House on Haunted Hill*, the fact that these images are evidently fake (the strings are visible) is quite appropriate. For Leeder this puzzling sequence further distorts the boundaries between what is real and what is unreal.⁷⁷ This confusion and fragility (a product of the film's incoherent logic) mediates on the fragility of such a relationship; there is a clear tension between the world as viewed subjectively and objectively. *The Tingler's* horror emphasises the difficulty individuals have in adopting an objective view of the world. Even the rational scientist, Chapin, has his perception distorted. For individuals, according to the film's logic, horror results from this disharmonious tension. How can one be sure that one sees what is actually there? Or is it the result of some manipulation, some contamination of our subjective consciousness by emotions, drugs, or an external conspiracy? Is this a world of our making, as suggested with Chapin's LSD trip?

Like Castle's prior films, *The Tingler* situates itself within the "gaslight melodrama" tradition evoked in *Les Diaboliques*, a tradition preoccupied with perceptual alienation and psychological manipulation. As mentioned, Vincent Price and Judith Evelyn both co-starred in *Angel Street*; Price played the lead role of the gaslighting husband alongside Evelyn as the manipulated wife.⁷⁸ Evelyn adopts a similar role as Martha in *The Tingler*, a woman abused and gaslit into a mental breakdown, with the abusive husband role filled by Oli. Oli wants to frighten Martha to death so that he can acquire her money. But Chapin is not innocent, and

⁷⁷ Leeder, 'Collective Screams', 89.

⁷⁸ Which MGM adapted into *Gaslight*, which starred Price's fellow Mercury Theatre alumni, Joseph Cotton.

arguably mediates a criticism of institutions. Chapin is a man of the medical and scientific profession who manipulates and controls women. We see Chapin threaten to kill his wife then make it look like she had committed suicide, and it is strongly implied that Chapin slips Martha LSD.⁷⁹ Agents of professional society are framed as untrustworthy forces of control and manipulation, engaged in a conspiracy to gaslight ordinary people – especially women – linking *The Tingler* to broader preoccupations with the threat to subjectivity that motivated many cultural critics and dissidents in the late-1950s consumer society. Mass society and its institutions are engaged in a plot to control the reality that appears to the individual, creating a sense of alienation where the subjective realm is manipulated and disempowered.

‘Don’t let it get control of you...’: Self-Control and Alienation

The preoccupation with hallucination gives certain meanings to the tingler monster. Like hallucination, the tingler is the result of distorted perception; notably, both prominent tingler attacks (Chapin and Martha) are brought on by an LSD trip. The tingler is in a sense a hallucination made immediate and real; a world rendered horrific because of distorted perception.

The tingler monster mediates similar existential (phenomenological) ideas about the nature of horror that circulated at the time. The tingler, as a creature of conscious perception that exists in every human being that manifests when one is afraid, is an objectified symbol of human fear, and fear, according to Sartre’s phenomenology, can induce uncontrollable bodily changes, such as an upset stomach, fainting, screaming. When Chapin uncovers the tingler and calls it an ‘ugly and dangerous thing, ugly because it’s the creation of man’s fear’, this indicates

⁷⁹ To quote Chapin, ‘sometimes science can be frighteningly impersonal’.

the film's understanding of fear and horror as existing within a transformative relationship with the human body, literally turning the body monstrous. It also indicates human oneness and disconnectedness from the world; in *The Tingler*, an absurd, disharmonious tension is created between the individual (self) and the world by a tingler which is at once subjective (as a structure of consciousness) and objective (as an objective creature that can survive outside of consciousness). As the tingler is a structure of consciousness, on an existential phenomenological reading, it appears to manifest due to something in the world perceived in fear; invoked by the horrific quality of phenomena. For instance, Chapin's tingler manifests during a bad trip in which the world ceases to conform to rational expectations. Sartre considered moments of horror to seem like the world has transformed into a "magical" place unbound by deterministic rules and expectations. Similarly, in *The Tingler*, in moments of horror the body is transformed into something horrific, a host for a crustaceous monster. *The Tingler* mediates this sense of distorted perception (in this case distorted by fear and hallucination) transforming the objective world into something alien, irrational, slimy, and horrific; in the film, the objective body, is made horrific by terrified consciousness which creates a monster.

For Brottman, the terror of the tingler lies within repressed anxieties about control over the body. In her psychoanalytic reading, the tingler signifies the perverse repulsiveness of the body, representing 'the human fear of losing control of one's defecatory functions – embodied by the sight of an enormous, swollen faecal animal, alive and on the loose...'⁸⁰ *The Tingler* is preoccupied with a loss of control over oneself, namely, our anxieties and fears, emotions which literally take over our bodies. This is not, however, a hidden psychoanalytic meaning, but something which is mediated directly by the film's intertextual identity, which is linked

⁸⁰ Brottman, *Ibid.*, 9.

with contemporary existential ideas about anxiety. The lobby jingle for theatrical screenings by “The Tinglers” and Thurl Ravenscroft rather brilliantly alludes to this narrative theme:

Don't let it get control of you,

Own the heart and soul of you.

Once it takes its toll of you,

It strangles your will.⁸¹

Likewise, anxiety constricts and control the will. What happens when one loses control of fear, when human fear becomes manifested as a real and immediate threat, signifies the constrictive power altered perception may hold over the individual. The tingler is a creature of consciousness, a monster developed by subjective emotional structures, mediating anxieties, as many of these films do, of losing control of those structures. Moreover, in the context of the preoccupation with gaslighting, *The Tingler* presents fear as something that can be manipulated to control the individual.

The Tingler conceptualizes the experience of anxiety as a process of dislocation, depersonalization, and alienation from the world around the individual. As mentioned, a key motif within the film (and *House on Haunted Hill*) is the feeling of being trapped with no exit in a world of horror dislocated from conventional reality. Chapin becomes anxious when the world ceases to conform to rational and deterministic laws, while Martha is literally killed by the surrealistic sense of perception while tripping on acid. This sense of dislocation is furthered by the tingler creature itself. Anxiety was characterized by contemporary existentialists such as Rollo May and Paul Tillich as a concern with selfhood and individuality, with the threats

⁸¹ *The Tingler with Thurl Ravenscroft* (YouTube: MeMadMusic, 2015) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tsljwlg5jtA>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

posed to the securities and meanings of the self.⁸² In anxiety, the sufferer is threatened by a loss of connection with themselves and with reality, becoming increasingly alienated from the world. For May, anxiety contributes to the “dissolution of the self”:

anxiety reduces self-awareness... the awareness of one's self as a subject related to objects in the external world is obscured. Awareness of one's self is simply a correlate of awareness of objects in the external world. It is precisely this differentiation between subjectivity and objectivity which breaks down in proportion to the severity of the anxiety experienced.⁸³

The Tingler is preoccupied with this alienation as dissolution of the self and as disharmony with the world; the tingler manifests itself as something a part of our body, yet not a part of it, as both an internal and external thing, both self and not-self. The boundaries between subject and object break down in the wake of the tingler as the psychic and physical entities of the individual are fractured and divided; the security of subjectivity is shattered in the loss of control of both. Once the tingler is discovered and unleashed, no rational means can control or master it (fire does not hurt it, a cage cannot contain it), precisely because as a structure of fearful consciousness, the tingler is an irrational being. The only means of controlling the tingler is likewise irrational: an outburst of terror, a scream. The protagonists undergo a sense of alienation, whereby they fail to adequately master the world around them via rational means.

The Tingler draws much of its possible existential meaning in this sense from its lowbrow, low-budget contexts. The obvious unreality of the tingler as a prop is itself alienating, while an element of absurdism is generated through the fact that the strings manipulating the tingler are barely concealed, further mediating on the theme of perception being manipulated like a puppet on a string. The sense of ambiguity generated by the text's incoherence mediates

⁸² Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, 1950. Reissue (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2015), 188–192; Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 1952. 2 edn, reprint (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, Yale University Press, 2000).

⁸³ May, *Ibid.*, 191.

on the thematic preoccupation with disharmony; the tension between these two positions perhaps evidences the broader disharmony of the world that appears in horror, as well as an attempt to come to terms with it.

‘For the first time in motion picture history...’: *Percepto!*

Before the film begins, Castle emerges from off-screen to warn of the affective material of the images on screen:

I feel obligated to warn you that some of the sensations, some of the physical reactions, which the actors on the screen will feel will also be experienced for the first time in motion picture history by certain members of this audience... These unfortunate, sensitive people will at times feel a strange tingling sensation... But don't be alarmed. You can protect yourself. At any time you are conscious of a tingling sensation, you may obtain immediate relief by screaming. Don't be embarrassed about opening your mouth and letting rip with all you've got, because the person in the seat right next to you will probably be screaming too. And remember this: a scream at the right time may save your life.

The gimmick of the film was dubbed “Percepto” by associate producer, Dona Holloway, immediately constructing an image of the film as concerned with perception.⁸⁴ In select theatres screening *The Tingler*, seats would be wired up to an electronic buzzing device that was activated during the third act of the film. Upon activation, certain audience members would feel a buzzing sensation. The aim of Percepto was to put members of the audience in the picture, facilitating a more direct affective experience, or perception, of the events happening on screen. Percepto is more involved with the film's narrative than Castle's previous gimmicks. The gimmick commences when the tingler escapes into a silent movie theatre and breaks the

⁸⁴ Castle, *Ibid.*, 167.

diegetic barrier. Percepto annihilated the distance between the events of the film and members of the audience, more directly engaging them with the preoccupations of the film. For *The Tingler*, the threat on screen becomes a threat immediately perceived by the audience. These are the ‘physical reactions’ and the ‘sensations’ that Castle speaks of in his warning, the audience shares the physical experience of the ‘fear tensions’ induced by the tingler, followed by the desired reaction to scream (often with laughter).

To describe the experience of horror as an apprehension of the world as magical, Sartre used the famous example of when ‘a grimacing face suddenly appears pressed against the outside of the window’.⁸⁵ The face, catching one by surprise, is apprehended in a state of horror. The face is not apprehended rationally, but as something magical (supernatural), because terrified consciousness has granted it transcendent properties. The face is not a rational thing, but a magical, horrible phenomenon that is not bound by deterministic expectations. Such a scene occurs in *Les Diaboliques*, when the face of the supposedly dead Michel is seen through a window, convincing Christina that he has returned as a vengeful ghost. Like Sartre’s example of the face at the window, the audience, through Percepto, does not perceive the events of the film as separated from them by being images screened onto a blank surface. Clepper argued that Castle’s gimmicks ‘challenged viewers to rethink the spatial, semiotic, and diegetic relationships that traditionally define filmgoing and filmmaking practices’.⁸⁶ The screen is no longer a separating barrier between the real and unreal, and the theatre is no longer a safe space or refuge. Through Percepto, the tingler can annihilate the distance between the audience and the film, coming as Sartre said of the grimacing face, into ‘an immediate relationship with our body’, the film compels a bodily alteration in the form of screaming and laughing.⁸⁷ Clepper

⁸⁵ Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 84.

⁸⁶ Clepper, *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁷ Sartre, *Ibid.*, 87.

agrees, claiming that ‘Castle’s films physically or materially *touched* his audiences’, and that ‘Castle’s gimmicks and objects directly employed viewers’ bodies and auditorium space in the act of cinematic meaning-making’.⁸⁸

This is almost literally the case in *The Tingler*, as some members of the audience are given direct physical experience of “the tingler”. When the buzzing begins, and the silhouette of the tingler crawls across the screen as though it were in the projectionist booth, Percepto drags the audience into immediate experience of the world of *The Tingler* by letting the tingler loose on the theatre to be directly and physically experienced. Castle’s gimmicks allowed the audience to transform the innocent buzzing and distanced events on screen into an immediate or “real” phenomenon. As *The Tingler*’s theatrical poster states: ‘GUARANTEED. “The Tingler will break loose in the theatre while you are in the audience”’.⁸⁹ Even more immediate is the voice of Vincent Price (*not* Chapin), compelling the audience to scream for their lives over the loudspeaker, as if he were in the auditorium with them. The audience has learnt from the film (through Dr Warren Chapin) that only by screaming may the tingler be annihilated. When the screen goes black in the “scream-break” sequence near the end of the film, one is encouraged by Price to do just that. Price (and Castle) invites the audience to participate in a collective ritual of screaming and pandemonium to vanquish the tingler. Like LSD, Percepto alters perception of the film, making the tingler “real”, replicating the “tingling” sensation, a bodily transformation, leading to a physical response in screaming (often with laughter).

According to Brottman: ‘To view *The Tingler* as it was originally screened is... to take part in a socially endorsed ritual of mass cathexis, where the threat of contamination is faced

⁸⁸ Clepper, *Ibid.*, 55, 77.

⁸⁹ *The Tingler* (Columbia, 1959), 1959
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053363/mediaviewer/rm2835364864/?ref_=tt_ov_i>
[accessed 30 June 2022].

head on, displaced, and, at least temporarily, “overcome”⁹⁰. Percepto functioned as a mass ritual, primarily for children and teenagers, in which they regained control over their bodies through screaming. On the present reading, the ritual function of Brottman’s interpretation is maintained, however, rather than simply regaining control over the body, the act of screaming becomes an admission of failure to control perception by rational means. One must resort to irrational ritual (some may say “*magical*”) means to regain control of perception, to vanquish the imaginary tingler made manifest in the theatre. Of course, no one would have taken this seriously in the slightest, but in many ways that was the point. David J. Skal wrote that ‘in a decade marked by suburban isolation and personal alienation... Horror gimmicks provided audiences with a needed sense of contact, engagement, and recognition’.⁹¹ They addressed and mediated on pervasive anxieties in ways that were fun, communicative, and engaging. *The Tinger* offered frights, but it also presented an opportunity for control.

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Castle’s “rebirth of the horror film” actively calls into question the meanings given to horror in 1950s cinema. As with Sartre, the conception of horror in Castle’s films is aligned with existential anxieties about limited perception is limited, the unknowability of the world, and that one’s psychological processes by which “reality” is determined is constantly subject to manipulation by Others. Castle’s films consistently pose the possibility that our perceptions are fragile, that our subjectivity can be manipulated, that we may be lonely, alienated individuals struggling to decipher whether we are the victims of a hidden conspiracy or of the generally horrific, inconceivable nature of the world – or worse, we are victims of both.

⁹⁰ Brottman, *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹¹ Skal, *The Monster Show*, 259.

Castle's gimmick horror films participated within contemporary existential discourses by mediating themes such as alienation, intersubjectivity, anxieties of perception, and a sense of absurd or disharmonious unreality of the perceivable world, themes which saturated contemporary cultural discourses (such as mass culture criticism, psychology, and sociology). These films also mediate on themes more traditionally associated with existential and surrealist literature and philosophy, which, seems a tactical ploy when one recognizes that Castle was deliberately exploiting associations with *Les Diaboliques*. Not only did these films mediate on such themes through (often ridiculed) narratives and style, Castle's use of intertextual and intermedial networks constructed an existential image for the films through promotion and showmanship. Moreover, Castle's cultural and intertextual connections – his associations with Orson Welles through theatre and *The Lady from Shanghai*, the influence of Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* which itself had numerous associations and connections with Sartre and existentialism – helped to associate his films with intellectual and existential themes. The present chapter has situated Castle's gimmick films within these broader cultural contexts, demonstrating how they were part of a wider set of existential discourses which pervaded popular culture as much as they did high or intellectual culture, which may have impacted the reception of these texts. It has also displayed the intersection between pervasive philosophical ideas and popular culture, and also how such ideas were connected with the workings of the industry which, in a bid to chase prominent markets in a trend towards a package system, exploited popular cultural trends.

Les Diaboliques was a major hit with the young American audiences that had by the mid-to-late-1950s become the largest cinema-going demographic; in interviews, Castle (who was regularly in touch with exhibitors) shows that he was aware of this, especially the appetite

for horror among the young (and indeed the arthouse crowd).⁹² Castle copies from *Les Diaboliques* and draws associations with the “classic” Gothic horrors that were being shown on television, along with shows such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, that themselves drew on German expressionism, as did film noir. Castle was not the only one doing this. Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, which was based on a Boileau-Narcejac’s novel, was a direct response to *Les Diaboliques* which he had originally wanted to direct.⁹³ *The Screaming Skull* (Nicol, 1958) and *My World Dies Screaming* (Daniels, 1958) both used the “death-by-fright” and gaslighting narratives supported by gimmicks – the latter of which directly referenced contemporary anxieties about subliminal advertising by employing subliminal messaging.⁹⁴

Les Diaboliques’ success revealed a trend that filmmakers like Castle were quick to exploit in the wake of a changing industry moving towards a package-unit system. There was a market trend towards horror films that played with existential themes such as manipulated perception, intersubjectivity and alienation in the 1950s, a trend which Castle was central to. In playing to these trends, Castle’s films became incredibly successful and influential, prompting the likes of Hitchcock – whose *Vertigo* had failed to chime with audiences – to respond with *Psycho*, a film which attempted to capture the new youth market as well as the more traditional middle-class audiences. *Psycho* tried at once to be a low-budget William Castle-*esque* exploitation horror film (and was received as such) whilst also being legitimate in the eyes of the middle classes. *Psycho*’s success, which was larger than any of Castle’s films, in part convinced the industry to develop on trends within 1950s exploitation horror (namely

⁹² Castle, *Ibid.*, 133–134; Strawn, ‘William Castle’, 287–298; Gladwin Hill, ‘PRODUCER EXCELS IN FILM “GIMMICKS”’: William Castle, Who Made “13 Ghosts,” Says Horror Alone Is Not Enough’, *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 6 April 1961), 28.

⁹³ Hayward, *Les Diaboliques*, 13; Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, *She Who Was No More (Celle Qui n’était Plus)*, trans. by Geoffrey Sainsbury, [1952] (London: Hutchinson, 1954); Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, *The Living and the Dead (D’entre Les Morts)*, trans. by Geoffrey Sainsbury, [1954] (London: Hutchinson, 1956).

⁹⁴ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 65.

films and themes that appealed to young audiences) and elevating them to more “legitimate” or prestigious entertainment for a broader audience, a blending of popular culture with more middle to highbrow entertainment. In terms of the horror film, this saw shift in the dominant generic modes towards more sophisticated “psychological” horror films which with playing, often more overtly, with the same existential themes as Castle was in his gimmick cycle.⁹⁵ The following chapters will consider Castle’s continued play with existential themes in a post-*Psycho* marketplace, where horror films trended towards greater maturity, sophistication, and legitimacy where such themes have often been taken for granted.

⁹⁵ See: Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 220–232, 267–268; Hantke, ‘A Sick Mind in Search of a Monstrous Body’, 153–170; Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 91–112; Davis, *Battle for the Bs*, 63–65, 78–82; Skal, *Ibid.*, 256–261; Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 137–139; McKenna, *Ibid.*, 63.

Chapter 2: ‘What do we really know about anybody?’: Identity, Subjectivity, and the Other in Castle’s 1960s Psychological Horror Films

Despite a traditional fixation in film history on Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* as a seminal text by an auteur director that shifted the horror genre towards the dominant (and “legitimate”) model of “psychological” horror, it is now becoming well established through approaches to film history that incorporate audience reception and contextual understandings of the film industry that the shift towards upscaled psychological horror was a trend that began in earlier in the 1940s and 1950s and within which producers such as William Castle were an integral part.¹ However, new histories have overlooked the associations between psychology and existentialism in the cultural discourses of the period and fail to really consider how such films actively mediated on these themes and ideas as part of the wider upscaling of the horror genre, whilst also maintaining the traditional lowbrow youth audience. The present chapter will demonstrate the intersection between existential ideas and new trends in psychological horror, showing how Castle’s 1960s psychological horror films, *Homicidal* and *Mr Sardonicus*, tried to expand their appeal and cultural legitimacy through play with existential ideas about identity and madness.

The success of low-budget horror pictures marketed to young audiences, particularly those made by William Castle, partially prompted Alfred Hitchcock to make *Psycho*. With *Psycho*, Hitchcock attempted to bridge the gap between young horror audiences (for whom the genre had both art-film and lowbrow associations) and more respectable middle-classes with a film that appealed to both, increasing box office potential after a series of notable flops like *Vertigo*. Unlike his most recent films, *Psycho* was in black-and-white and made (relatively)

¹ See: Hantke, “A Sick Mind in Search of a Monstrous Body”, 153.

cheaply to draw associations with “lowbrow” popular horror, whilst also being marketed as a clear extension of his popular television show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1965). *Psycho* drew links with *Les Diaboliques* and the horror films that followed in its wake through various scenes such as the famous shower sequence and the “none shall be admitted” gimmick. *Psycho*’s horror heritage was clear in the film’s constant use of iconography such as the “old dark” Bates house, Mother’s skeleton, and gruesome violence, and the fact that it was based on a lurid pulp novel by popular horror, SF, and crime author, Robert Bloch. *Psycho* also developed trends within the horror genre, namely the upscaling of the genre through the introduction of psychological themes.² It strived for legitimacy as a psychological thriller in the eyes of respectable culture (though was initially received as a vile lowbrow horror film), whilst also appealing to younger horror “addicts”.

Psycho is conventionally seen by genre critics such as Robin Wood as the point in which the supernatural was replaced by the psychological in the genre, with the eruption of the repressed bursting from within the familial structures, with the source of terror coming from within. These ‘horror-of-personality’ films as Charles Derry called them figured the abnormal or monstrous psychology as the central threat of the film, and were generally seen at the time as fixated on the psychic processes that determined reality for the individual (which was viewed as an existential idea).³ Despite their existential associations, psychological horror films are conventionally read by scholars via Freudian psychoanalysis, which saw immense cultural proliferation in postwar America. However, such ideas overlook the discourses within which *Psycho* clearly mediated; *Psycho* was not a break from the conventions of the horror genre, but an extension of trends already taking place. Attempts to distance *Psycho* from horror – giving

² Jancovich, ‘Beyond Hammer’ 2.

³ In many ways these films resembled the psychological melodramas of the 1940s, which also drew together the Gothic with more contemporary concerns about psychological manipulation and insanity – many films of which would now commonly be referred to as film noir.

it names such as “thriller” – often overlook (or ignore) the film’s directly associations with the horror genre of the 1950s, and that it was discussed in terms commonly used to discuss the horror film.

Psycho’s use of “psychological” themes was less a radical alteration to the structures and meanings of the horror genre by an auteur than an attempt to draw associations with (exploit) and mediate pervasive and diffused debates at the time to situate the film within wider legitimate culture and as a result improve box office takings; and this is something *Psycho* does because it is already being done within the genre. Because of *Psycho*’s success, there was a wave of similar psychological horror thrillers, again not because of a radical structural change in the genre, but because of business logic – producers thought that because *Psycho* was successful with both young people and middle-class audiences, they too would try and court similar associations and exploit popular trends, marketing their films to both the primary, assured young audience whilst branching out and trying to draw in more respectable, middle-brow audiences (and likewise attain wider cultural significance and distribution). This was nothing new. Jancovich discusses the prestigious, big-budget horror films of the 1940s (frequently overlooked in horror canons) which played with psychological themes, often to the distaste of some critics, with the inclusion of psychological themes being seen as a means of upscaling the genre and the particular emphasis on the paranoid Gothic woman tormented by invisible forces associating horror with legitimate culture by targeting women’s tastes.⁴ Themes of psychological destruction were consistently associated with the horror genre.⁵ It

⁴ Mark Jancovich, ““Two Ways of Looking”: The Critical Reception of 1940s Horror’, *Cinema Journal*, 49.3 (2010), 55–66; similar happened in the Western, see: Mark Jancovich, ‘Introduction’, *Horror Studies*, 13.1 (2022), 5.

⁵ Mark Jancovich, ““Peter Brook’s Night of the Living Dead”: Horror, Cinema, and the Post-War Theatre’, *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*, 15.1+2 (2022), 87; Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Hollywood’s Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?’, *Commentary*, 2 (1946), 132–36.

would be after the Second World War when psychoanalysis and psychiatry was mobilized in response to returning veterans that psychology attained cultural legitimacy (and celebrity).⁶ This can also be seen throughout the 1950s, especially following the success of *Les Diaboliques*. William Castle's 1960s films, particularly *Homicidal* and *Mr Sardonicus*, were frequently ignored or denigrated by scholars and subsequent critics as pale imitations of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. This ignores the wider discourses around *Psycho*, fixating on one single text at the expense of its history, and overlooks how Castle, like his contemporaries, responded to wider trends already in motion within the genre and culture more broadly.⁷ Like Hitchcock, Castle's 1960s psychological films were obvious attempts to extend the Castle brand, to expand beyond the guaranteed youth fanbase (consolidated with popular children's horror films like *13 Ghosts*, *Zotz!*, and *13 Frightened Girls* and continued use of gimmicks) and bring in a wider, middle-class audience through play with "respectable" adult themes that nonetheless still registered with core younger audiences.

Castle deliberately courted associations with *Psycho* through *Homicidal* to upscale his films, which were successful financially, if not highly regarded by cultural guardians. The trades built up associations with *Psycho* which exhibitors were invited to exploit, using terms like 'psychotic killer' which is repeated in the trailer and on the poster; *Boxoffice* reported 'a story which is similar to, and no more preposterous than "Psycho"', notably suggesting the broad appeal of the film which will 'fascinate the majority of moviegoers'.⁸ *The Hollywood Reporter* reported a test screening in Youngstown which '20% [said *Homicidal* was] better

⁶ See: Walker, 'Couching Resistance', 143–62.

⁷ See: Hantke, "'A Sick Mind in Search of a Monstrous Body'", 155.

⁸ 'Homicidal', *Boxoffice*, 79.10 (1961), a11; *Homicidal (Columbia, 1961)*, 1961 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054988/mediaviewer/rm1320762624/?ref=tt_ov_i> [accessed 30 June 2022]; *Homicidal 1961 Trailer HD | Glenn Corbett | Patricia Breslin* (YouTube: Trailer Chan, 2019).

than “Psycho””.⁹ *Homicidal* was compared favourably with *Psycho* by contemporary audiences, with *Time* magazine listed it as one of their top films of the year: ‘Made in imitation of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, it surpasses its model in structure, suspense and sheer nervous drive’.¹⁰ *The New York Times* associated *Homicidal* with both *Psycho* and Mickey Spillane – one of the most popular authors of the period.¹¹ Associations with the mystery story and the whodunnit showed the diffusion and wider cultural presence of horror; they were clearly associated with horror, but also had wider, more “legitimate” associations.¹² Genre was mobilized to broaden the appeal of individual films, which could be seen as pulling from various sources and associations. *Homicidal* was mediated as a ‘suspense-thriller’, a ‘murder mystery melodrama’, a ‘suspense melodrama’ with James Powers associating it with quality films like Billy Wilder’s *Witness to the Prosecution* (Wilder, 1957).¹³ Critical discourses highlight the themes at work in *Homicidal*: ‘deception’, ‘mask[s]’, ‘trickery’, ‘identity’.¹⁴

These are themes which were associated with contemporary (popular) psychology; the idea of psychological processes (impacted by social contexts) determining reality.¹⁵ As

⁹ ““Homicidal” Scores’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 165.5 (1965), 3.

¹⁰ ‘Time Listings: CINEMA’, *Time*, 15 September 1961 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20110205043634/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,938786,00.html>> [accessed 3 May 2022].

¹¹ Specifically *Vengeance is Mine* (1950); E.A., ‘Double Bill Opens’, *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 27 July 1961), 23.

¹² ‘Homicidal’, a11; associations with the whodunnit draws immediate connection with mystery authors like Agatha Christie and John Dickson Carr, both of whom were connected with the horror genre by critics.

¹³ ““Homicidal” Big in K.C.’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 165.48 (1961), 2; James Powers, ““HOMICIDAL” EXPLOITABLE MELODRAMA Wm. Castle Film Good Melodrama’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 165.34 (1961), 3; Whit., ‘Homicidal’, *Variety*, 223.4 (1961), 20.

¹⁴ Powers, ““HOMICIDAL” EXPLOITABLE MELODRAMA’, 3; ‘Mystery Actor in Castle “Homicidal”’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 162.27 (1960), 13.

¹⁵ Such as Thomas Szasz’s idea that medical concepts of mental illness and such are more so means of controlling and internalizing the problem, and which is also framed as a means of manipulation as we saw in *House on Haunted Hill*, overlooking the individual’s real relationship to the world around them; Keith Hoeller, ‘An Introduction to Existential Psychology and Psychiatry’, in *Readings in Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, ed. by Keith Hoeller (Seattle, WA: Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry, 1990), 3–19;

mentioned, it is common for the psychological horror films of the 1960s to be read in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis which was popular at the time; but Freud did not represent the totality of psychology in the 1950s and 1960s. While the behaviourist system was the dominant, official psychology in America, more critical, humanistic psychologies existed at the margins. They were also likely to be discussed in university courses, with work on existential psychology being included in popular textbooks for students such as Reinhardt's *Existential Revolt*; such ideas registered with young students, who were often the target for horror films. The late-1950s saw the proliferation of existential and phenomenological psychology in America following the publication of *Existence* edited by Rollo May, Ernest Angel, and Henri F. Ellenberger in 1958 which translated for the first time many European works on existential psychology.¹⁶ May was also a popular name in existential psychotherapy. Before long an existential approach to psychotherapy became well diffused and discussed. Existential psychology saw psychological conflict as 'interpersonal' rather than 'intrapsychic', as a result of one's being-in-the-world as opposed to erupting from within the person; illness is a result of one's relationship with the world around them, of being fragmented within modern society and culture.¹⁷ Existential psychologists saw illness as a response to the problems of existence, which Yalom identified as 'death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness', with terms like "alienation", "anxiety" and "the Other" entering popular usage.

Thomas S. Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*, 1961. Reprint (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2010), 1–13; Adrian Van Kaam, *Existential Foundations of Psychology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1966); Reinhardt, *The Existentialist Revolt*.

¹⁶ *Existence*, ed. by Rollo May, Ernest Angel, and Henri F. Ellenberger, 1958. Reprint (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).

¹⁷ Hoeller, 'Introduction to Existential Psychology and Psychiatry', 13; see also: R. D. Laing and A. Esterson, *Sanity, Madness, and the Family*, 1964. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

Existentialism and psychology had long associations in culture through philosophy, literature, and film, and had always interacted and reinforced each other (key philosophers like Sartre were actively working towards a new type of psychology). The famous American existential novels of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, both of whom came to be associated with existentialism, were psychological novels of coming to consciousness which told the story of alienated protagonists discovering their identity and freedom as a Black man living within a racist America, among other conditions.¹⁸ According to Emory Elliot, those novelists ‘explore the torments of the soul... they depicted the psychological trauma and strange sense of unreality and the uncanny that individuals experience in the face of human cruelty, brutality, and incomprehensible evil’.¹⁹ Film noir too, and the novels on which they were based, also explored psychological themes, especially the crisis of identity and consciousness created by modern society – ideas which would be influential on the French Existentialists. Problems in human psychology were often figured explicitly as existential problems of identity, bad faith, and alienation.

What will be argued in the following chapter is that Castle’s 1960s psychological horror films, in a clear effort to elevate and work within popular trends in the genre, are clearly working through ideas that were at the time heavily associated with existential psychology and likewise appeared more widely in culture. Deliberate alignment with such ideas mediated the possibility of existential psychological meanings which, as discussed, appealed both to young audiences (for whom psychological and existential concerns with identity, alienation, and bad faith had a more immediate cultural register) and middle-class audiences (particularly women,

¹⁸ Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 1940. New edn (London: Vintage, 2017); Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 1953. Reprint (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008); Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952. Penguin Essentials edn (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

¹⁹ Emory Elliot, ‘Society and the Novel in Twentieth-Century America’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 439.

who sought more “adult” and legitimate themes that indicated quality, and for whom such associations recalled the quality psychological horror cinema of the 1940s). *Homicidal* and *Mr Sardonicus* (and later films which will be discussed in the following chapter) explore the struggle for subjectivity, an attempt to maintain a sense of identity and selfhood in a world where one is forced to relate to others, placing identity at threat. Such themes are often taken for granted within the more “legitimate”, prestigious US and British psychological horror films of the period such as *Compulsion* (Fleischer, 1959), *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *The Innocents* (Clayton, 1963), *The Servant* (Losey, 1963), and *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte*; these were also prevalent themes in the crime melodramas (and the novels they adapted), whilst also being key themes of Gothic fiction and film more broadly.²⁰ In Gothic psychological horror, ‘villains were seen both as motivated by psychological disturbance and as determined to psychologically destroy their victims. In this way, these villains are specifically associated with the despotic desire to dominate and control others, while their victims are specifically figured as the psychologically dominated and victimized’.²¹ Such themes are directly on display in Castle’s Gothic film, *Mr Sardonicus*. Notably, Gothic film and literature were traditionally targeted at middle-class women.²²

²⁰ *The Servant* was scripted by Harold Pinter, who would become well associated with the Theatre of the Absurd – form of drama associated with existentialism; See Jancovich, ‘Beyond Hammer’, 2–5; for the Gothic see: David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions From 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longmans, 1980); Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1988); Jancovich, *Horror*, 18–33; Dani Cavallaro, *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (London: Continuum, 2002); Fred Botting, *Gothic*, 2nd edn (Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

²¹ Mark Jancovich, “It’s About Time British Actors Kicked Against These Roles in ‘Horror’ Films”: Horror Stars, Psychological Films and the Tyranny of the Old World in Classical Horror Cinema’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, 33.2 (2013), 216.

²² Indeed, many of the key Gothic melodramas and film noirs were released in the war years where women constituted the largest audiences. For Gothic literature and women, see: Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 59–84.

The Other (and the basic existential structure of being-with-others) is a source of concern (and horror) for a number of existential philosophers and psychologists, particularly French Existentialists like Sartre and Beauvoir, and the psychologist Frantz Fanon, and also appeared as mentioned in many important American novels. The Other becomes a reason for one's alienation and self-estrangement.²³ For Sartre, 'conflict' is an essential part of being-with-others, leading to the famous declaration that 'hell is other people'; this is a conflict, or struggle, for control of what Sartre called 'the Look', which is in turn a battle for the self, or subjectivity.²⁴ According to Aho, the 'look is a social judgement that defines me as a "being-in-itself", as an object or thing, and this, in turn, dehumanizes me, stripping me of the possibility of creating and fashioning my own identity'.²⁵ The Other's Look constitutes one's meanings for them, without their control. It renders the individual an object apprehended by another consciousness; in existential phenomenology, consciousness apprehends objects and confers meanings onto them. Sartre wrote:

being seen constitutes me as a defenceless being for a freedom which is not my freedom. It is in this sense that we can consider ourselves "slaves" in so far as we appear to the Other... I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the centre of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being. In so far as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on this qualification or even know about it.²⁶

Sartre specifically conceptualized the Look in horrific terms: 'when we gradually learn what [the Other] thinks of us, this is the thing which will be able at once to fascinate us and fill us with horror'.²⁷ It fills us with horror, because we realize the 'danger' posed to us by the Other's

²³ Cooper, *Existentialism*, 60.

²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'No Exit (Huis Clos)', in *No Exit, and Three Other Plays*, trans. by L. Abel and A. Knopf, [1946] (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1989), 1–46; Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 276–326.

²⁵ Aho, *Existentialism*, 60.

²⁶ Sartre, *Ibid.*, 291.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

Look, their freedom to constitute our meanings and freedom to make objects of us.²⁸ One becomes alienated from one's own body, trapped within the meanings that they have been given.²⁹

The following will demonstrate how Castle's 1960s psychological horror films *Homicidal* and *Mr Sardonicus*, in order to position themselves within wider cinematic discourses and trends towards legitimate, psychological horror, mediated similar ideas and anxieties which appeared in contemporary existential discourses. This analysis will also consider the respective gimmicks of those films, "Fright Break/Coward's Corner" and the "Punishment Poll", and how they can be seen within those trends.

1) **'I'm right here, Miriam': *Homicidal***

After seeing *Psycho*, Castle asked producer Dona Holloway: "how can I top Alfred Hitchcock?"³⁰ Following the more childish *13 Ghosts* (Castle, 1960), *Homicidal* was a clear attempt by Castle to produce a more "legitimate", psychological horror thriller that nonetheless appealed to younger people through violence and horrific images. *Homicidal* also exploits the case of Christine Jorgensen, the first high-profile American transgender woman, which was noted by *Variety*: 'William Castle lifts a choice morsel from headlines out of Scandinavia a decade ago to build the climax of his latest horror melo and backtrack his suspenseful narrative

²⁸ Ibid., 291; Warnock, Ibid., 117.

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon both built upon Sartre's conception of the Look, discussing how women and Black people have their meanings constituted, and freedoms determined by the patriarchy and colonialism (and racism more broadly) respectively. The sense of subjectivity – the ability to determine their own sense of self – of these groups, according to Beauvoir and Fanon, is destroyed by the dominating Look of the Other; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex (Le Deuxième Sexe)*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, [1949] (London: Vintage, 2009); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Richard Philcox, [1952] (London: Penguin, 2021).

³⁰ Castle, *Step Right Up*, 155.

leading up to a surprise and chilling finish'.³¹ Jorgensen, and LGBTQIA+ identities that were becoming increasingly visible in the late-1950s (most of which were outlawed or legally discriminated against, seen as “deviant” and psychologically maladjusted people), became the focal point for debates about identity, alienation, authenticity, and bad faith in American culture, contexts which anchored the meanings of *Homicidal*. In a broader debate about Jorgensen’s “authenticity”, some journalists claimed Jorgensen was a ‘fake’, whilst also prompting deeper anxieties about the meaning of gender and the security of identity.³² Jorgensen was linked to concepts of the postwar nuclear family and femininity.³³ There was debate in the press around whether she, and her body, could be seen as socially acceptable and desirable as an “idealized” woman – perpetuated through Jorgensen own engagements with the media – indicating how both her identity and meanings were determined by the perceptions of others.³⁴ Jorgensen’s story, according to Joanne Meyerowitz, ‘attracted readers, in part, because it offered an unconventional twist on a tried-and-true American tale of adversity, human striving, and success. With dignity and poise, Jorgensen told a moving story of someone who had pursued her own dreams and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles’.³⁵ Jorgensen’s transition was even linked to the atomic age – the idea that ‘anything seemed possible’ with modern science, according to Meyerowitz.³⁶ By the ‘60s, transgender people increasingly ‘began to organize for their civil rights’, drawing on other movements which, as discussed, were often seen as existential movements for authenticity and against bad faith.³⁷

³¹ Whit., ‘Homicidal’, 20.

³² Joanne Meyerowitz, ‘Transforming Sex: Christine Jorgensen in the Postwar U.S.’, *OAH Magazine of History*, 20.2 (2006), 18–19; Emily Skidmore, ‘Constructing the “Good Transsexual”’: Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press’, *Feminist Studies*, 37.2 (2011), 273 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2011.0043>>.

³³ Skidmore, *Ibid.*, 273.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁵ Meyerowitz, *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 18

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 20

Homicidal follows the murderous and mysterious Emily (Joan Marshall), apparently the new wife of young Warren Webster who has recently returned to Solvang, California from Denmark before his twenty-first birthday to claim the inheritance of his father's estate. However, it is revealed that Warren and Emily are in fact the same person; Warren (born female) has been using their Emily persona to murder the individuals who may reveal his birth-sex (essentially being outed) which could jeopardize his inheritance (see footnote).³⁸

Gothic Horror and Unclear Identities

The intertextual materials surrounding *Homicidal* demonstrate the film's associations with existential-psychological questions about identity and intersubjectivity. Castle and the trades built up mystery around the character of Warren which, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, was 'key to the astounding plot and Castle insists the only way people will learn the identity of the mystery actor [will be to] see the picture'.³⁹ Associations with *Psycho* and mystery and

³⁸ No explicit gendering of Warren/Emily is attempted in *Homicidal*, with deliberate confusion being perpetuated by the text. Given references to "something" happening in Denmark, it is strongly implied through contextual factors that Warren is a transgender man. Moreover, Warren makes it explicit that "Warren" is who he is. As such, the pronouns he/him/his will be used. Many critics (and fans) see Warren as queer-coded and a threat to heteronormativity. However, the mere act of being forced to decipher Warren's "real" sex and gender, and the anticipation of the reveal, make it clear that *Homicidal* is in many ways a transphobic text, though there is some nuance as Breneman and Grigs note, regardless of whether Warren is sympathetic or not. These discriminatory attitudes were normalized in the period, the object of this section is to look at how the film uses such these discussions to mediate issues of identity, bad faith, and alienation at the time through participation (and exploitation) within (often transphobic) discussions of transgender people. For a brilliant discussion of transphobia in these films see: Lindsay Ellis, *Tracing the Roots of Pop Culture Transphobia* (YouTube, 2021) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHTMidTLO60>> [accessed 30 June 2022]; Edwin Harris, '[Pride 2021] Transmasculinity in Horror', *Gayly Dreadful: Bursting Out of Your Closet*, 2021 <<https://www.gaylydreadful.com/blog/pride-2021-transmasculinity-in-horror>> [accessed 30 June 2022]; Jeremy Breneman and Eric Grigs, 'William Castle Double Feature: Homicidal and Mr. Sardonicus (1961)', *Pop Trash Museum*, 2021 <<https://poptrashmuseum.com/blog/william-castle-double-feature>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

³⁹ 'Mystery Actor in Castle "Homicidal"', 13.

suspense films (which implied associations with Gothic melodrama and psychological melodrama) also aided in this; the film was sold as being concerned with identity and psychology. Other materials also mediated these themes. Pre-production ads invited potential patrons to fill out a questionnaire to work out whether or not they could harbour homicidal tendencies, which tied into questions about the cause of Warren's violence.⁴⁰ The texts meanings were anchored in questions about identity, the self, and the Other.

Such themes were associated with Gothic and psychological melodrama (which had come back into fashion in the 1960s with a whole series of "quality" Gothic pictures such as *The Innocents* and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* that drew on 1940s psychological melodramas). In many of those Gothic texts, the family is tainted as a source of corruption, manipulation, and as the site of power struggle. In such texts, the villain, often a manipulator and puppet master, denies the tragic Gothic hero freedom and self-knowledge, exerting a dominating influence over their existence. The audience is told that Warren was dominated by his unseen father and manipulated by the women in his life to such an extent that his own sense of concrete identity becomes elusive to him, and to the audience. A recurrent Gothic motif is the denial of knowledge; the hidden door one must never open, the forbidden room one must never enter, hidden secrets of a tainted family, knowledge that is lost to time. These things are often exploited as a means of gaining power over an individual's subjective existence, a means of control and manipulation. The forbidden and concealed prompts psychological harm and existential terror, as it ensnares the subject within a realm that feels unreal and disharmonious (absurd).

Gothic melodrama often featured struggles for subjectivity (self-knowledge) and power. Warren is engaged in a power struggle against the heteronormative structures around

⁴⁰ 'Advertisement: HOMICIDAL A WILLIAM CASTLE PRODUCTION', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 157.25 (1960), 5; Breneman and Grigs, 'William Castle Double Feature'.

him, which could potentially deny his inheritance of his father's estate when he turns twenty-one. Warren was born into an authoritarian and repressive family structure, headed by a wealthy misogynistic patriarch, which rigidly enforced gendered norms. The father wanted a son to inherit his estate at the age of twenty-one; if he had no son, the estate would revert to his oldest daughter from another marriage, Miriam. Warren was assigned a female sex at birth but was raised according to masculine norms; Warren's birth sex was kept a secret by their mother and nanny, Helga. Warren is made to "become a man" and is denied knowledge of his own identity by being taught to fight other boys: 'That was part of the system; toughen me up, keep girls out of my life, make me more of a man'. Warren was also whipped (implying sadism) by Helga: 'Helga would come in here with this [whip], all to make me strong'. David Sanjek presents the juxtaposition of doll and whip in the last shot of the film as evocative of 'the violence done by adults to Emily/Warren and Castle's reinforcement of it in the last shot of the film that juxtaposes the doll, from which his/her father wished to keep his progeny and heir, and the whip, with which his/her gender identity was violently assured'.⁴¹ "Feminine" stereotypes are deemed to make Warren weaker. Warren is shielded (or alienated) from their sister, Miriam, to prevent some kind of feminine contamination.

The Webster house is an old dark house, in a style in keeping with Solvang's Danish aesthetic. The house is veined with dark corridors and arches and is clearly associated with the Gothic trope of mediating the complex psychology of the inhabitants. The house is also framed as a place where secrets are kept, where knowledge is denied. This is also evoked in the setting of the film. Solvang in California, founded by Danish immigrants, is famous for its Danish architecture and culture. Solvang visually evokes the Gothic otherworldliness of Europe, bringing the old-world into the heart of contemporary America. Emily is someone that comes

⁴¹ David Sanjek, 'The Doll and The Whip: Pathos and Ballyhoo in William Castle's Homicidal', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 20.4 (2003), 260.

“from” Denmark, another world, an unknown terror that enters from abroad, from a land where “something” happened which nobody knows. Doubling and duality is another motif of the Gothic that *Homicidal* plays with to indicate fractured, insecure personalities, such as in similarly framed one-shots of both Emily and Warren performing similar activities. The duality of American Denmark and actual Denmark appears to convey the duality of Emily/Warren, suggesting both persona’s strangeness (or estrangement). This person is both from America and from Denmark, they originated at home and abroad. As in *Chinatown*, “Denmark” is clearly metaphorical of a state of being rather than an actual place; though, of course, “Denmark” also references Jorgensen and is clear code for Warren’s transition, therefore indicating questions about Warren’s identity. There is a sense that Warren is trapped in a state of being where their identity is unconfirmed and unacceptable to others (in a world that rejected “deviant” sexualities). They are stuck within that marginalization, that world which is associated as “Other”.

Warren’s identity is left unclear, though as mentioned it is heavily implied through broader cultural references (to Denmark) that Warren is a transgender man, that Warren is the chosen identity while Emily is a fabrication. The repeated references to Denmark are, as Rebecca Nicole William’s notes, ‘almost euphemistic’.⁴² Frequent mentions of Helga and Warren’s long stay in Denmark are made. Emily, supposedly Warren’s wife, “returned” from Denmark with Helga. According to Lt Miller at the end of the film: ‘what happened there, we don’t know’.⁴³ The film is explicit about the inability to know the Other and problems of

⁴² Rebecca Nicole Williams, ‘What Happens in Denmark Stays in Denmark: Down the Warren of William Castle’s *Homicidal*’, in *Homicidal Blu-Ray Booklet*, ed. by Jeff Billington (Hampshire: Powerhouse Films Ltd, 2018), 9.

⁴³ William Castle wrote in his autobiography: ‘How do you transform a beautiful woman into a virile, masculine man? You can go to Sweden and have an operation [sic]’, and also (wrongly) suggested that the film was about a ‘transvestite’. The confusion of the two suggesting Scandinavia as a broader “Other place” for Castle; Castle, *Step Right Up*, 168.

intersubjectivity. Warren asks Miriam: ‘What do we really know about anybody?’. The tension (and ultimately horror) of *Homicidal*, is of not knowing, of being denied secure, objective knowledge about Others. As mentioned, postwar debates and transphobic anxieties about transgender people were often framed within wider questions about psychology, identity, and authenticity. Emily is the “stranger” who enters supposedly ordered society, in a sense alienated from everyone else (due to their secret) but also the one who alienates (and controls) others, such as in how, as Emily, Warren manipulates Miriam, her boyfriend Karl, and the bellhop at the beginning. The fact that Emily and Warren are one in the same entails that Warren, the familiar entity, is the real stranger.

Homicidal was associated with mystery and suspense melodrama, and as is so often the case in such narratives, society is never as ordered as it seems, it conceals a sinister, horrific truth (in this case, a conspiracy and tainted family).⁴⁴ Warren is also uncanny, and the uncanniness created by the male dubbing of Warren is also effective; it suggests that “Warren” is unnatural, dissonant, that this is not a real, secure identity. The dubbing hides the identity of female actor Joan Marshall. Warren is the one the characters know personally yet is the individual that they know the least about. *Homicidal* mediates identity as complex and mysterious and presents a “hell is other people” scenario where one is always at risk of having their identity controlled and manipulated by the Other. This is what has happened to Warren, who is forced into an identity that he has not chosen (which would register with alienated teens), but he also deceives and manipulates the other characters and denies the possibility of truth.

⁴⁴ Mystery literature was strongly associated with the horror genre; Jancovich, “Peter Brook’s Night of the Living Dead”, 88–89; Jancovich, “Two Ways of Looking”; Mark Jancovich and Shane Brown, “The Mystery Writers Conspire to Make Our Flesh Creep”: Horror, Detection and Mystery in the Late 1920s and Early 1930s’, forthcoming.

Deviance and Transgression

There is debate as to the extent to which *Homicidal* perpetuates the negative “killer queer” film trope, depicting sexual “deviants” as murderers, psychopaths, or monsters *because* of their sexuality, because of their unnatural identity. Psychoanalytic readings suggest that Warren kills out of repressed psycho-sexual rage. Writing in the 1980s, David J. Hogan argued that the horror of *Homicidal* is predicated upon the following: ‘Our sex and the behaviour it prompts informs us of what we are more pointedly than any other part of our makeup. We recoil instinctively from people whose sexuality seems ambiguous or “wrong”’.⁴⁵ Hogan also argues that unorthodox sexuality, in the film, is linked with violence.⁴⁶ Hogan’s approach is indicative of a broader psychoanalytic approach to the horror genre that treats horror films as perpetuating the cycle of repression; the monstrous “Other” signifies the return of the repressed, and its subsequent defeat signifies society once again repressing the transgression.⁴⁷ The reveal of the dual identity of Emily/Warren was intended to shock and was much built-up in marketing, as already discussed, and the ambiguity over “Jean Arless” is prolonged by credits – in which both Emily and Warren take a bow – has the potential to prompt a lingering discomfort. This is also mediated through the “Fright Break” gimmick. “Jean Arless” was Joan Marshall, the former name deemed by Castle as ‘androgynous’ enough to perpetuate the audience confusion long after the credits roll.⁴⁸ It has also been claimed here that the film is indicative of transphobic and homophobic anxieties about people considered to have “deviant” identities being deceptive that were normalized in the 1950s.

⁴⁵ Hogan, *Dark Romance*, 78.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ See: Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*; Wood, ‘The American Nightmare’, 25–32; Wood, ‘An Introduction to the American Horror Film’, 107–41.

⁴⁸ Castle, *Ibid.*, 170; Hantke, *Ibid.*, 160.

As an exploitation film, *Homicidal* draws on news headlines and clearly aims to top the reveal of Norman as Mother in *Psycho*, but it is also clear that engagement with these contexts which anchored the existential meanings of the text for contemporary audiences, because issues of “deviant” psychologies and sexualities were framed as existential issues of identity, intersubjectivity, and authenticity, with the narrative so clearly being about how Warren’s (lack of) identity is the result of oppression, that his manipulation and deception is in response to a society which will not accept him, in which he would be marginalized and alienated. Moreover, even as Warren he is forced to live in bad faith. For younger audiences, *Homicidal* may in many ways have been understood as countercultural. According to Pells, much of the counterculture of the 1960s was predicated upon the passion to shock and improvise, to make potent gestures and develop oppositional styles.⁴⁹ Transgender issues had been a feature of exploitation film in the past – most (in)famously in *Glen or Glenda?* (Wood, 1953 – but *Homicidal* shows recognition of Warren as a tragic figure driven to murder because of the power structures around him. This is even suggested when Warren is discussing “Emily” with Miriam: ‘She doesn’t think you like her. Thinks you won’t accept her’. At the end, the whole issue is practically ignored by Miriam, who shoots Emily/Warren out of impulse. After being told about the truth, she simply walks off happy and rich.

The text makes it clear that it is not Warren “deviant sexuality” which prompts them to kill out of repressed, abnormal impulse. To attain his inheritance, violence becomes the only logical form of resistance for Warren. Warren’s murders are, for Hantke, ‘pragmatic’, they are rational, not irrational as many readings of psychological horror films contend; they may also be potentially political (or countercultural).⁵⁰ According to Williams, of the inheritance, ‘Warren says, “It’s a cheap price for being his son”, which can be read as much as a comment

⁴⁹ Pells, *Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, 405.

⁵⁰ Hantke, *Ibid.*, 160.

on the role he has been forced to play as it is about the man for whose benefit he has been forced to play it, and his loss of freedom to self-identify'.⁵¹ Because his real identity would be rejected, because he is not free to determine who he is, Warren is forced to put on a performance as both Emily and the masculine, rational Warren. Gender norms and roles become a mere performance and mask. Helga is the only one who sees through the performance; her inability to speak due to stroke denies the possibility of communicating this knowledge.

By the 1960s, those who identified as non-normative sexual identities were beginning to make their voices heard. As Peter Marra discusses, by 'the arrival of *Homicidal* in 1961, gay visibility in America was significantly rising and advocacy for gay rights was taking shape'.⁵² Marra points to the Kinsey reports between 1948 and 1953, which suggested that 'homosexual sex was far more common than social norms might suggest... A key outcome of Kinsey's work was to suggest that homosexuality was far less abnormal than believed'.⁵³ This was also a period of reactionary resistance to the normalization of apparently "deviant" sexualities. Jorgensen was figured by the media power structures as a monster, a hideous, sexually confused Other which defied the laws of nature.⁵⁴ Marra argues that *Homicidal* should be read in the broader social context and anxieties about the 'emerging awareness of trans identities', especially with Jorgensen back in the public eye after her failed attempt to legally marry a man in the late 1950s. Her inability to legally prove her female sex functioned as a legal counter to the affirmation of her identity.⁵⁵ In this respect, it was certainly possible, as Marra suggests, that some audiences would have read Emily/Warren as representative of the genuine struggle

⁵¹ Williams, 'What Happens in Denmark...', 11.

⁵² Marra, 'Homo/cidal', 220; see also: Barbara Klinger, "'Local" Genres: The Hollywood Adult Film in the 1950S', in *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, ed. by Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1994), 141.

⁵³ Marra, *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵⁴ These attitudes are parodied in *Glen or Glenda?*.

⁵⁵ Marra, *Ibid.*, 226.

for authenticity against oppressive structures of power and conformity in the 1950s and 1960s. In a number of scenes, Warren defies, actively dismantles, and mocks the structures, institutions, and rituals that perpetuate the hegemony of heteronormative values: in particular, marriage.

Near the beginning of the film, Warren, posing as “Miriam”, pays a hotel bellhop \$2000 to marry them that night. The wedding is swiftly conducted by the local Justice of the Peace, Alfred S. Adrims (James Westerfield). This undermines the significance of marriage; it is inauthentic, a sham and masquerade used merely as a means to an end. For Marra, the wedding murder scene ‘depicts a dissonant relationship to a set of gender norms and cultural rituals. It first reduces the heterosexual marriage to a cash-in-hand ploy, then shreds any semblance of niceties by using the wedding as a site for a bloody murder’.⁵⁶ Following the sham wedding, Emily casts the wedding ring out of the car window; the significant symbol is reduced to a mere item flying down the dark road out of sight. Similarly, Emily smashes up a wedding display in the real Miriam’s florist. Christine Jorgenson was denied marriage on the grounds that she could not legally prove that she was a woman; the florist destruction scene mediates on a feeling of exclusion among non-normative identities and trans individuals from participation in societal cultural rituals and norms. As Williams suggests, Emily/Warren’s trashing of the wedding display suggests the ‘impossibility of entering into such a relationship herself without being outed’.⁵⁷ Such individuals, within a heteronormative society, are othered and exiled, they are denied the status of subject and instead, like Emily/Warren, are figured as monstrous objects. That is unless they choose to live a lie to participate within society, hiding behind a mask. “Emily” and “Warren” are both characters designed to fit in with

⁵⁶ Ibid., 224.

⁵⁷ Williams, ‘What Happens in Denmark...’, 10.

heteronormative society: Emily the glamorous blonde housewife, Warren the masculine husband.

While *Homicidal* strives for greater psychological maturity and legitimacy, it would have been consumed by youngsters and young adults and clearly remained mediated as a monster movie (a ‘psychotic killer!’). Castle was, by the 1960s, a figure beloved by children (particularly young boys). *Homicidal* deals with themes that had a certain register for the young such as alienation and the lack of freedom to build an identity. Warren was objectified as a boy and denied the ability to of self-construction by their patriarchal upbringing; this struggle is presented through Warren’s fight with Miriam over the doll which represents “Warren’s” struggle to re-affirm a sense of repressed femininity (a desire to engage in those “female” stereotypes restricted by the parents).⁵⁸ According to Williams: ‘In *Homicidal* it is arguably Emily who has been the victim all along, forced into a male role by patriarchal expectation... conspiratorial endeavours’.⁵⁹ Warren would perhaps have been seen as a point of identification for youngsters who typically identified more with the “Other” of horror pictures than mostly dull normative figures. Emily/Warren is a tragic figure on an ultimately fatal quest for revenge and self-identity against an othering, alienating, and exclusionary society. Warren is killed at the end of the film by Miriam, and as such receives no closure or justice for what was done to them. Emily/Warren is “explained” away by Lt Miller: ‘Warren created Emily, a homicidal maniac who did his killing for him’. According to Marra, this is an attempt by the heterosexual characters, caught up in their normative conceptual frameworks, to ‘normalize’ Emily/Warren’s body and ‘rationalize’ the situation.⁶⁰ Miller rationalizes Warren’s clear existential crisis of self. Emily is a mere creation, for Miller, rather than expression of or indeed

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Marra, *Ibid.*, 225.

a part of Warren's broader struggle for subjectivity. Heteronormative power structures devalue the legitimacy of the genuine crises faced by those associating with non-heteronormative identities, serving further to exclude and other them. Miller takes away Warren's voice, supplanting obviously wrong information in the place of a truth we can never know. What we know as truth comes only from those who wield the power.

'This is the Fright Break!'

The "Fright Break" gimmick begins when the film stops before it is revealed that Emily and Warren are the same person. William Castle himself gives the audience forty-five seconds, if they so wish, to leave the theatre and claim a full refund, avoiding the supposedly terrifying conclusion of the picture. There was a caveat, however: anyone leaving the theatre to claim their refund would need to follow a "yellow streak" (symbolizing both being "yellow", and the idea of having urinated in fear, further establishing Castle's thematic obsession with losing control of the body) and stand in the "Coward's Corner" in the theatre lobby until the patrons had exited. The idea was that any potential cowards would be humiliated. While the Coward's Corner is a participatory space, voluntarily entered, it is also an exclusionary one that denies knowledge. Inhabitants of the corner would be othered and objectified as cowards; the corner was a place of powerlessness. The pressbook for *Homicidal* details just how difficult and cumbersome the Coward's Corner was intended to be. Sometimes, the Coward's Corner would feature a 'blood pressure outfit... attended by a nurse trainee', and free blood pressure tests were to be offered to 'cowardly patrons'.⁶¹ This was designed to deter the collection of refunds for *Homicidal*, but functions also on a thematic level to further marginalize and shame the so-called coward. It can be suggested that the positioning of the Fright Break is itself ideological,

⁶¹ *Homicidal*, Columbia Pictures pressbook, 1961.

a way of suggesting that the Emily/Warren revelation was so shocking precisely because it broke dominant heteronormative structures about gender identity (structures that were, in 1961, already coming under assault from counterculture). This is terrifying, challenging knowledge; the Coward's Corner represents a flight from knowledge.

The Fright Break sequence also reveals the film at its most Gothic; Miriam's descent into darkness, into an unknown realm symbolised by the blackness through the arched doorway, evokes familiar Gothic images concerning frightful discovery of hidden knowledge. The Webster house doorway is a forbidden space that Miriam cannot help but enter out of curiosity, regardless of what she will find. As the heartbeat grows and the forty-five second clock appears on screen, the Fright Break begins, the voice of William Castle speaks to the audience: 'You hear that sound? It's the sound of a heartbeat; a frightened, terrified heart. Is it beating faster than your heart, or slower? This heart is going to beat for another twenty-five seconds...'. Castle and White consistently referred to the body, specifically the act of losing control of the body, often through the bottom ('I want to scare the pants off America').⁶² The 'sound of a heartbeat' draws direct attention to human embodiment, to the fact that we exist right here, watching the film as vulnerable spectators. Embodiment is a core theme of the film, as questions are raised around Emily/Warren's ambiguous body. The body is presented not as something conforming to habitual, established binaries. Rather, the body's meanings are fluid and negotiable. In a film that deals with social exclusion and othering, it seemed appropriate that those who could not stand the shock of these revelations would be relegated to an exclusionary (potentially conservative) safe-space and subjected to ritual humiliation by younger audiences, who would most likely have sided with Emily/Warren as the anti-hero of the picture.

⁶² Castle, *Ibid.*, 134.

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2) 'No mercy... so be it': *Mr Sardonicus*

William Castle followed *Homicidal* with a Gothic melodrama scripted by contemporary Gothic writer and *Playboy* fiction editor, Ray Russell: *Mr Sardonicus*. In his introduction to the film, William Castle greets his audience: 'It's good to see you again, my homicidal friends. This time our story is of a different kind. It's an old-fashioned story, full of gallantry, and graciousness... and ghouls!'. Steffan Hantke wrote that 'Regardless of its historical setting, *Mr Sardonicus* would first move Castle into the dark territory of the human mind...'.⁶³ Yet, even within its historical setting, *Mr Sardonicus*' play with psychological themes would have been hardly surprising, considering this was a frequent feature of historically-set paranoid Gothic women's films of the 1940s. Like Castle's prior films, *Mr Sardonicus* goes some way to promote this and was received as such. *Variety* called it a 'chiller' that was 'fairly suspenseful and more rational than most in its genre', further calling it a 'fantasy-horror'.⁶⁴ *The New York Times*, in a negative review, directly connected *Mr Sardonicus* with the Gothic work of Edgar Allan Poe which, like *Mr Sardonicus*, was often concerned with torture and psychological trickery.⁶⁵ The theatrical trailer emphasises the Gothic psychological horror elements of *Mr Sardonicus*.⁶⁶ Castle himself presents the evaluative nature of the film, where the audience is invited to 'see the evil events that made Sardonicus what he was', and against which audiences would base their judgements. A feature of the psychological horror film that was proposed to

⁶³ Hantke, *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁴ Pit., 'Film Reviews: Mr Sardonicus', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 224.9 (1961), 6; *Sardonicus* was also called a 'horror' film in *The Hollywood Reporter*: Lawrence Lipskin, "'SARDONICUS" HORROR FILM WITH INTRUIGUING GIMMICK: Castle Production Highly Exploitable', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 167.18 (1961), 3.

⁶⁵ Howard Thompson, "'Five Golden Hours" and "Mr Sardonicus" in Multiple Openings', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, October 1961), 39.

⁶⁶ *Mr Sardonicus (1961) Movie Trailer* (YouTube: horrortheatervideo, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24p3-yLgXuE>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

distinguish it was the rationalization of why monsters were the way they were, rooting their actions in ‘disturbed personalities’, which was also, according to Jancovich, one of the distinguishing features of the 1940s quality horror films’.⁶⁷ Similar such associations are drawn when the trailer proposes to explore the ‘strange attraction women had for [Sardonicus]’, and what the ‘secrets... hidden behind his doors’ that drew associations with the story of Bluebeard and the paranoid Gothic women’s films of the 1940s.⁶⁸ Like those films, *Mr Sardonicus* features physically and psychological tortured women, whilst also featuring a romantic male lead in Sir Robert Cargrave (Ronald Lewis) who tries to rescue the heroine from the clutches of the Gothic Baron. Cargrave fights not with fists, but with the mind, using psychological trickery to “cure” Sardonicus.

As well as its clear allusions to the women’s Gothic, *Mr Sardonicus*, in its associations with *Playboy*, was shaped by the tastes of a new masculine consumer. Russell based the film upon his own short novella: ‘*Sardonicus*’ which explicitly evoked European Gothic literature.⁶⁹ The story is gruesomely macabre and sadistic, forming a connection with the Grand Guignol that would be deepened with Russell’s latter stories, ‘*Sagittarius*’ and ‘*Sanguinarias*’. Russell was fiction editor at *Playboy* during the 1950s, and his original novella, ‘*Sardonicus*’ had appeared there in January 1961. In its reconstruction of postwar masculine identity, during the 1950s and 1960s, *Playboy* was a hotbed of philosophical, intellectual, and cultural debate, where according to Hugh Hefner, men of all ages could ‘enjoy mixing up cocktails and an *hors d’oeuvre* or two, putting on a little mood music on the phonograph and inviting in a female

⁶⁷ Jancovich, ‘Bluebeard’s Wives’, 20–43.

⁶⁸ See: Jancovich, ‘Bluebeard’s Wives’; Mark Jancovich, “‘The English Master of Movie Melodrama’: Hitchcock, Horror and the Woman’s Film’, *Film International*, 9.3 (2011), 51–67; Mark Jancovich, “‘Thrills and Chills’”, 157–71.

⁶⁹ Ray Russell, *Haunted Castles: The Complete Gothic Stories*, 1985. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex'.⁷⁰ Philosophy was presented as a strategy for entertaining attractive women.⁷¹ *Playboy* appealed to mobile, affluent men, particularly young college educated men.⁷² Barbara Ehrenreich stated that *Playboy* provided a 'coherent program for male rebellion' and encouraged a 'fraternity of male rebels'.⁷³ Alongside pornography, it would publish articles on philosophy, fashion, and cooking, and feature interviews with intellectual figures such as existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Ingmar Bergman, and Norman Mailer. Existentialism, with its emphasis on the discontented and authentic outsider (and particularly Nietzsche's aristocratic individualism) was adopted as part of the "*Playboy* philosophy" of liberated, individualistic, free men.⁷⁴ From its first edition in 1953, *Playboy* mobilized intellectual ideas like existentialism in order to appeal to bored, White, middle-class men and college students who desired a hedonistic yet sophisticated independent and self-directed lifestyle. For Osgerby, a 'sense of left-field independence... surfaced in *Playboy*'s literary pretension'.⁷⁵ Existential ideas were latent within the fictional works published in *Playboy*'s popular fiction section, where the likes of Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, and Charles Beaumont were promoted.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Hugh Hefner (1953) quoted in Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 252–253.

⁷¹ See Corman's use of existentialism as a means of flirting with French women in Chapter 4.

⁷² Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 139; Bill Osgerby, 'Playboy', in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. by Bret Carroll (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2003), 361–62.

⁷³ Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, New York: Pluto Press, 1983), 42, 43.

⁷⁴ Ratner-Rosenhagen, *Ibid.*, 252–253; see also: Osgerby, 'Playboy', 361–62.

⁷⁵ Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise*, 135.

⁷⁶ Matheson's *The Shrinking Man* and *I Am Legend* deal explicitly with the crisis of masculinity undergone by its suburban dwelling male protagonist; the filmed adaptation of *The Shrinking Man* is widely considered an existential film; Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 1954. Reprint (London: Gollancz, Orion Books Ltd., 1999); Richard Matheson, *The Shrinking Man*, 1956. Reprint (London: Gollancz, Orion Books Ltd., 2002).

In *Playboy*, existential ideas and popular horror fiction occupied the same cultural spaces. *Playboy* readers were among the market for psychological horror pictures in the 1950s and 1960s. Castle encountered ‘*Sardonicus*’ in *Playboy*, which he quickly adapted, incorporating many of the sadistic and existential ideas that are worked through in the text, and which more widely occupied *Playboy*’s pages; themes of psychological domination; manipulation; the Other and being-with-others; and Outsiders.⁷⁷

‘She is revolted... Revolted by my face.’

Mr Sardonicus follows the efforts of Victorian surgeon, Sir Robert Cargrave, to cure the physical affliction of the ghoulish Baron Sardonicus. Sardonicus’ face has been frozen in a horrific sardonic grin after being terrified while robbing the grave of his late father. Sardonicus threatens his wife and former lover of Cargrave, Maude (Audrey Dalton), with torture to force Cargrave to use dangerous methods to fix his face.

Baron Sardonicus is a sadistic creature who exerts his power over other others – particularly women – by subjecting them to physical and psychological torture (for instance, the maid, Anna (Lorna Hanson), is suspended with ropes and tortured with leeches; Sardonicus also threatens to mutilate Maude’s face and make it like his own which threatens to alienate her from other through deformity, much like himself). Throughout the film, Sardonicus reduces others to mere objectivity via psychological and physical torture. It is suggested by the text that Sardonicus’ does this for psychological reasons, as a response to his own alienation. Sardonicus wants to be recognized by others as a man, not a ghoul: ‘lift this curse from me... make me once more like a man, that I may take my place among my fellow human beings as one of them, rather than as a gargoyle to be shunned and ridiculed’. This in many ways mediates some of

⁷⁷ Castle, *Ibid.*, 163.

the central ideas of existential psychoanalysis; individual psychological problems stem from their being-in-the-world, or more specifically, their alienation from the world and from others. In existential discourses, particularly Sartre and Beauvoir's work and the fiction of Ellison and Wright, one's meaning to others is something which the individual does not control, it is negotiated the Other (and their gaze or Look).⁷⁸ One becomes an object in this sense, an object upon which meaning is granted. Similar themes are mediated in *Mr Sardonicus*. Sardonicus is denied access to the social world because of his face, whereby he loses the power of self-definition. Sardonicus is rendered an alienated Outsider in his retreat from society to his castle and through his use of a mask. In the gaze of others, Sardonicus is a monster. He is an object of horror, specifically a 'gargoyle'.⁷⁹

Sardonicus: I am the victim of a little domestic tragedy. My wife does not love. She has always been a wife in name only. She is revolted, you see. Revolted by my face.

Maude: It's not only that.

Sardonicus: Oh come, Madam. My crudeness? My cruelty? My arrogance? This is what you tell yourself in your womanish passion, is it not? But it is my face you bar your door against, not my character flaws.

Sardonicus is forced to don a mask to conceal his affliction and perform the role of playboy baron. Sardonicus refuses to eat in the company of others, since, due to his smile, he is forced to slurp his food like an animal. Being objectified in such a way torments Sardonicus; it is he who is trapped, he who is rendered powerless due to his deformity. The mask, which Alexandra

⁷⁸ In *Invisible Man*, Ellison's narrator writes: 'That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a particular disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality'; Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

⁷⁹ His predicament recalls Sartre's assertion that 'Hell is – other people!', Garcin's dreadful realization in the play *No Exit* that one cannot control how one is perceived by others; Sartre, 'No Exit', 45.

Heller-Nicholas calls a ‘transformative device’, conceals his true nature as well as attempts to recapture his past life as the handsome Marek.⁸⁰ The mask in this respect, conceals knowledge about Sardonicus, making him a compelling, mysterious figure.

Sardonicus figures himself as the victim when he details his tragic backstory, which places the blame on his ex-wife, Elenka (Erika Peters). Sardonicus was once a peasant, the handsome Marek Toleslawski. After realizing that a winning lottery ticket has been buried with his late father, Elenka forces Marek/Sardonicus to retrieve it. In framing his past, Sardonicus victimizes himself, arguing that his wife’s greed was as much to blame for his facial paralysis as his ghoulish deeds.⁸¹ Earlier in the film, Sardonicus and Cargrave discuss *Macbeth*; according to Sardonicus, Macbeth is ‘pressed into evil by circumstances’. Like Macbeth, Sardonicus is allegedly pressed into an evil act by his wife, who wants him to prove that he loves her. This evokes the same ideas explicit in *Playboy*, namely the threat to free, authentic individuality posed by marriage (and suburban conformity more generally). The primary enemy of the ideal *Playboy* man who sought to break out of suburban conformity was the wife, accused of both softening the man and taking away his earnings. To some extent, Sardonicus’ existential malaise (his Otherness and alienation from the world of men) is caused by the greed of his gold-digging wife. Sardonicus literally cannot be a ‘self-made man’ (his identity is constructed by others as a monster), in part because of his wife. His psychological and existential problems stem from the constraints on his male freedom placed by marriage.

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⁸⁰ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, ‘Chaos Made Flesh: Mr Sardonicus (1961) and the Mask as Transformative Device’, in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*, ed. by Murray Leeder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 143.

⁸¹ Of course, this is told from Sardonicus’ perspective and is by no means reliable, undercutting the possibility of true knowledge.

‘Mercy? Or no mercy?’: Sadism

It is unsurprising that sadism is a central theme of *Mr Sardonicus*, given controversies around the objectification of women in *Playboy*'s pages, their reduction to objects.⁸² Sadism is understood as an act of deliberate cruelty that elicits (sexual) pleasure. The writings of the Marquis de Sade saw circulation in high-brow circles in the 1950s where they were valued and used by artists and writers, especially surrealists, for their subversive and potentially revolutionary visions towards problems in contemporary culture and society.⁸³ The 1963 anthology, *The Existential Imagination*, included Sade's work alongside Sartre, strengthening the author's associations with existentialism for American readers.⁸⁴ Sade's work was controversial in this period, and occupied cross-cultural significance in America, blurring the line between high and low culture; Sade's books, as Joan Hawkins wrote, 'the intellectual elite view as masterful analyses of power and economics', yet also functioned as masturbatory aides.⁸⁵ Existentialist writers in particular adopted sadism as a means of understanding freedom, as is the case in Simone de Beauvoir's "Must we Burn de Sade?" (1951-1952). Sadistic acts, for Sartre, deprive an individual of their subjectivity and as such their freedom: 'What the sadist seeks to appropriate is in actuality the transcendent freedom of the victim'.⁸⁶

⁸² See: *Sex Exposed: Masculinity and the Pornography Debate*, ed. by L. Segal and M. McIntosh (London: Virago, 1992).

⁸³ See: Alyce Mahon, *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁸⁴ *The Existential Imagination*, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian, 1963. Reprint (London: Picador, 1973), 31–34.

⁸⁵ Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*, 6; Hawkins provides an informative list of examples of high cultural Sade scholarship, reprinted here: Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York, 1988); Jane Gallop, *Intersections: A Reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981); Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. by Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Linda Williams, *Hardcore* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

⁸⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 420, 427.

The sadist attempts to ‘incarnate the Other through violence’ and make the Other “‘flesh-as-instrument’”.⁸⁷ The Other becomes mere body, mere flesh. American scholar Maurice Natanson wrote on these theories in a 1952 paper: ‘Sartre's theory of sadism asserts that the sadist, as a consciousness, a self, attempts to reduce the Other to a non-conscious thing, to inert matter’.⁸⁸ For Natanson, sadism ‘is essentially the attempt to make the Other a complete object for my subjectivity’ by reducing the Other’s freedom.⁸⁹ The Other becomes, in the mind of the sadist, a utilizable object. Natanson adds: ‘My hatred of the Other is really an attempt, at least a desire, to cause the Other's complete destruction, his death. The fulfilment of my hate would mean the total abolition of his consciousness, his freedom’.⁹⁰ Intersubjective relationships are sadistic in this sense, as the Other tries to possess, determine, and control the meanings of another subject. Sadism attempts to deprive the other of subjectivity, and as a result their freedom; their freedom is destroyed, because the sadist forces their own subjectivity on them. The victim has no will, no subjectivity, other than that of the sadist.

Mr Sardonicus explicitly figures Sardonicus as a sadist. Whilst also exploiting the potential arousing aspect of sadism (for the male spectator), the film views power through a sadist lens and mediates a similar position to the existential conception of sadism.⁹¹ By depriving others of their freedoms in both an embodied and existential sense, Sardonicus reduces them to objects. Maude is trapped in a physically abusive marriage with Sardonicus (a marriage arranged by her father); he refuses to release her until his affliction is cured. ‘I wish he would be content with a mere beating. His cleverness knows of a more hideous torture’, she tells Cargrave. When the sardonic grin subsides, Sardonicus signs a divorce paper that grants

⁸⁷ Ibid., 421, 427.

⁸⁸ Maurice Natanson, ‘Jean-Paul Sartre’s Philosophy of Freedom’, *Social Research*, 19.3 (1952), 372.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ And potentially imbuing *Mr Sardonicus* with a certain countercultural political significance.

Maude her freedom to marry Cargrave, indicating her status as a mere possession of Sardonicus (one that has been traded in exchange for Cargrave's services). The letter even states: 'I have neither need nor use' of her, indicating that Sardonicus viewed her as utilizable for his own ends. While Sardonicus tortured Maude physically, it is implied that he deprived her of subjective autonomy by thrusting his own subjectivity in the place of hers. She is forced to be his wife, forced to symbolize his desired normality, a mere trophy piece to serve his public persona.

However, Sardonicus eventually finds himself in Cargrave's power during the curing process. Sardonicus' deformity is brought on by psychological terror and guilt at the crime of robbing his own father's grave: 'Shock and guilt, strong powers, not from God above nor the fiend below, but from within my own heart, my own brain, my own soul'. The sardonic grin is purely secular, psychological, and psychosomatic.⁹² Cargrave cures Sardonicus via psychological means. Cargrave manipulates Sardonicus into thinking a cure is being prepared, when in fact Cargrave is playing a mental game with the Baron, denying him knowledge; this participates within those conversations about psychology as trickery, control, and deception, though in this case, psychology has a more positive, curing role. Eventually, Sardonicus is cured by being forced to face the corpse of his father (which, in a typical Gothic move, is kept behind a locked door in a forbidden, or repressed, room).

In a reversal of roles, at the end of the film Krull achieves sadistic mastery over Sardonicus. Krull also uses the denial of knowledge to torture Sardonicus, forcing the status of objectified thing upon him. Like Maude and Anna, the servant Krull is rendered a subject-less puppet by Sardonicus' sadistic power throughout the film. Krull himself says as much: 'When my master says, "Krull, do this thing," I do the thing, whatever it may be'. Krull is the slave

⁹² A recurrence of themes in *The Tingler* whereby fear produces a psychosomatic response.

and Sardonicus is the master; Krull's will, his capacity for existential agency, is totally supplanted by Sardonicus' will. It is revealed that Krull obeys Sardonicus because once, when he did not, Sardonicus removed one of Krull's eyes. Krull lives in fear of Sardonicus' power, by the threat of Sardonicus' sadism. By the end of the film, however, Krull triumphs in the power struggle with Sardonicus. After being cured of his deformity, through psychological trickery, Sardonicus realizes that he cannot open his mouth. Cargrave reminds Krull that this is merely in Sardonicus' mind. However, Krull denies this knowledge to Sardonicus. In the closing scenes, Krull sits and eats the opulent feast in front of Sardonicus, as Sardonicus, unable to open his mouth, begins to starve to death. Castle's camera closes in on Krull's single eye, the missing eye standing out prominently in the black-and-white photography. Krull is looking at Sardonicus with the missing eye, indicating to Sardonicus that he has, as he says earlier, 'not forgotten'. According to Natanson:

In sadism, the sadist may be triumphant in the relationship almost to the point of completion and victory, but at the last moment an implicit and unavoidable defeat occurs: the sadist's victim looks at him and makes of him an object. The sadist is compelled to realize that it is not an object but a subjectivity that he has possessed and attempted to wound.⁹³

Likewise, in this moment, Sardonicus realises that Krull has transfixed Sardonicus' meanings in his own gaze. The slave becomes the master, and, in looking at Sardonicus the way in which he does, Krull objectifies his master as a pathetic monster while reminding Sardonicus of his own, now dominant subjectivity. Sardonicus is suffered to even deeper alienation because of his new, psychosomatic affliction, rendered unable to communicate or subsist. He was alienated beforehand due to his ghoulish face, although his mask did allow him some element of social participation. Moreover, the inability to open his mouth raises awareness of Sardonicus' embodied state. Sardonicus becomes trapped within his embodiment, unable to

⁹³ Natanson, *Ibid.*, 273.

transcend such confines through language. Additionally, such embodiment is limited by the fact that Sardonicus cannot eat or drink and is destined to starve to death; he is defeated by the insatiable needs of his own body.

There are potentially political undertones to the final scene, in which the slave sits at the former master's grand buffet and eats as they please; it may well be that the film participates within countercultural discourses rife at the turn of the decade. Connections to *Playboy* already associate *Mr Sardonicus* with themes of (male) rebellion against a position of individual/subjective powerlessness. Krull revolts against a position in which he has been denied individual subjectivity; in a battle of subjectivities, Krull dominates his master, assuming a controlling position whereby he can objectify and determine Sardonicus (much like Cargrave does through psychological trickery). *Mr Sardonicus* is a film that clearly mediates on the sadistic quality of power relationships that circulated during the 1950s and 1960s.

The "Punishment Poll" gimmick allows participation within this struggle and grants the audience sadistic power over Sardonicus. In the trailer, Castle announces that 'My latest picture... offers something no audience has ever had before: the power to determine the fate of a character on the screen, the power to punish', and likens this to historical public executions.⁹⁴ The audience was supposedly given the power to vote for the film's climax, in which Sardonicus was met with further punishment or spared it. Castle interrupts the film at the end of the narrative and invites the audience to vote for 'mercy' or for 'no mercy'. Given the demographic of the audience would primarily have consisted, according to *The Hollywood Reporter* of 'horror fanciers' (meaning youngsters and teenagers), and as argued, the *Playboy* associations may have brought in young, college educated men, the audience for *Mr Sardonicus* would likely have been made up of groups that, at the time, would have sympathised with the

⁹⁴ *Mr Sardonicus (1961) Movie Trailer.*

oppressed figure.⁹⁵ The Punishment Poll can be seen as functioning as a political act for these groups, attracted by the lure of power over the film (and narrative oppressor). The Poll, in spirit, places the power to condemn a wealthy, powerful and cruel aristocrat to agonizing torture in the hands of the oppressed. The Poll unites Krull and the audience in a scene of sadistic revenge, turning the objectifying tools of the oppressor against them. The fact that Castle encourages a ‘no mercy’ verdict affirms the sense in which Castle is on the side of the rebels and the oppressed, and particularly the children.

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The present chapter has demonstrated how, in situating his films in relation to trends towards psychological horror (which he had helped to facilitate in the 1950s), Castle’s early-1960s productions participated within discourses in contemporary psychology about the location of psychological malaise and abnormality, and in a move that mediates similar, more radical preoccupations in humanistic/existential psychology, roots those problems in the existential situation of being-with-others, as opposed to presenting psychological abnormality as an irrational explosion from within the psyche. The present chapter shows that these ideas were being discussed in popular horror films as well as other spaces which quite frequently drew on direct associations with such discourses to boost legitimacy and profits by expanding the audience of these films, but which also catered for that more secure “radical” twelve to thirty demographic that made up the largest single audience; an audience who was looking for alternatives to a mainstream from which they felt alienated (hence plots which centred on alienated individuals struggling to maintain a secure sense of identity in alienating situations and undergoing existential crisis). Castle’s psychological horror films very clearly mediate themes central to existential/humanistic psychological discourses – ideas about identity,

⁹⁵ Lipskin, “SARDONICUS”, 3; associations with the women’s Gothic melodrama also had various implications.

alienation, and particularly struggles for subjectivity, being-with-others (and hell is other people) – but were also prevalent throughout the discourses in 1950s and early-1960s America; they were diffused throughout culture, including sexuality debates, *Playboy* magazines, and intellectual and avant-garde conversations about the works of the Marquis de Sade, all of which *Mr Sardonicus* and *Homicidal* have clear associations with. Moreover, it is these such themes which were often employed in the process of intertextual mediation as part of the construction of the films’ identities; going some way to show that these films would provide a similar version of contemporary (existential) psychology or existential novels.

The psychological horror films became dominant not because they were somehow superior in aesthetic and narrative terms to other subgenres, but because producers successfully created a product that could both hold the reliable horror audience whilst also being seen as more “legitimate” by middle class adult audiences. The emergence of psychological horror was not the result of an intervention made within the genre by a few noted auteurs as scholars like Wood have contended, but the product of a developing trend within the genre and the changing film industry. Upscaled horror films with psychological themes became a key part of the industry strategy to expand audiences and maximize profits in the new package-unit system. Films like *Homicidal* and *Mr Sardonicus*, which were both financially successful, were part of a developing trend that included *Psycho* that would result in similar upscaled horror films being financed, such as *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* and Castle’s own *Rosemary’s Baby*, in which play with psychological and existential themes is frequently taken for granted. The play with existential themes in the period of dominance of American psychological horror films have been strangely overlooked, even though psychology itself was often well associated with existentialism. Castle would continue to play with such themes and upscale his own psychological horror films throughout the 1960s, which included introducing his biggest gimmick yet in *Strait-Jacket*: Joan Crawford.

Chapter 3: 'I saw what you did, and I know who you are...': Joan Crawford, Psychological Horror, and the Road to *Rosemary's Baby*

In the mid-1960s, Castle continued to upscale his horror films in response to wider trends in the horror genre to appeal to a 'middle-road' market that strived to present 'pure escape... and stark realism'.¹ He wanted his films to secure his guaranteed youth audience but convey a sense of legitimacy and sophistication through casting older stars like Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck and drawing associations with women's Gothic melodrama.² In doing so, films like *Strait-Jacket*, *The Night Walker*, and *I Saw What You Did* continued to mediate on psychological ideas, which were understood as existential problems in the period, that were diffused throughout wider cultural discourses: the sadistic structure of intersubjectivity, alienation, problems of freedom and liberty, and "reality" as constituted by psychic processes. These were themes that were strongly associated with the women's Gothic melodrama of the 1940s. Attempts to upscale the horror genre were in part attempts to draw out these associations and increasingly align the horror genre with a middle-class, "legitimate" audience. Importantly, these strategies would be employed in the big-budget "quality" psychological horror film, *Rosemary's Baby*, which Castle produced. The present chapter will show that *Rosemary's Baby* is clearly continuous with trends in 1950s and 1960s horror as demonstrated in Castle's films, notably the mediation on psychological-existential themes.

Castle situated these films within trends in the 1960s horror film. Producers and studios were looking to upscale horror in the 1960s. One such film was *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, which was clearly mediated as a psychological horror melodrama, utilizing terms such

¹ 'From Horror to Shock in Next Castle Films', *Boxoffice*, 85.22 (1964), 12.

² As Jancovich shows, the tastes of middle-class women were considered the benchmark of legitimate taste; Jancovich, 'Beyond Hammer', 2; Jancovich, 'Bluebeard's Wives', 20.

as ‘suspense’, ‘tension’, and ‘be prepared for the macabre and terrifying’ in its marketing. The film’s success resided in its ability to appeal to wide sections of American audiences, drawing in middle-class patrons paying to see the famous rivalling stars, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, together for the first time in a psychological melodrama. Critics solidified the film’s psychological horror credentials with *Variety* calling it a ‘tale of terror’ that featured Davis’ descent into ‘total madness’ that was both violent and repulsive, but the ‘best “shocker” since “*Psycho*”’.³ The film’s identity as an upscaled lowbrow horror was secured by Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times*, who found it lacking as a film with serious pretensions but suggested that if you saw it ‘as a “chiller” of the old-fashioned type – as a straight exercise in studied horror – you may find it a fairly gripping film’.⁴ Aided by wide promotion and hype surrounding the two stars, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* was a successful and influential film that was followed up by *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Aldrich, 1964) starring Davis, Olivia de Havilland, and Joseph Cotton, which follows quite closely the plot of psychological manipulation and gaslighting that was prominent in many 1940s Gothic women’s melodramas and also *Les Diaboliques*.⁵

As has been demonstrated, Castle and other horror producers were already playing with the themes that were upscaled in “quality” films like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, such as identity, subjectivity, sadism, paranoia, madness and the psychological processes that constitute reality for the individual, existential ideas which were widely discussed in contemporary socio-cultural discourses, and which regulated the

³ Robe., ‘Film Review: What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?’, *Variety*, 228.10 (1962), 6.

⁴ Bosley Crowther, ‘Screen: Bette Davis and Joan Crawford: They Portray Sisters in Melodrama’, *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 7 November 1962), 47.

⁵ The latter two were associated with 1940s Gothic melodrama. *Baby Jane* (along with *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950)) is also seen to have initiated the “Hagsploitation” horror cycle (also known as the “psycho biddy” film or “Grande Dame Guignol”) in which aging icons of the studio era were reframed as psychopathic killers or deranged victims, incorporating the women’s film and melodrama with the excesses of modern psychological horror.

meaning of psychology. Jancovich argued that by ‘the 1960s, it was increasingly claimed [in paranoid discourses] that the modern world was a nightmare of regulation within which the population had less control over their own lives; but also, that, within this situation, the population was powerless to resist the forces of regulation. It became commonplace to claim that even consciousness and desire... had previously been integrated within the system of regulation’.⁶ Such ideas were common in psychological and political debates of the 1960s. Herbert Marcuse wrote in 1964 that, the ‘private space’ of the ‘individual consciousness and... individual unconscious’ had been ‘invaded and whittled down...’.⁷ A secure subjective identity seemed impossible according to these discourses (which in many ways prompted the New Left and Civil Rights Movements and which were frequently read as existential movements against bad faith), especially given the manipulative conspiracies that aimed to make identity construction as difficult as possible.⁸ Films like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* play with the manipulative, conspiratorial Other who (sadistically) deprives freedom and subjectivity from the powerless victim, a victim often alienated from the world around them (as in Sartre’s philosophy, alienation is captured as a nausea, a ‘*horrified* awareness of being looked at’ by an Other, a realization that I exist as an object for Others); they play with our problematic relationship to truth, how real, objective truth is impossible especially as subjective perception is distorted by emotion or the machinations of others.⁹

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⁶ Jancovich, *Horror*, 83.

⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 12.

⁸ See: Cotkin, *Existential America*, 227–251; Menand, *The Free World*, 686–727.

⁹ Katherine J. Morris, *Sartre* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 105.

1) **'It was an asylum! And it was hell! Twenty years of pure hell!': *Strait-Jacket***

With *Strait-Jacket*, William Castle drew on associations with the paranoid women's picture, closely aligning Joan Crawford's star identity with contemporary existential-psychological anxieties about identity, subjectivity, and power, particularly in relation to discourses about mental institutions. The film also mediated youth-based concerns with such contexts through Diane Baker's role as Crawford's murderous young daughter.

This was explicit in how the film was mediated for audiences. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* saw *Strait-Jacket* as 'an archetypical Joan Crawford situation, offering plenty of opportunities for sin, seduction, suffering... and self-sacrifice', linking the picture to traditional expectations of Crawford as an earnest, hard-working figure caught up in a web of psychological and existential torment.¹⁰ The film became so associated with Crawford's image that *Boxoffice* saw fit to warn that 'Joan Crawford fans should take care of the other categories', meaning the horror elements (specifically the heavily promoted axe-murders), and vice versa, suggested that 'horror-suspense' fans who may have been put off by Crawford should be 'properly alerted'.¹¹ However, Crawford had popular currency with teenagers through re-showings of her films on television during the 1950s and 1960s (something which *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* plays with). During her personal promotion of *Strait-Jacket*, Crawford disclosed in an interview with the *Motion Picture Exhibitor* that 'a whole new audience of teenagers are now her fans', and know her from late-shows of '*Mildred Pierce* [Curtiz, 1945], *Sudden Fear* [Miller, 1952], *Possessed* [Bernhardt, 1947]', all films in which Crawford undergoes some psychological torment or breakdown.¹² She was figured by younger

¹⁰ 'STRAIT-JACKET', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 31.360 (1964), 136.

¹¹ 'FEATURE REVIEWS: Strait-Jacket', *Boxoffice*, 84.11 (1964), b11.

¹² 'Joan Crawford Stars in All-Media Campaign', *Motion Picture Exhibitor* (5 February 1964), EX-565; Alexander Walker, *Joan Crawford: The Ultimate Star* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983), 176.

audiences (and gay audiences) as an outsider, and they could relate to her oppression and psychological distress, often caused by manipulative others or the conditions around her. *Strait-Jacket* was marketed and received around Crawford's star presence, her association with the paranoid women's melodrama, and her post-*Baby Jane* alignment with contemporary psychological horror. The trailer is primarily comprised of Crawford's performance and the implication of her insanity.¹³ One tagline suggested by *Boxoffice* ran with: 'From the author of "Psycho", the Director of "Homicidal" and the Costar of "What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?"... A New Hight in Harrowing Shock Suspense... Just Keep Saying to Yourself: "It's Only a Movie... It's Only a Movie..." [sic]'.¹⁴ The later line (popular in horror exploitation) implies a shocking level of psychological realism from Crawford's performance, and references to Bloch and Castle firmly situates the film in relation to violent psychological horrors.¹⁵ These intertextual associations telegraphed themes of identity crisis, psychological breakdown, and conspiracy (which had been the twist of most of Castle's psychological horrors) that circulated in contemporary existential psychological discourses.

The film's relationship to the mental institution is also prominent. According to Crawford, she spent 'six weeks at a mental hospital doing research'.¹⁶ After a twenty-year stint in an asylum following the brutal axe-murder of her adulterous husband and his lover, Lucy Harbin (Joan Crawford) is released into the care of her brother, Bill (Leif Erikson), and her grown-up daughter, Carol (Diane Baker), who live on a farm. Carol, who witnessed the murder at an early age, manipulates Lucy into thinking that she is going insane. Carol seeks to create

¹³ *Strait-Jacket (1964) - Official Trailer* (YouTube: ScreamFactoryTV, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9n8BnNL03GY>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

¹⁴ 'Joan Crawford Stars in All-Media Campaign', EX-565.

¹⁵ *Variety* called the film a 'chip off the old Bloch' and wrote that 'most of the murders are suspensefully and chillingly constructed along the order of the bloodbath blueprints for "Psycho"'; Tube., 'Film Reviews: Strait-Jacket', *Variety*, 233.8 (1964), 6.

¹⁶ 'Joan Crawford Stars in All-Media Campaign', EX-565.

the suspicion that Lucy has returned to her murderous ways to cover-up Carol's own pragmatic murder of her boyfriend Michael's parents who object to Carol and Michael's planned marriage.

'She almost convinced me too...'

Strait-Jacket is hugely concerned with Lucy's struggle to maintain her identity and a sense of control over her perception of the world, unaware that she is a victim of her own daughter's manipulations. When Lucy is released into the Cutler's custody, Carol takes her on a tour of the farm. Carol is a clay model artist with her own studio and literally owns a bust of Lucy, the implication being that she manipulates and moulds others the way she moulds clay; she makes objects of others, particularly of Lucy. Carol describes the bust of Lucy as 'the best thing I've ever done'; in fact, it is from the bust which she makes a Lucy facemask which she dons to commit murder. Making Lucy think she is becoming her old murderous self again becomes, for Carol, akin to a work of art, a moulding of Lucy into something. In one sequence, Carol and Lucy go shopping in order to outfit Lucy with a more fashionable and vibrant look. Under the guise of "improving" Lucy's drab and grey look – a look which reflects her desire to reject and overcome her past self – Carol attempts to recreate the sexually dangerous and extroverted Lucy of twenty years ago. Carol moulds Lucy to look, sound, and act as she did on the night that she murdered her husband and Carol's father. Through Carol's manipulation, Lucy becomes deprived of control over her identity and sense of self and over how she appears to others. Because these clothes are Lucy's murder-outfit, Lucy appears to others (such as her doctor and her family) as that woman who took an axe to her husband twenty years ago. Carol objectifies Lucy; literally moulding her like an object, like a lump of clay. Lucy is denied the freedom of self-determination and self-knowing and begins to think that perhaps she is the

murderer: '[Carol] almost convinced me too...'. She almost becomes powerless to even locate the source of her manipulation, to recognize the power that Others have over her. She sees the issue as rooted in her corrupted psychological state, unaware that that state is a result of her being-with-others.¹⁷

The text foregrounds the visual and thematic link between Lucy and the farm animals. Animals are a key feature of the *mise en scène* of the farmyard. It is implied that Lucy is one of the farm animals that the Cutler's rear, oblivious to the fact that she is in the power of another, that her entire identity is being manipulated. Carol's art studio is also full of models of animals, further entrenching the notion that Lucy is being controlled as one controls the life of a farm animal. Such animals quite literally exist for-others, as they are mere things for use. Lucy is, like the animals, made into a thing to be caged and controlled. Carol's victims are also equated with farm animals particularly in their obliviousness to and method of their slaughter. The editing juxtaposes a few of the murders with the screaming of animals to hammer this point home. A chicken is shown being decapitated by shifty farmhand, Leo (George Kennedy), who is himself decapitated. The iconography of decapitation also alludes to "losing one's head", the sense of going mad. The motif of being manipulated like a puppet (or model) by forces beyond one's control and awareness is central to *Strait-Jacket's* plot, as is the prominent postwar concern of being so extensively manipulated that one believes *themselves* (and their faulty psychology) to be the problem, and it is through such themes that the film very clearly mediates on prominent existential ideas about identity, intersubjectivity, sadism, and the freedom of self-determination. The psychological horror film was increasingly shaped by and aligned with such ideas in the 1960s, as can be seen in the ways in which films like *What Ever*

¹⁷ This plot recalls Crawford's role in *Mildred Pierce*, and her character's relationship with her troubled daughter. The film was based on a novel by James M. Cain (and scripted by William Faulkner), who had become strongly associated with existentialism through Camus, who claimed to have been inspired by *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

Happened to Baby Jane? were being discussed and sold. In many ways, the themes of *Strait-Jacket* were shaped in response to such ideas that were not only being discussed by the usual suspects (young audiences and students), but increasingly by the middle-classes, and applied by intellectuals to middle class life. To both of these groups, the image of Joan Crawford (as classic star and youth/queer icon) had a significant register.

‘Everyone’s a stranger’; *Strait-Jacket* and Mental Illness

Strait-Jacket’s themes were also mediated by their explicit connection to ideas about the status of mentally ill people in 1950s and 1960s. Lucy is a former asylum inmate.¹⁸ Mental illness was met with stigma and anxiety by large sections of American society. The mentally ill were often exiled from ordinary social life, and contemporary discussion of mental illness was framed through existential language of alienation, estrangement, and intersubjectivity. Recall that many American psychologists were profoundly influenced by existentialism.¹⁹ According to Jo C. Phelan et al., ‘public conceptions were suffused with negative stereotypes, fear, and rejection’.²⁰ In a study of two communities in Saskatchewan, Elaine and John Cumming ‘found that most people preferred to avoid close personal contact with someone who had been mentally ill and that the researchers’ efforts to change those attitudes were met with anxiety and hostility’.²¹ In their research into changing attitudes towards people suffering with mental illness, Phelan et al., claimed that that findings in the 1950s and 1960s ‘implied that persons

¹⁸ Crawford also played a nurse in a mental institution in *The Caretakers* (Bartlett, 1963), and herself played a woman with schizophrenia who ended up in *Possession*.

¹⁹ Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions*, 242.

²⁰ Jo C. Phelan and others, ‘Public Conceptions of Mental Illness in 1950 and 1996: What Is Mental Illness and Is It to Be Feared?’, *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 41.2 (2000), 189; see also: Elaine Cumming and John Cumming, *Closed Ranks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

²¹ Phelan, *Ibid.*, 189.

identified as mentally ill might suffer extreme rejection and stigmatization'.²² Moreover, the 'public's negative orientations toward mental illness also extended to the professionals who treated it'.²³ Jum Nunnally found that the public evaluated professionals who treat mental disorders significantly more negatively than those who treat physical disorders'.²⁴ Like *Homicidal* before it in regard to "deviant" sexualities, *Strait-Jacket* figures the mentally ill Lucy as a marginalized and existentially alienated individual, seemingly powerless to resist her stigmatization.

Once a 'self-assured, sexual, and confident woman', Lucy emerges from the asylum as reclusive and anxious; her reserved clothing articulating her desire to be invisible, as opposed to the visually and physically loud clothing of her former self.²⁵ The relative isolation of the farmhouse represents the extent to which Lucy has become alienated and dissociated from the world around her. Lucy carries the stigma of having been in an asylum, motivating her desire to shield herself from the world around her, concerned how people such as Carol's boyfriend, Michael, will react to her. Ultimately, she fears her lack of control over her meanings for others, what others will conceive her to be. Hence her anxiety when it appears she is going insane, her loss of control over her mind points to a more ontological loss of control over how she is perceived. Lucy's stigma – her status in society as a pariah and taboo – forms part of the reason as to why Michael's parents refuse to allow him to marry Carol; they not only fear the stigma (which could affect the father's milk business), but also the extent to which insanity is hereditary. Carol also carries this concern, bowing her head in shame when Michael's father jokes: '[Michael] has the instincts of a killer... inherited from his mother'. According to Sartre,

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.; see also: Jum C. Nunnally, *Popular Conceptions of Mental Health: Their Development and Change* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961).

²⁵ Marra, 'Homo/cidal', 228.

shame is a response to our failed desire, and failure to attain some mastery over how we appear: 'I seek to reach it, to master it, by making use of it as an instrument...'.²⁶ Likewise, Lucy's shame arises when she fails to master her own body (which as discussed, has been made up by Others), and her own insecure mind; her fear results from the frequent lapses and disturbing "dreams" which indicate her relapse into insanity.

When Lucy finds herself interrogated by Michael's parents as to what kind of institution she was in, she admits that 'It was an asylum! And it was hell! Twenty years of pure hell!'. Lucy's outburst recalls a similar scene in Bloch's *Psycho*, in which Norman Bates explodes with anger and panic when Mary suggests that he put his mother in an institution:

"*She's not crazy!*"... "No matter what you think, or any body thinks. No matter what the books say, or what those doctors would say out at the asylum. I know all about that. They'd certify her in a hurry and lock her away if they could..."²⁷

Like "Denmark" in *Homicidal*, Lucy and Norman characterize the mental institution as a negative space that represents the crisis of self, the inability to master our subjectivity and appearance to others. In the filmed adaptation of the above scene from *Psycho*, Norman says: 'You mean an institution? A madhouse?... People always call a madhouse "someplace", don't they?... Have you ever been inside one of those places? The laughing, and the tears, and those cruel eyes studying you? My mother, there?'. This likewise expresses a place in which the "crazy" person is denied subjectivity, objectified by the watching eyes who figure one as "insane". According to Booker, there was a 'growing preoccupation, in the America of the 1950s, with mental illness and with psychoanalysis as a technique for separating "normal," mentally healthy (and thus reliable) citizens from those who were mentally ill, and thus were

²⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 377.

²⁷ Robert Bloch, *Psycho*, 1959. Reprint (London: Joffe Books, 2019), 32–33.

abnormal and unreliable'.²⁸ Irving Goffman's work on identity and asylums was highly influential in the 1960s; he was also strongly associated with existentialism, with his most popular work *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* often quoting Sartre when discussing "social actors" and featuring many overlaps with Sartre's notions of being-for-others.²⁹ In Goffman's 1961 work, *Asylums*, which Booker called 'perhaps the most chilling account of the suppression of individuality by impersonal institutions', the asylum is presented as a place of horror, a "total institution" of control in which the behaviour of both inmates and captors are regularized so as to be predictable, resulting in the corroding of individual identity (which would go on to inspire Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1963), in which the inmates of a mental institution are dominated by the tyrannical Nurse Ratched).³⁰ Goffman wrote: 'the inmate is never fully alone; he is always within sight and often earshot of someone'; the inmate is at all times locked in the gaze of others who define their identity.³¹ In many ways, Lucy never leaves the asylum, for she continues to be scrutinised, watched, predicted, and judged, and above all controlled by a conspiracy around her. Warren in *Homicidal* is trapped in "Denmark"; Lucy is trapped in an "asylum". In one scene, Lucy believes herself trapped in a doorless room, the wallpaper resembling prison bars as she screams to be let out, when she has merely transformed the real world into a place of horror that resembles the asylum. Interestingly, the script refers to the asylum as 'hell'; this has a number overlaps with Sartre, who used the same term to characterize being-with-others, of having one's identity constructed for them by the Other.

²⁸ Booker, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War*, 15.

²⁹ Menand, *The Free World*, 87n; Tom Burns, *Erving Goffman* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 122–124; Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Double Day Anchor Books, 1956), 74–75.

³⁰ Booker, *Ibid.*

³¹ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, 1961. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 33.

In a society that favoured conformity and fitting in, where individuals, according to David Riesman, were subjected to the jury of peers, the brand of “insane” and the taint of the mental institution was detrimental.³² The asylum represented exclusion, a place to which the abnormal were carted off and forgotten about, denying proper participation within a social role. It also served to objectify and other the “insane” individual as an outsider, or even a threat. *Strait-Jacket* is heavily concerned with being seen, of being caught in an objectifying, manipulative gaze that constitutes one’s identity for them. The asylum is a space in which individuals are controlled, regulated, and predicted, to such an extent that, as Jancovich suggests, those regulatory practices become internalized within the unconscious itself, such that even outside of the asylum, Lucy loses the ability to be herself.³³ The asylum, figured in Bloch’s fiction as a place in which one is *looked at* and studied, extends to the farmhouse (and even more so to the high-society types). The Othering gaze is woven into the very everydayness of American life, and Lucy’s paranoia stems from her inability to properly place or uncover it, and as such develop some kind of resistance to it. The sudden phone call from Lucy’s old doctor, Dr Andersen, and his sudden appearance at the farm, furthers the anxieties associated with insanity and mental institutions, the sense that all is seen. Lucy believes herself under trial by the doctor, to whom she must prove herself sane. She knits erratically as he speaks to her, yet, like her sense of self and sanity, the knitting comes unravelled. This is extended to other characters, figuring within Lucy’s sense of alienation. She hides herself from the world – such as Carol’s boyfriend – because she feels herself as being placed under trial by others. Her inability to relate to the world, she fears, will risk her being sent back to the asylum, and hell.

As mentioned, by the 1960s, Crawford star image registered both with her core fanbase as well as younger people; her alienation related to older women and younger people for whom

³² Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 18.

³³ Jancovich, *Horror*, 83.

alienation was seen as a significant concern. Like prior psychological horror films, the fear of the Other and of being Othered (intersubjectivity) is a core theme of the film and of which Crawford's casting was a signifier due to her associations with films like *Sudden Fear* and *Mildred Pierce*, and most recently *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*. She was a marker of those existential themes that were not only aligned with the psychological horror genre in the 1960s, but also with the genre in the 1940s.

Following *Strait-Jacket*, Castle's production house was acquired by Universal, the studio perhaps most associated with the horror genre in America, with the intent on producing more of 'this type of product', psychological shockers in the vein of *Psycho*.³⁴ Universal in the 1960s was strongly associated with psychological horror, being the main distributor of Hammer's psychological thrillers in the US.³⁵ *The Night Walker*, also scripted by Robert Bloch, starred Barbara Stanwyck in the role of a woman tormented by what she believes to be dreams of her dead husband who, despite being blind, watched and controlled her every move. Stanwyck 'having dreams so starkly real that she cannot determine whether they are illusory or are actually happening', is discussed in a few reviews; the line between the real and the imaginary was deemed central to *The Night Walker*'s identity.³⁶ Her appearance with ex-husband Robert Taylor for the first time in over twenty years was much hyped.³⁷ Stanwyck's appearance in this 'suspense melodrama' was not unsurprising for critics, given her association with crime melodramas like *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), which was marketed as a "SHOCKING... SUSPENSE FILLED MASTERPIECE OF LOVE... AND MURDER!".³⁸ Like the crime melodramas of the 1940s, the psychological aspects of *The Night Walker* are

³⁴ Whit., 'Film Review: The Night Walker', 237.5 (1964), 6.

³⁵ *Paranoid* (Francis, 1963) strongly resembles both the *Night Walker* and *Strait-Jacket*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ 'Barbara Stanwyck to Join Robert Taylor in New Film', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 15 April 1964), 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 46; *Double Indemnity* was based on by James M. Cain's novel.

heavily foregrounded in the emphasis on dreams, with a warning that dreams reveal true, inner desires: “DO YOU DREAM OF SEX? DO YOU DREAM OF VIOLENCE? DO YOU DREAM OF MURDER?”³⁹ These themes were picked up by critics and became integral to the way in which *The Night Walker*’s meanings were mediated, representative of the wider alignment of horror with psychological and existential ideas in the 1960s. Like *Strait-Jacket*, the trailer hints at Stanwyck’s madness (and sexuality), and her inability to properly perceive the world around her. The film centres on her manipulation by Taylor, who forces her to doubt the line between dreams and reality (she is in fact, totally awake). Like Crawford, she is trapped and controlled by the Other. In the explicitly psychoanalytic opening a narrator talks about dreams (*Boxoffice* called this a ‘too lengthy Freudian description of... dreams’): ‘Sometimes we watch [dreams]. Sometimes they watch us. Did you ever dream you were being stared at? Pursued by evil eyes, with no escape, no place to hide?’⁴⁰ As this goes on, human eyes fill the screen, imposed over a woman clearly in distress, with her head in her hands.⁴¹ It creates a sense of being controlled by inner desires and emotions which can be manipulated and regulated. *The Night Walker* was accompanied by a promotional campaign in which people were hypnotised (controlled) by Pat Collins, a noted TV and nightclub hypnotist from the period.⁴²

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³⁹ *The Night Walker (1964) - Official Trailer* (YouTube: ScreamFactoryTV, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEbbQ11lA8c>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁴⁰ ‘FEATURE REVIEWS: The Night Walker’, *Boxoffice*, 86.13 (1965), b11, b12.

⁴¹ A woman also falls into a spiralling vortex, very much like the famous James Stewart dream sequence in *Vertigo*, which was based on a book by the authors of *Les Diaboliques*. *The Night Walker*’s plot follows *Les Diaboliques* closely, even having a scene in which a supposedly dead character (really Taylor in a mask) removes ghostly contact lenses from his eyes.

⁴² ‘National Dream Contest Keyed to “Night Walker”’, *Boxoffice*, 86.11 (1965), a4.

2) 'I know who you are!': *I Saw What You Did*

Castle's second film for Universal, *I Saw What You Did*, was based on 'Ursula Curtis' "suspense novel" *Out of the Dark*, and follows teenagers Kit (Sara Lane) and Libby (Andi Garrett), and Libby's kid-sister, Tess (Sharyl Locke) who, while home alone in an isolated farmhouse, spend the evening making random prank calls.⁴³ During these calls, Libby taunts those who pick up with the ominous line: 'I saw what you did, and I know who you are'. Unfortunately for the girls, they call the psychotic Steve Marak (John Ireland), who has just brutally murdered his wife.

Like Castle's prior psychological horror films, *I Saw What You Did* was targeted at a cross-generational audience. The film centres on two teenagers, but also stars Joan Crawford and John Ireland (Ireland was a star of epics, westerns, and gangster films). According to Marra, '*I Saw What You Did* creates an odd composite of two incompatible genres whose formal conventions clash against one another. The picture is decidedly a teen babysitter movie at some point and at other points a *Psycho*-ish thriller'.⁴⁴ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the scene of Judith's murder. According to Marra this 'contrast results in dissonant cuts between shots of Steve violently murdering his wife and those of young girls laughing about prank calls while eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches'.⁴⁵ But this is a misreading of the way the horror genre was constructed in the mid-1960s. The industry was trying to expand the audience of its films, using genre to attract different markets. Horror was associated with young people, especially teenagers, but those psychological themes which Marra calls '*Psycho*-ish' had been a significant part of horror's identity since the 1940s and were developed throughout

⁴³ 'Universal, William Castle Sign Three-Year Pact', *Boxoffice*, 85.16 (1964), 14.

⁴⁴ Marra, *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

the 1950s.⁴⁶ Psychological themes were commonly associated with teenage entertainment, because psychological concerns had a significant register with teens. Psychological themes related to broader existential crises of identity, freedom, alienation, and self-determination, all of which were mediated in *I Saw What You Did*.

I Saw What You Did was not viewed as an aberration within the genre, but as a logical extension of recent trends. *Variety* called it a ‘well-made suspense-terror feature [that] should appeal to both frightfans and general audiences attracted by Joan Crawford and two new teenagers [sic]’ and emphasised its ‘cat-and-mouse’ and ‘mystery and suspense’ features.⁴⁷ Critics at the time noted the tonal shift initiated by Libby and Kit’s call to the Marak household, which in many ways captured broader ambivalence and contradictions in contemporary American society. *Boxoffice* wrote of the film’s truth and sense of reality: ‘There is a stark reality in this which producer-director William Castle emphasizes, as a warning to the little monsters, perhaps’ and warned of ‘possible protests’.⁴⁸ Psychological horror was aligned with the everyday, existential terrors in the period, such as security and identity, and a sense of unwitting characters stumbling into a world of complete horror, in this case, madness. As the title suggests, there is also an emphasis on being seen, which ties into the broader concerns with identity and the self. In the trailer, a narrator warns ‘don’t answer it!’ as various hands reach for a ringing phone; later, we see the pages of a phonebook flicking by as the trailer warns: “‘YOUR NAME IS IN THIS BOOK! IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU!’”⁴⁹ The landline phone, and the interconnectedness of society it represents, is figured as a threat to identity, as

⁴⁶ Even the presence of older stars associated with melodrama was not unusual – after all, Vincent Price was an older man who had appeared in a number of psychological melodramas in the 1940s.

⁴⁷ Hogg., ‘Film Reviews: I Saw What You Did’, *Variety*, 238.22 (1965), 28.

⁴⁸ ‘FEATURE REVIEWS: I Saw What You Did’, *Boxoffice*, 87.5 (1965), a11, a12.

⁴⁹ *I Saw What You Did - Joan Crawford (1965) - Official Trailer (HD)* (YouTube: ScreamFactoryTV, 2016) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fJgN686Znw>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

a means by which the Othering gaze can peer into one's darkest secrets. Crawford's casting is significant in this respect. Crawford draws associations with melodrama; she is seen peeking through her window at Ireland as he drags a crate, suggesting issues of privacy and identity and the Othering gaze within normal society (whilst also hinting at the explosion of madness in the domestic space as Ireland attacks his wife in the shower).⁵⁰ Moreover, some posters highlighted the theme of "uxoricide" – murder of the wife – which was connected with a number of films that had starred Crawford (such as *Sudden Fear*).⁵¹

'I saw what you did, and I know who are': Seeing and Being Seen

The phone game in the film raises the central themes of identity and the Othering gaze, as well as themes of power over another's subjectivity. Libby and Kit are aware of their ability to control adults through the telephone. The girls become equipped with a dangerous and pervasive form of power. Marak, on the other hand, is caught on the receiving end of power and is cast in the role of the oppressed. Marak is aware of his being subjugated by power yet is unable comprehend or objectify the power that he is subjected to, unable to locate a site of resistance. He becomes paranoid at when he hears those ominous words, 'I saw what you did, and I know who you are', freezing in pure terror at the sound of them. Marak has been seen, and he is known; for others, he has been discovered to be a murderer. These words, for Marra, 'fittingly [express] a core concern of the film with both *seeing* and *knowing* – two acts that work in tandem, though neither encompasses the other'.⁵²

⁵⁰ The shower scene solidly aligned *I Saw What You Did* with *Psycho*.

⁵¹ *I Saw What You Did* (Universal, 1965), 1965
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0059297/mediaviewer/rm1329456896/?ref=tt_ov_i>
[accessed 30 June 2022].

⁵² Marra, *Ibid.*, 230.

Marak, when seen and known, is deprived of power and of subjectivity; he falls under the power of “Suzette”. The telephone, in alienating Marak from actual contact with the person on the other end, denies him the ability to objectify the Other, “Suzette”. He is possessed by a formless alien voice and is unable to locate a site of resistance to power; his struggle is defined by a pursuit for knowledge about his oppressor. It is only through circumstance – that is, through Libby’s sexual curiosity with the man she is victimizing (her fantasies objectify, yet misidentified Marak) – that Marak comes to gain any knowledge about who has supposedly seen him. Libby derives almost sexual thrill from the objectification of Marak, making her in many ways a sadist in both the sexual and existential sense. Libby seeks out Marak’s address in her mother’s car, only for Amy (Crawford) to snatch the car license and registration in a fit of jealousy. This crucial artefact provides Marak the knowledge he needs to resist his oppressor. Like the name in the phone book, Libby is reduced to a name and address on a vehicle registration card, indicative of the vulnerability of identity in modern American society. When Marak eventually comes face-to-face with Libby, the power struggle is reversed. He objectifies her, declaring her to be ‘just a kid’, devaluing Libby’s prior assertion to the contrary. In the ensuing chase, Libby is reduced to a crying child, totally deprived of power.

In existential terms, Marak’s terror can be read as his response to being caught in the Look of another. When he becomes aware that he has been seen, he becomes conscious of his being perceived by other consciousnesses; the dog-walker, “Suzette”, and later Amy. Marak becomes aware that, for others, he is perceived as a murderer, and this he cannot control. His freedom is threatened. When burying his wife, Marak is happened upon by a young dog-walker and is caught in the objectifying look of the Other, which figures him as shifty and suspicious. He attempts to hide himself within the shadows of the trees that surround him, removing from the dog-walker the object of her gaze. When he is described as a dark haired, middle-aged man on the radio, Marak is further deprived of subjectivity; this description is based on the statement

of the dog-walker. Just as the phone book only lists his name, number, and address, so too does the radio only list his general that barely even distinguishes him as an individual. Marak's attempted self-annihilation in the shadows is recalled in his murder of Amy – and his intended murder of Libby and Tess – which functions as a means of removing those who have him “seen” him and who “know” him. His identity is threatened by Amy throughout the film. Amy is obsessively in love with Marak and tries to blackmail him into marrying her when she discovers his secrets. Amy uses her knowledge of his identity (his psychotic madness) to bring him into her power. Marak, however, associates marriage with control and subjugation (which is presumed to be the reason he killed his first wife):

Marak: I don't need you to plan my life or give me orders. You wanna crack the whip, get a dog!

Amy: Oh, the orders are just starting. We're gonna get married, go away, and do exactly what you said: be together.

Marak: You're crowding me again, Amy. I've got things to do.

According to Amy: 'It's a simple choice, Steve: life with me or no life at all'.⁵³ These individuals are obstacles to Marak's freedom and his subjectivity by increasing his threat of being arrested.

I Saw What You Did mediates on alienation through the iconography of the telephone. As an icon, the telephone has a rich history of alluding to social alienation. Critics have associated the phone with film noir of the 1940s; according to Marc Olivier: 'the film noir genre employs the telephone as a metaphor for isolation, violence, and alienation. As a character itself, the device plays the role of phone fatale by creating bonds that are at once

⁵³ This plot recalls Crawford's role as a woman obsessed with her former lover David in *Possessed*; David resists marriage at all costs, seeing it explicitly as an obstacle to his freedom.

alluring and deadly'.⁵⁴ As has been stated, those films were conventionally associated with horror in the period; the phone was as such a familiar horror device that was integral to *I Saw What You Did*'s identity as a horror film. The telephone, as a horror device, mediates on increased interconnectivity as increasing detachment, whereby individuals are linked via the phone and yet alienated from meaningful human contact with each other. The telephone also presents, according to Olivier, 'the possibility of intrusion'.⁵⁵ As in *Les Diaboliques*, when Christina recoils from the ringing phone out of fear that her abusive husband, Michel, is trying to reach her, the phone in *I Saw What You Did* is presented as a frightening gateway through which one can invade the space, and life, of another. The phone allows invasion into the private and intimate lives that occur behind closed doors. One can never be subject; one must always remain object because one will now always be in the gaze of the other. Due to the telephone (and telephone book), everybody can be known and seen. According to Marra: '*I Saw What You Did* dramatizes a cultural desire to know secrets, investigate people's sexual interests and identities, and very literally *see* what they do and *know* who they are'.⁵⁶ As one character who is engaged in a sex act in a darkened room says in response to receiving a prank call: 'Nothing is sacred'. The interconnectivity (and intersubjectivity) of society is rendered horrific through the sense in which the girls choose a name at random from the telephone book; as mentioned, the interconnectedness of landline telephones reduces an individual's life to a name, number, and address in a depersonalised and deindividuated telephone book. Subjectivity itself becomes impossible when anyone can pick out a name in a telephone book and immediately have access to the living room of another.

⁵⁴ This noir aspect is unsurprising, considering that the film's screenwriter was William P. McGivern, author of a number of crime novels that were adapted into crime melodramas such as *The Big Heat* (Lang, 1953); Marc Olivier, 'Gidget Goes Noir: William Castle and Teenage Phone Fatale', *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 41.1 (2013), 31, 35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁶ Marra, *Ibid.*, 232.

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3) 'All according to Dr Sapirstein's directions...': *Rosemary's Baby*

A review of *Rosemary's Baby* in the *Independent Film Journal* wrote that it 'is easy to see why Castle jumped at the property: it bears some resemblance to his semi-classic little thriller, *When Strangers Marry...*', but unlike that earlier film, *Rosemary's Baby* was a 'major-league' picture.⁵⁷ *Rosemary's Baby's* status as a "major-league" property with associations to the lowbrow is also discussed in a review of Ira Levin's original novel by *The New York Times*: 'Mr Levin's literal resolution of his story leaves the rueful feeling one might get from watching a major-league game – and discovering in the very last inning, that it was only good minor-league after all'; the review was frustrated that the psychological horror narrative of Jamesian ambiguity was thrown out in the final pages, 'tumbling from sophistication to Dracula'.⁵⁸ The *Independent Film Journal* agreed that the resolution of the film adaptation likewise betrayed its Jamesian psychological ambiguity and realism in favour of 'absurd... nonsense'.⁵⁹

Rosemary's Baby was received as a sophisticated, psychologically realistic text that grew out of lowbrow horror contexts, and as such it was seen as a fitting property for William Castle who, by the late-1960s, was associated with a genre upscaled through psychological themes yet retaining a lowbrow appeal; according to Heffernan, the 'Castle aesthetic fit in well with Hammer's then-current cycle of black-and-white psychological thrillers inspired by *Psycho*' and which was also continuous with the artful psychological horrors being made by Polanski in Europe, such as *Repulsion* (Polanski, 1965).⁶⁰ Castle's acquisition in the late-1960s

⁵⁷ 'Independent Trade Reviews: ROSEMARY'S BABY', *The Independent Film Journal*, 62.1 (1968), 22.

⁵⁸ Thomas J. Fleming, 'The Couple Next Door', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 30 April 1967), 316.

⁵⁹ 'Independent Trade Reviews', 23.

⁶⁰ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 184.

by Paramount was seen as a major asset to the studio. Castle was a major figure in popular psychological horror, which often proved strong at the box office, and as Heffernan points out, Levin's novel 'featured a plot device that Castle himself had successfully exploited in his Universal films: the narrative of a persecuted heroine who is either the victim of a sinister conspiracy or is descending into madness'.⁶¹ Castle was seen as a logical and unsurprising choice for producer of *Rosemary's Baby*, with Polanski as the hip young European auteur director.

Rosemary's Baby was clearly mediated as an upmarket Castle film; theatrical posters and trailers call it 'a William Castle production' and Castle was a central figure in selling the film.⁶² Heffernan rightly points out that 'Castle remains a presence, both seen and unseen, throughout *Rosemary's Baby*'.⁶³ Elisha Cook Jr. appears in the film as the nervous Mr Miklas, who, when giving a tour of the Bramford, 'cannot fail to recall his similar function in Castle's *House on Haunted Hill*'.⁶⁴ Additionally, according to Castle's autobiography, both Polanski and Paramount head, Robert Evans, wanted him to play Sapirstein.⁶⁵ Sapirstein is presented as a Castle-*esque* figure, a big, burly, white-haired fellow with an air of kindness and comfort, who behind the façade is a master manipulator of perception, working to deprive the female

⁶¹ Ibid., 185.

⁶² Interestingly, as the film has gained critical and aesthetic acclaim and became well regarded as an art-film, William Castle's name all but disappeared from subsequent marketing and critical discussion, with Polanski's name being more central. This was preceded by *The New York Times* which, in their original review, barely mentions Castle's association with the film, despite his central presence in the film's extratextual identity; Renata Adler, 'The Screen: "Rosemary's Baby", a Story of Fantasy and Horror: John Cassavetes Stars With Mia Farrow', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 13 June 1968), 57; *Rosemary's Baby* (Paramount Pictures, 1968), 1968
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0063522/mediaviewer/rm2259426817/?ref=tt_ov_i>
[accessed 30 June 2022]; *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) Trailer #1 | Movieclips Classic Trailers (YouTube: Movieclips Classic Trailers, 2018)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjpA6IH_Skc> [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁶³ Heffernan., Ibid., 199.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Castle, *Step Right Up*, 198–199.

protagonist (and the audience) of power and subjectivity. Castle would famously appear in the film as a man outside the phonebooth who Rosemary confuses for Sapirstein (mistaken identity, inability to know the Other). Castle's character even smokes his signature cigar in this scene. The marketing of *Rosemary's Baby* emphasised the more 'modernist' elements of the film, such as streams-of-consciousness; those modernist features were associated at the time with existentialism and absurdism.⁶⁶ Polanski's work was widely considered modernist (and absurdist), and prior to *Rosemary's Baby*, he was heavily associated with both art-cinema and lowbrow horror with films like *Repulsion*, *Cul-de-Sac* (Polanski, 1966), and *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (Polanski, 1967). Jancovich showed that Polanski's films were frequently associated with the preoccupations of the theatre of the absurd by critics, and that the film also featured clearly absurdist motifs, with Rosemary being 'someone manipulated by others into performing a predetermined role, even as "the fool" believes they are resisting manipulation'.⁶⁷ Polanski's films were frequently preoccupied with the horror of the human condition, the ontological alienation of individuals, paranoia and the insecurity of the self, the manipulation of individuals like puppets by invisible forces, the dissonance between reality and truth, and the impossibility of objective knowledge. But of course, these were precisely the themes and concepts that were explicitly identified in Castle's horror films; Castle's films consistently featured narratives of psychological conflict and destruction, of sadistic control and alienation, of warped psychologies that predetermine a horrific reality.

The themes of *Rosemary's Baby* were discussed in very similar terms to Castle's horror films. On *The Night Walker*, Crowther in *The New York Times* wrote of Stanwyck's character that she is not quite 'certain whether it was a bad dream or the real thing'.⁶⁸ Compare this with

⁶⁶ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 190, 196.

⁶⁷ Jancovich, "Peter Brook's *Night of the Living Dead*", 87, 90.

⁶⁸ Bosley Crowther, 'Screen: Somnabulists: "Night Walker" Stars Barbara Stanwyck', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 21 January 1965), 22.

a review of *Rosemary's Baby* from the same paper: 'It is a fantasy of what could have happened to me while I was asleep sort, What did I do when I was drunk, How do I know I'm awake now, What if everyone is lying to me...'.⁶⁹ These are all themes at work in Castle's horror films; the psychological realism and modernist sensibilities of *Rosemary's Baby* was by most seen as a continuation and upscaling of Castle and wider trends in the genre since the 1950s. *Variety* twice called *Rosemary's Baby* 'diabolical', a term frequently used in reviews and marketing to connect psychological horror films with *Les Diaboliques*, with which the former film has many similarities, and with which Castle's films were heavily associated.⁷⁰ *Rosemary's Baby's* identity was defined by its relationship to Castle's horror films. *Variety* wrote that 'Castle has crossed the artistic Rubicon from successful exploitation shockers to first class suspenseurs'.⁷¹ With *Rosemary's Baby*, the industry more explicitly aligned horror with more sophisticated, cultured adult tastes, yet through Castle retained associations with the lowbrow.

Rosemary's Baby follows newly-weds, Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse (Mia Farrow and John Cassavettes) as they move into their Bramford apartment. Their neighbours, including Roman and Minnie Castevet (Sidney Blackmer and Ruth Gordon), take an active interest in Rosemary's pregnancy; as it turns out, the residents of the Bramford are part of a Satanic cult who have done a deal with Guy to use Rosemary as a vessel for the Antichrist. According to Heffernan, the 'story is quite explicit about the means by which first Sapirstein and later Guy attempt to strip [Rosemary] of her power and knowledge', which as has been demonstrated, was a consistent feature of the psychological horror films that Castle, and others, was producing.⁷² Contextually, *Rosemary's Baby*, like Levin's 1972 novella *The Stepford Wives*,

⁶⁹ Adler, 'The Screen: "Rosemary's Baby"', 57.

⁷⁰ Murf., 'Film Review: Rosemary's Baby', *Variety*, 251.2 (1968), 2.

⁷¹ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 192.

was directly associated with the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and figures like Betty Friedan who was heavily associated with existentialism (particularly Simone de Beauvoir), which were translated almost exactly into the filmed version.⁷³ In the film, Rosemary is alienated and denied power, as a woman, to determine the course of her own life. As Heffernan notes, Rosemary begins the film as 'educated, assertive, and socially aware'; she convinces Guy to lease the Bramford apartment and is also presented as a sexual equal to Guy.⁷⁴ Her power and identity, her subjectivity, is eroded as the film progresses, as the conspiracy against her deepens. Those who appear to her as friends (the Bramford Satanists) are false, they, like Guy, are actors; Rosemary can never properly know the Other. According to Beauvoir: 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, physical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society'.⁷⁵ Roughly, the idea of the "woman", according to Beauvoir, is a construct determined by a patriarchal agenda as Other to serve the needs and wants of the patriarchy. According to Sarah Bakewell, 'For Beauvoir, the greatest inhibition for women comes from their acquired tendency to see themselves as "other" rather than as a transcendent subject'; women adopt the othering gaze through which their identity as women is constructed.⁷⁶ *Rosemary's Baby*, in relating itself to the Women's Liberation Movement and existential feminism, mediates on similar ideas; that Rosemary's identity as a woman is something constructed for her by a patriarchal conspiracy, by others who see her as defined by her ability to conceive and carry children, and it is an identity she ends up assuming by the end of the film, after her resistance fails.

⁷³ Chuck Palahniuk, 'Revisionist History: Everywhere Is Stepford', in *The Stepford Wives*, by Ira Levin, 1972. Reprint (London: Corsair, 2011), v–ix; Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, 1972. Reprint (London: Corsair, 2011); see: Menand, *The Free World*, 560–572; Cotkin, *Existential America*, 252–275; Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café*, 281–282.

⁷⁴ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 192.

⁷⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 294.

⁷⁶ Bakewell, *Ibid.*, 212.

Rosemary's Baby mediates on existential feminist movements against the Othering of women by the patriarchy, which, for Friedan, had resulted in bad faith excuses by a lot of women for their apparent desire for a domesticised, subordinated existence in the home. The plot of having Rosemary's body used as a vehicle for the antichrist is a potent symbol for Rosemary's alienation and the deprivation of her subjectivity and power. She is reduced to powerless material, a thing, a functionary object to serve the ends of the invisible Other. Layers of distrust are constructed as we discover that certain characters are not who we thought they were. Sapirstein's warm care for Rosemary is false; he cares not for her, but for the baby. Notable is how Satan's piercing eyes gaze at Rosemary throughout the rape sequence (where she thinks she is dreaming). There is a link to the opening sequence of *The Night Walker* (the eyes watching us as we dream), and the general theme of not being able to distinguish between dreams and reality. As in Castle's films, the gaze is a means of Othering. According to Bakewell: 'That Other has the power to stamp me as a certain kind of object, ascribing definite characteristics to me rather than leaving me to be free'.⁷⁷ The lustful gaze of Satan, the nosey gaze of Minnie, and the dominant gaze of Guy and Roman, the fact that the cultists can infiltrate Rosemary's apartment through secret doors, all serve to objectify Rosemary; her constant vulnerability to the Look alienates her, makes her a thing. Rosemary is caught in a totally absurd, horrific situation, where she can neither trust her own perspective, nor can she trust that of the Other; the horror lies in the complete non-existence of objective truth, and thus the inability to locate a secure site of resistance.

Her rebellion against objectification fails because even her free agency works to the cult's advantage. The horror of the film lies in how her determination and sense of self is turned against her. For both the audience and Rosemary, the conspiracy unfolds in the open. The

⁷⁷ Bakewell, *Ibid.*, 213.

conspiracy at work here gradually dissolves the individual's ability to make free, informed decisions, and distorts perception. The events of the film are mostly the result of Rosemary's choices; she wants to move into the Bramford, she wants the baby, she opens a relationship with the Castavets, and she is the one who protects the baby from harm. All of these decisions, Jancovich argues, stem from the 'Catholic upbringing [that] has instilled certain attitudes towards maternity within her'.⁷⁸ This does not excuse what happens to Rosemary as her own fault in any sense, but adds to the thematic layers at play, the idea that devious, anti-human forces work to manipulate freedom to their own advantage; the true existential terror of the film, our ontological alienation in which even our freedom serves to objectify us. This is evident in one key scene which initiates the rape of Rosemary. The Castavets' have prepared a mousse intended to drug Rosemary. As she often does throughout the film, Rosemary notices an 'under taste' (immediately figuring her as more aware), leading to her refusal to eat the mousse. However, Guy manipulates Rosemary into eating the drugged mousse as an act of free will (through guilt: 'C'mon, the old bat slaved all day, now eat it!'), it becomes her free choice to eat it. When she does, and when the drugs kick in, Guy stands over her limp body, looking down on her; Rosemary falls into Guy's power, and by extension the cult's power, through an act of free will. Later in the film, initiated through the liminal book, *All of them Witches*, Rosemary's works out that her neighbours – along with Guy and Sapirstein – all have insidious plans for her and her baby. As in *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973) a few years later, where Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward) believes that the Summerisle pagans (led by Christopher Lee) wish to sacrifice Rowan Morrison, only to discover too late that *he* is the intended sacrifice, Rosemary believes that the Satanists want to sacrifice her baby. According to Jancovich, 'While Rosemary thinks she is protecting the child from the coven's conspiracy,

⁷⁸ Jancovich, *Ibid.*, 88.

she is actually performing the very role they have planned for her' in keeping the baby safe.⁷⁹ Again, as with the chocolate mousse, her very freedom and commitment is used against her, rendering her freedom mute. As a result of this absurd situation, she becomes merely an alienated puppet. These are also key themes of Castle's films, which explains his attraction to the original novel. Similarly, in Castle's films, the protagonists/antagonists are deprived of their freedom through their own actions.

Both Castle and Polanski's films also provide visual, auditory, and thematic details readily available to decipher the conspiracy which go unnoticed until it is too late. Rosemary, like Crawford's character in *Strait-Jacket* or Nora in *House on Haunted Hill*, is unaware that she is a character in a story/film, unaware also that this story has an author who has carefully plotted her narrative. Jancovich commends 'Levin's cunning [in structuring] the novel entirely from Rosemary's point of view. We are never given access to any more information than Rosemary and are kept in the same position of ignorance and uncertainty', a cunning which extends to Polanski's screenplay and direction for both *Rosemary's Baby* and later *Chinatown* (scripted by Robert Towne).⁸⁰ As with Castle, the conspiracy around Rosemary works to restrict her access to knowledge by keeping her in the dark (effectively gaslighting her), her books are removed (books which unravel the Satanist conspiracy), she is prevented from seeing a real doctor, and she is alienated from others outside of the coven (like Hutch and her friends). As Dr Sapirstein instructs: 'Please don't read any books... and don't listen to your friends either'. In the rape scene, Minnie says: 'She don't see. As long as she ate the mousse, she can't hear nor see. She's like dead', paralleling an earlier scene when Minnie and her friend barge into Rosemary's apartment and sit on a book she is reading. Likewise, in *Strait-Jacket*, Lucy is denied knowledge by Carol, and in *I Saw What You Did*, the girls deny knowledge to Marak,

⁷⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 87.

feeding him falsehoods and leading him into a warped, alternative perception of reality. Castle's earlier horror films similarly deny the audience access to knowledge by putting them in the shoes of the alienated, confused protagonist, making us privy to their psychological unravelling, denying knowledge of the wider plot until the final reels.

There are also a number of references to the Death of God, a core existential concept, in both the film and novel: 'Rosemary took up a copy of *Time* that lay at her elbow. *Is God Dead?* it asked in red letters on a black background'.⁸¹ This scene also features in the film, when Rosemary realizes that Sapirstein smells of the tannis root Minnie gave her – leading to shock, horror, disorientation, the sort of reaction Nietzsche suggested his Madman had in response to the same realization. The "Death of God" movement in American theology, sparked by Gabriel Vahanian's 1961 book, *The Death of God*, attempted to respond to secularization 1960s and the sense that God was becoming irrelevant as a source of meaning and purpose.⁸² By including these references, *Rosemary's Baby* participates within the conversation about the meaning in the modern world, presenting an absurd world in which things cease to become clear and meaningful, as we expect them to be. As Jancovich notes, the Death of God in *Rosemary's Baby* does not refer necessarily to the loss of 'religious faith and authority' in contemporary America.⁸³ Rather, the Death of God is symbolic of an existential malaise, a sense of alienation and absurdity in modern society. The Death of God iconography in novel and film mediates on the absurdity of the human condition, the existential horror.

⁸¹ Levin, *Rosemary's Baby*, 187.

⁸² Patrick Gray, "'God Is Dead" Controversy', 2013 <<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/god-is-dead-controversy/>> [accessed 6 August 2022]; Gabriel Vanhanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: George Braziller, 1961); *The Meaning of the Death of God: Protestant, Jewish and Catholic Scholars Explore Atheistic Theology*, ed. by Bernard Murchland (New York: Random House, 1967).

⁸³ Jancovich, *Ibid.*, 88.

There is no order, nothing can be predicted or planned, and one's neighbours may be out to get you. This logic culminates in Rosemary's acceptance her absurd situation.

At the climax of both the novel and the film, when the Antichrist is revealed to Rosemary, Roman (mirroring Prospero in *The Masque of the Red Death*) declares that 'God is dead! Satan lives!'.⁸⁴ Unlike in *The Masque of the Red Death*, in which the Satanists are punished by the absurd reality of death, the Satanists in *Rosemary's Baby* are victorious. Rosemary is finally and totally Othered as a mother, a moment immortalized by the camera-gaze of the unnamed photographer, forced by her internalized Catholic duty to care for the Antichrist: 'No, she *couldn't* throw him out the window. He was her baby, no matter who the father was'.⁸⁵ In a move similar to Camus' Sisyphus, she rejects nihilistic suicide, and intends to make her rock her thing. She exerts some degree of power over the child, and over the Satanists, changing the child's name from Adrian to Andrew. The novel suggests that, in caring for Andrew, Rosemary intends to work '*against* them, exert[ing] a good influence to counteract their bad one...'.⁸⁶ By caring for the baby, Rosemary acts in rebellion against the Satanists, in rebellion against the fate she is now tied to. In doing so, she also rebels against her alienation, her position as slave woman. She makes the formative, influential position of "mother" her own, extracting it from the machinations of the Satanists – of course there is always the possibility that, in doing so, she falls victim to Roman's hidden agenda through her own free will, again.

Rosemary: You're trying to get me to be his mother.

Roman: *Aren't* you his mother?

⁸⁴ Levin, *Ibid.*, 221.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

This is the final line of the film; Rosemary's answerless rocking of the crib indicates her acceptance of the absurd mother role. This is cemented in the novel, with the Satanists shouting: 'Hail Rosemary, mother of Andrew'. The film closes with the baby ceasing to cry, the shot lingering on Rosemary's loving, motherly eyes of acceptance as the lullaby theme from the opening credits reprises, the shot dissolves into an exterior of the Bramford, pulling away in a reverse of the opening shot.

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As Heffernan also points out, *Rosemary's Baby* provided the narrative and marketing model for *The Exorcist*, a major blockbuster in the 1970s and the first time an adult horror film had made a huge amount of money.⁸⁷ The marketing for *The Exorcist* was markedly similar to that of *Rosemary's Baby*; a modernist collection of haunting images with little dialogue aside from a narrator signifies the film as a mature, sophisticated picture, albeit one that is very obviously associated with lowbrow horror elements that are upscaled and taken to greater extremes. Films like *Rosemary's Baby* had been the final nail in the coffin for the authority of the Production Code Administration which attempted to impose self-regulation on the industry to ensure all products were safe for family consumption.⁸⁸ There are also obvious similarities between the two films. Both narratives centre around the relationship between Satanism and childhood, with the demon Pazuzu possessing the twelve-year old Regan (Linda Blair). When science and reason fail, Regan's mother must turn to supernatural means in the form of an exorcism. *The Exorcist* mediates on a whole series of existential themes. A sense of God abandoning the world, of traditional norms and structures (childhood and family in this case) being subverted and losing all meaning, a commitment to faith as a guiding light in 'a world of darkness' that the trailer describes as sitting 'between science and superstition', and a broader anti-rationalism

⁸⁷ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

and anti-modernity (science and medicine fails to explain what is happening).⁸⁹ *The Exorcist* was also noted for its horrific spectacle and special effects; spectacle was the primary draw of lowbrow horror in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Exorcist was one of the most important and influential films of New Hollywood that would be copied by studios throughout the period (most notably by *The Omen* (Donner, 1976)). While horror films like *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby* presented themselves as distinctly adult and new, a strategy that appealed to the fragmented modern tastes of distinctive 1960s audiences, particularly young audiences, demanding something different to the safe and sanitary catch-all family entertainment of the studio era, they played with the same existential themes and ideas that were developed in the genre throughout the 1950s and 1960s by producers like William Castle.⁹⁰ New Hollywood horror films, which are frequently praised for their mature psychological and modernist themes in contrast to immature lowbrow “schlock” grew out of a trend established by lowbrow horror in the 1950s and 1960s. As a number of scholars like Joan Hawkins and Jeffrey Sconce have shown, these texts were not consumed exclusively, but were actually consumed together by the same audiences; the connoisseur of the art horror films was also the avid fan of the “schlock” or “trash” put out by William Castle.⁹¹ Producers knew this. They knew the horror audience was secure (that consumption of horror continued to be key for youth identities with whom existential themes registered) but needed a greater draw for those who were not “addicts” which meant a process of legitimization in the genre, a process already being led by producers like William Castle by the late-1950s. Even the upscaling of the genre was already being done, as with Castle’s casting

⁸⁹ *THE EXORCIST - Trailer - (1973) - HQ* (YouTube: ryy79, 2009) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDGw1MTEe9k>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁹⁰ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 221.

⁹¹ Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*; Sconce, ““Trashing” the Academy”; see also: Mathijs and Sexton, *Cult Cinema*; Mathijs and Sexton, *Routledge Guide*; Mathijs and Mendik, *The Cult Film Reader*.

of Joan Crawford (and Barbara Stanwyck). In the “New” Hollywood of the 1970s, the horror genre remained aligned with modernist, psychological, and existential themes like identity and consciousness, meaninglessness and the disintegration of the rational world, the Other, absurdity, and sadistic violence, elements that were all heavily emphasised in the marketing of these “new” films.

Part 2: “King of the Bs”: Roger Corman

Chapter 4: ““An unspeakable horror! Destroying! Terrifying!””: Meaning and Structure in Corman’s 1950s SF-Horror films

Producer-director Roger Corman became a leader in the independent exploitation cinema that emerged in response to a series of transitions in the film industry following the break-up of the studio system and audience diversification. Corman is a central figure revered in American cult cinema and is the subject of considerable attention; Corman is often treated by paracinema enthusiasts (including scholars) as a cult auteur of “bad film/badfilm”, an underappreciated genius, much of which is constructed around various mythologies which Corman himself perpetuated that relate to his status as a maverick, rebellious outsider who defied the mainstream conventions of cinema.¹ Such discourses frequently raise Corman’s existential themes, such as his concerns with God, freedom, and the outsider. However, many of these readings overlook the historical industry and socio-cultural dimensions that regulated the meanings of Corman’s texts. As Corman himself pointed out: a lot ‘of people... ask me if I knew I was being existential. No. I was primarily aware that I was in trouble. I was shooting with hardly any money and less time’.² For Corman, the exploitation contexts under which he (and many others) operated facilitated the clear existential themes at work in his films. The following chapter will look at how some of Corman’s earlier exploitation horror productions – *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, *Day the World Ended*, and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* – play

¹ Jancovich calls this the “gee-whizz” approach and charges such literature with propagating fan mythology; Beverley Gray’s controversial biography attempted to bust many of these myths; Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 269; Beverley Gray, *Roger Corman: Blood-Sucking Vampires, Flesh-Eating Cockroaches, and Driller Killers*, 3rd edn (USA: A. Z. Ferris Publications, 2014); see: J. Philip di Franco, *The Movie World of Roger Corman* (New York and London: Chelsea House Publishers, 1979); Ed Naha, *The Films of Roger Corman: Brilliance on a Budget* (New York: Acro Publishing, Inc., 1982); Mark Thomas McGee, *Teenage Thunder: A Front Row Look at the 1950s Teenpics* (Albany, Georgia: Bear Manor, 2020); Alan Frank, *The Films of Roger Corman: ‘Shooting My Way Out of Trouble’* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1998).

² Roger Corman quoted in Naha, *Ibid.*, 144.

with existential themes, such as the disintegration of meaning, freedom, and commitment, and how those themes are clearly mediated as part of their wider identity. It will demonstrate that, in appealing to a specific lowbrow exploitation market, Corman's films were aligned with existential ideas.

Exploitation is a form of distribution in this context, in which producers sought to construct an audience through offering a type of picture; exploitation is a distributive strategy that is central in the American film industry.³ In the 1950s, exploitation films were predominantly marketed to a youth audience. The youth audience had emerged as a distinct culture during the 1950s, and their increased disposable income (due to postwar affluence) made them into a core consumer group that were integral to the shift towards a consumer economy in the US.⁴ Young people were leaders in consumption and made up the largest cinema going demographic, with young adults (aged 20–35) and teenagers (12–19) accounting for seventy per cent of audiences in the 1950s following the diversification of cinema audiences in the wake of the Paramount decision and suburbanization.⁵ As a distinct set of subcultures, these audiences demanded products that had a certain register with their tastes and identities.⁶ Exploitation producers like Roger Corman and independent studio American International Pictures (AIP) were among the first to target and cultivate this audience.⁷

Exploitation films differed from traditional B-movies of the studio system in the sense that, unlike B-movies, 'these movies had to sell on their own appeal... and their distributors resorted to exploitation strategies in marketing them specifically at the teenage audience'.⁸ According to Lev, these movies 'paid special attention to advertising and to the changing tastes

³ Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*, 136.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138; Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 34; Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 168.

⁵ Tzioumakis, *Ibid.*, 137; Strawn, 'William Castle', 291.

⁶ Tzioumakis, *Ibid.*; Maltby, *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷ Doherty, *Ibid.*, 125.

⁸ Maltby, *Ibid.*, 169.

of the teenage audience'; concept came first in the form of posters and titles, followed by a quickly and cheaply made production.⁹ Horror films (or "weirdies") were among the most numerous kinds of this type of product.¹⁰ Horror traditionally had a distinct association with youth (children in particular), with horror audiences constructed as "addicts" by the trade press; horror audiences constituted a distinct group with a particular set of tastes. Like their fellows, exploitation horror films in the 1950s were constructed to appeal to the distinct tastes of the younger audiences. Horror texts played a key part in the construction of youth identity in this period. They were often consumed as part of a set of subcultural rituals as taboo texts, the sort that would be (and were) frowned upon by adults and cultural guardians, in similarly disreputable youth spaces such as the drive-in; horror had a distinct lowbrow register those producers and distributors deliberately cultivated.¹¹ Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel argued that cultural products for young audiences often reinforced the idea that they were alienated and isolated, that they were a distinct, anxious group; these texts not only reflected attitudes but also provided new sets of symbols that helped to construct youth identity.¹² According to Gray, 'Corman instinctively grasped horror's appeal to the vast youth audience that in the late 1950s was just coming into its own'.¹³ These films were appealing for younger teens, according to fellow alumni and 1950s "monster kid", Joe Dante, because 'they were movies your parents wouldn't want you to see', but also helped to inform the construction of cultural identities.¹⁴ Part of the reason for the decline in receipts for bug-budget mainstream family pictures was the lack of register with youth tastes and anxieties. Youth exploitation films were by contrast

⁹ Lev, *Transforming the Screen*, 206.

¹⁰ Doherty, *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹ Maltby, *Ibid.*, 164.

¹² Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, 'The Young Audience', in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. by John Storey (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 70.

¹³ Gray, *Roger Corman*, 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

directly sold to youth concerns and anxieties and mediated wider ideas that were often central to youth identity in the 1950s. According to Doherty, as well as sex, a 'rich vein of psychological dislocation and social estrangement runs through the weirdies, signalled readily in titles such as *Teenage Zombies*'.¹⁵

The intertextual identity of these films was directly aligned with existential and psychological anxieties and themes, particularly concerning the self, identity, alienation, estrangement, and freedom, and would often centre around concepts of otherness (as both a point of identification and threat) and the outsider. Corman and AIP were doing this when they started out in 1954. Titles such as *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, *Day the World Ended*, *Not of this Earth*, *It Conquered the World*, and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* all signal monstrous others, a sense of alienation and estrangement, threats to freedom and identity, death, destruction, and the disintegration of all meaning, concerns central to contemporary youth cultures which form the thematic core of the texts themselves. Morris (who views Corman as an auteur) argued that Corman's films presented 'a violently antiromantic, existential view of life... concerned with the problem – the impossibility – of satisfactory human existence'.¹⁶ Similarly, Cochran argued that in 'face of the official optimism of the dominant Cold War culture, Corman consistently presented a dark vision of American life... It is a dreary world always on the verge of destruction in which the most commonplace assumptions... are dramatically overturned. It is, in short, an unremittingly modernist worldview'.¹⁷ Jancovich

¹⁵ Recall that "psychological" and "existential" were often interchangeable concepts during these years; Doherty, *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁶ Pawel Aleksandrowicz also adopts a structuralist auteur position not dissimilar to Morris, however he seeks to locate Corman's significance in terms of his status as an exploitation director; Gary Morris, *Roger Corman* (Twayne Publishers: USA, 1985), 14, 16; Pawel Aleksandrowicz, *The Cinematography of Roger Corman: Exploitation Filmmaker or Auteur?* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar's Publishing, 2016).

¹⁷ David Cochran, 'The Low-Budget Modernism Roger Corman', *North Dakota Quarterly*, 64.1 (1997), 23; see also: David Cochran, *America Noir: Underground Writers and*

referred to Corman as a liberal humanist filmmaker concerned with the crisis of human identity and the possibilities of self-meaning versus arbitrary rationalist assumptions.¹⁸

The existentialism of Corman's films was less down to some auteur's personal vision than the contexts of exploitation filmmaking; the identification and alignment with these ideas made business sense considering their distinct register with the largest audiences. As Cochran indicated, few works look at the cultural contexts of Roger Corman's films, with exceptions such as Whitehead's impressive yet slight overview of Corman's directorial efforts and their brief mention in Jancovich's work.¹⁹ Exploitation cinema was about (small) profits, not visions.²⁰ Corman knew what existentialism was; he spoke in his autobiography of dabbling in the philosophical conversation ('We were all major existentialists') in the Left Bank Parisian cafés in the 1940s, notably the same cafés which Sartre and Beauvoir frequented.²¹ Corman even invested five hundred dollars to Monte Hellman's 1958 production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which had become an American sensation in 1956 when it was published in paperback.²² Contrary to his later claim of ignorance of such themes, there can be little doubt of Corman's awareness of the register of existential ideas with his youth audience, and the more general phenomenon – one that was cultivated by publishing companies and other industries – of existential philosophy and literature among young people in the 1950s and 1960s (particularly authors like Camus), who found authors and idea that spoke to their specific

Filmmakers of the Postwar Era (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 151–171.

¹⁸ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 277.

¹⁹ Mark Whitehead, *The Pocket Essential Roger Corman* (Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2003).

²⁰ As exploitation producer, George Weiss (Mike Starr) says to Ed Wood (Johnny Depp) in *Ed Wood* (Burton, 1995): 'I don't hire directors with burning desires to tell their stories... I need someone with experience to shoot a film in four days to make me a profit. I'm sorry, that's all there is to it'.

²¹ Roger Corman and Jim Jerome, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*, 1990. Reprint (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1998), 15.

²² Gray, *Ibid.*, 45; Menand, *The Free World*, 370.

concerns and anxieties and became integral to their identity. The college and university markets were important for Corman and AIP and a key focus. By 1960, the market for films distributed to campuses and film societies had exploded.²³ First year courses in existentialism had also been brought in due to popular demand from the American youth, which in turn opened a market for introductory texts and translations of existentialist works: ‘Hardly a college student in the 1960s could be found without a dog-eared copy of’ Walter Kaufmann’s *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* according to Cotkin, while ‘Sartre’s concepts resonated... loudly in the ears of younger philosophers and their students... it had greater appeal for young Americans’.²⁴ Regardless of whether or not Corman or anyone at AIP (or Allied Artists) held existentialist views, there is clear play with existential ideas and themes in these films. Existentialism was part of the ways in which Corman’s exploitation horror films were sold to young teenage and student audiences; they mediated on clear, recognizable as a means of cultivating an existential identity that registered with these audiences.

1) **‘...your world is mine!’: *The Beast with a Million Eyes***

Corman’s exploitation horror films were produced on extremely low budgets (*Variety* put *The Beast with a Million Eyes*’ budget at \$20,000, but it was likely lower).²⁵ Corman himself admitted that scripts he was given were ‘reworked to fit a low budget’.²⁶ Corman called his horror films “‘contained situation”” pictures, meaning they would feature a small cast of

²³ Menand, *The Free World*, 579–580.

²⁴ Cotkin, *Existential America*, 1; Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 252; see also: Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre*, 141.

²⁵ ‘Pictures: \$65,000 “Day” May Hit \$1,000,000; Ex-Industrial Engineer Corman Shoots 8 Budget Films in a Year’, *Variety*, 201.12 (1956), 16; Mark Thomas McGee, *Faster and Furiouser: The Revised and Fattened Fable of American International Pictures* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 1996), 24–27.

²⁶ Corman and Jerome, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood*, 31.

characters and focus on the psychological conflicts between them.²⁷ Monsters, if any, would be concealed until the final reel. The horror would generally operate on a metaphorical or suggested level and often emerged from the general situation of the narrative and visual execution. Corman used minimal sets and exploited real locations which forced the production to utilize the authenticity of the natural world to service the narrative.²⁸ Location shooting often lent the production a sense of existential emptiness and isolation.²⁹ Cochran claimed the ‘minimalism of the sets and the bleakness of the world portrayed also reflected the pessimism of a Kafkaesque universe... a dreary world always on the verge of destruction in which the most common place assumptions... are dramatically overturned’.³⁰

Corman’s early horror films frequently pitted seemingly powerless individuals and communities against a larger, more powerful force, often alien-invaders, monsters, or a hostile environment, presenting a struggle for meaningful existence in a world that is, essentially, without meaning, or possesses horrific meanings that are intolerable to individual security. As Morris notes, in these films, Corman typically ‘isolates a few individuals in a hopeless, hostile environment... detailing their methodical destruction in the face of social chaos, their inability to deal with life stripped of buttressing social institutions and “order”’.³¹ This loss of control, this alienation, is framed against the destruction of the world in a metaphoric and literal sense; domestic collapse and desert isolation in *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, the end of the world in *Day the World Ended*, and the collapsing island in *Attack of the Crab Monsters*.

²⁷ ‘Pictures: \$65,000 “Day” May Hit \$1,000,000’, 16.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Corman and Jerome, Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Cochran, ‘The Low-Budget Modernism Roger Corman’, 23, 30.

³¹ Morris, Ibid., 20.

This schism between the individual and their world occupied many writers and critics in the postwar years, in particular existentialist writers, who wrote of a failure for individuals to find secure meaning in the world around them. As Camus wrote:

And here are trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste... how shall I negate this world whose power and strength I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine.³²

For Camus, natural sciences and knowledge serve to further prove to him the unknowable and uncontrollable totality of the universe, increasingly alienating the individual from it. Sartre saw meaning in the natural world as viscous and slimy; the world of phenomena strikes the individual as meaningless, rendering language powerless.³³ These writers saw this as the absurd condition of human existence, the tension between a need for guaranteed meaning and the absence of it. Contemporary American writers were simply preoccupied with the absurd schism between human and world. The existentialist, William Barrett, argued the modern individual had become an ‘outsider... a stranger to God, to nature...’ under modern mass capitalism.³⁴ In the 1950s, the progression of science and mass society organized along rationalistic and scientifically informed lines led many (like Barrett) to view the world as becoming disenchanted. Similarly, Hannah Arendt wrote of “‘alienation from the *earth*’” at the hands of scientific progress, while “‘alienation from the *world*’” resulted in an automated society with individuals becoming contingent on a new order.³⁵ Human meaning came to be determined, it was said, by this wider net of interconnected institutions and systems. The natural world played

³² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus (Le Mythe de Sisyphe)*, trans. by Justin O’Brien, [1942] 1955. Penguin Classics edn (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 16.

³³ Haynes-Curtis, ‘Sartre and the Drug Connection’, 105; Sartre, *Nausea*, 20, 116, 178; Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 81.

³⁴ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 35–36.

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958. Reprint (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), x–xi.

little role in the new order save for providing natural resources; human beings were increasingly made contingent on the systems of mass capitalism. A popular anxiety in this period of affluence and convenience related to the collapse of these systems, the return of a new Depression, for instance, or a nuclear apocalypse.

Despite David Kramarksy's credit, Roger Corman was the uncredited director and producer of ARC's (soon to be AIP) *The Beast with a Million Eyes*.³⁶ The narrative surrounds the Kelley family, a family of three (plus a mute farmhand) operating a failing date ranch in the middle of the desert. The arrival of an alien consciousness that feeds off hatred and steals the minds of weaker animals serves as a catalyst for increasing family tension and domestic collapse. At this point, exploitation horror films rarely saw reviews in the popular or trade press – exploitation was traditionally positioned as outside of the system.³⁷ One of the few reviews dismissed the film as a silly melodrama.³⁸ Exploitation films relied on a strong advertising push that conveyed attractive elements that attracted specific audiences. The theatrical poster teases a distinctly existential threat: ““An unspeakable horror... Destroying... Terrifying!”. The monster is ““unspeakable”, the source of the threat cannot be placed.³⁹ The film thus promises anxiety due to the amorphous nature of the beast. The title itself conjures the horror of sight, of being seen. The gaze was related to control by existential discourses, a beast with a million eyes possesses great power in this regard. What is being destroyed? In one sense, meaning and security – as indicated, we cannot properly know the beast, nor can we hide from its gaze.

³⁶ Gary A. Smith, *American International Pictures: The Golden Years* (Albany: Bear Manor, 2014), 18–19; McGee, *Faster and Furiouser*, 24–27; Silver and Ursini, *Roger Corman: Metaphysics on a Shoestring*, 266.

³⁷ See: Schaefer, *'Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!'*, 42–135.

³⁸ 'YOUR DOUBLE BILL PROGRAMME: The Beast with A Million Eyes!', *Picturegoer*, 32.1110 (1955), 17.

³⁹ *The Beast with a Million Eyes* (American Releasing Corporation, 1955), 1955 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048991/mediaviewer/rm659384832/?ref=tt_ov_i> [accessed 30 June 2022].

Desert Horrors

Made on a tiny budget with a small cast and limited locations and sets, *The Beast with a Million Eyes*' narrative of family tension is underscored by a preoccupation with the schism – the sense of alienation – between the individual and the world around them, and the absurdity of human efforts to make meaningful a meaningless world is conveyed through the family's relationship to the hostile desert. Vivian Sobchack recognised the symbolic value in the location shooting of low budget SF films. She argued that 'visual tension' can be detected in films which are 'literally grounded... for budgetary reasons', in earthly locations: 'These films, starting from home base and the familiar, strive not to bring us down to Earth, but to remove us from it in various ways... toward the viewer's alienation from the familiar and concrete'.⁴⁰ *The Beast with a Million Eyes* effectively presents this sense of alienation, isolation and absurd nihilism in the familiar through limited locations, restricted sets, and good use of authentic surroundings.

Corman's non-union production used a date farm in Palm Springs, California as the principle location for the picture.⁴¹ The ranch draws meaning from the film's emphasis on isolation and alienation; according to Sobchack, 'Such imagery may... cause anxiety, because it hits us – literally – where we live'.⁴² As Allan Kelley (Paul Birch) says: 'A date ranch in the off-season is the loneliest place in the world'. The ranch is a negative, dark, and gloomy space that may on a political level suggest a darker take on the American Dream as a failed concept; rather than taking the Kelleys out into a prosperous, individualistic existence, the ranch exposes them to the emptiness and meaninglessness of the surrounding desert, reducing them to an

⁴⁰ Sobchack, *The Limits of Infinity*, 108.

⁴¹ di Franco, *The Films of Roger Corman*, 6.

⁴² Sobchack, *Ibid.*, 109.

insecure existence over which they have no control. According to Sobchack, 'it is our security in the power of being human which is visually undermined' by such images.⁴³ The desert suggests a broader absurd schism between humankind and the power of nature.

The location is convincingly weird and dreamlike, and clear spatial coherence is disrupted and disorientated by thick foliage and shadow. These shadows engulf the characters, suggesting suffocation and gloom alluded to in Allan's opening narration. The uncredited black-and-white cinematography by Floyd Crosby greatly enhances the exterior shots of the date ranch that emphasises the eternality and impenetrability of the palm trees and their shadows.⁴⁴ Despite being in the middle of the desert, the date ranch is screened as a thick, almost alien forest. These qualities create the impression of the decentralized individual lost in an alien world. As places of horror and unease, Corman's locations are convincing. For Sobchack, 'Quietly and grayly, [such images] turn the familiar into the alien, visually subvert the known and the comfortable, and alter the world we take for granted into something we mistrust'.⁴⁵ Similarly, the desert is dark and empty; it is almost eternal as the horizon fades into the distant mountain range. Carol (Lorna Thayer) appropriately says: 'we might as well be on another planet', symbolizing the fact that the Kelleys are cut off literally and existentially from the world around them.

On *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, among other desert-set SF films, Sobchack argued that they 'take us away from our larger structures, our cities and skyscrapers which normally break up the disturbing blankness of the horizon'.⁴⁶ The desert mediates exposure and vulnerability and functioned symbolically as an expansive mass over which humankind had limited control over or knowledge thereof. Deserts were places that made human existence

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Silver and Ursini, *Roger Corman*, 266.

⁴⁵ Sobchack, Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 113.

difficult or intolerable, which resisted the imposition of all-too-human assumptions and structures. Relatedly, Dana Polan suggests that 1940s American films presented a ‘negative existentialism’ in relation to the environment; the postwar environment is inhospitable and alienating because it resists human efforts to make it reflect themselves and their own projects.⁴⁷ The desert in *The Beast with a Million Eyes* is inhospitable and alien and resists efforts to humanize it; the desert mediates what Polan called ‘radical externality’.⁴⁸ In *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, the desert – large, empty, and desolate – is a nothingness, a nihilistic place that exposes the essential minuteness of the human subject and the absurdity of the struggle to make it meaningful. While the horror of the desert is conveyed convincingly by Crosby’s moody black-and-white cinematography, Corman added an indulgently cheesy insert of an animal skeleton and a human skull to really hammer home this sense of negation. The human skull indicates, through reference to the fragility of the body, the way in which the desert strips down the human subject, much like how the Kelley’s are stripped down and isolated by their oasis existence. In such images, according to Sobchack, ‘the spectator is forced to a recognition... of Man’s precarious and puny stability, his vulnerability... his isolation’.⁴⁹ The Kelleys are rendered mere object, meaningless matter when placed within nature.

Due to the lack of budget, the desert (and its creatures) become (cheap) means of suggesting the Beast’s presence and power; in doing so, the film appears to equate the desert and the eponymous Beast as forces that deprive individuals’ self and identity. The “million eyes” of the Beast indicates its ability to possess the weaker Earth creatures: ‘They shall be my ears, my eyes, until your world is mine. Because I see your most secret acts, you will know me as the Beast with a Million Eyes!’. This is further cemented in the opening credits sequence

⁴⁷ Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, the American Cinema, 1940-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 142–143.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴⁹ Sobchack, *Ibid.*, 112.

which depicts eyes embedded and hidden within the natural formations of the desert, further equating the omniscient Beast with the anxieties of the desert. The sense in which the desert exposes the existential nakedness of the human individual is mediated through the Beast's power to occupy the minds of all creatures on Earth. The loss of autonomy due to possession by the Beast mediates the desert as inhibitor of physical transgression and freedom; the desert, quite literally, possesses the individual, just as the Beast possesses Him and Sandy. In confronting the Beast, the Kelleys confront the desert. Such symbolism, necessitated by the lack of budget for a monster, forgoes the need for the physical presence of a monster, which operates as a mediator of existential anxieties concerning autonomy and freedom.

The title of the script was initially "The Unseen" before becoming the more exploitable *The Beast with a Million Eyes*. Both indicate a preoccupation with seeing or being seen. The mute farmhand Him (Leonard Tarver) is a peeping tom. His room is full of lurid pin-ups, and he also spies on Sandy from a tree as she swims. Like the Beast, Him wants to possess Sandy, and his possessive desires are suggested through his gaze. Voyeurism and the act of being seen is played up in the film's trailer which, in exploitation fashion, overpromises in terms of sexual transgression and spectacle.⁵⁰ The trailer asks one to watch as a man's friend becomes a 'violinist of every code of decency'.⁵¹ The theatrical poster likewise invokes the threat of an unknown force to women as the Beast looks down on a scantily clad woman.⁵² Voyeurism is a prominent preoccupation, an anxiety surrounding personal security and selfhood (subjectivity). Carol feels this violation of personal security, sensing the malignant, controlling eyes of the

⁵⁰ *The Beast With A Million Eyes 1955 Movie Trailer* (YouTube: horrortheatervideo, 2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miDAMQ_JWDM> [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁵¹ Which itself nods to the potentially transgressive materials in the film in defiance of the PCA and Catholic Legion of Decency.

⁵² *Day the World Ended* (American Releasing Corporation, 1955), 1955 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049128/mediaviewer/rm2631802624/?ref_=tt_ov_i> [accessed 30 June 2022].

desert. She posits that some ‘master brain’ is at work, that there is ‘some pattern’. ‘Oh, you’re imagining things’, claims Allan. The following scene shows him enveloping his letter to the “Psychiatric Division” in Los Angeles, hinting at a central theme of alienation and estrangement being the cause of madness that was a prominent concern of humanistic psychology in these years.

Domesticity in the Desert

The Beast with a Million Eyes centres the disintegration of meaning within the collapse of the domestic unit as a site of security. Such plots had a distinct register with teenagers; they had responded well to the family disintegration plot of *Rebel with Out a Cause*. According to Sobchack, change and transition in the tumultuous post-war years brought on a destabilisation of the ‘domestic economy’ which led to a ‘lived sense of insecurity, instability, and social incoherence’.⁵³ As cheap products, many of Corman’s 1950s horror films feature a single suburban interior set around which much of the conflict-based narrative is played. This is especially the case in *The Day the World Ended*, *Not of this Earth*, and *It Conquered the World*, indicating the failure of central assumptions that gave meaning to postwar American life. In this case domesticity and the stable nuclear family as a central site of meaning and purpose. The breakdown of the domestic sphere as guarantor of meaning and purpose ties into the broader anxieties concerning alienation, discussed above. In the film, by being presented as incapable of providing security from the Beast, the domestic sphere is presented as unable to provide the existential security required of it. The use of a single set furthers this theme; instead of providing purpose, the domestic sphere stifles freedom by isolating and alienating the individuals within from one another. A feeling of homelessness is created for the main

⁵³ Sobchack, ‘Lounge Time’, 130.

characters – this homelessness is mediated through the literal insecurity and collapse of the domestic home. In future Corman films, the family is either non-existent or corrupted, tainted, and incestuous, as in the Poe cycle.

The Beast with a Million Eyes mediates the failure of the domestic sphere to provide secure meaning through the experience of Carol. The conditions of women in 1950s America led 1960s feminist critic, Betty Friedan, following Simone de Beauvoir, to argue that women were ‘contained ideologically and physically within the home’ by structures of oppression based upon constructions and mythologies about the essentialist qualities of “woman”.⁵⁴ In a similar sense, Carol is contained within her “natural” sphere, the home, and yet is alienated from it due to its failure to provide meaning. This is mediated through Carol’s failure to secure the home as a functioning space. The Beast arrives in a spaceship while Carol is in the middle of her domestic chores and the craft’s sonic shockwave causes the house to fall apart. Pictures fall off the walls, windows are smashed, Carol’s China crockery lies in ruins, a half-full coffee pot shatters, and the pie burns in the oven. The literal collapse of the home suggests her loss of control in domestic sphere. Subsequently, Carol loses a sense of the meaning and purpose supposedly imposed by domesticity. Following the destruction, Carol claims: ‘people aren’t safe anywhere these days’.

The family home in the 1950s was sanctified as a place of security and community, serving an ideological function. According to Sobchack, during the Eisenhower era and the general “settling down” of American life, ‘official rhetoric establish[ed] the family unit and the

⁵⁴ Quoted in Cotkin, *Existential America*, 260–261; see also: Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963. Reprint (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997); Joanne Meyerowitz, ‘Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Post War Mass Culture’, *Journal of American History*, 79 (1993), 1455–82; Eva Moskowitz, “‘It’s Gonna Blow Your Top’: Woman’s Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 8 (1996), 67–98.

suburban home as the domestic matrix of democracy even as divorce rates and personal debt escalated'.⁵⁵ Women who had worked "men's" jobs during the war needed to be compelled back not a domestic, familiar existence predicated on essentialist ideas about what a woman should be and do. Moreover, as many families moved to the suburbs, many women became limited, trapped within the domestic space. The domestic space became her job, her thing, and in many ways facilitated alienation and loneliness among American women. In the film, Carol cannot own her domestic space. The domestic realm rebels against her and resists utilization. The failed pies in the oven, for instance, disrupt the regular lunch time of the family. Far from being a predictable and ordered environment, the domestic sphere is prone to breakage and disorder. According to *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, the domestic sphere fails as an ideological function; it does not offer the sense of meaning and order that it is supposed to. Rather than acting as a secure base for the Kelleys, the house is symbolic of their dysfunction. Indeed, the Kelley house is a place from which characters often leave or are evicted from.

Beyond the domestic set, Allan's ranch is also the site of rebellion and revolution. The farm animals resist and rebel against the function imposed upon them: a cow resists being milked and eventually spears her owner to death; the chickens turn on the Kelleys; the family dog turns into a killer. Carol and Allan explicitly refer to these events as 'revolutions'. For Sobchack, the sequence where Duke the dog attacks Carol is significant, because it visually conveys the idea that our habitual assumptions are untrustworthy and prone to collapse. She argued that the dog does 'not act in ways merited by such usually sacrosanct roles'.⁵⁶ The domesticized family dog is an icon of the family, yet it turns killer when exposed to the desert, to the Beast. The scene in question has garnered criticism for the fact that Duke's attack is unthreatening. Yet, it is the seeming normality of the dog's behaviour that renders the scene

⁵⁵ Sobchack, 'Lounge Time', 131.

⁵⁶ Sobchack, *The Limits of Infinity*, 127–128.

uncanny. The dissonance between the dog behaving normally and Carol reacting with histrionic terror indicates a tension between Carol and her everyday existence. Yet, despite these domestic revolutions, the Kelley family still observes the ideological ritual of dinner to celebrate Sandy's birthday. As Carol says: 'there was nothing else I could do'. She attempts to cling to meaning and purpose by conducting the ideological household ritual. Their meal is lit by an oil lamp, an attempt to retain some semblance of order and meaning in a time of nihilism, clinging to light in darkness.

God in the Desert

There is a heavy Christian emphasis in both *The Beast with a Million Eyes* and *Day the World Ended*.⁵⁷ *The Beast with a Million Eyes* and *Day the World Ended* both utilize *Deus ex Machina* to resolve their plots, suggesting that God intervenes and destroys the threat to the protagonists. The reliance upon *Deus ex Machina* is typical of low-budget exploitation horror cinema, primarily because the films were produced in such a short amount of time, necessitating a cheap and swift conclusion. Such endings were often resolved in stock footage (such as a big explosion). The divine intervention of *The Beast with a Million Eyes* is executed through stock footage of an eagle attacking a desert rat. Moreover, the specific intervention of God meant that little expenditure was needed to craft a thrilling conclusion. Though the intervention of the Lord is often merely suggested in dialogue or in symbolism, it openly invites interpretation. God's presence does not contradict the bleaker existentialism of the text that position human beings in a meaningless relationship to meaning but presents a more optimistic route to meaning that was similarly adopted by many American Christian existentialists.

⁵⁷ Corman claimed that he was ambivalent towards religion; Corman, and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 4.

Far from being an exclusively atheistic modernism dominated by French thinkers, Christian existentialism was a popular intellectual current in 1950s America.⁵⁸ Often drawing on Søren Kierkegaard – who advocated an existential leap of faith – faith, for Christian existentialists like Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, is a personal commitment to a Divine meaning and purpose to life, and as a means of overcoming bad faith.⁵⁹ Living in faith is a commitment to this executed via one’s own freedom. Similarly, *The Beast with a Million Eyes* and *Day the World Ended* posit commitment to faith as an alternative to nihilistic despair, as a source of potential meaning. At the climax of *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, the Beast attempts to escape by in the body of a desert rat. However, the rat is killed by an eagle which appears out of nowhere. Allan raises his rifle to shoot the eagle, but Carol prevents him: ‘have you ever seen an eagle around here?’, she asks. Allan becomes a preacher:

Allan: Where did the eagle come from? Why do men have souls?

Carol: If I could answer that, I’d be more than human. I’d be...

The figure of the eagle is often employed in the Bible as a symbol of God’s strength and of His guidance such as in Deuteronomy 32:10-11: ‘He found him in a desert land... He led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirreth her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings...’. The Kelley family is similarly lost in the desert, and it is the eagle that leads them

⁵⁸ Cotkin, *Existential America*, 54–87.

⁵⁹ Tillich, *The Courage to Be*; Martin Luther King Jr., ‘Pilgrimage to Nonviolence’, *Stanford University: The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, 1960 <<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/pilgrimage-nonviolence>> [accessed 26 June 2020]; Julius Seelye Bixler, ‘The Contribution of Existenz-Philosophie’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 33 (1948), 47–48; John Wild, ‘Kierkegaard and Classical Philosophy’, *Philosophical Review*, 49 (1940), 536–51; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953).

out of it in each other's arms with a renewed sense of purpose and meaning. The Kelleys defeat the Beast by coming together, by committing to unity, to love, to family. Before heading to confront the Beast, Allan says: 'We're stronger than it is now, we're together, we can defeat it' and 'He's alone, Carol; we aren't'. The eagle is of course also symbolic of America. Potentially, the appearance of the eagle poses patriotic meaning, suggesting a slippage between faith in God and faith in national unity.

According to Tony Williams: 'the Cold War conservative Imprimatur of "In God We Trust" upon the American body politic used Christianity as a method of social control' and refers to *The Beast with a Million Eyes* as a 'conformist science fiction' film that employs Christian-American propaganda.⁶⁰ Despite being targeted at taboo-hungry teens, AIPs exploitation still operated within the confines of the PCA.⁶¹ Lowbrow exploitation films, far from presenting a negative vision of American life, participated in conversations about how to make life meaningful, with Corman's earlier horrors offering commitment to faith as one such solution to the existential malaise of alienation and absurdity.

2) **'Our story begins with... THE END': *Day the World Ended***

Similar to *The Beast with a Million Eyes* in many narrative and stylistic respects, albeit made with a relatively higher (though still small) budget, *Day the World Ended* is set in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse and surrounds a small group of survivors taking refuge in a safe house buried deep in an uncontaminated valley.⁶² Morris argued that *Day the World Ended* is one of the most thematically interesting of Corman's horror exploitation films, one that

⁶⁰ Tony Williams, 'Nicholas Ray's King of Kings', *Cineaction*, 76 (2008), 42–49.

⁶¹ Irving Rubine, 'BOYS MEET GHOULS, MAKE MONEY', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 16 March 1958), X7; Doherty, *Ibid.*, 52–53.

⁶² Morris, *Roger Corman*, 20; 'The Pit and the Pen of Alex Gordon', *Fangoria*, 3.27 (1983), 35.

transcends the basic conventions of the popular “atomic” picture of the decade, producing what Whitehead called something ‘reassuringly mythical’, though when actually considered in its original context, *Day the World Ended* was a typical part of a broader alignment of this type of entertainment with existential ideas.⁶³

Like many atomic SF-horror pictures of the period, *Day the World Ended* was sold as a realistic “what if?” scenario. Trade reviews similarly mediated this identity for the film.⁶⁴ The advertisements for the film indicate *Day the World Ended* as a ‘new high in NAKED SHRIEKING TERROR’, naked referring to the naked “realism” of the film, but also presenting possible sexual spectacle; a woman in her nightdress pursued by a quite literally horny beast with a third arm is displayed prominently on the theatrical poster.⁶⁵ The trailer depicts an emotional drama, human beings and their essential selfishness and irrationality captured in a realistic sense following the all-too-real possibility. It is thus framed explicitly as an existential drama, the desperate lengths to which ordinary people will go to survive and to preserve some sense of meaning at the end of the world. Corman said that he wanted to present a realistic postapocalyptic scenario in later films with films like *Teenage Caveman* (Corman, 1958) and *The Last Woman on Earth* (Corman, 1960).⁶⁶ *Teenage Caveman* was similarly mediated as an existential story set in ‘a wonderful and strange world before women knew shame’ where ‘the unknown challenged the young and the brave’. It was sold as a story where brave teenage individuals challenged restrictive laws and searched for meaning ‘beyond his horizon’.⁶⁷

⁶³ Morris, *Ibid.*, 21; Whitehead, *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁴ ‘Day the World Ended’, *Variety*, 201.6 (1956), 6, 22.

⁶⁵ *Day the World Ended* (American Releasing Corporation, 1955), 1955 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049128/mediaviewer/rm2631802624/?ref_=tt_ov_i> [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁶⁶ Ed Naha, ‘Cautionary Fables: An Interview with Roger Corman by Ed Naha’, in *Omni’s Screen Flights/Screen Fantasies: The Future According to Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. by Danny Peary (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1984), 233–235.

⁶⁷ *Teenage Cave Man* (1958) - Trailer (YouTube: Mystic550, 2010) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqLEucQzW48>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

Similarly, *The Last Woman on Earth* presents a postapocalyptic world in which the survivors ‘must make their own world, their own code of morals’.⁶⁸

House at the End of the World

Day the World Ended opens with: ‘What you are about to see may later happen... but to this anxious age in which we live, it presents a fearsome warning... Our story begins with... THE END [sic]’. *Day the World Ended* posits a situation where all that made human existence recognisable and meaningful has come to an end, by their own hands: ‘This is TD day: total destruction from nuclear weapons. And from this hour forward, the world as we know it no longer exists, and over all the lands and waters of the Earth hangs the atomic haze of death’. Note ‘the world as we know it’; *Day the World Ended* presents individuals in an existential crisis, how can human beings exist meaningfully when the world as they knew it ceases to be?

This tension is promoted through the low budget use of location (Bronson Canyon, LA) which, like *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, stages human alienation in a hostile, meaningless world. These locations, framed as cut-off from civilization, mediate the impossibility of transgression and escape, with the central characters trapped in a post-atomic world that defies human structures of meaning. Moreover, entrapment is mediated through the fact that, in the film, the survivors are shielded from the radiation by hills packed with lead ore; the very mountains that bring sanctuary which imprison the survivors in their new Garden of Eden, invoking a tension between the need for security and for transgression (or existential transcendence). An idea of the individual as being cut-off and decentralized from the world is presented, something noted by Louise Maddison (Lori Nelson) who describes her surroundings

⁶⁸ *Last Woman on Earth Trailer (1960)* (YouTube: CONELRAD6401240, 2011) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEAQV1zVDak>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

as 'isolated'. Importantly, the continued existence of the survivors in *Day the World Ended* is dependent on the weather. The winds push the radioactive smog over the valley and the iron ore hills naturally shielded the Maddison house from the atomic fallout of the nuclear war. However, while the winds keep the smog at bay, it also restricts the survivors from leaving the valley by erecting a radioactive wall around it, as is shown when two characters die after entering the smog. Moreover, radioactive rain threatens to bring death. The survivors in *Day the World Ended* are totally at the mercy of a dangerous and murderous natural world. Similarly, the Kelleys in *The Beast with a Million Eyes* are oppressed by the desert. They are cut off from kinship and interaction with others, with the only means of transport away from the ranch being a single car. Otherwise, the only other means of escape is on foot through the desert which means death. This creates a sense of the characters being unable to properly interact with or change the world around them; they become alienated from it as they are incapable of dominating the world they have been thrust into, of transgressing the conditions of their existence. This seemingly strips away the meaning of life, to transcend and utilize the world. The remoteness of the valley and desolation of the desert indicates the encroachment of nihilism. There is no meaning to be found in these locations; the desert is desolate and empty, while the atomic wasteland beyond the valley is at once a place of destruction and a place of uncomfortable, inhuman change. Both inhibit transgression and restrict existential possibility by placing the individual the complete mercy of the inhuman and the impersonal expanse of nature; humankind is presented, in both films, as insignificant and naked.

Corman's apocalyptic films mediate the crisis of the individual confronted by the disintegration of established meaning and a change in the order of things. Radek (Paul Dubov), one of the survivors, is contaminated and slowly mutates into the next stage of human evolution. Radiation upturns the natural order of things and ushers in a 'new world', according

to Jim. On Radek, Jim says: ‘Logically, he should have been dead by now’. Rick responds: ‘There’s no such thing as logic anymore’.

Jim [on Radek]: He defies all the laws of man and God.

Rick: There may be an entirely new set of laws, Jim, that we know nothing about.

The nuclear holocaust has destroyed the sources of meaning and assumptions that allowed individuals to clearly to navigate the world around them. Jim gives voice to his existential anxieties, saying: ‘Sometimes, I have the feeling of doom’. Jim faces down the inexorable march of negation without a legitimate and purposeful reason for resisting it. Change comes at the negation of previous meaning, Jim’s doom is in response to his inability to alter the course of change, to shore up his assumed meaning-structures and values.

The house that the survivors take refuge in functions symbolically as the last bastion of the old world, the sets of values and meanings that are under assault from broader change. Morris places importance on how the film transitions between the interior and exterior worlds – it shows ‘two kinds of worlds – the unsatisfying “real” and the “artificial,” wish-fulfilment alternative’.⁶⁹ The house mediates a wish-fulfilment, an attempt to secure the values that once made life meaningful. According to Jim, chief architect of the domestic fallout shelter: ‘I planned this whole thing just to stay alive’. Jim reveals that he has books on every craft for sustaining life. The home no longer has a purpose other than to merely sustain existence. The interior of the house is a typical 1950s suburban home, while the exterior shots were filmed at a sporting lodge in Bronson Canyon.⁷⁰ Initially, the Maddison family cling to the home as a place of safety and security, while the other characters flock to it for salvation. But the home proves an inadequate guarantee of those feelings; it becomes a prison that deters inexorable

⁶⁹ Morris, *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁰ Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 31; Whitehead, *Ibid.*, 22.

death. Tension, hatred, and jealousy indicates that the domestic sphere fails as a place of security and community. The house is the site of fracturing relationships, resentment, and a struggle for power. At the end of the world, the domestic sphere fails to offer much needed purpose and meaning in dark times of existential devastation. Like *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, *Day the World Ended* mediates on the collapse of the domestic ideology as a guarantor of a more philosophical sort of meaning and purpose, one the couple at the end must leave in order to find a new purpose.

Divine Water

Day the World Ended develops its religious themes to a greater extent than *The Beast with a Million Eyes*.⁷¹ The film presents a religious-existential commitment to life as a solution to nihilism and the problem of meaninglessness, finding meaning in faith. While Morris contends that a unifying preoccupation for Corman's films was the absence or malevolence of God – with *Day the World Ended* mediating on a 'clear antagonism between God and mankind' – he admits that the positive role of God in the film points to a moral of 'self-actualization' of the individual.⁷²

In one scene, Jim reads from Jeremiah (15:20-21): 'I am with thee to save thee and to deliver thee, saith the Lord. And I will deliver thee out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem thee out of the hand of the terrible'. This verse evokes the message of the opening narration, which claims: 'Man has done his best to destroy himself, but there is a force more powerful than man, and in His infinite wisdom he has spared a few'. God is present throughout *Day the World Ended*; it is suggested that God was responsible for the set of coincidences that

⁷¹ Whitehead, *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷² Morris, *Ibid.*, 21, 24.

ensured the survival of the key characters. According to *Day the World Ended*, while things may appear hopeless and without meaning, God has a plan for everything, we only need to commit to faith and to ourselves to find it. It is Rick who inspires Jim's renewed faith. Rick reveals that his brother was training to become a minister.

Rick: My brother believed the Bible gave strength and revealed a plan for everything.

Jim: Then I hope I find it before I lose my mind.

Jim later says to Rick: 'It's surprising how much strength I've drawn from you... you've given me a feeling of responsibility towards the future of our kind'. Jim is compelled towards taking responsibility for his own freedom in the new world. Rather than just sit and wait out the end – either in the form of atomic rain or a dwindling food supply – he realises that the future rests in his own hands. *Day the World Ended* calls for commitment. Existential commitment, particularly as it was conceived of in Camus, itself became a rallying call for counterculture in the late-1950s and early-1960s. For Camus, commitment and existential rebellion was a revolt against the meaningless, absurd conditions of human existence.⁷³ In a similar sense, *Day the World Ended* posits an existential commitment to faith as an individualistic revolt against meaninglessness.

Day the World Ended concludes on a similar note to *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, with the 'pure' and 'uncontaminated' rain washing away the sins of humanity (the atom bomb) by destroying the mutant and de-contaminating the Earth, re-creating the world for human habitation. Jim realises that it is God who has saved him and his daughter, and delivered Rick unto them, for a purpose. Jim (Paul Birch occupying a similar preacher role) claims: 'there's a

⁷³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. by Anthony Bower, [1950] 1953. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 19–21.

future out there, for you two. You've got to go and find it'. The last shot is of Rick and Louise, the new Adam and Eve, heading out into the unknown.⁷⁴ The other survivors are not so lucky.

3) 'Once they were men... now they are land crabs...': *Attack of the Crab Monsters*

Attack of the Crab Monsters follows a group of scientists who come to an eroding island to investigate the disappearance of the previous research team, only to discover that a group of mutant crab monsters are responsible. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* dismissed *Attack of the Crab Monsters* as a 'below average exemplar of the current science-fiction vogue. The story is chaotic, the idea is wildly over exploited and the film in general verges on the lunatic...'.⁷⁵ Trades like *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* commended the sensationalism and 'fun' concept, particularly drawing attention to the mind-eating crabs as the film's centrally interesting idea.⁷⁶ Silver and Ursini note the breakneck pace of the film: '*Attack* does not pause to philosophize on the issues at hand, as is common in most Corman films. Its action makes the point for him'.⁷⁷ *Attack of the Crab Monsters* is indicative of the low-budget style of mid-1950s exploitation cinema, in which spectacle and shock is emphasized over clear coherence. Though it has a clear story, the film cuts many corners in terms of spatial, temporal, and narrative logic. This was typical of films of this type, sold to an audience who cared little about those elements anyway. Spectacle, resonant themes, and lowbrow images were far more important for these audiences. Films like *Attack of the Crab* monsters were seldom naïve or

⁷⁴ Silver and Ursini, *Roger Corman*, 33.

⁷⁵ 'ATTACK OF THE CRAB MONSTERS', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 24.276 (1957), 86.

⁷⁶ 'Film Reviews: Attack of the Crab Monsters', *Variety*, 206.3 (1957), 6; James Powers, 'Corman Production Exploitation Piece: "ATTACK OF THE CRAB MONSTERS"', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 144.2, 3.

⁷⁷ Silver and Ursini, *Ibid.*, 57.

self-serious as many critics contend. Clear awareness of its ridiculousness (or absurdity) was integral to films like *Attack of the Crab Monsters* and in many ways regulated their meanings.

Morris is one of the few scholars to approach a thematic analysis of *Attack of the Crab Monsters*. For Morris, the deserted island is one of the most significant characters in the film and that the ‘abnormal, suspended-from-reality nature of the island is immediately apparent to the arriving group’.⁷⁸ Lieutenant Quinlan (Ed Nelson) suggests that the previous group ‘were lost completely and forever, body and soul’, leading Jules Devereaux (Mel Welles) to posit that their lost souls still linger on the island. Dr Weigand (Leslie Bradley) indicates that ‘Something is wrong in the air’. Quinlan points to the unnatural silence that permeates the island, the nothingness. Allusions are made to the island as a kind of hell, or purgatory; the trailer calls it a ‘A NIGHTMARE ISLAND’.⁷⁹ Morris notes that the “‘atmosphere of [the film] is characterized by entrapment in nature... and hopelessness’.⁸⁰ In an interview, Corman revealed his instructions to screenwriter, Charles Griffith: ‘I told Charles “I don’t want any scene... that doesn’t either end with a shock of the suspicion that a shocking event is about to take place”’.⁸¹ He added: ‘You always had the feeling... that something, anything was about to happen’.⁸² Corman and Griffith based the film around suspense and anxiety; the film attempts to invoke a sort of light dread (as well as surprisingly subtle humour), where the characters are constantly made aware of their vulnerability and the fragility of their existence. Terror is emphasised in the marketing for the film with the trailer telling the audience to ‘SHUT YOUR EYES! ... COVER YOUR EARS! ... THE MOST TERRIFYING HORROR ... EVER LOOSED ON A

⁷⁸ Morris, *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁹ *Attack of the Crab Monsters Trailer* (YouTube: frightism, 2010) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S68QJFheZaw>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁸⁰ Morris, *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸¹ Corman quoted in Naha, *The Films of Roger Corman*, 112.

⁸² *Ibid.*

SHUDDERING EARTH!'.⁸³ Human fragility is invoked as 'mankind faces its last desperate chance', struggling against the onset of this absurd 'strange horror' that will 'stagger the imagination' which mediates the idea of unready individuals facing down their imminent destruction and the disintegration of all that was once secure. As with *Day the World Ended*, nakedness is emphasised in the exploitation of 'daring skin divers', which foregrounds this conflict between humans and a horrific nature out of control: 'Up from the ocean depths... a tidal wave of terror!'.⁸⁴ Suspense and terror are played up in the film itself. The creeping sounds of the crabs for instance creates suspense, suggesting the creep of death (or worse). Even in lighter moments, this existential dread lingers. In one scene, the two bumbling sailors, Fellows (Beech Dickerson) and Sommers (Tony Miller) are playing cards on the beach, with sticks of dynamite as stakes. In a similar scene, Hank realises that he has accidentally brought a crate of dynamite into the house. Like the crabs, the dynamite suggests the immediacy of death, the constant vulnerability of the characters which they initially seem to merely laugh off or appear ambivalent towards.

The more serious sense of impending dread and inescapability is captured as the island collapses around the main characters and as they are slowly picked off one by one by the crab monsters. The scene where Dale (Richard Garland) and Martha (Pamela Duncan) go diving, for example, mediates on the schism between the human desire to control nature and their ultimate vulnerability to it, their contingency. While the underwater sequence is familiar (evoking the recent *Creature from the Black Lagoon*), it is also alien and unknown in the sense that it is dark, concealed, and associated with death by the decapitation of the sailor early on. Human beings do not belong there, they cannot control it, nor make meaning of it, as is revealed in an exchange between the two:

⁸³ *Attack of the Crab Monsters Trailer*.

⁸⁴ Davis, *Battle for the Bs*, 159.

Dale: You looked scared down there.

Martha: I was scared... and lost too.

Martha indicates this also when she explains why she got lost: 'I was using a big black rock as a landmark, but when I swam back the rock was gone'. The ocean is, like the island, insecure; Martha is in danger as there is little security for her (or the others) to cling on to, little to stop her floating off into the primordial darkness. Both Martha and Dale certainly look lost and vulnerable, especially as they are stalked by the crabs in the dark. Human beings are lost within nature and as a result vulnerable to it; nature is something insecure, something they cannot control. The low-budget qualities of the film which denied the actual ability to screen an island collapsing into the sea benefits this thematic preoccupation; the film's usage of space is incoherent and disorientating. Additionally, nature resists human desire by reminding them that they are fundamentally part of it, contingent on it. As with the desert shots on *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, Floyd Crosby's cinematography greatly elevates the natural surroundings on film to reveal human contingency on and vulnerability to nature, displaying the sense in which nature is uncontrollable and ultimately calls the shots. The sea is expansive and lonely, the horizon disappears in a hazy whiteness indicating eternity. In one shot, following Martha's observation that a mountain has disappeared, a fog rolls in obscuring dark cliff edges. The island is collapsing into night, into nothingness, and beyond the ocean barrier is an equal nothingness of white.

The island in many ways places the isolation of human existence at the centre of *Attack of the Crab Monsters*. Early in the film, the island is noted as displaying a 'lack of welcome, [a] lack of abiding life'. The island is revealed to have been contaminated by radiation from the H-Bomb. During this perfunctory exposition – which positions the film, semi-ironically, in the context of the primary source of existential anxiety in the 1950s – Corman cuts to some stock footage of a Gothic, foggy, dark forests indicating this as a place of horror and suspense.

The island is also cut off from the outside world first by storm, and then by the destruction of radio equipment. Humankind is completely alone, subject to a chaotic nature over which they have no power.

The human scientists are confronted with a universe that resists human rationality and desires for control. Morris reads the collapsing island as an indicator of collapsing identity, ‘a broad symbol of collapsing consciousness’, but it can also be read as the collapse of humankind’s worldview, of humanity’s feeling of centralisation and privileged position in the universe, meanings which the mediation of these films foregrounded for audiences.⁸⁵ The island suggests a collapse of reason, of a worldview that places the human being central to, and superior over, nature (the opening narration even suggests God’s desire to wipe humankind off the face of the earth). The blame for the events of the film is placed upon things that are ‘outside of nature’, that is, outside of their construction of nature. The realisation that there are things beyond what was rationally thought possible prompts a collapse in meaning, leaving little to nothing for the rational individual to stand upon; literally, the ordered, rational world collapses around the scientists of the film. As Weigand says: ‘We are unquestionably on the brink of a great discovery, it is not likely that discovery will be of a pleasant nature’. These are the top people in the field, and yet:

Devereaux: There are things I do not understand...

Weigand: There are many things I do not understand also, Jules!

Dale solemnly notes that the victims of the crabs were once men, but ‘now they’re land crabs’, pointing towards the fluidity of reality and identity. The fact that this conclusion is reached by scientists through reason itself suggests the power of rationality to reveal uncomfortable, anti-human truths. They rationally conclude these things, yet the result is absurd, unbelievable, and

⁸⁵ Morris, *Ibid.*, 27.

horrifying in its existential implications. Such is captured by Weigand: ‘How this can be, I do not know, but its implications are far more terrible than any ghost could ever be’.

Attack of the Crab Monsters mediates on those existential anxieties of alienation and estrangement in an apparently meaningless universe that were popular with young people in mid-1950s America, through the schism between humankind and the universe further in the development that mutant crab monsters, impervious to penetration by physical objects, steal the consciousnesses of their victims. The crabs are pronounced to be made up of free atoms, with no ordered molecular structure. As a result, they can assimilate matter, including, of course, the human mind. The human essence or soul is scientized, cutting away the core spiritual meanings. The human being, despiritualised, is rendered purely object, pure matter; the human being is a completely contingent thing, as much a part of the chaotic, disordered universe as the rocks upon which they stand. Moreover, that island is collapsing beneath them, just as their consciousness is increasingly divided by the crabs.

Through fact that the crabs want to ‘receive us in that great common stomach of theirs’, the film participates within wider discourses about conformity and totalitarianism (the crab sounds like a communist), which often reflected on the deeper loss of self and identity in existential terms. For the existentialist Barrett, totalitarianism ‘stripped nature of its human forms and presented man with a universe that was neutral, alien, in its vastness and force, to his human purposes... collectivised man, whether communist or capitalist, is still only a fragment of man’.⁸⁶ The sense in which things would be easier if the characters submitted to the crabs also mediates the dangerous attractiveness of totalitarianism, which interested existential psychologists like May and Fromm. Totalitarianism, for Fromm, ‘redirected and harnessed... anxiety for its own nefarious purposes’.⁸⁷ May agreed: ‘Totalitarianism is a

⁸⁶ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 21, 30, 35.

⁸⁷ Cotkin, *Existential America*, 64; Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 210.

cultural neurotic symptom of the need for community – a symptom in the respect that it is grasped as a means of allaying the anxiety resulting from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness of the isolated, alienated individuals produced in a society in which competitive individualism has been the dominant goal'.⁸⁸ May articulated and synthesised what many Americans were starting to feel during the post-war period; anxiety. This was a period of transition: 'we live at one of those points in history when one way of living is in its death throes, and another is being born'.⁸⁹ For Eric Hoffer, totalitarian mass movements 'offers [refuge] from the anxieties, the barrenness and meaninglessness of an individual existence...'.⁹⁰ The crabs are out stealing consciousness, stealing human subjectivity and using consciousnesses as macabre, ghostly puppets. Once this is realised, once the threat becomes more than merely death, the characters try to defend their crucial subjectivity, their souls.

The film also participates in concerns about contingency, the fact that the human being is a part of the world around them, and just like that world, is prone to collapse. It is established that the crabs are essentially chaos – free atoms with no molecular structure (but they look like crabs). Becoming one with the crabs is becoming one with chaos, a nihilistic sort of hell. Their loss of identity upon being consumed is framed in the film as a loss of the soul. Agency, autonomy, freedom, all such things are lost to the crabs, the loss of the soul means that the victims simply cease to be human at all. Moreover, it is through the crabs that the souls of the dead still linger on the island, ghosts remaining to haunt the living and lead them to their doom. The opening Biblical narration frames the film in somewhat religious terms: 'And the Lord said "I will destroy Man from the face of the Earth whom I have created. Both Man and Beast and the creeping things in the bowls of the earth, for it offended me, that I made them'. The

⁸⁸ May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, 223.

⁸⁹ May, *Man's Search for Himself*, 28.

⁹⁰ Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 41.

link is made between the crabs and the devils in the earth. This religious subtext is for the most part abandoned, particularly when a scientific explanation is offered for the crabs, leading to a demystification and de-spiritualization of the world. The soul is reconfigured as electrical impulses in the brain tissue, while the crabs are chaotic matter, demons of human making. God is, aside from the opening narration, conspicuously absent; a human(ist) drama about people struggling to maintain a sense of identity and consciousness against harsh existential threats is developed, in which human beings must come to terms with the schism that exists between them and nature, and the sense in which existence is utterly, unavoidably contingent on meaningless, chaotic material things. They must come to terms with human insignificance, the fact that their existence is not spiritually important or necessary, and that they are potentially a mere rung on the evolutionary ladder.

The crabs are eventually defeated (or are they?) by the humans, when Hank (Russell Johnson) sacrifices himself and lands an electric conductor on the final crab, suggesting a triumph of human determination and resistance against an absurd, powerful opponent. As we see also in the optimistic, committed endings of *The Beast with a Million Eyes* and *Day the World Ended*, this is a consistent trend in Corman's earlier films. The "normal" humans tend to win (at least temporarily) against the threat that confronts them, but usually at a cost (death of a loved one perhaps, or a friend). Humanity always triumphs in the end, learning vital lessons about the human condition and what the individual can do to resist or rebel against their horrific, absurd condition.

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Auteur and cult approaches to the lowbrow films of Roger Corman have obscured the fact that presentations of the 'the world as a place of either utter hopelessness or malevolent destruction of individual identity' was a meaning that was mediated more so by the industrial and soci-

cultural conditions of exploitation horror than by any articulation of personal vision on Corman's part.⁹¹ Moreover, most critics have neglected the intellectual currents at work at the time. Existential themes were a broader trend within this kind of film in the period and were by no means exclusive to Corman; exploitation horror was broadly aligned to these ideas in part because they registered with target audiences.

Corman, as producer, needed to appeal to a specific audience. According to *The New York Times*, 'The only goal of [AIP's] films... is to provide an hour or more of thrills and chills. Toward this goal, titles are selected for sensational and melodramatic appeal'.⁹² Clear play with ideas such as disintegration, alienation, estrangement, meaning, and absurdity, all of which was explicitly mediated as part of those films' intertextual identity, was part of the products' appeal, a means of marketing to the tastes of specific audiences. These films drew their existential meanings from participation with the thoughts and ideas that registered with teenagers, young adults, and a whole series of outsider communities. The existential themes present in these films was as a result of Corman's response to and shaping of his productions in response to the tastes of his audience and the trends in their subculture which connected with wider existential thought. Corman participated in and contributed to a trend in exploitation horror cinema that saw a broader alignment with and participation in wider existential ideas and discourses, leading to his films becoming very influential in the field.

⁹¹ Morris, *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹² Rubine, 'BOYS MEET GHOULS, MAKE MONEY', X7.

Chapter 5: ‘Life is an obscure hobo bumming a ride on the omnibus of art’: Authenticity and the Outsider in Corman’s Black Comedies

By 1960, Roger Corman was associated with a lowbrow exploitation cinema geared towards a youth market that consisted of teenagers and students, one that was strongly aligned with existential ideas such as meaninglessness, freedom, disintegration, alienation, and the Outsider. The following chapter will look at how such themes are mediated in Corman’s black comedies, *A Bucket of Blood* (Corman, 1959) and *The Little Shop of Horrors* (Corman, 1960), which can be seen as participating with ideas about the Outsider and the psychic alienation of young men in a “phoney” society increasingly without direction, purpose, or meaning.

The figure of the alienated Outsider was a prominent character in postwar American literature. Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye* became an icon of teenage alienation. The work of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, both strongly associated with existentialism, described the effects of an alienating society and bad faith on the psyche of Black individuals in their novels (Wright: *Native Son*, *The Outsider*; Ellison: *The Invisible Man*), which drew on similar ideas to the anticolonial existential psychoanalysis of Frantz Fanon.¹ By the late-1950s, the existential Outsider was the topic of sociological, cultural, psychological, and political writings. Paul Goodman wrote of a generation of young boys and men who were growing up “absurd”, purposeless, downbeat, with no direction or inner sense of meaning; they were ‘groups of boys and young men disaffected from the dominant society. The young men are Angry and Beat’.² Of course, young men and boys were precisely the sorts to flock to lowbrow

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington, [1961] 1965. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 2001); Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

² Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized Society*, 1960. Reprint (New York: New York Review Books, 2012), 19; Cyndy Hendershot, *I Was A Cold War Monster*, 107.

exploitation horror films, hence why Corman's films were often so preoccupied with meaninglessness and the plight of the outsider, particularly in men. This condition resulted, he argued, drawing on Whyte's *Organization Man*, in part from a highly organized society that no longer rewarded traditional displays and virtues of masculinity.³ Traditional senses of meaning guaranteed by society, are eroded by modernity, where, 'in the great interlocking system of corporations people live not by attending to the job, but by status, role playing, and tenure, and they work to maximize profits, prestige, or votes regardless of utility of even public disutility'.⁴ He continues: 'We live increasingly, then, in a system in which little direct attention is paid to the object, the function, the program, the task, the need; but immense attention to the role, procedure, prestige, and profit'.⁵ Goodman was insistent that this was not a psychological problem, but a broader existential one rooted in the real world.⁶ Existential psychotherapist, Rollo May, similarly articulated this: 'the chief problem of people in the [mid-twentieth century] is *emptiness*. By that I mean not only that many people do not know what they want; they often do not have any clear idea of what they feel' and moreover are '*powerless* to do anything effective about their lives or the world they live in'.⁷

Remedies were offered to young boys and men. Norman Mailer 'encourage[d] the psychopath in oneself', the hip, existential rebel with the courage to create one's own purpose.⁸ The Beats offered voluntary exclusion as a route to freedom, while Nietzsche's call to "live dangerously" as a self-created and self-affirmed work of art circulated widely among young

³ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 85.

⁴ Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd*, 7.

⁵ Goodman, *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20

⁷ May, *Man's Search for Himself*, 4, 11–12.

⁸ Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro', in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 583–4; Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1959).

people through Walter Kaufmann's popular translations.⁹ The Outsider's plight had broader significance beyond young boys and men. Such ideas informed the various political and cultural movements, such as the American New Left movement to which Camus' committed rebel was a hero, or the Civil Rights Movement which saw estrangement, alienation, and psychological problems as the result of racist oppression and adopted a whole series of existentialist outlooks and thinkers from Nietzsche to Fanon for a programme of resistance and change.¹⁰ Indeed, the Civil Rights Movement was read as an existentialist movement against bad faith at the time. Corman was involved in such conversations. In 1962, Corman would direct *The Intruder* (Corman, 1962), written by Charles Beaumont based on his own novel, about a racist agitator (William Shatner) who arrives in town and incites racist violence in response to school integration; the film mediates on themes such as bad faith and commitment.

Corman's horror comedies also mediate on many of these ideas. Many have attempted to link Corman to the counterculture, as an icon of the various movements, and as such read his films as key countercultural texts. While Corman would eventually come to be associated with the counterculture in the 1960s, his earlier exploitation horror films are better understood as consumer products marketed to disaffected, alienated teenagers and young people, particularly college students, many of whom were taking first-year courses in existentialism. Play with such ideas was all part of the ploy to make profit. Corman's horror comedies were also to some extent associated with absurd drama. Jancovich showed that the postwar theatre of the absurd, which 'emerged from a French cultural scene that also celebrated surrealism and, like surrealists, those associated with the absurd were often explicit fans of horror', was

⁹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 129–131, 250; Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Nietzsche: "Live Dangerously"', in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. & trans. by Walter Kaufmann, 1956. Reprint (New York: PLUME, 1975), 121–133.

¹⁰ Cotkin, *Existential America*, 225–251; Menand, *The Free World*, 380–421, 601–643.

strongly associated with horror.¹¹ The ‘theatre of the absurd was also fascinated by black comedy, in which there is a hesitation between, or explicit interaction of, humour and horror’.¹² Absurd drama, a term coined by critic Martin Esslin to collect a group of plays and playwrights with a loosely connected set of preoccupations, reacted to the conditions of the postwar situation, the ‘sense that the certitudes and unshakeable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away’, and mediated on the sense of ‘metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition’.¹³ According to Jancovich, in the theatre of the absurd: ‘the meaninglessness of the world (or the extent to which it is indifferent to human desire) is supposed to create an experience of terror, and the sense that human beings are merely “puppets controlled or menaced by invisible forces”. In the process... players [are] trapped within a game of arbitrary rules and... these themes recurred repeatedly in the films’.¹⁴

As mentioned, Corman was well aware of absurd drama which, by 1960, had a presence in the US. Corman financed Monte Hellman’s western version of *Waiting for Godot* and produced Hellman’s *The Beast from the Haunted Cave* (Helleman, 1959) which incorporated a number of existential motifs (such as “hell is other people” and “no exit”); Hellman would also direct a number of existential westerns in the 1960s with fellow existentialist, Jack Nicholson. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* linked Corman’s black comedies with theatre when it referred to *A Bucket of Blood*’s ‘tragi-comic situations’.¹⁵ One *Variety* review even used the term ‘absurd’ to define the comedy-horror of *The Little Shop of Horrors*’.¹⁶ Both films, in

¹¹ Jancovich, “Peter Brook’s Night of the Living Dead”, 79–80.

¹² Jancovich, *Ibid.*, 79.

¹³ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 23–24.

¹⁴ Jancovich, *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁵ ‘Bucket of Blood, A, USA, 1959’, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 27.312 (1960), 6; see also: Glen., ‘Film Reviews: A Bucket of Blood’, *Variety*, 216.9 (1959), 6; Jack Moffitt, “Bucket of Blood,” Beatnik Satire Filled with Laffs’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 157.20 (1959), 3; Tube., ‘Film Review: The Little Shop of Horrors’, *Variety*, 222.11 (1961), 6.

¹⁶ Tube., ‘Film Review: The Little Shop of Horrors’, 6.

drawing meaning from contemporary cultural discourses about the purposeless and alienated existences of the Outsider and organization men, certainly mediate on similar ideas that Esslin identifies as central to absurd theatre which, ‘castigates, satirically, the absurdity of lives lived unaware and unconscious of reality’ and satires the ‘deadness and mechanical senselessness of half-unconscious lives’ in which individuals function as automatons due to their inability to confront the existential reality of the human condition, that the world is meaningless, and that the individual is fundamentally free to define their own essence.¹⁷ Additionally, Corman’s films, like absurd theatre, complicated boundaries between trash and art. Corman’s black comedies were strongly aligned with the lowbrow; the defenders of culture at the *New York Times* barely afforded either film a review, aside for mention in an attack on those films which ‘pollute’ culture.¹⁸ Bosley Crowther believed *A Bucket of Blood* to be made for ‘creeps and kids’.¹⁹ The actors who appeared in the Outsider roles were recognizable faces of the drive-in teenage exploitation film. Barboura Morris also starred in a series of Corman teenpics, including: *Teenage Doll* (Corman, 1957), *Rock All Night* (Corman, 1957) (both scripted by Charles Griffith), *Sorority Girl* (Corman, 1957), and *Teenage Caveman*. Jonathan Haze appeared frequently in bit-parts for Corman, often in the role of a weirdo outsider, such as the criminal with the itchy trigger-finger in *Five Guns West* (Corman, 1955) and *Rock All Night*. Dick Miller played the teen lead in *Rock All Night*, among numerous other roles for Corman, predominantly in teenpics like *Carnival Rock* (Corman, 1957) and *Sorority Girl*. He also appears often as cannon fodder for Corman’s monsters, who often look into the camera right before being eaten (*Not of this Earth*). Jack Nicholson played the alienated teen lead in *The Cry Baby Killer* (Addiss, 1958), *Teenage Lovers* (Rush, 1960), and the Beatnik drag-racing

¹⁷ Esslin, *Ibid.*, 400.

¹⁸ Bosley Crowther, ‘LESSER EVILS: Considering the Cheap And Violent Films’, *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 7 February 1960), X1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

cop-killer in *The Wild Ride* (Berman, 1960). But *The Hollywood Reporter* notes how *The Little Shop of Horrors*, what it calls an ‘experimental satire’, was pulled from general release ‘in favour of special individualized art theatre handling’.²⁰ This was nothing unusual, as lowbrow horror films were frequently conflated with art films and often occupied the same exhibition spaces and were distributed using similar tactics. Moreover, as mentioned, like these art films, Corman targeted horror films like *The Little Shop of Horrors* at college students, as by 1960 the market for the distribution of films on college campuses and in film clubs and societies had grown considerably.²¹

1) **‘Walter Paisley is Born!’: A Bucket of Blood**

A Bucket of Blood centres on down-and-out waiter Walter Paisley’s (Dick Miller) quest to find a sense of meaning and purpose by integrating within the Beat culture in the bohemian café, “The Yellow Door”. A failed artist, Walter is rejected by the Beats until one day, after accidentally killing his landlady’s cat, he finds an artistic niche in coating dead bodies in clay which finds him the acceptance he so craved. The following will look at themes of alienation and meaning, and the figure of the estranged Outsider in this low-budget film shot in five days.²²

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²⁰ “‘Little Shop of Horrors’ For Art Theatre Release’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 165.3 (1961), 3.

²¹ Menand, *The Free World*, 579–580.

²² Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 62.

‘And the souls become flesh, Walter Paisley is born!’: Art and Inauthenticity

According to Morris, *A Bucket of Blood* is ‘based on a grim awareness of the gulf between people, the isolation of the individual, the impossibility of satisfaction or pleasure or faith’.²³

Walter Paisley is defined by alienation and his isolation from other people:

Mrs Swickard: Are you sure you’re all alone?

Walter: I’m always alone, Mrs Swickard.

Mrs Swickard: Walter, have you been talking to yourself again?

Walter: Well, I guess maybe I have, Mrs Swickard. Somebody’s got to...

Walter’s alienation stems from his estrangement from community, his status as a rejected outsider. Walter’s financial and existential poverty is suggested through his living space. He inhabits a grim two-room apartment, distinguished by stained walls, clutter, and mess. The disorganized nature of the place suggests Walter’s lack of control over his own life. Additionally, both he and the space around him is dominated and controlled by the nosey landlady, Mrs Swickard (Myrtle Vail). She is an unwanted surrogate mother who takes an overbearing responsibility for Walter. As Morris noted, this also extended to the regulation of Walter’s sex-life, ‘reminding him that he cannot bring girls to her “respectable rooming house”’.²⁴ Morris also figures Mrs Swickard as an ‘unsatisfactory mother figure... the closest Walter comes to any kind of family situation, except for the imaginary world at “The Yellow Door”’, indicating his rootlessness and lack of any real ties to a source of secure identity; his identity is frequently defined by this overbearing and regulatory figure, one who also does not really comprehend the depths of Walter’s depression.²⁵

²³ Morris, *Roger Corman*, 46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Walter's attempts to integrate with the Yellow Door's Beat community contributes to this sense of alienation. Like Walter's apartment, his place of work tells us much about both Walter and the crowd he seeks to impress. The Yellow Door resides down a dingy alleyway full of trash. The alleyway is a gateway to another social world, an alternative reality that evokes the voluntary social exile and disinterestedness of the Beats. Contemporary Beat counterculture rested on principles of self-alienation from mainstream American mass culture. The Beats celebrated life and death, freedom and risk, enlightenment, and self-destruction. It was an adversarial culture that according to Pells, 'received wider publicity than their novels or poems'.²⁶ Beat was an avant-garde literary movement organized around highly cultured young men who evoked an attitude to life which in turn attracted a circle of 'drifters, hustlers, petty criminals, drug users', mostly young men.²⁷ Menand wrote that some of this circle 'had literary aspirations, but they were effectively outside the class system, persons without cultural capital, social dropouts'.²⁸ Goodman argued that while there were many phonies in the Beat culture, nonetheless Beat art and culture possessed a register for those who were legitimately disaffected, something which is clearly on display in *A Bucket of Blood*.²⁹ Beat culture was strongly associated with existentialism, by writers like Norman Mailer, for their fixation on cutting loose from the totalitarian and oppressive organization of the mainstream and hitting the road which provided the individual with a more authentic kind of freedom, and a sense of legitimate community with fellow Beats, though, according to Cotkin, 'while the Beat individual felt alienated, he or she revelled in that outsider status, wearing it as an emblem of

²⁶ Pells, *Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, 375.

²⁷ Menand, *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Goodman, *Ibid.*, 216.

coolness. Unlike the existentialist, the Beat did not work through a perspective of anguish and dread'.³⁰ Nonetheless, the Beat preoccupations had an existential register.

Like Goodman's boys and young men, Walter attempts to integrate and find acceptance within the Beat counterculture, attracted no doubt by his own alienation. However, the Beats in *A Bucket of Blood* are portrayed as inauthentic, and see Walter as a pathetic lost soul, while they are alienated by choice. His attempts to integrate prove mostly futile until he stumbles upon his new murderous talent for art. In finding acceptance, Walter increasingly loses himself in the inauthenticity of his fellow Beats, becoming Walter the Artist. Walter believes that becoming a Beat will make his life meaningful, that fame and the love of Carla will lift him from literal and existential poverty. He sees a meaning to life guaranteed in the Beat counterculture of the Yellow Door café. Walter confronts the reality of existence as a struggle between the human desire for a meaning to their life and the unavailable guarantee of any meaning in the universe. He seeks meaning from Beats culture, which is at first denied to him; however, even when his life does become meaningful via acceptance, that meaning is only as temporary as his art and soon crumbles away.

One of the most suggestive scenes for Walter's existential predicament is the scene where Walter tries to create a clay model of Carla. The scene is played semi-tragic; it is ironic in that Walter's artistic incompetence is quite remarkable, and tragic because it is indicative of the total hopeless alienation and meaningless that defines Walter's life. What the scene suggests is that there is no implicit, guaranteed meaning in the world, and that the individual needs to make something out of it, that world is formless and without meaning, like clay, until the artist comes along and makes something of it. Yet Walter fails to do this. The clay is formless matter which Walter tries to mould into an image of Carla: 'Be a nose!'. This suggests,

³⁰ Cotkin, *Existential America*, 213.

firstly, that Walter cannot have Carla, that his pursuit of her love will come to nothing and fail to offer that much needed sense of meaning and purpose. It also suggests that Walter seeks meaning in the world, yet he cannot find it there; he cannot convert the world into something that is for him meaningful. His failure to convert the formless matter of clay into something tangible, recognizable, meaningful, is revealing of his inability to take any existential command. His artwork is similarly inauthentic, being contingent on other things, like a dead cat and several murdered individuals. Like an absurd puppet, Walter is mostly pushed and pulled by events (such as the accidental murders). He reacts to circumstance as opposed to taking an active command.

It could of course be suggested that Walter makes life meaningful through the dead bodies that he covers in clay, but this meaning is only temporary and insecure, as is shown by the fact that firstly, he only uses them for acceptance, and secondly, they eventually break. The true reality he tries to cover up breaks through the veneer of clay. Walter is also prone to bad faith, making excuses for himself such as when he accidentally kills the undercover police detective: 'I didn't mean to hurt you, Lou. But if you'd have shot me, you'd be mopping up my blood now'. Walter also uses Brock's poetry as a justification to continue his artistic murders: 'Let them become clay in his hands that he might mould them'. In his mind, without his art, Walter cannot remain one with the Beats; he simply must keep going to maintain a sense of meaning.

Walter believes that his existence will become itself meaningful if he can find Beat acceptance, something which is validated for him when Brock delivers a poem in Walter's honour, following the completion of Walter's third "statue":

Duncan knows; Tuesday sunrise knows; Alley cats and garbage cans and steaming pavements
and you and I and the nude descending the staircase, and all such things with souls we know
that Walter Paisley is born! Green rubber bells; beat cotton gong strike; silken cymbals play;

leaden flutes; the cats and cans and you and all such things with souls we shall hear; Walter Paisley is born! And the souls become flesh; Walter Paisley is born!

Griffith wrote the poetry spoken by Brock to evoke what he saw as the meaningless pretentiousness of Beat poetry. Notably, the meaningless of language, the inability of it to convey anything of meaning, is a key feature of absurd drama.³¹ Beat art created distance with mainstream culture by proving deliberately provocative, angry, and extreme. The controversies of Beat counterculture in the 1950s were not unknown to Corman and Griffiths, who intended the film as a satire 'about the trendy beat coffeehouse scene'.³² Beatnik culture flourished in the late-1950s following the writings of Allen Ginsburg ('Howl', 1956), Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*, 1957), and William S. Burroughs (*Junkie*, 1953; *Naked Lunch*, 1959). Griffith's ironic script, delivered with the utmost seriousness and impressive rhythm by Julian Burton as Brock, presents the poem as completely meaningless, a jumble of words highlighted by some rather cuckoo sounding jazz. What is significant however, is that Walter seeks meaning in them, a reason for his existence. The poem is absurd, as is Walter's extraction of meaning from it. The fact that Walter is blind drunk during this poem is also significant; his drunkenness indicates a further disconnect from the world around him, trapping him in a deluded world in which he is king. He is treated like a king, ironically, by Carla and Brock, complete with a phoney crown on his head and a toilet plunger in hand. However, Walter cuts the figure of a fool more so than a king. Walter says to Carla: 'Did you hear what he said? All about me... it's true, isn't it?'. It is like Walter is in a deluded dream state, desperate to cling to the reality of what is happening to him, and yet fundamentally insecure. To Brock, he says: 'I wouldn't ignore you [Maxwell], I know what it is to be ignored'. His continuation of his murderous art responds to this sense of insecurity. After reeling off a list of statues he wants to make, Walter reveals his relatively

³¹ Esslin, *Ibid.*, 26.

³² Corman and Jerome, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood*, 62.

simple ambition: ‘everybody will say “Walter, let me shake your hand, it’s been a real pleasure to have known you”’. Walter simply needs recognition, to be seen, for people to be aware of him as a person and to accept him. *A Bucket of Blood* mediates the horror of *not being seen*, of being invisible to the gaze of others. Walter craves that objectivity that comes with being seen.

‘I know what it’s like to be ignored...’: Beating Inauthenticity

The Beats lamented a mass culture which decentralized and made homeless the human individual. Beat counterculture was built around the recognition of the individual and affirmation of individual freedom and enlightenment. According to existentialist Hazel E. Barnes, these characters ‘express a revolt against society and against the human condition; they all are sympathetically concerned with those who, from choice or necessity, live as outcasts on the fringes of society’.³³ Yet, *A Bucket of Blood* articulates a point that a number of critics made at the time, that Beat culture essentially ends up with its own conformist structure of rules and restrictions, deliberately alienating of those who did not share its cultural politics or situation, a culture that is detrimental to authentic individuality.

Even though Beat culture is the culture of the alienated, the homeless, and the dispossessed, Corman’s ‘cool but pretentious’ Beats reject Walter, despite Walter being the most genuinely alienated character in the film.³⁴ These Beats are inauthentic phonies, evidenced in their comically outrageous yet conformist outfits. For instance, the head Beat, Maxwell Brock, wears a tuxedo with socks and sandals.³⁵ The Beats become uniform in a literal sense. This is also indicated in Walter’s transition to Beat artist, where he ‘*mimics the popular*

³³ Hazel E. Barnes, *An Existentialist Ethics*, 1967. Reprint (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 123.

³⁴ Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁵ This outfit was chosen by Burton because he had swollen feet; Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 63; Whitehead, *Roger Corman*, 46.

stereotype of “the artist” [sic], a wacky “Beat” outfit; he dons a black beret, a scarf, and noisy striped suit jacket, and wields a cigarette holder.³⁶ To be accepted by the Beats, Walter must look like a Beat. As Brock states in his celebratory poem, before he became an artist ‘no one knows that Walter Paisley is born!’. ‘Walter Paisley is born’ only when he becomes an artist; only in becoming immortalized (seen) in Brock’s poetry is ‘Walter Paisley’ recognized as an individual. Beat culture in the film appears governed by its own arbitrary bureaucracies, with its own figure head in the form of Brock (who is worshiped). Morris points out that when we first see Brock (filmed at a low angle), ‘he stands on a stage far above Walter... he is “above” the busboy in every sense’.³⁷ The Beats in this film, and later Paisley, are inauthentic, “phoney”; their image (as well as their art) is carefully cultivated to give the impression of being random, arbitrary, rebellious. It is a necessary uniform needed to fit in, to be a Beat. In joining the Beats, Walter becomes a puppet dancing to a series of arbitrary rules and controls.

That this is just an act is revealed when Brock attends Paisley’s exhibit near the end of the film. He drops his exclusionary and dismissive Beat framework when the mainstream art critics start to talk highly of Walter’s work. Brock strolls over to Walter, champagne in hand:

Brock: Why should you be so depressed, have you heard the things they’re saying? You can make twenty-five thousand on these pieces alone.

Walter: I thought you put money down.

Brock: I do! But twenty-five thou’? [sic].

According to Morris, this exchange is significant for Walter’s final recognition of ‘Brock for the hollow man he is’³⁸. Walter has recently been rejected by Carla, who is romantically interested in ‘thinking people, artistic people’. She does not, however, love Walter, and only

³⁶ Morris, *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

kissed him ‘because of [his] work’. Walter replies, ‘I get it, I see the whole thing now. Nobody knows that Walter Paisley is born’. This realization that the Beats only paid any attention to him because of his art sends Walter into a depression; he acknowledges the inauthenticity of his “friends”, the fakery of these artists, and the unsatisfactory existence of one who loses who they are to become “somebody”. This indicates the absurdity of Walter’s tragic story, the fact that the meaning he sought was non-existent and existentially unsatisfying. Brock drops his act to the tune of twenty-five thousand dollars, implying that he too would sell out. The countercultural ethic of the Yellow Door is also dropped by two-faced coffeehouse owner, Leonard de Santis (Antony Carbone) to attract a more prestigious (and rich) crowd that would otherwise be put off by the “bums” who normally frequent the premises.

Inauthenticity, the sense of something not being what it really is or trying to be something it is not, is a core theme of *A Bucket of Blood*. In “becoming” a Beat, Walter is being inauthentic; his inauthenticity lies in the fact that he only participates in Beat culture to find a sense of meaning that he himself, as an individual, cannot create for himself. Like Sartre’s waiter in *Being and Nothingness*, Walter merely plays at being a Beat, going through the motions and typical performances. Ironically, Walter is in fact employed as a waiter, a job he is terrible at performing. The only thing he seems to be genuinely good at is murder. Walter is inauthentic, but he is simply quite bad at being inauthentic. Walter’s art mediates his inauthenticity in a number of ways. Like his art, he is fake, showing a façade that conceals a more fundamental reality. This reality is that Walter is dead inside, little more than a zombie meandering through life with little rhyme or reason. Yet the façade that conceals this is flimsy and temporary. The film creates tension (as well as comedy) in the anticipation of the veil being dropped, the revelation of Walter’s crimes.

‘I will talk to you of Art, for there is nothing else to talk about’: Creative Living

There is a broadly humanist theme of creative living that runs throughout *A Bucket of Blood*.

One of Brock’s poems opens the film:

I will talk to you of Art, for there is nothing else to talk about. For there is nothing else... Life is an obscure hobo bumming a ride on the omnibus of Art... Creation is, all else is not... The Artist is, all others are not. A canvas is a canvas or a painting. A rock is a rock or a statue. A sound is a sound or is music. A preacher is a preacher, or an Artist. Where are John, Joe, Jake, Jim, jerk? Dead, dead, dead... They were not born before they were born. They were not born... Where are Leonardo, Rembrandt, Ludwig? Alive! Alive! Alive! They were born!

While intended as satire, Brock’s pretentious affirmation of the artist subsequently mediates on the core theme of creative living that is integral to the film, as well within existentialist philosophies (such as Nietzsche). The goal of many existentialist ethical philosophies is to live such that one determines and controls one’s own existence and identity. The free individual becomes self-authored and authentic. It is quite ironic, then, given that the Beat culture of the *Yellow Door* is so stagnantly conformist and controlling, and so two-faced and inauthentic. As Maxwell says when Walter begins reciting his poem: ‘I refuse to say anything twice. Repetition is death... When you repeat something, you are reliving a moment, wasting it, severing it from the other end of your life. I believe only in new impressions, new stimuli, new life’. Further, Brock critiques conformity: ‘I also believe in creative living. To be uncreative, you might as well be in your grave, or in the army’. Likewise, Walter’s “statues” are mere repetitions. In an act of bad faith, Walter justifies his art by quoting Brock: ‘Let them become clay in his hands, that he might mould them’. Walter conforms because he repeats the Beats, he replicates them to overcome alienation. But in doing so, he lives uncreatively, and eventually does die by his own hand. Brock even mocks Walter’s inability to be original earlier in the film: ‘Walter has a clear mind. One day something will enter it, feel lonely, and leave again’. Brock suggests that

conformity is the same, essentially, as death; one is dead because one cannot create anything new or live according to any personal, self-constructed values.

‘It would have been called “Hanging Man”. His greatest work’: Death and Realism

A Bucket of Blood is punctuated by Walter’s suicide. After the veil is shattered and Walter is revealed as a murderer, leading to even more resounding rejection from society, he decides to hang himself whilst covered in clay – a final piece of art. According to Camus: ‘Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively... the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering’.³⁹ In *A Bucket of Blood*, Walter commits suicide because he is unable to face his meaningless existence any longer. Walter’s criminal art essentially becomes pointless in the wake of Carla’s rejection. Continuing to suffer is useless, without his object of romance and without his newfound family of Beats, a life of tension, suspense, and murder has no purpose. Moreover, his suicide represents a refusal to take responsibility for his actions, to face up to the consequences of murder. Death, then, is a form of nihilistic release not only from suffering, but from himself.

The real-world Beats revelled in and welcomed death as a release from the boredom and artificiality of the modern world. Similarly, Corman’s Beatniks in *A Bucket of Blood* are shown to celebrate and valorise death by elevating it to a form of high art. Walter Paisley is accepted into the Beat community for the realism of his “statues” which capture individuals (and a cat) in the throes and pains of death. Little do the Beats know, these models are Walter’s murder victims covered in clay. For the Beats, Walter has produced true art, his ‘masterpiece’. The “realism” of Walter’s art is debated by the Beats. As stated, the real-world Beats were

³⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 7.

defined by a dissatisfaction with reality, choosing instead to retreat into a disconnected alternative counterculture. This is shown in the fact that many of the Beats in the film are stoned and numbed to what is going on around them.⁴⁰ For Morris, the Yellow Door represents such a closed, imaginative reality, ‘the creation of an enclosed world which they control – temporarily – as an alternative to the unacceptable “real” world whose chief characteristic is eventual death’.⁴¹ Upon finding out that Walter is concealing dead bodies in clay, Leonard attempts to bait him: ‘[Walter’s] work has enormous realism. You can hardly tell it from the real thing’. A Beat responds: ‘Well, that sounds like a real put down’. Similarly, when explaining his own poetry, Brock says: ‘One of the greatest achievements in modern poetry is the elimination of clarity. I am proud to say that my poetry is only understood by that minority which is aware’. As Walter’s statues grow increasingly macabre, Leonard says: ‘you can see the direction his realism takes, it’s unhealthy!’.

The Beats reject reality because they are dissatisfied with it. They think that it is sick, that those blindly caught up in it are ill and unaware. The conversion of death into art makes it more palatable and more affirmative of the current condition of humankind. Upon seeing Walter’s “Murdered Man”, Carla says: ‘It’s hideous, yet it’s eloquent. It expresses modern man in all his self-pity’. This becomes particularly problematic when the Beats inspect and scrutinize Walter’s “mould” of Alice (Judy Bamber). She is strangled to death while modelling for Walter. The mould of Alice is revealed (or undressed) the next day. Walter’s art is a form of undressing, stripping human beings back to their essential nakedness and vulnerability (these elements are exploited in the trailer) which is probably precisely what the Beatniks see in his models (Brock: ‘I’m honoured to know this man... Walter, I’m deeply moved’). These Beats,

⁴⁰ Beatniks in the 1950s and 1960s notably experimented with mind-altering drugs that offered an escape from reality; Barnes, *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴¹ Morris, *Ibid.*, 51.

for Corman and Griffith, are nihilistic; they hate life so much that they are prepared to elevate self-destruction to a work of art. The statues are, for the Beats, an indictment of realism, a recognition of how terrible the real is, and an affirmation of Beat self-isolation and disconnectedness; for Walter, the statues similarly allow him entry into a fictional, imaginary world that is somehow separate from his banal, alienated existence in the real world. But the “real” world always comes through, there is no escape.

2) **‘Feed me!’: *The Little Shop of Horrors***

Scripted again by Chuck Griffith using the framework of *A Bucket of Blood* and mediating on many of the same absurd themes, *The Little Shop of Horrors* follows Seymour Krelboin (Jonathan Haze), an impoverished loser working in Gravis Mushnik’s (Mel Welles) Skid Row plant store. Pining after the Audrey (Jackie Joseph), Seymour finds fame and fortune after he presents the strange plant, dubbed Audrey Jr, causing Mushnik’s store to become instantly successful. Audrey, however, has a taste for human blood. In order to maintain his success, Seymour is forced to present Audrey Jr with fresh murder victims before eventually killing himself in order to stop the plant’s insatiable appetite. Shot in two days, *Variety* called the film ‘a sort of rowdy vegetable that hits the funnybone in about the same way that seeing a man slip on a banana peel does. It’s absurd, but different [sic]’.⁴² Situated clearly by the trade press in a Twilight Zone between trash and art, *The Little Shop of Horrors* was mediated as an offbeat variation on a familiar horror framework.

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⁴² Tube., ‘Film Review: The Little Shop of Horrors’, 6.

‘Suddenly Seymour!’: The Tragicomedy of Seymour Krelboin

Seymour is a similar character to Walter Paisley: an alienated young man living in poverty, ostracised by society, lusting after a girl, leading a life that is wholly without meaning, purpose, or direction. However, Seymour’s sense of alienation is a little different, a little more extreme than Walter’s. While Walter tries desperately to overcome the meaninglessness of his life, the absurdity of the human condition, Seymour seems wholly resigned to that existential fact, though not in any positive, affirmative way. Seymour is not some Camusian absurdist man who takes the inherent meaninglessness of life as a starting point for creative living. Seymour is barely alive; he fits into the routine mechanized existence that he and the other inhabitants of Skid Row are unable to escape from. As Hogan wrote, Seymour ‘may be cinema’s ultimate victim of circumstance. He does not act – he reacts, and is dominated by nearly all the principle people in his life’.⁴³

Seymour’s character is defined by a passivity and acceptance of his lot in life, an unwillingness (or inability) to really do anything about it:

Seymour: Don’t waste your pity on me Audrey. I’m not worth it.

Audrey: Who says you’re not?

Seymour: Everybody.

Audrey: Yeah, I know.

Seymour does have dreams. When asked what he wants ‘to be’ by Audrey, he replies: ‘I wanna grow things. If I had a lot of money, I’d go to the south seas where they grow the most fabulous plants in the world’. Looking wistfully away, Audrey says, ‘That sounds exciting’. Also

⁴³ Hogan, *Dark Romance*, 222.

looking away, Seymour agrees: ‘Yeah...’, acknowledging the hopelessness and achievability of that dream.

In his black comedies, especially through Seymour in *The Little Shop of Horrors*, Cochran argued that Roger Corman (with Charles Griffith) ‘took the character of the alienated, insignificant nebbish even further, portraying him as driven by his anonymity and powerlessness into fits of mass murder in a desperate attempt to establish his significance’.⁴⁴ The success of Seymour’s strange vampire plant grants him some public visibility, a sense of importance. Otherwise, without Audrey Jr and the visibility it brings him, Seymour has no real sense of identity whatsoever, no reason for his existence. He goes to work, does a terrible job, goes home to his sordid, rotten apartment and is dominated by his hypochondriac mother, Winifred (Myrtle Vail). Like with Walter in *A Bucket of Blood*, the dominating mother-figure (played by the same actor) regulates and controls Seymour’s existence. Winifred likewise monitors Seymour’s sex-life, infantilizing him: ‘She’s out after your money... She’ll latch onto ya until you get some, and then goodbye fortune... Ya never trust a woman who’s too healthy’. Seymour becomes both trapped, contingent in a dual caregiving and care-receiving role, both of which deny escape from his mother: ‘Please don’t die till I get back ma. I’ll take care of ya, I’ll always take care of you’. This mother-son relationship cements this idea that Seymour is alienated from his own existence, unable to take any creative, self-determining role, unable to exert any humanistic agency. This relationship is also mediated through Seymour’s relationship with the plant. As with his mother, Seymour nurses the plant which is on death’s door. He quite literally gives his blood to the task. Seymour’s life is made to revolve around the plant, as his reputation and his job is made to depend on it by the tyrannical Mushnik. The plant becomes another Winifred, a creature that forces itself into dependency on Seymour to

⁴⁴ Cochran, *American Noir*, 166–167.

such an extent that it takes control of his life. The fact that Seymour names the plant after his love, Audrey, perhaps suggests Seymour's need to be dominated by and contingent upon the women who provide some semblance of purpose. Also, like his mother, Seymour cannot escape from Audrey Jr, his existence is contingent upon it. He says to the plant 'if you die, I don't know what I'll do...', mirroring the above conversation with Winifred.

'Skid Row... my beat': The Absurd Zombies of Skid Row

Both *A Bucket of Blood* and *The Little Shop of Horrors* have what Morris called a "low-budget aesthetic": "The very dreariness of these black-and-white dramas... is an early indication of Corman's view of the world as a closed, empty, pointless place".⁴⁵ Cochran agreed: "the few, sparsely-furnished sets... of Corman's 1950s movies created a universe that was simultaneously claustrophobic, barren, paranoid, and absurd".⁴⁶ This though, is less an articulation of personal vision than a result of the reality of exploitation film production, which frequently cut down and recycled sets and props. Additionally, there is the factor of the market for these films that demanded lowbrow texts, such that the low elements of Corman's films were 'deliberately accentuated'.⁴⁷ The potential nihilistic, absurd meanings of these properties were regulated by the cultural politics and identities to which these films were marketed (alienated, estranged young outsiders).

The setting of the film also registers with such sensibilities. Sgt. Fink (Wally Campo) describes Skid Row as 'a part of town that everybody knows but nobody wants to see'; it is on the periphery of society, outcast to the fringes, much like the characters inside. The fact that the bulk the film is confined to a single space is indicative of this entrapment in an exiled

⁴⁵ Morris, *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ Cochran, 'The Low-budget Modernism of Roger Corman', 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

universe. Seymour has few places to go and consequently few possibilities. In many ways, *The Little Shop of Horrors* as well as *A Bucket of Blood* resemble stage-plays, with strong associations with absurd theatre.⁴⁸ In contemporary absurdist theatre, single sets were often used, or the narrative would be mostly contained to an expressionistic single location, as in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where two men wait by a tree seemingly endlessly for a person called Godot. In Ionesco's *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It* (1957), a dysfunctional husband and wife have not left their flat for fifteen years and are stuck with a dead body that keeps on growing. Like the dead body of *Amédée*, the plant in *The Little Shop of Horrors* grows larger, and the need for Audrey Jr to keep growing to maintain Seymour's love-life, his job, and hopefully to purchase an iron lung for his mother, infringes upon his freedom to determine the course of his own life. The insatiable, growing appetite of the plant reflects the sense in which Seymour losing control of the thing that gives his life any sort of meaning and purpose, to such an extent that he loses his will power to the hypnotic plant, resigned to existence as a mechanical puppet. Similar stylistic visual methods (and underlying philosophical preoccupations and assumptions) found in absurd drama such as cheap, limited sets, and narratives contained to a single space were utilized in Corman's exploitation films which, like those plays, mediated on the absurdity of the situation and human condition, on the alienation of the individual in a barren universe devoid of meaning, feelings that would have been recognizable to target audiences undergoing their own crises or who were well read in Camus and existentialism.

Both films are devoid of any meaningfully developed characters. For instance, *The Little Shop of Horrors* is full of caricatures (and ethnic stereotypes); Seymour is a loser, Wilbur Force is a masochist, Gravis Mushnick is a penny-pinching small business owner, Audrey is

⁴⁸ Both were adapted as such in 1982 and 2009 respectively.

an innocent dolt, and Winifred is a hypochondriac.⁴⁹ In *The Little Shop of Horrors* in particular, the denizens of Skid Row aimlessly perform their pre-ordained function. For instance, almost every time we see Mrs Shiva, she comes into Mushnick's store weeping about the recent death of a relative before preceding to purchase flowers for the funeral, lamenting the fact that Mushnick will not give her any for free. This repetition of events is highlighted when, upon Shiva's entry into the store, Seymour asks: 'what's new?' – but, of course, nothing is new. Shiva even refers to deaths in the family ('My nephew Frankie just lost his little boy...') as 'the same as usual'. Jancovich notes how death does not seem to really bother anyone in the film.⁵⁰ Seldom do the central characters react to Mrs Shiva's "news" with any authentic interest, they merely fall in with the act, the play, and get to work fixing her funeral bouquet. Jancovich pays close attention to the 'blank, mindless' dialogue between the two detectives, Fink and Coolie.⁵¹ The scene features the two detectives seemingly going through the motions of their job and lives with total detachment: 'These two figures not only fail to solve anything, but discuss everything in a cold, mechanically deadpan way'.⁵² Similarly, the two girls who want to spend two thousand dollars on Mushnick's flowers finish and start each other's sentences in a melodic, repetitive way.

Seymour's slapstick moments are also mechanical and planned. There is a running gag of Seymour getting his foot stuck in a bucket and tripping over.⁵³ Seymour's incompetence is so mechanistic as to be expected; like with Mrs Shiva, the other characters seem to be unaware of it, except Mushnick, but even then, his concern lies with the impact on his business. This

⁴⁹ See: Danny Peary, *Cult Movies* (London: Vermilion, 1981), 203–205; Marc Jensen, "“Feed Me!”: Power Struggles and the Portrayal of Race in Little Shop of Horrors", *Cinema Journal*, 48.1 (2008), 52.

⁵⁰ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 281.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 280.

⁵³ The classic slapstick of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Laurel and Hardy itself influenced the physical comedy of the theatre of the absurd; Esslin, *Ibid.*, 335–336.

mechanical puppetry of Seymour is accentuated when Audrey Jr is introduced into the narrative. After the first scene of Audrey Jr talking, Seymour goes for a walk to clear his head. The scene is banal, seemingly insignificant. Hogan saw that the ‘film’s nighttime exteriors, shot on location in the slums of Los Angeles... contribute to the aura of surreal hopelessness [sic]’.⁵⁴ Later in the film, when Seymour is hypnotised by the plant, the earlier scene is mirrored. As opposed to standing out as an individual, Seymour is thoroughly deindividuated; even his wacky slapstick antics are not unusual, because the real-life drunks in the background are doing the same thing. Seymour’s hypnosis is also mirrored by the genuine background players. In both scenes of Seymour’s walk, the extras are spaced out, throwing dice in doorways, some individuals stare listlessly into a black shop window, people are asleep on the floor. The mechanistic repetition of life is captured well in this scene as Seymour bumps into people who will not move out of his way as though both Seymour and the others are set on a predetermined course. Interestingly, these scenes on location were shot guerrilla style by Chuck Griffith. Griffith employed the local homeless population to assist in the second unit shots, lending a significant authenticity to these scenes, a genuine capturing of the state of being and situations of these outsiders.⁵⁵

In *The Little Shop of Horrors*, when Stoolie tells Fink that he lost one of his kids to an accident with matches, Fink responds: ‘Well, them’s the breaks’. What is clear in *The Little Shop of Horrors* is the pervasive resignation to the fact that there is no meaning to existence, as opposed to the acceptance of it. Fink does not even question the seeming arbitrariness of death by playing with matches, nor does Stoolie seem bothered by it. According to Camus, ‘mechanical nature of many people’s lives may lead them to question the value and purpose of

⁵⁴ Hogan, *Ibid.*, 223.

⁵⁵ Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 66.

their existence'.⁵⁶ Mrs Shiva seems to expect the arbitrary deaths of her relatives; as such her tears, her self-pity, and her attempt to get free flowers are routine and rehearsed. Similarly, when Fouch (Dick Miller) reveals that he'll eat the carnations, Mushnick stops in his tracks, before relaxing and saying: 'Why not? Of course, what else?'. He simply decides to go with it, after all, a sale is a sale. The characters in the film, because of the clear lack of meaning to their lives, resign themselves to their mechanical routines.

The film concludes with Seymour taking his own life to destroy the plant he cultivated. According to Hogan: 'Seymour, unloved and alienated, is very nearly a tragic hero', though the suicide can hardly be seen as authentic self-sacrifice.⁵⁷ Seymour's tragic story is more absurd in the sense that it does not really reach any highs or lows, it is merely a flat line.⁵⁸ Throughout the film, Seymour remains alienated, dispossessed, and dominated by those around him, even in his success. Unlike Walter's murder spree, Seymour's killings seem mostly circumstantial. Like Walter, the only free choice Seymour makes is suicide. Already his relationship with Audrey has been destroyed by the dominance the plant has over his life; the revelation that he is a murderer (when Audrey's buds bloom revealing the faces of those it has eaten) tips him over the edge. His suicide not only destroys a great evil, but it also ends his pitiful, meaningless existence. His suicide is a nihilistic act, an escape an unbearably meaningless, absurd life. His final words, as his face comes into bloom from one of Audrey Jr's buds, are 'I didn't mean it!'. Even in death, Seymour fails to take responsibility for his life. That Seymour finally becomes one with the plant is further cements his lack of identity and

⁵⁶ Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *The Absurd* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1969), 36.

⁵⁷ Hogan, *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁸ For an account of the narrative trajectory of absurd tragedy, see: Michael Y. Bennet, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 20.

agency, becoming part of a collective whole, quite literally having his personality digested and destroyed.

‘No novocaine, it dulls the senses!’: Wilbur Force, Absurd Man

Jack Nicholson is among Corman’s most famous alumni and an icon of New Hollywood. In his early days, as revealed in a 1972 interview, Nicholson ‘was part of a generation that was raised on cool jazz and Jack Kerouac, and we walked around in corduroys and turtlenecks talking about Camus and Sartre and existentialism and what going on the road would be like’.⁵⁹ Camus’ absurdism was by far the biggest philosophical influence on his career; many such themes in both existentialism and Camusian absurdism made their way into scripts penned by Nicholson, such as his existential westerns *The Shooting* and *Ride the Whirlwind* for Monte Hellman, the later which was based on Camus’ ‘Myth of Sisyphus’.⁶⁰ Shaun R. Karli asserts that Nicholson was drawn to certain outsider roles via his own existential sensibilities.⁶¹ Beginning as a minor bit-player in 1950s and 1960s exploitation films, often playing angsty unhinged teenagers, Nicholson went on to become an anti-establishment icon in 1960s and 1970s New Hollywood, starring in *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969), as a private detective in *Chinatown*, and a rabbleroxing mental institution inmate in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.⁶² Moreover, Nicholson’s Joker in *Batman* (Burton, 1989) was, like Walter Paisley, a

⁵⁹ Jack Nicholson and Playboy, ‘Jack Nicholson, April 1972’, in *50 Years of the Playboy Interview: Jack Nicholson* (Playboy Enterprises, 2020) [eBook].

⁶⁰ John Parker, *Jack Nicholson: The Biography*, reprint (London: John Blake Publishing, 2017), 37; Patrick McGilligan, *Jack’s Life: A Biography of Jack Nicholson, Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2015), 108–109; Shaun R. Karli, *Becoming Jack Nicholson: The Masculine Persona from Easy Rider to The Shining* (Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), 53.

⁶¹ Karli, *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶² The latter of which, as already established, was heavily associated with existentialism through its relationship to Erving Goffman.

homicidal artist. Nicholson's stardom became symbolic of existential rebellion against arbitrary rules, authority, and conformity; the Absurd Man, a law unto himself, who recognised the legitimacy of no order in a world fundamentally without meaning.

These more famous roles were prefigured in Nicholson's minor appearance in *The Little Shop of Horrors* as Wilbur Force ('just Wilbur Force'), the pain-loving masochist undertaker who mistakes Seymour for the dentist, Dr Farb, subsequently leading to the time of his life. In many ways, Nicholson's Wilbur Force mediates these absurd ideas about meaninglessness and commitment. According to Nicholson: 'I couldn't play it straight. So I just did a lot of weird shit that I thought would make it funny'.⁶³ The scene was also apparently done in one take and (as is obvious) is unfinished, making it feel even more like a minor snapshot of the random and arbitrary happenings in Skid Row (drawing meaning from exploitation contexts). Like many moments in life, the scenes with Wilbur are completely inconsequential and alter the narrative in no meaningful way. While Seymour is overwhelmed by the absurdity of the human condition, leading to a profound depression and lostness in the world, Wilbur seems completely content. Wilbur tells us, with a smile, that he is in 'terrible pain'. He frequently giggles dementedly, often saying 'Oh, goody!'. One gets the sense that Wilbur is a creep, but so is everybody else in this film. Everyone is an outsider, an exile, but Wilbur, as well as the plant-eating Burson Fouch, seem to be the only people enjoying themselves.

As well as a man contented with the arbitrary suffering of the human condition, Wilbur is potentially a transgressive figure, with the scene of his dental operation framed like a sex scene that is coded with transgressive homosexual undertones. Wilbur anticipates long objects and drills being stuck in his mouth with the words 'Oh goody, goody, here it comes!' and 'Oh my god, don't stop now!'. The dentist sequence is transgressive in a way available only to the

⁶³ Nicholson, quoted in Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 67.

aware, those in on the joke, by (young) audiences already sympathetic to transgressive and countercultural ideology (homosexuals and sexual “deviants” were considered outsiders and often relegated to the fringes of society, though a considerable amount of homosexual activity occurred beneath the surface of America).⁶⁴ These outsiders were frequently points of identification for young audiences.

Upon leaving the dentist, Wilbur is missing teeth and others are full of holes; yet, he has a smile on his face: ‘I can truly say I’ve never enjoyed myself so much’. Wilbur is probably the most authentic character in the film. In many ways, Wilbur had meaning as an absurd hero, one who is completely aware of the fact that the world is meaningless, arbitrary, devoid of any guarantees, that suffering is the basic experience of humanity. For Camus, Sisyphus can find happiness in his absurd situation of pushing a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down again for all eternity. He does this through an awareness of the fundamental absurdity of life, the fact that he can never resolve the gulf between humanity’s need for meaning and the total lack of it in a chaotic universe unbound by rational determinism. As Camus wrote: ‘Sisyphus returning to his rock, in that slight pivoting, he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon sealed by his death’.⁶⁵ Sisyphus makes his rock his thing, transforms his absurd punishment into his reason for existing.

The world of *The Little Shop of Horrors* is unified by a basic, banal level of human suffering where, as Jancovich writes ‘even the death of a child fails to break [people] out of their blank, mindless behaviour’.⁶⁶ Death is part of the everyday reality of the unfortunate denizens of Skid Row, such as Mrs Shiva who is forever losing relatives, and for whom Wilbur

⁶⁴ Paradoxically, according to Beverly Gray, Roger Corman was infamously homophobic; Gray, *Ibid.*, 138–139.

⁶⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 89.

⁶⁶ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 280.

‘does a lot of undertaking’. Yet, instead of bumming along through life like everyone else resigned to pain, Wilbur makes his pain his thing (even gaining sexual satisfaction from it). He makes the seemingly arbitrary, everyday pain and death that surrounds him his reason for existing. In the dentist, Seymour offers Wilbur some anaesthetic gas, to which Wilbur, with an anticipatory smile, replies: ‘No novocaine, it dulls the senses!’. While drugs have a liberatory function in later Corman films like *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* and *The Trip* (the latter, scripted by Nicholson himself), here, as in *A Bucket of Blood*, they have a more negative, numbing effect. In later films, drugs place the individual in close contact with the world in all its chaotic meaninglessness; in *The Little Shop of Horrors* and *A Bucket of Blood*, they sever the individual from the world around them, offering momentary escape from it. Wilbur, however, does not want to be severed from the experience of life. He does not want to escape it because he wants to live it, to own his life and enjoy it.

The Wilbur Force sequence might seem inconsequential in narrative terms. But it is in its strangeness, ridiculousness, and overall inconsequentiality, that it can be seen as existential, as absurd, fitting within the idea that life is defined by an existential suffering and a futile struggle to locate meaning in a universe within which we are all inconsequential. It seems that Wilbur (and Fouch) potentially knows this to be the case, and as such makes a greater effort to enjoy the arbitrary existential situation. As Fouch says when the patrons of Mushnik’s store express shock at his eating habits: ‘Look, don’t knock it till you try it’. While Seymour struggles to find meaning in things beyond himself, Wilbur and Fouch are content with who they are, content with the meanings that they themselves have constructed. In many ways, they revolt against life’s absurdity by accepting it, owning it, and doing *something* creative. Their behaviours are irrational, deviant, and nonconformist, and importantly, they have affirmed these behaviours as part of their identity, their reason for existing. This is opposed to the more

general nihilism of characters like Seymour or Mrs Shiva, who despair at their lot in life yet routinely fall in like mechanized puppets. In the end, we must imagine Wilbur Force happy.

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According to Whitehead: ‘Alienated by the clean-cut teen representations of Sally Field’s *Gidget* and Disney’s *Mousketeers*, teens turned towards exploitation cinema for role models [and] Corman’s films frequently carried objective portrayals of the borderline characters in society’.⁶⁷ Roger Corman’s black comedies feature alienated Outsider figures who undergo physical and psychological destruction as a result of being trapped in a meaningless, arbitrary situation with little to no means of making life meaningful or purposeful; they are rendered mere puppets pushed and pulled by forces beyond their control. These films are best understood not, as they so often are, as expressions of Corman’s personal existential vision, but as products of particular production and cultural contexts. They were intended for consumption by teenagers who used such texts to cultivate an identity, and young people, particularly college and university students who would likely be taking courses in existentialism, and it is within such contexts that they become meaningful. Moreover, these films more broadly participate within cultural discourses about existential alienation and bad faith, as seen in the New Left and Civil Rights Movements, and as a key topic for debate about alienated youngsters and “juvenile delinquents”. As such, Corman played with these ideas to attract audiences; his comedies appear existential, and were marketed so, because they are aiming for this register with teens and young students. However, by 1960, the industry was changing. There was increasing competition in the independent lowbrow film market within which Corman was dominant, which prompted the need to adapt. It is within such contexts that Corman turned to the work of Poe.

⁶⁷ Whitehead, *Ibid.*, 10.

Chapter 6: ‘Each man creates his own God for himself, his own heaven, his own Hell’: God, Death, and the Horror of Freedom in Corman’s 1960s Psychological Gothics

Increasing competition and saturation in American independent cinema during the late-1950s, and the prospect of the majors moving into the arena with films like *The Fly* (Neumann, 1958) and *Psycho*, prompted Roger Corman to adapt to stay ahead of the competition.¹ With AIP, Corman inflated his budgets to produce a series of lavish colour adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe, as well as other “upscaled” products like *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, that were promoted as prestigious productions with explicit psychological and existential themes, but which still appealed to (and drew meaning from) the core youth and student audience through lowbrow associations. The critical and commercial success of *House of Usher* marked the beginning of a five-year span of drive-in, modestly budgeted Gothic films, without a full departure from the studio’s “low” origins.² Additionally, these films explicitly drew on influences in art-cinema such as Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, and Federico Fellini. Corman also worked with prominent horror authors like Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont, and Ray Russell, who were well read within the genre. As Cochran wrote, ‘Corman went beyond simply evincing a familiarity with both elite and popular cultures and actively sought to merge the two’.³ The following will explore the existential themes at work in Corman’s upscaled films, *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and *The Masque of the Red Death*, such as the meaninglessness of the world, the insecurity of the subjective self, the absurd, and the idea of the Death of God.

¹ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 105.

² Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, 128–129; Jancovich, *Ibid.*, n3, 12–13.

³ Cochran, *America Noir*, 171.

According to Heffernan, due to the popularity of foreign imports, the American horror film of the late-1950s and early 1960s became ‘characterized by the increasing influence of the international art cinema in their overt symbolism, stylized colour, and flashback narrative structure’ as the horror film became increasingly conflated with the European art film.⁴ Due to the proliferation of art-cinemas and film societies, young adults and students were becoming increasingly film-literate and exposed to a range of European and Japanese art films, such as *The Seventh Seal*, which were frequently associated with and read as existentialism. Corman’s films drew much of their existential meanings through deliberate associations with European and Japanese modernist art cinema, which frequently mediated on questions of meaning, death, perception, psychology, and the death of God. Corman’s turn to a more modernist Gothic cinema filmed in a lurid, surreal colour and tackling of ideas about psychology, anxiety, meaning, and God, must be seen in these wider contexts, rather than as personal expressions of a vision, as it is from such contexts that existential meanings were mediated for contemporary audiences.

Like both Hitchcock and William Castle, Corman’s aim in upscaling his horror films was to create a sense of respectability and legitimacy to attract middle-class audiences as well as the reliable youth box-office.⁵ As Jancovich points out, mainstream producers and filmmakers wanted to reproduce the success of the youth and art-film markets whilst also maintaining legitimacy and respectability.⁶ Corman dispensed with monsters and adapted classic American Gothic literature drawing associations with legitimate culture. Similarly, the casting of actors like Vincent Price and Ray Milland drew direct links with ‘40s psychological thrillers, Gothic melodramas, and women’s pictures like *Laura* (Preminger, 1944), *Gaslight*,

⁴ Ibid., 112; see also: Jancovich, ‘Beyond Hammer’, n3, 11–12; Peter John Dyer, ‘Z Films’, *Sight and Sound*, 33.4 (1964), 179–207.

⁵ See: Jancovich, ‘Beyond Hammer’, 6–8.

⁶ Jancovich, ‘Beyond Hammer’, 2.

Dragonwyck, *The Uninvited* (Allen, 1944), and *The Lost Weekend* (Wilder, 1945), whilst also conjuring images of Universal (for instance, Price is labelled ‘The Screen’s Foremost Delineator of the Draculean’ in the trailer for *House of Usher* (Corman, 1960)). Critics agreed, calling *House of Usher*: ‘a film that should attract mature tastes’ says *Variety*, while *The Hollywood Reporter* credits it as a ‘superior horror film’.⁷ These prior legitimate films, as mentioned throughout, were also heavily concerned with existential questions, particularly concerning the impact of psychological processes on determining individual reality, as well as themes such as sadistic psychological domination and individuality, that would also be developed throughout 1950s and 1960s lowbrow horror successors.

Play with these legitimate psychological ideas is clear in the mediation of Corman’s Gothic such films, which refer to ‘The Horror Classic of Literature’, and ‘a GENIUS of LITERATURE GONE MAD’.⁸ Auteur (and cult) scholarship often fixates on Corman’s personal Freudian psychoanalytic vision in the Poe texts, which Corman himself personally encouraged, but neglect to discuss the broader contexts of the films within which psychology was both associated with legitimate middle-class audiences and lowbrow, youth audiences.⁹ Corman encouraged such readings in order to appeal to a broader set of audiences. Mediation on psychological issues was a wider trend in the upscaling of horror for middle-class, first-run audiences, whilst remaining aligned with younger, lowbrow audiences. Moreover, as discussed, psychology was frequently associated with existentialism at the time; psychological questions were often framed as existential questions that registered with feelings of anxiety, alienation, and perception. Psychologists enquired into the impact of existential crises the

⁷ ‘Advertisement: House of USHER’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 161.7 (1960), 5–7.

⁸ *House of Usher Official Trailer #1 - Vincent Price Movie (1960) HD* (YouTube: Movieclips Classic Trailers, 2012) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsIKMIOeME8>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁹ Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 78.

collapse of structures of meaning, the death of God, and anxiety on the psyche, while the existential works of Camus, Fanon, and others was mobilized to address profound psychological malaise that prompted violence, suicide, and madness. Corman's Gothic frequently present characters descending into madness as they try desperately to keep out horrific truths and existential facts about the universe, constructing their own psychic worlds mediated through set-bound worlds and lurid colours. Trailers emphasised a whole series of existential-psychological themes, promising an 'experience in extreme terror', and highlighting the psychological processes of the characters that send them spiralling into horror: the horrors of things 'others cannot believe', the terrors of being trapped in a 'personal hell' where one 'creates one's own heaven, his own hell', 'deadly passions', the 'tortures of madness', 'evil thoughts and evil deeds', sadism (Basil Rathbone in *Tales of Terror* says: 'I shall take what I desire, your body and your soul if I demand it'), 'unseen forces of the unknown', the 'unseen memories of a long forgotten childhood', human perception and identity, stories told in lurid colour with modernist style in which 'reality and madness become one'.¹⁰

1) **'If thine eye offend thee... pluck it out!': *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes***

The Man with the X-Ray Eyes was mediated as a philosophical film on its release; *Variety* spoke of the 'philosophical aspects' and 'philosophical ideas' of the film, while other reviews commended it as 'imaginative' and 'unusual', suggesting more abstract questions as central to

¹⁰ *The Premature Burial (1962) ORIGINAL TRAILER [HD 1080p]* (YouTube: HD Retro Trailers, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-88CQaoajU>> [accessed 30 June 2022]; *The Pit and the Pendulum - Vincent Price (1961) - Official Trailer* (YouTube: ScreamFactoryTV, 2013) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QChBy15UiTs>> [accessed 30 June 2022]; *The Masque of the Red Death - Vincent Price (1964) - Official Trailer* (YouTube: ScreamFactoryTV, 2013) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCUtm7mCF4I>> [accessed 30 June 2022]; *Tales of Terror (Trailer)* (YouTube: Behind The Science Fiction, 2013) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y58nHVXTO1c>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

the film's identity.¹¹ *The New York Times* gave a positive review, calling the film 'original' and 'thoughtful'.¹² The much advertised and discussed top prize at the First International Science-Fiction Film Festival at Trieste, Italy, giving it prestige for fans, while Ray Milland's casting elevated it in the eyes of potential middle-class spectators.¹³

Framed as a Promethean tragedy and (a Gothic in the vein of *Frankenstein*), in the film, Dr Xavier (Ray Milland) develops a serum that expands the range of human vision, which subsequently sends him on the run from the authorities and scientific establishment. As his vision becomes increasingly expanded, Xavier sees to the centre of the universe itself, possibly even God Himself. This overwhelms Xavier, who then plucks his eyes out. The film mediates the search for truth as destructive, presenting the existential problems of what happens when the rationalist peels back the veneer of meaning that orders and structures the world. The film charts Xavier's futile struggle to make meaningful a world that is fundamentally meaningless. According to Willeman's auteur reading, the film is 'Corman's central statement about the condition of man, [and] represents a terrifying realization of hopelessness', but these themes in fact mediate on broader contemporary questions in existential psychology about secure sites of meaning and psychological reactions to alienation.¹⁴ Indeed, the narrative strongly resembles ideas about the absurd in Camus and Sartre who were both circulating heavily in student circles, and is quite directly referential of the search for meaning in *The Seventh Seal*. Associations with existentialism were also drawn through the screenwriters: Ray Russell and Robert Dillon

¹¹ Mosk., 'Film Review: First Sci-Fi Fest at Trieste - "X" - The Man with X-Ray Eyes', *Variety*, 231.9 (1963), 6; Frank Morris, 'MOVIES: EFFECTIVE HORRORS FOR STRONG STOMACHS', *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, 3 January 1964), 9; 'THE EXHIBITOR HAS HIS SAY ABOUT PICTURES', *Boxoffice*, 85.9 (1964), a4.

¹² 'Screen: Ray Milland in "X": Movie About Surgeon Opens in Double Bill', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 24 October 1963), 37.

¹³ 'Arkoff Screens AIP Films during Venice Festival', *Boxoffice*, 83.20 (1963), 13; 'AIP's "X" Wins Top Honour As Science-Fiction Film', *Boxoffice*, 83.13 (1963), 10; 'The Festivals: Venice and Trieste', *Sight and Sound*, 32.4 (1963), 177-207.

¹⁴ Willeman, 'Roger Corman: The Millenic Vision', 17.

(the latter wrote William Castle's *13 Frightened Girls* and *The Old Dark House*). As discussed extensively in chapter 2, Russell was connected with *Playboy*, which had a young, educated male readership and often featured articles on existentialism (as a toolkit for the hedonistic, individualistic "new man").¹⁵ The presence of Milland in such a situation draws associations with adult films like *The Lost Weekend*, part of the prestige adult psychological horror cycle of the 1940s.¹⁶ In the trailer draws attention to this, linking *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* to adult themes of vice, intoxication, and transgression.¹⁷

The film is in many ways a "trip" film (Corman would of course go on to make films like *The Trip*, *Gas-s-s-s*, and *The Wild Angels* which all involve drug taking); the premise originally concerned a jazz musician who dabbles too much in experimental hallucinogenic acids.¹⁸ As with *The Tingler* (chapter 2), there are a number of connections between *The Man*

¹⁵ *Playboy* also promoted the horror fiction of writers like Charles Beaumont and Robert Bloch, both of whom were associated with the work of H. P. Lovecraft. In many ways, *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* can be read as Lovecraftian (Corman and Charles Beaumont adapted Lovecraft in *The Haunted Palace* (Corman, 1963) in the same year). Clear allusions to H. P. Lovecraft (often read as a writer of existential horrors) are also drawn; Stephen King felt that the film became 'kind of a Lovecraftian horror movie' of the 'purer' kind. In the oft-quoted opening lines of 'The Call of Cthulhu', Lovecraft famously wrote: 'The most merciful thing in the world... is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences... will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark'. In 'From Beyond' (1934), the protagonist writes 'It would help my shaky nerves if I could dismiss what I now have to think of the air and the sky about sand above me'. Xavier's research represents one of the 'sciences' which pulls back the tapestry of meaning just a little too far; Xavier is exposed to these 'black seas of infinity' when he is able to witness the centre of the universe – this 'deadly light' of which Lovecraft writes; Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*, 1982. Reprint (London: Warner Books, 1994), 221; H. P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 139; H. P. Lovecraft, *H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 2: Dagon and Other Macabre Tales* (London: Voyager, 2000), 97.

¹⁶ Paul Willemen, 'Roger Corman: The Millenic Vision', in *Roger Corman: The Millenic Vision*, ed. by David Will and Paul Willemen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival 70, 1970), 17.

¹⁷ Jancovich, 'Shadows and Bogeymen', 42; Mark Jancovich, "'Frighteningly Real'", 26, 28.

¹⁸ Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 117.

with *the X-Ray Eyes* and Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, where Huxley describes his experiences under the influence of mescaline. He detailed the experiential possibilities of hallucinogenic drugs, the sense in which the world itself becomes a heightened world of wonder and horror to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind [sic].¹⁹ Huxley (often read as an existential phenomenologist and who participated in such discussions) argued that things in the world possess an inner light that shines out at the perceiver, a revelation of the unseen essence of the object, where perception becomes 'cleansed' of 'names and notions, mere verbalizations, for utilitarian purposes, after the event', language which also mirrors Camusian absurdism.²⁰ Xavier, like Huxley, penetrates to a level of awareness that heightens colours and the image of physical phenomena to a dazzling extent, that reveals to him the universe as is, in-itself. Like Xavier, there is a sense in which Huxley believed the drugs to have taken him too far, to a perceptual level intolerable to the human experience:

I found myself, all at once on the brink of panic. This, I suddenly felt, was going too far... The fear... was of being overwhelmed, of disintegrating under the pressure of a reality greater than a mind, accustomed to living most of the time in a cosy world of symbols, could possibly bear.²¹

This parallels the tragic fate of Dr Xavier, who also becomes overwhelmed by unfettered perception of the universe stripped of human signifiers and signs to contain the dual horror/wonder of natural purity. As Huxley wrote: 'Alas, this paradise of cleansed perception... was not to endure... there was only horror'.²² As in *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* the security of subjectivity comes under threat when one peers too deeply past habitually constructed meanings.

¹⁹ Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 36.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 39.

²² Ibid., 36.

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‘I want to see...’: Xavier’s Absurd Vision

The climax of *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* is foreshadowed in the scene where the x-ray serum is first used on a monkey which dies after being overwhelmed by sight. When Xavier first uses the eye serum, he complains about the overwhelming light which causes him to faint: ‘It’s like the splitting of the world, my vision is fragmented, more light than I’ve ever seen! Filled with light! I have to close them!’. This is paralleled in *The Masque of the Red Death*, where light is considered ‘cruel’ as opposed to the comforting ‘velvet darkness’. As the scene with the centre of the universe shows, what Xavier sees is essentially impossible to conceive and comprehend. What he sees is chaos, unrationalizable absurdity unbound by any perceivable order or meaning. He sees the universe as it is, in its absurd meaninglessness. The use of optical light effects do a good job of conveying this meaninglessness, this abundance of light and colour that cannot come together in any significant pattern. The point is that Xavier cannot rationalize what he sees. Take the scene when Xavier and Diane drive through the city: ‘This city, as if it were unborn, rising into the sky with fingers of metal, limbs without support, girders without stone, signs hanging without support, wires dipping and swaying without poles. A city unborn, its flesh dissolved in an acid of light. A city of the dead’. The city Xavier sees is absurd, unbound by conventional order or reason.

Xavier’s absurd vision has the effect of stripping back the essences and constructed meanings that give form to the conventional everyday phenomenon that he experiences. His eyes pierce through the artificial, disclosing reality in its true, chaotic form. According to Jancovich, Corman uses his characters to challenge the ‘ignorance and repression upon which supposedly “normal” life is based’.²³ His vision dissects the world around him, even at one

²³ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 278.

point referring to Diane as a ‘perfect breathing dissection’. Xavier’s gaze renders difference and individuality meaningless, imposing a fundamental, existential unity to the individuals around him; as the poster declares: ‘HE STRIPPED SOULS AS BARE AS BODIES’.²⁴ Xavier’s gaze is an object of horror in the poster, stripping a woman and a monkey down to their skeletons suggesting objectification. For Camus, the absurd being disclosed is akin to an experience of de-clothing. Over the centuries, humankind has dressed the world up in clothes to rationalize and make sense of it, clothes constitute ‘illusory meaning’.²⁵ However, when revealed as absurd, objects ‘lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them’.²⁶ In being able to see through the universe, Xavier is able to de-clothe it. As the party scene shows, Xavier undresses individuals with his eyes (links with the appeal of *Playboy* here; Xavier is unable to perceive women as anything other than objects). This is taken to the extreme during the casino sequence as Xavier sees through the entirety of the flesh, finding himself surrounded by skeletons. Xavier’s gaze strips people back to raw existential fact of existence before essence, existence as a mass of flesh and bone, nerves and veins. Xavier sought to transcend humankind; instead, he saw it for what it truly, existentially, is.

Jancovich argued that the sunglasses worn by a number of Corman’s oversensitive characters (such as Verden Fell in *Tomb of Ligeia*) are a signal of control. Xavier, Jancovich writes, wears the glasses to protect himself from the ‘sensory assaults which the world makes upon [him] and hence as a means of controlling their environment’.²⁷ In controlling the environment, Xavier makes the world meaningful for him by returning it to the conventional, habitually expected clothed plain, thus being able to relate to it. However, as his absurd gaze

²⁴ *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* (AIP, 1963), 1963 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057693/mediaviewer/rm2391365376?ref=ttmi_mi_all_pos_66> [accessed 30 June 2022].

²⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jancovich, *Ibid.*, 278.

grows more intense, even the glasses fail to control the environment. His gaze destroys the meaningful world around him, placing him on a different plain of experience. The glasses help Xavier reconnect with a world that is increasingly slipping away from him, though eventually even they fail to prevent his increasing alienation in the world as they fail to prevent his de-clothing of it, and as a result his exile.

Beyond the thematic, stylistic, and narrative emphasis on x-ray seeing, the film also mediates existential alienation and meaninglessness through the *mise-en-scène*. Though produced with a higher budget than Corman's 1950s films, *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* bears many of the hallmarks of low-budget exploitation production. The film looks and feels cheap, with clearly artificial sets splashed with ugly, pulpy colours. Corman insisted that there was method to this ugliness, wanting the sets to blend with the characters on screen; indeed, lowbrow audiences often demanded such qualities which they felt more reflective of their identities and cultural politics.²⁸ The characters, particularly in the beginning of the film, wear grey suits which blend with the grey/blue walls. This creates the dreaded sense of alienating conformity from which Xavier, as a rebel, hopes to escape, the reality of humankind which Xavier wants to overcome. As the set is distinctly artificial, this consequently makes the characters onscreen feel artificial. There are a number of accidental aspects that make the sets feel artificial, which in turn draws meaning from the contexts of the film. When hiding as Mr Metallo, Xavier lives in a small purple room in which the window panes and door frame have been painted red. According to Tim Lucas, the rushed nature of the film meant that the paint was still wet and began to run under the studio lights; 'haste, has the intriguing effect of making

²⁸ According to Corman, he used cheaper Pathé film stock for the picture, with Floyd Crosby's photography contributing to the beautiful ugliness of the image; 'Audio Commentary by Roger Corman'.

the set look like it's melting or at least dissolving'.²⁹ Xavier's perception of the world is coming apart, dissolving, around him; the world itself is artificial, ephemeral, and inconsistent. Eventually, given time, it will dissolve away, precisely as it does for Xavier.

As Camus wrote, the world revealing itself as absurd is akin to the 'stage-scenery' being withdrawn:

At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we have clothed them... The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia. For a second, we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood it in solely the images and signs that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage-scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. It withdraws at a distance from us.³⁰

Corman's tacky, cheap sets mediate similar notions effect, presenting the world precisely as an artifice, as clothing. Corman claimed that 'the unconscious mind does not really see the real world... [it] is not aware of the world. I do not want to photograph the real world. Everything is artificial'.³¹ The set-boundness film of Corman's films share this quality of the world-as-artifice, within which the rebel struggles to break free. Xavier is given the power to see beyond the meaningful artifice, to draw back the scenery and reveal the world as it is: without meaning, absurd. *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* also deals with the horror of a kind of freedom to individually make meaningful the world, without being contingent on pre-formed, external

²⁹ 'Audio Commentary by Tim Lucas', *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, MGM/Second Sight Films, 2020, Blu-Ray.

³⁰ Camus, *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹ Keith Phipps, 'Roger Corman Reflects On His Long, Legendary Career — But He Isn't Finished Yet', 2017 <<https://uproxx.com/movies/interview-roger-corman/>> [accessed 21 June 2022].

ways of seeing.³² Xavier tries desperately to escape from his new freedom. When Xavier tries to sleep, he bemoans that ‘while they sleep, I close my eyes and I can still see through my own eyelids. Oh lord, I’d give anything to have dark!’. As he looks to the ceiling above him seeing a blinding light. Xavier screams as the weight of reality crushes him. He says to Diane: ‘sometimes, when I look up... I see all those people above me pressing down upon me... the whole of humanity’. While ordinary human beings can fall back on arbitrary constructs and habitual assumptions to mediate and temper the threat of meaningless, Xavier is unable to do so. His absurd gaze penetrates all, such that nothing exists, nothing is there for him to relate to and construct a sense of self. According to Camus: ‘The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it’.³³ The absurd invokes in humanity the anxiety of freedom, as it reveals the meaningless world upon which humanity has built systems and structures of meaning. Xavier confronts something like the anxiety of freedom via his destructive gaze, which reminds him of his fundamental need for rationally given order and meaning. His x-ray eyes reveal to him the existential burden to construct our own sense of meaning. His scientific experiments did not account for these philosophical consequences of the ability to see beyond the natural range of human vision; Xavier tears out his eyes because he can no longer face this burden.

Xavier’s flight into the desert is indicative of his sense of existential alienation, his homelessness in a world that is dissolving around him. Following his loss of the glasses in the casino, the patrons see Xavier for who, or *what* he is. Due to overexposure from the serum,

³² Existential freedom was a well discussed topic among cultural critics and particularly the adherents to new cultural movements. Cold War culture was frequently presented as a choice between conformity or a liberal connotation of freedom, which meant a freedom to determine oneself. Yet as critics of totalitarianism agreed, freedom is frightening because it severs one from premade meanings, a draw of totalitarian movements.

³³ Camus, *Ibid.*, 22.

Xavier's eyes have gone a glassy black with yellow irises; he is *seen* as Other, as something that is not them, not human. Xavier recognizes that he no longer belongs. This is ironic, as Xavier has until now othered those around him through his gaze, but as discussed in the Sartrean account of sadism and the "Look" in chapters two and three respectively, the Looker is finally "looked at", caught in the objectifying gaze when the Other looks back at them. As said, his use of the sunglasses was a way of fitting in, of hiding his true eyes from the world to be accepted as human. This is too, is ironic, given that Xavier's plan was to become a god. As he gets closer and closer to becoming a god, Xavier becomes increasingly alien to humanity. The true nature of God – the eye at the centre of the universe – is hidden to humanity, it is alien to it. Xavier's eyes become more and more monstrous, more alien, as he uses them, until eventually they are black orbs. Xavier flees into the desert, famously a place of alienation and nothingness in the SF-horror films of the 1950s and 1960s, often used to represent otherworldly, inhuman spaces. As argued in *The Beast with a Million Eyes*, the desert was often utilized in such films to represent a space which separates humanity from itself, from all meaning. Xavier becomes homeless and lost, that is until he sees the Preachers tent. Desperate for a sense of belonging, Xavier gravitates towards the sermon.

'I'm closing in on the gods!': Seeing and Being Seen by God

The Man with the X-Ray Eyes inverts the positive religious connotations of light as revelation and guidance. Whereas Antonius Block in *The Seventh Seal* is mortally afraid of the darkness in the absence of God, Xavier is overwhelmed and overpowered by the abundance of "divine" light, leading him to seek darkness by plucking out his eyes. Compared with some of the more positive affirmations of faith in earlier films (like *The Beast with a Million Eyes* and *Day the World Ended*), the theology is here far more negative and dangerous. God is a force which the

individual has faith in; one seeks a sense of meaning and purpose in faith. The potential reality is far more overwhelming and chaotic. Russell's script is to an extent both indictment of religion and a recognition of its necessity (much like Nietzsche). Religion mediates the power of "God", it casts a veil of ignorance over the believer. As the Preacher orders: 'If thine eye offends thee... pluck it out!'. Religion serves to temper reality so that it makes sense to the believer, imposes a sense of reason and order, and disguises the chaotic meaninglessness of it all. Xavier's image of God, which we are also shown, is an indistinct kaleidoscope of light and colour: 'There are great darkneses farther than time itself. And beyond the darkness, a light that glows, changes. And in the centre of the universe, the eye that sees us all!'. Such an images have no meaning, nor order, no reason. It is this fundamental truth of the universe, beyond the comforting lies and darkness of religion, which forces Xavier to pull out his eyes. To be like God is to be like the all-seeing eye at the centre of the universe that Xavier claims to have witnessed, unable to shut, unable to *not see*. In the end, he got his wish, but it came with a heavy cost.

Light is also significant in the myth of Prometheus, which *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* alludes to heavily; Corman joked that the film was 'low-budget Greek Tragedy'.³⁴ This is in reference specifically to the scene where Xavier plucks out his eyes due to his overwhelming sight. The myth of Prometheus has been integral to the Gothic (for instance Shelley's *Frankenstein*) in which scientists challenge the gods but are soon made to suffer for their transgression. Indeed, like Frankenstein, Xavier is explicit about his desire to challenge and become God:

Sam: My dear friend, only the gods see everything.

Xavier: My dear doctor, I'm closing in on the gods.

³⁴ 'Audio Commentary by Roger Corman'.

Xavier also refers to knowledge as ‘power’, power ‘to learn, to create, to do’. Xavier’s desire to become a God is in some sense an existential pursuit, an affirmation of individual freedom and power. Just as Prometheus wanted to give the fire to humanity to aide their development, Xavier wants to contribute to science and medicine in unprecedented ways. Xavier wants to transcend the existential limits of his given sight to become an even better surgeon. ‘Soon, I’ll be able to see what no man has ever seen’; Xavier wants to transcend the existential condition given to him as a human being. He wants unlimited power and knowledge, the freedom that would come with being a god. In the scene with the carnies, Xavier laments his situation, his need to hide and use his power for cheap circus tricks. ‘Maybe this is all he could be’, Xavier says of himself, ‘this and nothing more. Nothing more than just a man’. Xavier wants to transcend those givens that make him a human being. However, as with Prometheus, Xavier’s taking of the light results in him being torn apart, as Greek Tragedy so often ends. Instead of having his liver devoured, Xavier is forced to pluck out his eyes after witnessing “God”.

Xavier’s final act of plucking out his eyes upon seeing and being seen by “God” is significant, representing Xavier’s return to the darkness of ignorance on his realization of the true character of the world. It is in this that the film mediates on ideas similar to absurd, existential myth, like Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus*, the human struggle to overcome the limitations to our “sight”, our awareness, only to be repulsed and horrified once the curtain of familiar concepts and habitual expectations is withdrawn. While Sisyphus becomes aware of his task to make meaningful his life as an absurd one, Xavier similarly becomes privy to the absurd character of existence and the sense of terror brought on by our unshackled freedom, the personal responsibility to make meaningful a world that refuses to guarantee meaning. In this sense, *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* participates in a number of conversations and debates about freedom and meaning, particularly in a time of cultural turbulence and change, where many groups became existentially committed to rebellion and authenticity. Moreover, such

ideas resonated with youth audiences perhaps see too clearly felt alienated because they saw differently, perhaps too clearly. It also played on those broader debates about society and culture itself, the dilemma of choice between an escape from the conformities of an alienating culture and society, only to be plunged lost and alone into a world where nothing is guaranteed, and an escape from freedom itself; the desire to keep the world out versus the need to truly know it and be free within it.

2) **'Can you look around this world and believe in a God who rules it?': *The Masque of the Red Death***

Roger Corman claimed that he had been wanting to make an equivalent to Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* since the film's 1957 release, which has been interpreted as Corman sharing the same existential vision as Bergman.³⁵ It is far more likely that Corman saw the success of films like *The Seventh Seal* with horror and art fans, as well as the adoration for them in the legitimate press. The influence of Bergman's films can be seen across Corman's work in horror. *The Masque of the Red Death* in particular was read by British critics in terms of Bergman as a film that 'reminds one of *The Seventh Seal* in its intellectual probings'.³⁶ Such reviews connected the film with European art cinema, an attitude both the trailers and marketing exploited. Generally, *The Masque of the Red Death* was viewed critically as an elevated horror film with higher pretensions. *Variety* made much of the theological themes of the film, and the mention of Beaumont as writer connected it with *Playboy* and *The Twilight Zone* which both similarly mediated on similar questions.³⁷ The trailer highlighted "European" aspects such as orgies and

³⁵ Corman and Jerome, *Ibid.*, 87; see also di Franco, *The Films of Roger Corman*, 32.

³⁶ 'MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH, The', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 31.360 (1964), 116; Dyer, 'Z Films', 180.

³⁷ Whit., 'Film Reviews: Masque of the Red Death', *Variety*, 235.5 (1964), 7.

dreamlike images, with the theatrical poster prominently displaying Prospero's (Vincent Price) face made up of squirming bodies; the trailer, moreover, demanded that the film be read in theological and existential terms, featuring the scene where the Red Death tells Prospero: 'Each man creates his own heaven, his own hell'.³⁸ *The Masque of the Red Death* explicitly demanded to be read as an art film and to be directly associated with *The Seventh Seal*. The film was also made in England, which was associated with psychological thrillers by American critics and, of course, Hammer films.³⁹

The Seventh Seal was read as an existential text by American critics, such as Crowther, as 'a forthright demonstration of man's search for something in which to believe'.⁴⁰ *Variety* also mediated it as an existential text that 'details the life-and-death struggle and man's yearning for the truth'.⁴¹ It, like other Bergman films (such as *The Magician*), was also viewed by some as a horror text, and on its American release occupied similar exhibition spaces as horror films.⁴² Bergman apparently made *The Seventh Seal* to address his fear of nothingness after death in the absence of God.⁴³ The film asks: is life meaningful if there is no God?⁴⁴ *The Seventh Seal* follows Crusader Knight, Antonius Block (Max Von Sydow), fearful of the possibility of eternal nothingness after death, struggles against a plague-ridden universe from which God is conspicuously absent: 'life is a preposterous horror. No man can live faced with death knowing everything is a nothingness'. The absurd fact is that there is no point, other than

³⁸ *The Masque of the Red Death - Vincent Price (1964) - Official Trailer*.

³⁹ Jancovich, "Peter Brook's Night of the Living Dead", 79.

⁴⁰ Bosley Crowther, 'HIDDEN MEANINGS: Allegorical Intimations in "The Seventh Seal" and Other Films', *The New York Times* (New York, 19 October 1958), x1; see also: Werner Wiskari, 'Another Bergman Gains Renown: Unlike Ingrid, Ingmar Bergman Works behind the Cameras, the "demoniacally Creative" Director of Bold, Searching Films. Another Bergman', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 20 December 1959), SM20.

⁴¹ 'Film Reviews: The Seventh Seal', *Variety*, 212.8 (1958), 8.

⁴² Davis, *Battle of the Bs*, 120.

⁴³ See: Charles B. Ketcham, *The Influence of Existentialism on Ingmar Bergman*.

⁴⁴ Litch, *Philosophy Through Film*, 227.

that for which we create for ourselves. *The Seventh Seal* offers a humanistic solution in the traveling performers who join Block's quest. According to Litch and Karofsky, their lives are lived according to 'simple needs, simple pleasures, and simple faith', they live life as is and enjoy it, without dwelling upon these overbearing existential questions.⁴⁵ Individuals are ultimately responsible for the authorship of their own subjective meaning and purpose, a fact which Block's squire, Jöns (Gunnar Björnstrand) is all too aware of:

It's always your own arse you sit on. A great truth! Here is Jöns the Squire. He grins at Death, guffaws at the Lord, laughs at himself, smiles at the girls. His world is believable to no-one but himself. Ridiculous to everyone, even himself. Meaningless in heaven and indifferent in hell...

Jöns' awareness allows an ironic awareness of meaningless and bleak world around him. He follows Block's journey, making sure to point out just how absurd it is. Like *The Seventh Seal*, *The Masque of the Red Death* was explicitly preoccupied with existential questions about meaning in the wake of God's absence or death. It also raised familiar topics about control, sadism, and human psychology, as well as the conflict between the desire to escape from the world versus the need for secure meaningful knowledge about it.

'There is no other God! Satan killed him!': Corman, Beaumont, and the Death of God

In invoking the "Death of God", *The Masque of the Red Death* unavoidably conjures Nietzsche, a very popular philosopher among American students – thanks in great part to Walter Kaufmann's popular translations and work that revolutionized Nietzsche scholarship in America – who would have been likely to attend art theatres and film societies where both this

⁴⁵ Ibid., 233.

film and *The Seventh Seal* would have been screened.⁴⁶ According to Ratner-Rosenhagen, ‘Kaufmann’s achievements lay in the ways in which he rendered a Nietzsche who could speak in so many of the different cultural registers of the day... [and was] easily put to work alongside the varieties of 1950s sociological, political, and literary criticism’.⁴⁷ Nietzsche’s “Death of God” represented the decline of religion as a source of meaning in Europe.⁴⁸ One is essentially on their own to decide for themselves what is valuable, what is meaningful, what is the purpose of being. This is no easy task, and one that burdens the individual with a significant responsibility: ‘Must we ourselves not become gods...?’⁴⁹ Nietzsche traversed 1950s and 1960s American culture, being a favourite topic, as we have seen, in Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy*.⁵⁰ Charles Beaumont, screenwriter of *The Masque of the Red Death* published a number of stories in *Playboy* in the 1950s (promoted by Ray Russell). Both authors adapted existentialist themes into their work, especially Beaumont who was, essentially, a Christian existentialist, albeit one more interested in evil and the devil than in God.⁵¹

For Cochran: ‘In Beaumont’s universe... no paradigm is complete unless it leaves plenty of room for irrationality, absurdity, and evil’.⁵² This is certainly the case for *The Masque of the Red Death*. Set somewhere in Italy during the feudal Middle Ages, a pestilence known as the Red Death ravages the land. In fear of the Red Death, the cruel Satanist, Prince Prospero, retreats to his castle with the peasant girl, Francesca, in tow, whom Prospero intends to corrupt with the ways of Satan. Prospero invites the noblemen of the surrounding country to his castle,

⁴⁶ Kaufmann’s Nietzsche in part ‘helped to cultivate a growing interest in European existentialism in America and established him in his next role as a major midwife to this new style of thought’; Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 251.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, [1887] (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), S. 108.

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Ibid.*, S. 125.

⁵⁰ Ratner-Rosenhagen, *Ibid.*, 252.

⁵¹ Cochran, *America Noir*, 74.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 88.

offering sanctuary from the Red Death. Prospero retreats from a world that has seemingly been abandoned by God. His retreat also, notably, is a rebellion against the human condition, the fact that all must die. Yet his retreat fails, for the Red Death finds a way into his castle, killing all inside.

God's absence is notable from the outset. The forest and the village are desolate and bleak; leafless trees, squalid huts, a rolling fog, the overture of darkness, these are indicators of the godlessness of a world ruled by the Red Death. Almost the entire film was shot on a soundstage in England, suggesting a sort of the psychic closedness of the central characters' world; the world of meaning is an artificial phenomenon of a mind desperate to impose meaningful order on a chaotic, absurd universe. These same motifs further the idea of the godless universe; that the "world" is an artificial construction. There is no hint of natural beauty or sublime majesty of the natural world in sight. This is the world of human beings, human minds, and human evils. The villagers are God-fearing people, devoted to the point of fanatical ignorance to his worship. They believe that the "deliverance" brought by the old woman who meets the Red Death in the forest means liberation, freedom from the evil authoritarianism of Prospero. But a prophecy misread it is, for their deliverance is revealed only in more death and destruction, at the hands of both Prospero and the Red Death. As the village is burned, a shot of a burning cross is inserted, a clear marker of God's absence or death.

A theological struggle between Prospero and Francesca comprises much of the film's narrative. Prospero, the manipulative Gothic aristocrat, attempts to corrupt and possess the pure, innocent Gothic heroine, Francesca. Prospero is an avowed Satanist. He looks at the world around him, a world of hate, pain, and suffering, and concludes that if a 'God of love and life ever did exist, he is long since dead. Someone... something... rules in his place'. For Prospero, the death of God is a literal event. He realizes, via his own demented logic, that if a

God must exist in this universe of evil, then that God would be an evil God: Satan. Satan rules in place of the Christian God.

‘...to open the door that separates us from our... creator’: Power and Mastery

The Masque of the Red Death follows Prospero’s attempt to become God. As the self-proclaimed emissary of Satan, Prospero claims mastery over this world of evil. In an early scene, Francesca pleads to the soldiers, ‘in the name of God’, to spare her brother and father from execution. Prospero replies: ‘The girl was addressing me’. Morris argues that Prospero ‘works hard to achieve the kind of inscrutability and random justice associated with a Creator’.⁵³ Prospero attempts to craft the world around him according to his own philosophical worldview. In conversation with Francesca in the “yellow room”, Prospero theorizes that: ‘Somewhere in the mind... is the key to our existence. My ancestors tried to find it... to open the door that separates us from our... creator’ (Prospero frowns on the word creator). He tells a story of how his father imprisoned someone in the room of yellow for three years, ‘merely to test how easily a man’s mind could be controlled and twisted’. Prospero, like his father, is a sadist who seeks to dominate and control people, rendering them mere objects. This was clearly meditated as part of the marketing. The theatrical poster reads: “LOOK INTO THIS FACE... somewhere among the squirming, teeming terrors in this orgy of evil... is the thing, whose vile desire she must obey... or those she loves will scream out their lives on a bloodstained alter of horror’.⁵⁴

⁵³ Morris, *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁴ *The Masque of the Red Death* (American International Pictures, 1964), 1964 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058333/mediaviewer/rm2403749376?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_pos_106> [accessed 30 June 2022].

Like the scene with the hawk, there are frequent comparisons to animals throughout the film that serve to signify Prospero's godlike mastery over others, as Morris also suggests.⁵⁵ In one scene, Prospero orders the revellers to show him the lives of the animals, reducing them to parodies of animals such as worms, donkeys, and cows. Prospero has a Little Person in his employ as court-jester named "Hop-Toad" (Skip Martin). In another scene, the surviving villagers beg for mercy and help from Prospero, for sanctuary from the Red Death. Prospero demonstrates again his godlike mastery by recommending they make burrows or collect nuts like squirrels to survive. Early in the film, he compares his punishment of Gino and Ludovico to the reprimanding of a dog who bites the hand of its owner. But Prospero is not the only one who demonstrates this power over others by reducing them to animals. Hop-Toad takes revenge on Prince Alfredo (Patrick McGee), who strikes Hop-Toad's lover, Esmerelda (Verina Greenlaw), who is herself referred to as a 'toy'. Hop-Toad manipulates Alfredo into dressing as a 'Great African Ape' for the Masque as a symbolic gesture of power over the other conventionally dressed revellers. The visage of the ape contains the usual codes of cinematic apes in this period (and in the broader themes of Poe), suggesting de-evolution, uncontrolled sexual lust, and blind irrationality.⁵⁶ The powerful Alfredo is reduced from his aristocratic status to a raging, horny ape who becomes a slave as Hop-Toad, once servant, becomes the master through his whip which he uses to control Alfredo. Importantly, Hop-Toad kills Alfredo, tying him up with the whip (itself symbolic of servitude) and setting him alight. Alfredo's objectification as a thing is furthered when Prospero orders the corpse to be removed, questioning how his revellers can be expected to dance around 'that'.

⁵⁵ Morris, *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁶ See: Daniel Tilsley, 'The Meaningful Art of One of the "Worst Movies of All Time": Phil Tucker's Robot Monster (1953) as an Existential Critique of American Modernity', *Horror Studies*, 13.1 (2022), 27–42 <https://doi.org/10.1386/host_00044_1>, 34–37.

Prospero positions himself as the master, the manipulator, of the world around him: ‘The world lives in pain and despair but is at least kept alive by a few dedicated men. If we lost our power, chaos would engulf everything’. Men like Prospero, through their tyrannical power, attempt to maintain a sense of rationality and order in an absurd universe. Prospero believes himself to have constructed a scaffold of meaning around the world. However, according to Jancovich: ‘in *The Masque of the Red Death*... Prospero’s mistake is to believe in religious frameworks, even if he rejects God’.⁵⁷ Jancovich adds that: ‘Even the symbolic figures of death are not determined by some larger moral scheme... They are merely forces of nature whose actions are entirely arbitrary and lack either meaning or purpose’.⁵⁸ Prospero, in Death’s wake, is as insignificant and powerless as the villagers he rules over; he is bound to the same irrational, invisible forces as the rest of them. As with *The Little Shop of Horrors* and *A Bucket of Blood*, there are links to absurd theatre here, the plays of which ‘present the audience with almost mechanical puppets’, according to Esslin, puppets manipulated by forces beyond reason and beyond control.⁵⁹ Likewise, the revellers at the Masque become absurd puppets, mechanically dancing to a power that is beyond them, which they cannot understand. Moreover, they are rendered conformist by the uniform colour of red. The Masque, according to Morris, ‘jerkily acts out the film’s theme of suffering humanity, dancing like puppets to the tune of an evil God’, or manipulator.⁶⁰ A link between *The Masque of the Red Death* and absurd theatre is clear in the casting Patrick McGee as Alfredo. McGee worked with Samuel Beckett and appeared in an early performance of Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* and its filmed adaptation directed by William Friedkin (director of *The Exorcist*), as well as in the film *The*

⁵⁷ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 281.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 281–282.

⁵⁹ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 22.

⁶⁰ Morris, *Ibid.*, 127.

Servant (Losey, 1963) which Pinter wrote and was widely received by American critics as a horror film; all of which feature games of psychological domination.⁶¹

The Masque has been criticised for being ludicrous, unintentionally comical, and a failure at representation that comes ‘very near to being an embarrassing failure’, according to David Pirie; the ‘sequence never seems anything more than an averagely lurid bit of choreography, and one wishes that another related device could have been found to convey the disintegration of the Prince’s world’.⁶² However, describing viewing a man in a telephone booth, Camus wrote that: ‘At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime make silly everything that surrounds them’.⁶³ The Masque is Prospero’s moment of clarity, when the mask slips from the world revealing it in its horrific absurdity. As Morris rightly argues, the ‘details of choreography do not seem important, since we are dealing simply with puppetlike characters, manipulated in life and death’ [sic].⁶⁴ The strangeness of the Masque mediated the absurdity of human existence, dancing mechanically like puppets to a tune over which they have no control. Prospero’s attempt to escape from the Red Death is also absurd, captured by the fact that his movements themselves become puppet-like, choreographed; his rebellion against the human condition, his assertion of power over the world, is finished as he too becomes one with the dance of death.

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⁶¹ Jancovich, “‘Peter Brook’s Night of the Living Dead’”, 83.

⁶² David Pirie, ‘Roger Corman’s Descent into the Maelstrom’, in *Roger Corman: The Millennial Vision*, ed. by David Will and Paul Willemen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival 70, 1970), 62.

⁶³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

⁶⁴ Morris, *Ibid.*, 128.

‘Death has no master’: Making our own Gods

Prospero claims that Alfredo knows nothing of terror for his senses are too blunt. ‘The knowledge of terror’, he claims, ‘is vouchsafed to the precious few’. There are only a few who can know the true meaning of terror, or of the fundamental horror of the world. When Francesca accuses Prospero of worshipping evil, Prospero does not deny it, but contends that ‘often the appearance of evil is mistaken for a lack of understanding’. What is for the devoutly Christian Francesca “evil” is for Prospero “reality”. Prospero considers himself a realist: ‘[Satan] is a god of reality, of truth’. Life is an ugly thing and Prospero’s Satanism is in part a response to this. Rather than blinding himself in the so-called ignorance of a ‘cruel light’, he engulfs himself in the comforting ‘velvet darkness’ of Satanism, a worship of life’s suffering and pains. Prospero considers the pious Francesca to be among the blind, stuck in servitude to a ‘deity long dead’. He demonstrates this with a trained hawk, who’s eyes are sewn shut until it learns to obey its master, its God. Religion, for Prospero, acts in the same way: it sews shut the eyes and conditions believers to obey a God they cannot see. Prospero believes that he, unlike Francesca, is more open minded, and as a result is more accepting of the world of despair. Prospero is committed to the “truth” that the world is run by Satan. Though as becomes clear, his “truth” imparted by his “God” has no more security or guarantee than Francesca’s. The film questions Prospero’s ability to truly know the world, let alone the essential terror of it. He mistakes terror as being the result of the fact that Satan is in charge; but terror is a result of the absence of any deity and the total failure for any systems of belief to securely confer meaning onto the world.

Prospero gives arbitrary meaning to Death, identifying him as either an emissary of Satan or indeed, Satan himself. He believes in Death as the primary cause of pain and suffering currently ravaging the land, as in league with the Devil-God that currently rules in the seat of God. Death and Prospero, Prospero believes, have one key thing in common: they both serve

the same master. But Death reprimands Prospero: 'Death has no master'. According to Death, as Jancovich identifies above, Prospero is trapped within his own theology, his own belief system that offers a divine explanation for the existence of evil in the world. Like Francesca, Prospero is ruled by his own interpretation of evil. Death's words reveal that the universe is absurd, that there is no overriding, divine meaning and purpose, that God 'does not rule alone': 'Each man creates his own God for himself. His own heaven, his own hell', a position very much similar to the existential and absurd ethics of philosophical writers like Camus, and indeed a position that directed youth dissent during the turbulent countercultural 1960s.

For Camus, the best response to the absurd is to 'accept such a universe and draw from it [one's] strength, [one's] refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation'.⁶⁵ For Nietzsche, after the Death of God, the individual must learn to live creatively as the author of one's own existence, living life as a work of art.⁶⁶ Such a position was raised earlier in Corman's SF-horror film, *It Conquered the World* (Corman, 1956):

He learned almost too late that man is a feeling creature; and because of it the greatest in the universe. He learned too late for himself that men have to find their own way, to make their own mistakes. There can't be any gift of perfection from outside ourselves... It can't be given. It has to be achieved. There is hope. But it has to come from inside, from man himself.

The Red Death's message is that "God" does not exist as a one secure concept, but is instead who the individual makes Her, Him, They, or It, just as how in *It Conquered the World*, Dr Tom Anderson (Lee Van Cleef) confers God-status onto the Venusian invader. Both Prospero and Francesca are two sides of the same theological coin, and both are ultimately failed by their belief systems. Their ultimate purpose, their personal meaning, is and should be a product of

⁶⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 45.

⁶⁶ See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, S. 276, S. 277; Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra', in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, [1885] 1954. Reprint (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 170, 225.

their own agency, as opposed to delivered from on-high. Prospero compares Christians to a blind hawk obedient to a hidden master, yet this is precisely what Prospero is; he even admits to preferring the comfort of ‘velvet’ darkness, which symbolically contradicts his claim to be following a God of truth and reality.

Prospero is thus confronted with that core existential, absurd dilemma. Despite preaching the Death of God, he replaces God with a religious (totalitarian?) framework of his own which is just as arbitrary and ultimately as meaningless as the Christian one he criticises. For Prospero, at the end of the film his belief system, which he thought gave sanctuary from the Red Death, collapses under the weight of this absurd reality. Prospero and his followers worshiped a human construct that gave no more sanctuary than Francesca’s Christian deity. Prospero’s satanic party, despite his assurances, fails to keep out the Red Death; Satan is as much dead as God. Notably, Prospero flees from the Red Death into the Black Room, his chapel to Satan, barring the door with his body. However, this retreat again to religion fails to keep death, or reality, out. Prospero’s final desperate attempt to escape from death (portrayed through a fully camp Price performance) is his flight from this absurd situation, the fact that human beings are responsible for their own purpose and meaning, the authorship of their own being. This is the terrifying knowledge that Prospero claimed to possess. Prospero’s mad flight indicates his descent into nihilism because of the collapse of his Satanic world view, his realisation that his pursuit of truth leads him straight into the unbearable, inhuman arms of the absurd.

The frequently recurrent climactic burning castle/house in Corman’s Gothics (a cost cutting measure in actuality) is often read in psychoanalytic terms as the collapsing consciousness of the central protagonists, the final collapse of their already fragile subjective worldview. Often such characters will descend into a final mad frenzy; Nicholas Medina in *The Pit and the Pendulum* for instance becomes his inquisitor father and tries to kill the

protagonists in a repetition of his father's gruesome crimes, whilst Charles Dexter Ward finally "becomes" his warlock ancestor in *The Haunted Palace*. This may also be a collapse of reason and of logic, the final undoing of sanity and identity, a nihilistic response to the understanding that "reality" is a human construction, and that the universe has no meaning, that identity is fluid, and that truth is negotiable. There is no "burning barn" in *The Masque of the Red Death*, but the film nonetheless mediates on similar existential conclusions through the titular Masque-turned-bloodbath, when the Red Death moves through Prospero's revellers, infecting them with His deadly pestilence.

'And darkness and decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all': Death and the Absurd

Evidence of the absurd is revealed when 'the inexorable, mathematical certainty of death' is considered, according to Camus scholar John Cruickshank.⁶⁷ Life, considered in light of the certainty of death, becomes seemingly an absurd mission; a pointless task to make meaningful that which will inevitably be extinguished, obliterated into nothingness. Likewise, death is a prominent preoccupation of Corman's films, particularly the Poe pictures, with *The Masque of the Red Death* being the most overt mediation on the topic. Prospero is in effect a 'metaphysical rebel', according to David Pirie, in rebellion against God and Death.⁶⁸ But Corman's Gothic films emphasise the inexorability of death and the hopelessness of escaping from it.

Fittingly as in life, the Red Death has the final word in the film: '*Sic transit gloria mundi*' – "Thus passes worldly glory". The phrase, used in Papal rites, reminds us that life is transitory, fleeting, that it by nature must come and go. To grant an extra level of literary

⁶⁷ John Cruickshank, 'Afterword', in *Caligula and Other Plays*, by Albert Camus, 1944. Reprint (London: Penguin, 2013), 304.

⁶⁸ Pirie, 'Roger Corman's Descent into the Maelstrom', 61.

integrity, the final epigraph is a quote from Poe's 'Masque of the Red Death': 'And darkness and decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all'. Death is presented, likewise, as an inexorable fate throughout the film: 'The passing of time... the beating of a heart... the footsteps of an assassin... destiny!'. Death as fate was framed overtly existentialist terms in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, written by Richard Matheson.⁶⁹ At the climax, the hero Francis (John Kerr) is subjected to the titular pit and pendulum torture device by a mad, possessed Nicholas Medina:

You are about to enter Hell, Bartolome. Hell! The netherworld... the infernal regions... the abode of the damned, the place of torment... Pandemonium... Gehenna... Naraka... the pit! And the pendulum, the razor edge of death. Thus, is the condition of man, bound on an island from which he can never hope to escape, surrounded by the waiting pit of hell, subject to the inexorable pendulum of fate which must destroy him finally.

The pendulum is death and its inexorable march, the march of fate, of destiny; as Medina says, it is the condition of man, the ultimate torture.

Death is conceived in this regard as transcendent of religion, a fated reality, the only certain destiny. This is developed by Beaumont in *The Masque of the Red Death*. In an exchange with Gino in the forest, Death does suggest that there is a one, true "God", so to speak. This "God" is Death itself because Death is inevitable, arbitrary, necessary. In locking himself away, Prospero effectively attempts a rebellion against the human condition itself, against Death. His belief system situates himself as the figurehead, second only to Satan thus creating an impression of exception. But Prospero is human, not God, such that Death comes for him as is dictated by facts of the human condition. Corman and Beaumont are not, here,

⁶⁹ Author of *The Shrinking Man* and the film adaptation, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Arnold, 1957), both of which were strongly associated with existentialism and themes of alienation, anxiety, absurdity, and affirmation of life; Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café*, 284.

presenting a philosophy of Death, an idea of Death as God, or a malevolent God, as auteur critics like Morris claim. In aiming to replicate European art cinema, the image was deliberately symbolic and allegorical of human condition – that death is the only certainty, the only guarantee. Prospero’s attempt to beat death is an attempt to escape from the human condition, to escape from the ‘island from which he can never hope to escape’. This image mediates on popular existential questions about the meaning of life, and what to do about arbitrary, meaningless existence. *The Masque of the Red Death* effectively presents this idea, this anxiety, of the conflict between the need for true knowledge versus the horror of it, the desire to truly know the world yet also keep it shut out. The conflict is unresolvable, as Corman’s Gothics have shown; our escape from the human condition is temporary at best and impossible at worst. Moreover, there is the idea of knowledge as terror, the irresistible pull of the possibility of true knowledge subjects us to the basic, horrifying meaninglessness of things. Prospero seeks more knowledge about the cruelties and horrors of the world through his Satanism, his god of reality and truth. But his pursuit of knowledge attracts the attention of Death, who grants Prospero “true” knowledge – the inexorability of death and the absurdity of life without God.

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Corman’s 1960s Gothic films can be seen as existential because they were targeted at specific markets, in particular teenagers at the drive-in and students (among others) at the art-house; films like *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* and *The Masque of the Red Death* aimed to conflate exploitation horror with art cinema, a wider trend in American film distribution. Kim Newman said that in Corman’s Gothics, particularly the Poe films, ‘the revolutionary mood of the 1960s really fit all these stories in which decadent old houses representing the established order collapse into lakes or go up in flames... the characters who represent the sins of the past burn,

but usually the teenagers walk away'.⁷⁰ Corman's films always targeted the "underground" audiences of horror aficionados, teenagers at the drive-in, students, and the art-house crowd, and Corman's Gothics were no different, though they did represent AIP's shift to the production of 'middle-bracket picture[s]' with broader cultural appeal.⁷¹ With higher-budgets (though still very low), emphasis on scale and style, and wider distribution, the Gothics courted mainstream audiences along with the usual, reliable suspects through overt play with legitimate psychological themes that were a hallmark of prestige horror films in the 1940s (and which were increasingly read as existential problems). According to Blair Davis 'AIP... began to branch out beyond the teenage demographic that had defined the company since its inception. It would continue to make films for this audience, of course, but no longer to the exclusion of all others'.⁷² Corman's Gothics represented an attempt at cultural legitimacy, whilst still courting the existential angst of the countercultural, underground, and student audience. These themes were sold as the vision of an established literary figure, or as in the case of *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, the product of myth, that also spoke to the adult (psychological) concerns of the day, in a world that increasingly appeared to be going mad. Assured values and comfortable assumptions were increasingly coming under threat, leading to a proliferation of popular psychology books and prompting existential debates such as the question posed by TIME: "Is God Dead?" (see chapter 3). This broader appeal ensured that Corman's Gothics would be far more successful than his cheaper exploitation pictures, something which the majors noticed. Moreover, with *The Masque of the Red Death* and *Tomb of Ligeia*, Corman and AIP courted lucrative international markets. Both films were made in England with a deliberate intention of evoking the feel of prestigious and controversial European imports that

⁷⁰ 'Kim Newman on Edgar Allan Poe', *Tales of Terror*, MGM/Arrow Films, 2014, Blu-Ray.

⁷¹ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷² Davis, *Ibid.*, 128.

walked a line between high cultural sensibilities and low-brow exploitation.⁷³ This is not something exclusive to Corman (as discussed, William Castle was doing much the same thing at the same time, as well as horror films like *Dementia* (Parker and VeSota, 1955) and *Carnival of Souls* (Harvey, 1962)), nor to lowbrow independent cinema, but was a wider trend within the industry, and which would become a taken-for-granted feature of the “New” Hollywood art cinema, within which Corman’s significance is well established.

At the end of his directing career, Corman established New World Pictures, which produced exploitation films whilst also distributing the latest Bergman, Truffaut, and Kurosawa pictures. Cochran wrote that the ‘cultural blending that marked New World Pictures represented the logical culmination of Corman’s career and represented one of the major characteristics of the underground culture, the breaking down of traditional distinctions between high and popular cultures’.⁷⁴ The late 1960s saw notable decline in box-office receipts for major Hollywood studios who, run by aging chief executives, failed to make appealing, successful pictures for a fragmented audience. It was a period marked by instability, and unpredictability, according to Hollywood historian Richard Maltby, leading to an influx of ‘new, much younger production heads’ who were more willing to take chances on younger, fresher independent talent.⁷⁵ New Hollywood was characterized by a series of director-led, independently produced films that received financial backing from the studios (under the package-unit system). These films would often draw on popular, lowbrow genres (like the horror film, the western, or the gangster film) and employ techniques associated with art cinema such as stream of consciousness, montage, editing, unreliable narrators, existential themes. More often than not these films were aimed precisely at those audiences cultivated by

⁷³ Heffernan, *Ibid.*, 111, 112.

⁷⁴ Cochran, *America Noir*, 171.

⁷⁵ Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 178.

the likes of Corman: mostly male teenagers, young adults, and students (including film students), they frequently mediated on psychological ideas such as alienation, aloneness, freedom, male crisis. Many of the directors, writers, and actors in this movement were cultivated by Corman, such as Jack Nicholson, Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, Peter Fonda, Francis Ford Coppola, Bruce Dern, Robert Towne. The absurd struggle to make sense of things is displayed in Polanski's *Chinatown*, starring Jack Nicholson and written by Robert Towne; Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) existential crisis of meaning in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, which was associated with existential ideas by critics; the general nightmare and absurdism, and the total collapse of the secure sense of self of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.⁷⁶ Paul Schrader wrote *Taxi Driver* after re-reading Sartre's *Nausea* and other existential texts: 'I saw the script as an attempt to take the European existential hero, that is, the man from *The Stranger*, *Notes from the Underground*, *Nausea*... and put him in an American context'.⁷⁷ *Taxi Driver* was actually sold as a 'sociological horror film' by *Variety*, with Vincent Price also calling it a 'horror story' that dealt 'with reality', demonstrating that existentialism continued to be aligned with horror.⁷⁸

This look into the existentialism of Roger Corman's horror films presents a new way of considering these New Hollywood art films, which often have their mediation on existential themes and ideas taken for granted by critics (precisely because they are seen as art-films). This analysis of such themes in Corman's films demonstrates how New Hollywood existentialism emerged from the contexts within which Corman was operating. Corman was

⁷⁶ *Taxi Driver* was also written by Paul Schrader, who wrote an important essay on existential ideas in film noir; Vincent Canby, 'FILM VIEW: Scorsese's Disturbing "Taxi Driver" FILM VIEW "Taxi Driver"', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 15 February 1976), d1; Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', 229–42.

⁷⁷ Richard Thompson, 'SCREEN WRITER TAXI DRIVER's Paul Schrader', *Film Comment*, 12.2 (1976), 6–19, 64.

⁷⁸ Murf., 'Film Reviews: Taxi Driver', *Variety*, 281.13 (1976), 17; Price, *Vincent Price*, 275.

making horror with existential themes because those kinds of themes both reflected and cultivated an intended audience that were familiar with such ideas and debates. Often, an existential identity was deliberately mediated by the industry, with lowbrow exploitation horror being directly aligned with existential ideas, which drew meaning from their cultural contexts. New Hollywood art films that played with and mediated existential ideas emerged from the broader market trends within which Corman's horror films (and his exploitation films more generally) were a key player.

Conclusion

This work responded to a gap in scholarship in and around this significant and transitory period in American film (and cultural) history. Existential ideas are frequently taken for granted in studies of film noir and of the films of New Hollywood, although, as clearly shown, both periods were strongly associated with the horror genre and with this period of lowbrow horror in particular. Few have really looked at the strong (textual, cultural, historical) associations between lowbrow horror films and existential ideas in the postwar period, which is surprising given the connections between existential thought and the cultural politics and spaces of the predominant young audience, and the more general connections between ideas raised in both the text and intertexts and well-discussed questions and debates in postwar American culture.

It has been demonstrated that not only were lowbrow horror films in the 1950s and 1960s clearly playing with existential ideas such as alienation, sadism, disintegration, meaninglessness, absurdity, intersubjectivity, and freedom, but that the industry itself directly aligned those films with such ideas, participating within broader cultural debates, in order to both reflect and shape the tastes and attitudes of the predominant market of teenagers, students, and young adults who were the primary consumers of this type of product. This research has shown that, in this period, some of the meanings of lowbrow horror texts like *The Tingler* and *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* were in part product of participation within wider existentialist discourses, whereby the mediation on the contexts of existential thought and ideas in postwar American culture provided the conditions of reception of these films for certain audiences, such as teenagers, students, and young adults, as meaningful in an existential sense. Moreover, building upon work in economic history by Heffernan and Davis, it has demonstrated that this was a trend that was part of the genre's broader transition into mainstream, middlebrow cinema through the development of "psychological" horror, and more generally the development of

the New Hollywood commercial art film.¹ This research has not purported to have unveiled the complete and true meaning of these texts and trends, but a series of possible (often competing) meanings among a heterogeneous set of meanings made possible for audiences within the context of original production and reception.

Alternative Existentialism

In response to changes in audience demographics in the 1950s and the rise of the young consumer as a distinct group, the industry aimed to align the horror genre to register with the identities and ideologies of these groups. Horror films were sold to these groups and were key artefacts to be consumed alongside other products (such as horror comics) in the formation of youth identities; for instance, horror films were prominent fixtures in drive-ins where newly mobile and affluent teenagers would gather in a subcultural space repudiated by adult culture with their dates.² Supported by trailers and advertising, as well as critical reviews that highlighted possible readings, horror films registered with existential ideas and feelings of being the Other or the outsider; anxieties concerning depersonalization, conformity, and inauthenticity; psychological problems and identity crisis; senses of conspiracy, deception, and manipulation; sex, gore, and violence; spectacle, shock, suspense, sights unseen. For young people, these horror films were products intended to be consumed along a whole range of other products that constituted an alternative sense of identity. Existentialism was wedded to these products as part of their identity, emphasising alienation and Outsiders, a marker of estrangement and anxiety in the world, a popular language that articulated psychological crisis. They neatly packaged the existential anxieties commonly associated with the young in the

¹ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 221; Davis, *Battle of the Bs*, 209–213.

² See: Menand for the construction of cultural and political identity through popular entertainment such as in the 1950s; Menand, *The Free World*, 291–332.

1950s and 1960s. Horror's identity in these years was specifically geared to the tastes of newly affluent teenagers and youth consumers (such as college students), and cult aficionados (labelled as "addicts" in the press). Importantly, horror was given a lowbrow, popular, alternative identity, becoming what many critics and scholars have called "bad" or "trash". However, this "badness" was often clearly mobilized by producers and the industry in order to distinguish lowbrow horror as a specific product for this new generation of consumers who rejected mainstream cinema in the 1950s that felt alienating. Badness was often not seen as a deficiency by the intended recipients but as clear indicator of their alternative identity. They were also significantly sold to college students amongst a booming market for films on campuses. In many ways, the lowbrow horror film was conflated with the new wave of imported European art films (and vice versa), and were clearly intended to register with ideas, such as existentialism, that were being increasingly studied by young students. Films like *The Masque of the Red Death* were sold as products to be consumed alongside Bergman, Nietzsche, and *Playboy*.

By the 1960s, attempts were made to "upscale" the horror film, constructing an identity that would resonate with the tastes of middle-class consumers, traditionally the core audience of the first-run market during the Studio System. Many producers aimed to overcome the "badness" of horror texts through quality whilst still retaining a lowbrow register. Horror products in the late-1950s had proven relatively successful (against their low-budgets). Producers sought to replicate these successes on a larger scale, continuing to target the guaranteed youth market while attracting the first-run middle-classes with quality. Horror still maintained an identity that registered with youth culture, but at the same time emphasised those more "legitimate" or "sophisticated" aspects, often in ways that recalled the prestigious Gothic women's films and psychological melodramas of the 1940s (and what we would now call film noir), such as highlighting contemporary psychological questions and anxieties (including

themes of psychological destruction and domination) and literary source material, as well as including female stars. This was the more “legitimate” psychological horror film commonly associated with *Psycho*, but with roots in 1940s and 1950s. Of course, those films were remained associated with existential ideas through their emphasis on psychology, because psychology and existentialism were frequently conflated in postwar culture (by popular authors like Rollo May, Erich Fromm, and Walter Kaufmann). Existential debates were diffused throughout postwar culture and discussed by a range of figures. Existentialism, as a sellable feature of cultural products, registered across culture and was not restricted to lowbrow spaces.

Cultural History

The present research took a cultural and historiographical route to a textually focused film study, situating textual readings in relation to social, cultural, industrial, and intellectual contexts that aimed to reconstruct the conditions that may have influenced partial reception of these films as existential, that provided the contexts for existential meanings. Rather than suggesting that the texts themselves produced existential meanings (or indeed, offering a reading that projected existential meanings as the dominant meaning of the text) it demonstrated that those readings were made possible by the contextual factors and intertexts in the time of original production, drawing on Klinger’s notion that ‘historical and intertextual environments shape meanings that circulate during the time of reception’.³ These texts were situated in a period of transition in the film industry. In many ways these films replaced B-

³ Of course, as with Klinger’s research into the meanings of Douglas Sirk’s melodramas, meanings can change over time depending on changing contexts and intertexts. This is certainly the case for the films under discussion in this work, which were frequently reappropriated by cult film fans, as well as critics and scholars also often discussed the cultural politics of these films reflective of the wider politics of the era, using them to present the period as conservative, reactionary, and paranoid; Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, 160.

films, but unlike B-films (which had guaranteed audiences and little need to make profit), these films needed to be marketed and sold to diverse markets based on distinct attractive properties and appeal under a package-unit system which transferred risk to the independent producer. As consumer products, texts needed to be sold to specific audiences, which prompted an emphasis on “exploitation” as a distribution strategy. The new norms of the postwar independent film industry meant that many films, especially horror films, were made to both reflect and shape the contemporary attitudes and cultural politics of youth consumers, which itself was not a homogenous group as many contend but a diverse grouping of teenagers, aficionados, college students, art fans, cultural outsiders, and children. The textual meanings (the existentialism) emerge because of these contexts. Given the privileged position of existential thought and ideas in these cultural communities, elements of the text that registered with existential ideas were exploited in intertextual materials. Existentialism was part of the clear identity of these products in the moment of original production and reception; this is what is meant by the industry having aligned the lowbrow horror genre with existential thought.

While textual readings of these features have formed the focus of the present research, considerable emphasis has been placed on studying these intertexts. These intertexts provided a window into how texts were intended to be read and consumed, what ideas and themes they were aligned with. It was through such intertexts that the industry positioned texts within cultural debates, how texts participated in wider existential ideas and questions of the period; through critical reception we may see how texts were received as such, how critics positioned the films in relation to ideas about authenticity, sadism, madness, freedom, and meaninglessness. According to Klinger: ‘Placing films within larger discursive and cultural frameworks thus suggests that viewing experience is partially negotiated by antilinear dynamics that ceaselessly puncture the film body, relating its elements to external discursive

and cultural systems'.⁴ Situating the texts in relation to intertexts, with an awareness of cultural and discursive contexts and an understanding of how the industry during the transition towards a package-unit system operated – greater emphasis on selling and marketing individual features of a film product to specific and diversified audiences, fashioning an individual identity for film texts – demonstrated that lowbrow horror cinema was often aligned with existential ideas that circulated in postwar popular discourse in order to appeal to the youth demographic, while the move towards psychological horror drew on more “legitimate” discussions about existential concerns as psychological problems that had a longer American history.

This identity clearly registered with the existential ideas and concepts that were diffused throughout contemporary cultural and intellectual discourse. Existential products – like the work of Camus and Nietzsche, Beat poetry, existential novels, university modules – were consumed by youth audiences in the late-1960s as part of identity construction; horror films can clearly be seen as but one product to be consumed within a wider market of like cultural products. Those discourses also had some register with middle-class audiences, appearing in popular novels, sociology, psychology, being discussed in the press, and related to contemporary concerns such as suburbanisation, conformity, and the overarching concern with totalitarianism in the postwar years.

The films of William Castle and Roger Corman were chosen as case studies to demonstrate these trends. Castle responded to the success of *Les Diaboliques* with youth, producing a series of low-budget imitations that proved successful with young audiences in the 1950s and with broader, middle-class audiences in the 1960s by regularly drawing on the legitimate films of the 1940s, which of course *Les Diaboliques* was indebted to. Anxieties around perception, sadism, control, manipulation, and power were all emphasised in the

⁴ Ibid.

intertextual identity of his films; Castle's famous gimmicks frequently mediated existential ideas about perception and the idea that psychological and perceptual processes determine the reality we perceive. In Castle's horror films "reality" is often artificial and conceals basic, horrific truths. Moreover, his villains (or morally dubious protagonists) are distinctly Gothic, adopting the role of hidden puppeteer who manipulates and controls the perceptions of other characters. Castle's association with Vincent Price drew connections with older narratives of psychological manipulation. Castle was also integral to the development of the adult psychological horror film by cementing horror's alignment with psychological ideas through references to both *Les Diaboliques* and '40s psychological thrillers; his success with films like *House on Haunted Hill* was a big influence on Hitchcock's *Psycho*. *Rosemary's Baby* was mediated and received as a logical extension of Castle's work in psychological horror and an upscaling of horrors alignment with existential ideas, and also had a huge impact on the decline of the PCA and the development adult horror (and special effects) blockbusters such as *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* (and *Jaws*).

Roger Corman, often working with AIP, was one of the earliest leaders in low budget independent cinema in the mid-1950s; the films he produced and directed were also targeted at young audiences, primarily teenagers and students, for the drive-in and college film society market, often also appearing in art-house theatres and campus theatres. They utilized their trash aesthetics as part of a wider attempt to provide alternative products for consumption by this subcultural market that often reflected and facilitated ideas and identities of alienation and estrangement within the suffocating conformity and meaninglessness of everyday life. Corman employed exploitation tactics that preceded the production of hastily made films produced around a title and advertising campaign. Intertexts conveyed the existential identity; posters and advertisements emphasised the horrific realities, the destruction of identity, the disintegration of meaning, absurdity, and outsiders. Alignment with popular existential ideas

and concerns was one tactic he employed in order to make a small profit against his already tiny budgets. Like Castle, Corman's upscaled Gothic films of the 1960s, such as the Poe cycle and *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, as well as in lower-budgeted Gothics like *Tower of London* (Corman, 1963), mediated on the psychic processes that determine reality, and feature sensitive protagonists determined to shut out a horrific reality by creating an artificial world bound by a constructed sense of order while being pursued relentlessly and inexorably by death. They are psychologically destroyed, however, by the absurd realities that confront them, that things have no meaning, that order is merely a scaffolding designed to project arbitrary meaning onto a chaotic and meaningless world.

Corman famously facilitated the careers of many key creatives of the American New Wave. What is perhaps more important than this, however, is how these creatives developed the trends established by exploitation figures like Corman drawing on lowbrow genres with a specific audience base of teenagers and young people and used such texts to mediate on the existential questions that resonated with them. The existentialism of films like *Taxi Driver* is often taken for granted, seen as a marker of their aesthetic and legitimate quality when compared to prior periods of exploitation.⁵ However, these "quality" films arose out of the exact same contexts and market trends set by the likes of Corman and Castle – one such trend being the wider alignment of lowbrow cinema with the familiarity and importance of existential ideas with young target audiences that is identified in this research.

Musicals, Romantic Comedies, and Art-Horror

It was not just lowbrow horror films that were playing with existential ideas. Mainstream films frequently played with existential ideas in the 1950s and 1960s. Musicals like *Seven Brides for*

⁵ Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, 15; King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, 42–44.

Seven Brothers (Donen, 1954) and *Funny Face* (Donen, 1957) mediate on existential themes such as authenticity, bad faith, seeing the other as object, and the inability to accurately and properly know the other; *Funny Face* directly parodies Sartre and existentialism. The film sold itself in association with the existentialist vogue, using an image of a dancing Audrey Hepburn, viewed as a fashion icon by this point, dressed in the existentialist iconography of black trousers and a black turtleneck.⁶ Melodramas targeted at middleclass women frequently featured existential situations, such as in Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (Sirk, 1955) where Cory (Jane Wyman) is forced to choose between an authentic life with the younger Ron (Rock Hudson) or a life of bad faith keeping up appearances to satisfy her children and the judgemental country club women who want to determine her identity; these ideas (related to scandal) are all presented in the trailer.⁷ Humphrey Bogart (commonly associated with existentialism by French critics) is forced into a similar choice between authenticity and bad faith when he falls for Audrey Hepburn in Billy Wilder's romantic comedy *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954). Jack Lemmon battles bad faith in *The Apartment* (Wilder, 1960) when he falls in love with his boss's mistress but risks his popularity and promotion that has come from allowing his boss and colleagues to use his apartment as a love nest. In *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder, 1959), Lemmon and Tony Curtis fool Marilyn Monroe by dressing as women, all while constantly objectifying and manipulating her without her being aware. The present research has shown how lowbrow horror was frequently aligned with existentialism, but it is clear that this was not the only genre to draw on associations with existential ideas and thought in postwar America.

⁶ *Funny Face* (MGM, 1957), 1957
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050419/mediaviewer/rm3913898752/?ref_=tt_ov_i
 [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁷ Hudson even paraphrases Nietzsche when he tells Wyman that she needs to “become a man” and lead an independent existence; see: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, trans. by Duncan Large, [1887] Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); *All That Heaven Allows 1955 Trailer* (YouTube: TrailerFood, 2009) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqJkCHMWw40&t=81s> [accessed 30 June 2022].

Further scholarly research into the broader relationship between mainstream American cinema and existential thought would be fruitful.

There is also the clear legacy of these existential horror films on the way the genre was sold in the 1970s which has been alluded to throughout the present research. 1970s horror, associated with the American New Wave, is often distinguished from the majority 1950s and 1960s by fans, critics, and scholars of horror due to its conflation with more artistic (and realist) forms of filmmaking driven by auteurs like Wes Craven and Tobe Hooper. The trailer for *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977) reveals a film that is clearly aligning its horror elements with existential ideas about death, survival, identity, the horror of being seen and objectified (the title and trailer, of course, emphasises seeing), and the collapse of meaning. As the voice over states: ‘She thought she knew what the world was, but nothing prepared her for this!’.⁸ The same idea is conveyed in the iconic tagline of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974): ‘Who will survive and what will be left of them?’. In both films, a group of ordinary White suburbanites stumble upon horrors unimaginable buried deep in rural America, and are forced into a battle for survival against sadistic human monsters while descending increasingly into madness. These are the same ideas associated with the films of Roger Corman and William Castle; a protagonist is confronted with the collapse of the meaningful world and the real truth is horrific, often prompting a collapse into madness. *The Last House on the Left* (Craven, 1972) even uses the same tagline as *Strait-Jacket* to convey its realism (“‘keep telling yourself: it’s only a movie... it’s only a movie’”).⁹ A whole series of horror films, such as *When a Stranger Calls* (Walton, 1979), *Scream* (Craven, 1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Gillsepie, 1997), and *Urban Legend* (Blanks, 1998) use the same idea of the unknown Other who

⁸ *The Hills Have Eyes (1977) - Trailer* (YouTube: Pyrkenstein, 2012) <[youtube.com/watch?v=EkdskdFemWM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkdskdFemWM)> [accessed 30 June 2022].

⁹ *The Last House on the Left (1972) ORIGINAL TRAILER [HD 1080p]* (YouTube: HD Retro Trailers, 2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gftu8RjqJ_o> [accessed 30 June 2022].

manipulates and controls the unsuspecting character through the phone (or other media) that was a core theme of Castle's *I Saw What You Did. Taxi Driver*, though now read as a neo-noir, was sold as an existential horror film: 'a terrifying portrait of life on the edge of madness', selling de Niro's 'chilling' portrayal as a monster 'preparing himself for the only moment in his life that will ever mean anything'. Such themes were not restricted to lowbrow exploitation films but were prominent in the new blockbuster horror films of the 1970s. The trailer for *The Omen* sells a film of 'psychological suspense' that has 'earth-shaking importance', and teases a horrific truth about the world: 'if this is the truth, where does it end?'.¹⁰ The horror of *The Omen* is existential, a truth (or biblical revelation) that will shatter the world of meaning. In *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), a primal, ancient threat rises up from the depths (the unknown) and exists only to eat ('It is as though God created the devil and gave him jaws'); the shark embodies the meaninglessness and inexorability of death.¹¹ As the trailer for *Jaws 2* states: 'None of man's fantasies can compare with the reality of *Jaws*'.¹² As in the 1950s and 1960s, existential themes were used as a selling point for 1970s horror films. In 1975, one executive at Universal rightly asked: "'What was *Jaws*... but an old Corman monster-from-the-deep flick[?]'".¹³ Not only were these films aligned with existential ideas, but actively read in terms of and associated with lowbrow exploitation horror from the 1950s and 1960s.

¹⁰ *The Omen* | #TBT Trailer | 20th Century FOX (YouTube: 20th Century Studios, 2014) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqAYR6z7yAU>>.

¹¹ *Jaws Official Trailer #1 - Richard Dreyfuss, Steven Spielberg Movie (1975) HD* (YouTube: Movieclips Classic Trailers, 2011) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1fu_sA7XhE&t=35s> [accessed 30 June 2022].

¹² *Jaws 2 Official Trailer #1 - Roy Scheider Movie (1978) HD* (YouTube: Movieclips Classic Trailers, 2012) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wpr-X20Rrwo>> [accessed 30 June 2022].

¹³ Bill Davidson, 'King of Schlock: Roger Corman, Auteur of Major Minor Movies like "The Beast With a Million Eyes," Is Not the Critics' Darling. But Many Top Directors, Actors and Writers Learned the Ropes Working for Him', *The New York Times* (New York, NY, 28 December 1975), 152; Gray, *Roger Corman*, 126.

Film and Philosophy

What does this cultural-historiographical approach that also considers the dynamics of the film industry contribute to the debates around film and philosophy? Many scholars, such as Stephen Mullhall, have utilized a number of methodologies to investigate the relationship, if any, between film and philosophical ideas. Mulhall addresses the value of bringing philosophy to the discussion of film: ‘philosophy has something distinctive to contribute to the ongoing conversations about particular films and the medium of cinema that play such an important role in contemporary public culture’.¹⁴ He adds that ‘Philosophy’s voice has a specific register’ that does not ‘render other voices mute’, but brings to the fore a set of potential meanings and ideas that may be overlooked, to draw attention to the ‘intellectual powers of film and of the pervasiveness of matters of philosophical interest in human life’.¹⁵ The present research has ultimately taken an approach similar to intellectual history, looking at how ideas are the result of conditions of production and reception.¹⁶ This research has considered the conditions of production and reception that produced existential ideas and meanings in these lowbrow horror films during their original consumption. Cultural products are unavoidably ‘soaked through’ by contemporary ideas and situations; such ideas and situations frequently informed the reception and consumption of cultural texts.¹⁷ Existential ideas and questions were among the most pertinent and diffused in postwar American culture (they were fashionable) and held a considerable register in a time of cultural conformity, scientific rationalization, and atomic anxiety; William Barrett called existentialism the ‘philosophy of the atomic age’.¹⁸ It had a broader cultural register in how it was discussed by a wide range of scholars, intellectuals,

¹⁴ Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, 3rd edn (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

¹⁶ Menand, *The Free World*, 346.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁸ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 65.

psychologists, and writers across the postwar American cultural landscape – many of whom would not be considered existentialists, but nonetheless addressed core questions of being, alienation, meaning, identity, and freedom. It was also a vital resource for alienated young people and countercultural movements. When these situations are considered, the fact that lowbrow horror texts seem so fixated on recognizable themes of existential thought is precisely because they drew many of their contemporary meanings from their clear situatedness and participation within these *popular* existential conversations; indeed, it is the essence of exploitation as a means of production and distribution to sell films as timely, controversial, hip, and up-to-the-minute, to register with what was popular at the time of reception.

Ideas, like film, are cultural products, and as cultural products they are subject to and shaped by their contexts and conditions. Both existential ideas and lowbrow horror films frequently overlapped precisely because they were important cultural products for specific groups; both were used similarly in the process of identity construction and as signifiers of distinct cultural politics. Existential ideas were parts of the ways in which lowbrow horror films were sold, and one of the possible ways in which they may have been read as meaningful by (certain) cultural audiences during this period. This is a study of the relationship between philosophy (or ideas) and film rooted in cultural-intellectual historiography, as well as in the histories of media industries and reception. Klinger used her study of the reception and marketing of melodrama to ‘historicize the study of media phenomena’; in a similar sense, the present study seeks to historicize the study of film and its relationship with philosophical ideas, to historicize philosophical meanings of film texts and genres, and the role played by ideas in making media texts meaningful.¹⁹

¹⁹ Klinger, *Ibid.*, 160.

This research is not without its limitations, many of which are the result of its scope. Cultural and reception studies often struggle to provide a total history.²⁰ Temporal distance from these audiences and lack of much ethnographic data about reception make any conclusive statements about the contemporaneous meanings of these films for audiences (but that should not deter the scholar from trying). Much of the present textual analyses have rested on an understanding of certain ideologies and ideas in postwar culture in a more general sense. Audiences were not homogenous and often divided by class situation, race, gender, and geography. It has been alluded how different groups found different usages of existential ideas for application to issues in race and gender. Greater exploration in these areas would indeed be fruitful, and it is hoped that this preliminary and more general research will be influential in this regard. Existential readings are provided as one possible reading based on what is known about the cultural politics of these consumers and given that we know how diffused existential ideas were during this period, clear mediation on such ideas through intertextual materials and within the text itself provides clearly show that an existential viewing position was at least reflected and constructed, regardless of whether any of these audiences read them as such. In many ways, these limitations are provocative and provide ample areas for future research.

Due to a focus on one set of possible meanings in the moment of original production, there has been little discussion as to how the meanings of these films are in flux due to changing historical conditions of mediation and reception. The explosion an underground cult film network in the 1970s and beyond meant that many of these texts found new life and meaning as part of a new set of distinct cultural identities through fanzines, festivals, mail-order videos, and rituals, which subsequently became more mainstream as it was exploited by media

²⁰ See: Barbara Klinger, 'Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies', in *The Film Studies Reader*, ed. by Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings, and Mark Jancovich (London: Arnold, 2000), 299–307.

industries through DVD, TV, books, magazines, and Hollywood remakes and homages. Lowbrow horror films were among many that became meaningful for the subversive cultural politics of (often White male) cult film fans and scholars within the academy who seek to construct an alternative, paracinematic canon of counter-cinema, often overlooking that this kind of reception frequently mirrors how those texts were utilized in their original reception, of which register with existential ideas was a part.²¹ As of 2022, as home video technology has improved, these films are frequently being sold in expensive Blu-Ray collections that market them either (semi-ironically) as auteur works of misunderstood genius or as trash cult masterpieces (and often as both), approaches which dominate the reception of these texts today.²² Roger Corman and many figures associated with him and the contexts he represented (such as Joe Dante) remain alive in 2022 and continue to perpetuate many of the same 1970s and 1980s auteur myths that mediated the meanings of his films (often through platforms like YouTube and cult film festivals). Academic scholarship flits between continued cult paracinematic reverence and cultural and historical attempts to situate texts in context.²³ The meanings of postwar lowbrow horror films remain contested and heterogenous and no doubt will continue to be so.

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This research offers a fresh approach to familiar topics within studies and histories of postwar American film. The present research has contributed to understandings of the cultural meanings of horror texts and the genre more widely in the 1950s and 1960s, using William Castle and Roger Corman as case studies in demonstrating how the industry aligned the lowbrow end of

²¹ See: Sconce, ““Trashing” the Academy”; Jancovich, ‘Cult fictions’; Hollows, ‘The masculinity of cult’; Mathijs, *Cult Cinema*, 13–25; Ernest Mathijs, ““Nasty,” “Naughty,” “Culty””, 11–23.

²² Approaches initially adopted by this author before a turn to cultural studies.

²³ As indicated by this research and by the recent volume on William Castle edited by Murray Leeder.

the genre with contemporary existential thought as part of the ways in which horror films were marketed and sold to specific consumers, which in turn resulted in a series of existential meanings clearly at work in the text. It has also shown by engaging with industrial historians like Kevin Heffernan and Blair Davis, and cultural historians like Barbara Klinger, how this played a role within wider industrial trends towards mainstream, “legitimate” psychological horror, “adult horror”, and the New Hollywood commercial art film. This research also positions these horror films within cultural and intellectual contexts that mediated their meanings, presenting an intellectual history of postwar existentialism that makes use of popular horror texts.

This research has importantly presented new ways of approaching the relationship of film and philosophical ideas on a more cultural and historiographical footing, which provides a fertile area for further research, as hinted in the above discussion of existential ideas in 1950s musicals and romantic comedies, and 1970s art-horror films (which incorporates a broader scope of what was received as horror). These trends identified in postwar horror did not simply emerge in response to films like *Les Diaboliques* but was broadly rooted in the films of the 1940s, particularly psychological thrillers, melodramas, and Gothic women’s films. These films, often categorised as film noir by critics, had strong associations with (particularly) French existentialism; when imported into France following the liberation, these films both reflected and cultivated many existential philosophies and writings. They were also frequently read as mediating on existential ideas (though not called as such, of course) such as authenticity, sadism, identity, freedom, and manipulation, concepts which were long rooted in the American consciousness before the arrival of French existentialism.²⁴ Importantly, as critics such as Naremore and Jancovich have noted, these films were frequently read and mediated as

²⁴ Cotkin, *Existential America*, 6.

psychological horror films by contemporary critics and the industry in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁵ Given the strong association between '40s psychological horror and the lowbrow horror films of the 1950s and 1960s, scholars should return to this period and the question of film noir's relationship with existentialism; such a period is clearly important for a whole series of processes, developments, and trends in the horror which have been identified in the present research, such as the development of adult psychological horror and New Hollywood, which reflected and participated in broader trends in the industry as a whole. It shows the horror genre as being consistently tied to and used as a popular means of addressing the central existential questions and debates of the postwar era.

²⁵ As Naremore rightly said 'one can imagine a large video store where examples of [film noir] would be shelved somewhere between gothic horror and dystopian science fiction'; Naremore, *More than Night*, 9.

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