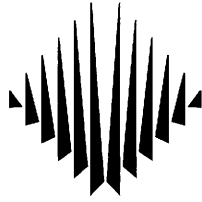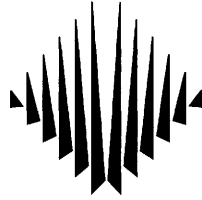# The Gothic Postmodern

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Making Monsters, or
Serializing Killers

For all that it had the veneer of currency, with its special effects
and dalliance with the quasi-scientific "paranormal" and "para-
psychological," Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* seemed, in 1982, to be
merely a residual demon-possession film, a latecomer to the al-
ready rather shopworn seventies occult movie. Lagging behind
The Exorcist (1973), *The Omen* (1976), *The Sentinel* (1977), *The
Amityville Horror* (1979), and *The Shining* (1980), *Poltergeist* nev-
ertheless had all the ingredients: a nice family, a haunted house,
a possessed child, and, most important, the ever-menacing dan-
ger of unholy spirits and the "Beast" lurking just beyond the re-
ality of the bucolic suburbia of Cuesta Verde. And yet *Poltergeist*
also presented something else, something other than a drafty
window or bricked-in basement as the liminal space between the
demonic and domestic world: it posited a television set as the in-
terstice and conduit between specular reality and what gets por-
tentously referred to throughout the film as the "other side." Ex-
periencing the most profound effects of this liminal space is a
little female viewer, Carol Anne Freeling, who is sucked into the
interstice through her apparently one-sided interaction with
"TV people." That the "TV people" are merely pleasant illu-
sions, produced to occlude the horror of the Beast from Carol
Anne, is made clear by the time Hooper shifts the cinematic em-
phasis from the white noise and snow-filled holding pattern of
the perpetually on television to the bedrooms upstairs, in which
the scene of Carol Anne's metaphoric rebirth into American

suburbia is enacted. As with *The Amityville Horror*, the Beast is eventually thwarted, and the now-reunited Freeling family abandon their home, drive to a Holiday Inn, and, as a parting shot, proceed to stick the hotel television set out in the hall—presumably to stave off any further unwitting submission to its dangerous enticement.[1]

If *Poltergeist* was effectively among the last gasps of the popular seventies genre of occult or Satanic-possession films, its early eighties take on that genre equally registered, as did David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (also of 1982), the emergence of what would become one of the more gnawed-over and politically fraught debates in eighties and nineties America: the problematic relationship between fictional illusion, or "TV people," and its youthful American consumers. And if, in terms of those debates at any rate, the Satanic Beast was dropped out of the triangulated relation of real viewer, fictional screen, and otherworldly gothic demon, this lacuna suggests as much about a shift away from the popular seventies articulation of horror as it does about a realignment of the locus of monstrosity. What seems to disappear in the removal of the Beast is horror's representation within arcane religious tropes and a thematics of the "other side."

Now, to a point, the situating of the monstrous and its horror within the parameters of religious extremes made perfect sense in the seventies, when the supposed prevalence of strange "brainwashing" cults and their charismatic leaders prompted alarmist anticult propaganda. With the trials of Charles Manson and the Manson "family" in 1970, with Mansonite Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme's failed shooting of President Gerald Ford and her trial in 1975, with the Jonestown massacre in 1978, and with the repeated hysterical efforts to have Reverend Sun Myung Moon deported and his Unification Church disbanded in the late seventies, it is scarcely surprising that the decade's horror films should at least tangentially reflect real fears of an emergent evangelical menace. Given their focus on the mysterious "possession" of middle-class American family members, who speak with the voice and words of the symbolically recognizable but always elided, faceless, otherworldly Beast of the apocalypse, films like

The Exorcist and *The Amityville Horror* accentuate the helpless-
ness of vulnerable youth in the face of a far greater occult power.
In the post-Watergate early eighties, however, when television
had proven itself useful for the simultaneous propagation of
comforting fictions and exposure of the shocking truth behind
them, when Cronenberg's Father O'Blivion had heralded the
emergence of the more benign but equally avaricious televange-
list Jimmy Baker, the construct of horror and its representation
had changed.

By the time Reverend Moon had been dispatched to a Con-
necticut prison on a vaguely trumped-up charge of tax evasion in
1984, the cinema's metaphysical gothic Beast, whose presence
was merely suggested representationally with gusts of frigid
wind, swarms of flies, low gutteral growls, and the tip of a lash-
ing tail, had given way to a more visceral, because more "real,"
form of the monstrous. The American serial killer, who left hu-
man detritus in his wake from New York and Texas to Washing-
ton, D.C., and Milwaukee, had come to occupy the symbolic
space of montrosity in the public imagination. Indeed, nothing
could have quite illustrated the dissolution or reification of the
myth of demonic possession as clearly as Son of Sam's failed in-
sanity defense in 1978 and its aftermath in 1979. While he was
killing, David Berkowitz wrote to the *New York Daily News* that
he was driven to kill by the "Duke of Death," the "Wicked King
Wicker," and the "22 Disciples of Hell" (*Serial* 171); he wrote
taunting letters to New York police captain Joseph Borrelli that
he signed "Mr Monster" (Klausner 142). At his trial Berkowitz
described "demonic inner choirs," hellish noises under his floor-
boards, and compulsions from the depths of hell; his defense at-
torney offered samples of the doodles and graffiti from the walls
of his house: "I am possessed" and "demons torment me" (*Serial*
182). Declared insane and delusional (although not "possessed")
by a panel of three psychiatrists, Berkowitz was nevertheless
reevaluated, determined fit to stand trial, and convicted as a sane
murderer. Eight months later, much to the surprise of the prison
psychologists and much to the satisfaction of both New York
district attorneys, Berkowitz recanted: in February of 1979 he

held a press conference at Attica, at which he assured reporters that the demons were fabrications "invented by me in my own mind to condone what I was doing" (*Serial* 182).

This dispelling of illusory or obfuscatory fictions and disclosure of the "facts" of Berkowitz's true guilt speak not only of the inadequacy, at the end of the seventies, of the literal "devil-made-me-do-it" defense but equally of the confident separation of the fictional and the real, in which the latter can produce the affect, if not exactly the content, that was once exclusively in the sphere of the former. And the seemingly pragmatic rejection of the gothic *other* side as the locus of horror brings forth a symptomatic overvaluation of *this* side's true serial killers. That America thought it had horrifyingly "real" monsters instead of fictional demons is unquestionably reflected in the emergence and stunning efflorescence of eighties "true-crime" books like Ann Rule's *The Stranger beside Me* (1980), Terry Sullivan's *Killer Clown: The John Wayne Gacy Murders* (1983), Stephen Michaud and Hugh Aynesworth's *The Only Living Witness* (1983) and *Ted Bundy: Conversations with a Killer* (1989), Lawrence Klausner's *Son of Sam* (1981), and scores of other books about the so-called superstar killers, who, according to Elliott Leyton, had made "lifelong *celebrity career[s]*" (2) out of their multiple murders.

Gallows jokes aside about the acute brevity of the "*lifelong*" celebrity careers of, say, the late Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, or John Wayne Gacy, much of that celebrity emerged out of the frisson of fear offered by the "real" rather than by the merely fictional gothic Beast. But that seemingly confident divide between the fictional gothic and the "real" is not, I would argue, unproblematic. Nor is it a divide that can simply accommodate a Berkowitz-like claim to be first a monster and then a liar, as if the monstrous were eminently dispatchable to the pages of a novel (the "other side" of truth) while the real were pristinely articulable within the pages of true crime, purporting to present its unmediated horror. The dust jackets, for example, invite us to read "The Shocking True Story of American's Most Notorious Serial Killer" (Henry Lee Lucas), "The Shocking True-Crime Story of America's Most Twisted Serial Sex Killer" (Jeffrey Dahmer), "The Shocking True Story of the Man Convicted

of More Murders than Any Other Person in United States History!" (Gacy) and enjoin us to peruse the accompanying "8 Pages of Chilling [or "Gripping" or "Dramatic" or "Shocking"] Photos." Contrary to their billing, the photographs are neither "shocking" nor "gripping," consisting almost exclusively of high-school yearbook photos of the victims, mug shots or courtroom pictures of the killers, and, occasionally, grainy, indistinct polaroids of investigators at one of the crime scenes. Conventional and scarcely "chilling," they confer above all the air of bland verisimilitude.

For all their hyperbolic claims to shock with "truth," true-crime books, and indeed the entire discourse around serial killers, nevertheless register an ongoing difficulty: how, in the true-crime story, to marshal "fact" into "story" and seemingly banal people into satisfying characters; how, in other words, to generate comprehension and explicability out of a real that, unlike fiction, potentially defies satisfying organization and mimetic representation. The "facts" about serial killers—at least those that form the real base of true-crime books—are little more than catalogs of the killers' effects on their victims, whose corpses testify silently to pre- or postmortem torture, mutilation, dismemberment, sexual assault, cannibalism, necrophilia, exposure, paraphelia. Typically such catalogs are lightly larded with thumbnail sketches of the young, innocent victims' lives and last-known movements, embellished slightly with speculation about the killers' modus operandi, and explicit about the totemic body parts or pieces of clothing and jewelry that the killer removed from the victim. And, as if to offer some vague sociological or psychological justification for the killers' actions, true-crime writers hark back to cryptic biographical facts about the killers' childhoods and early, premurderous, years.

Like forensic reports, however, such catalogs of facts in the true crime story are grossly lacking in "story" potential, confounding, as they do, any organizational principles that would offer familiar readerly comprehensibility. Indeed, given the randomness, repetition, and seeming motivelessness of the killings, the crimes themselves pose a stony resistance to even the loosest picaresque narrative models.[2] When, for example, Joyce Carol

Oates criticizes Nick Broomfield's *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1994) as "one of those hand-held-camera documentaries that make of their own limitations and rebuffs a theme of the narrative, and which can only be viewed by VCR, with one's thumb firmly on the fast-forward button" (55), she simply fails to register the on going narrative problem with the true-crime story. She fails, in other words, to acknowledge that the "theme of the narrative" must be constructed as that of documentary filmmaking, just as the theme of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" had to be that of Auguste Dupin's detection, because the "factual" material cannot itself sustain the burden of the narrative.

If the killers' actions, in their abject plotlessness, are intrinsically bereft of any narrative potential to proffer comprehensibility, the killers' characters do not compensate. In *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990) Janet Malcolm attempts to appraise Joe McGinniss's obvious difficulties with his subject in *Fatal Vision* (1983), his true-crime bestseller about convicted murderer Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald. Reading over the trial transcripts and listening to tape recordings, Malcolm is surprised to find that MacDonald's language is "dead, flat, soft, clichéd," that the "plain words" have an "awful puerility" (67). The "bland dullness" of MacDonald on tape strikes her as "unusual . . . because of its contrast to the excitingly dire character of the crime for which he stood convicted: a murderer shouldn't sound like an accountant" (70). The *New Yorker*'s Alec Wilkinson makes an almost identical observation about Gacy: that his voice "rarely change[d] pitch" as he went "over the same ground again and again," and sometimes Gacy's "company was so dreary that I would take off my watch, so I couldn't see how slowly the time was passing"—"[w]hat personality he may once have had collapsed long ago and has been replaced by a catalogue of gestures and attitudes" (59). Ted Bundy's biographers or interviewers, Stephen Michaud and Hugh Aynesworth, had to spell each other off when they were interviewing Bundy, perceiving him as simultaneously "empty" and grandiose; they finally gave up altogether and published barely edited transcripts in *Ted Bundy: Conversations with a Killer*, concluding the book with a veiled apology

for their lack of perseverance or fortitude. And Anne Schwartz, in her book on Jeffrey Dahmer, *The Man Who Could Not Kill Enough* (1992), comments that the intellectually "dull normal" Dahmer had no apparent craziness or charm: "[t]here was just nothing to him" (180).

The real MacDonalds or Gacys, the real Bundys or Dahmers, unlike the charismatic gothic killers of, say, Thomas Harris's recent fiction, are deeply dull and blandly ordinary.[3] They are so ordinary, in fact, that Malcolm suggests that McGinniss, having "found out too late . . . that the subject of his book was not up to scratch—not suitable for a work of nonfiction, not a member of the wonderful race of auto-fictionalizers . . . on whom the New Journalism and the 'nonfiction novel' depend for their lives," had to find a "solution to his literary problem of making Mac-Donald into a believable murderer" (71–72, 75). This "literary" problem of having to create believability or explicability virtually ex nihilo, emerges from the kind of assumption Malcolm makes so explicit—that crimes with "excitingly dire" characters are supposed to have equally "excitingly dire" killers as their agents. Ironically, of course, it is precisely their ordinariness, their characteristic of "sounding like accountants" and being employed in low-profile "unexciting" jobs like construction/contracting, mail sorting, vat mixing at a chocolate factory that makes their crimes seem all the more shocking. And yet, Malcolm is focusing on the pragmatics of journalistic representation, which demand that startlingly grisly effects necessitate the "literary production" of monstrous causes. While FBI special agents may assert bluntly, "We're not interested in causes, and we're not interested in cures. We're interested in identification, apprehension, incarceration and prosecution" (Oates 53), the "just-the-facts-ma'am" attitude produces only data banks at Quantico, not answers to public bewilderment, not the consolation of vague explanation, and certainly not a story whose explicit project is to communicate the horror of the real.

It is, I would argue, precisely in the space of this representational vacuum, in the space of absent causes—both the killers' absent characters and the plot-producing motives for their actions—that the "real" becomes inadequate and the "literary so-

lutions" become crucial to the creation of the true-crime story. If the ongoing assumption is that the killer is not what he seems, that he is "excitingly dire" behind the mere illusion of ordinariness, it shouldn't surprise us that writers about serial killers turn to a rearticulation of the nineteenth-century gothic as both a paradigm and a constellation of metaphors. The gothic is, after all, traditionally the genre best equipped for the representation of a collective fear in the seemingly incomprehensible or occultly ineffable, just as it proffers a full complement of metaphors for the monstrously knowledgeable and the virtuously innocent and ignorant. Poe's tortured Roderick Usher, Melville's monomaniacal but lucid Ahab, Henry James's ultraproper governess and permanently youthful Grace Brissenden, Stoker's urbane Count Dracula, and Stevenson's driven Dr. Jekyll all conceal the possibility of horror and madness beneath their beauty, charm, or charisma, all offer the potential for an uncanny supernatural or monstrous transcendence of the ordinary, and all occupy the upper position in the hierarchy of victimizer and victim. As "literary solutions," in other words, gothic figures flesh out with fiction what is otherwise unavailable in the real and, in turn, make "story" possible—although true crime generally fails to acknowledge the debt.

Even the most cursory glance at most of the self-consciously "nonfiction" work on serial killers, from psychologists' and anthropologists' textbooks to true-crime books and journalists' interviews, reveals the degree to which gothic metaphors and the attendant rhetoric of monstrosity pertain almost exclusively. In *The Only Living Witness*, for example, Michaud and Aynesworth describe the real Ted Bundy as containing a malignant "entity," a "slithering hunchback": "[o]nly by means of his astounding capacity to compartmentalize had [he] been able to keep the hunchback from raging through the mask [of sanity] and destroying him. When at last it did, *Ted* became the hunchback" (6, 13). In his psychobiological treatise *Serial Killers*, psychologist Joel Norris details one of what he determines to be the seven phases of serial murder: the "aura" phase, the point at which superficially "normal-looking individuals" are "translated into a different kind of creature. Whatever is human in [them] recedes

for a while, and [they] enter into a shadowy existence, a death in life" (24); later he describes Henry Lee Lucas as living his "years in a kind of phantom world," as "belong[ing] to the walking dead" (125, 126). In *Hunting Humans* anthropologist Elliott Leyton enjoins us, at one point, not to consider John Kemper III a "deranged Frankenstein monster" with a mind filled with "fantasies of demons and spirit forces" but at another to wonder why Henry Lee Lucas spent decades "exorcising [his mother's] ghost by killing 'her' over and over again" (36, 4).

Even the killers themselves feel compelled to respond to and dispute the all-pervasive constructions of them as gothic monsters. Bundy, for example, announced flatly to the *New York Times*, "I am not a monster" (Rule 446). And more recently Gacy fumed to Wilkinson that his alleged victims were all presented at his trial as "Boy Scouts and altar boys, and I was the monster. . . . Jesus, I didn't even want to run into myself the way they described me" (69). Granted, Gacy's figural monstrosity was accentuated rather profoundly at his trial when Sam Amirante, his attorney, attempted to bolster Gacy's insanity defense by reading aloud passages of Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. He then urged the jury members to view Gacy not as a mere human killer but as the "personification of this novel written in 1886" (Sullivan and Maiken 365).

What is peculiar about Amirante's construction of Gacy as a "personification" of a novel, apart from his apparent difficulty with the trope of "personification," is the way in which his inadvertent reversal of the human and the rhetorical figure actually reflects a similar confusion in the representation of serial killers. According to Amirante, Stevenson's novel is the human ground or template and Gacy the rhetorical figure of imitation. An analogue not of a human being or even a fictional character but of a book, Gacy is connotatively an inhuman reflection of a fully humanized fiction. When the gothic—or the "literary solution," the Jekyll/Hyde response to the banality and ordinariness of the killers—prevails, in other words, "real" killers become, as Norris suggests, only "translations" of fictional creatures. This metaphoric "translation," in true crime, of the real serial killer into a figural gothic monster—a "demon," "Frankenstein monster,"

"vampire," "incubus," "zombie," "malevolent entity," "slithering hunchback," "Mr. Hyde," "different kind of creature"—displays the extent to which fiction ultimately provides the bedrock for all attempts to represent the "real" serial killers.

More than merely providing monster prototypes, however, the paradigmatic gothic presents a number of other satisfying components that the real cannot. Not only does it situate collective fear within the familiar gothic construct of feminine victimization, in which "an entire community . . . [can be] frozen with terror" (Norris, *Serial Killers* 14), "all of Milwaukee [can feel] victimized by [a] Dahmer" (Schwartz 176), and "entire cities are traumatized when everyone becomes a victim" (Norris, *Serial Killers* 74), but it equally absolves the rest of humanity of monstrousness by positing an extreme of the human that seems to exist only in fiction. Above all, perhaps, gothic paradigms allow for the creation of a compelling narrative and, consequently, the generation of character and plot out of "bland ordinariness" and incomprehensible randomness. Indeed, the most readable true-crime stories are organized around the formal principles of the nineteenth-century gothic monster novel, which, as Christopher Craft points out, inscribes a "tripartite cycle of [the monster's] admission-entertainment-expulsion" (217).

Typically, the true-crime story introduces a stalwart police detective, the soon-to-be final victims, and the slick killer. The victims are disarmed by the killer's smooth charm; the detective is equally duped. Eventually, the detective retrieves facts that link the killer to the crimes, then unearths some grisly evidence that exposes his monstrousness. Tracking, then capturing the killer, the detective finally participates in a lavishly detailed courtroom drama that concludes with the monster's terminal expulsion via the electric chair, lethal injection, or prison fatality. Alternately, true crime deploys a first-person narrative by a "friend" of the killer. Ann Rule's *The Stranger beside Me*, for example, charts her involvement with the seductive Ted Bundy, her initial whispered confidences, gradual awareness of a subtle "dark side," her realization that her "friend" is a monster, and final rejection of him, complete with bewildered head shaking and theatrical shudders. The formal movement of both versions

of true crime is roughly the same, presenting the intersection of the monstrously inhuman outsider who, once absorbed temporarily within the symbolic "ordinary," precipitates the dichotemy of victimizer and victim, and it allows for the articulation of an uncanny fear that is structurally resolved at the end of the narrative. But the "friend"-centered model emphasizes confessions of self-deception, and the detective-centered model aggrandizes the profession and its legal might. The introduction and celebration of the heroic counterpredator—the canny FBI agents, the state troopers, or the metropolitan police, who, like Van Helsing and Victor Frankenstein, can stalk the monster—not only offer the means to plot organization but equally offer tidy orderliness to an otherwise unnarratable chaos.

The heroic counterstalker is as much a fantastic construct as the gothic monster in that, for all their resources, the police or FBI can boast the capture of probably less than 1 percent of serial killers, and even then they succeed only by sheer blind luck and not exhaustive police work. On some level the fictionality of the counterstalkers is tacitly acknowledged: when the FBI's team from the Behavioral Science Unit at Quantico arrived in upstate New York to investigate a quadruple homicide, for instance, they were hailed in local newspaper headlines as the "A Team" (Wilson and Seaman 134). But on another level, the enthusiasm with which the apparent success of this almost-fictional counterstalker is met and celebrated by readers suggests the profundity of the public desire to believe implicitly in the gothic narrative and not in the "facts" of the "real." We need only look to a number of extremely popular novels—Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), Patricia Cornwell's *Postmortem* (1990) and *All that Remains* (1992), Julie Smith's *Tourist Trap* (1986)—to see how consolatory such constructions are in their positing of the capture of monsters like Francis Dolarhyde, Roy McCorkle, and Jame Gumb.

If fictional consolation is thus approved wholeheartedly, the controversial unpopularity of such works as Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) and John McNaughton's quasi-documentary *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* is telling: the former was condemned by American feminists as promoting vio-

lence against women, and the latter, which was completed in 1986, had its release held up until 1990 because it couldn't get a rating. Neither work offers even a particle of consolation. Based loosely on the life of Henry Lee Lucas, *Henry* is bleakly natural- istic and grimly plotless, beginning innocuously and trailing off with a final dumped corpse and a last glimpse of disappearing taillights. The fictional *American Psycho* practically offers a cri- tique of true crime's dependence on fiction, and, like *Henry*, it eschews familiar formal plot structures. Ellis's emphasis on the dull, yuppy, consumer-mad routine of Patrick Bateman's su- perficial life—on the endless round of restaurant dinners, after- work drinks, aerobic workouts, health spa facials, and shopping sprees at Bloomingdale's—accentuates the absence of a recog- nizable chronology. And his insistence on Bateman's blandly ge- neric good looks and banal conversation, which prompt people to confuse him regularly with someone else, equally highlights the emptiness of Bateman's character, an emptiness he attempts to fill by borrowing from the similarly blank characters of Ted Bundy, John Gacy, Ed Gein, Dennis Nilsen, et al. The vocifer- ous objections to *Henry* and *American Psycho*, both of which are, ironically, probably more mimetic than true-crime books be- cause they re-fuse gothic figurations and thematize the unfit- ness of their characters to be "up to scratch," suggest a decided public preference for lack of mimetic fidelity in favor of the more hopeful, distinctly less real fictions of monstrous villains and valiant apprehenders, of excitingly dire criminals and heroic gumshoes.

Now, much as gothic paradigms and the rhetoric of mon- strosity do allow for a schematic organization of narrative, much as they therefore create explicability out of the confounding ac- tions and characters of serial killers, their presence is problem- atically double-edged. Once the serial killer is fashioned into a "personification" or "translated" into a monster, that narratori- ally satisfying formation nevertheless implicitly invites censori- ous scrutiny, for once the killer is explicable and representable as fiction, he necessarily moves into an overdetermined arena of in- cendiary controversy. As long as the serial killer is "real," in

other words, he stands outside the burning eighties and nineties debates about fictions and consumers, about represented violence and real violence, about "TV people" and little girls. But because the serial killer cannot, as I have suggested, be articulated as anything but a literary figure (and surely the very "serial" sobriquet invites connotative links between repeat murderers and magazine installments or soap operas),[4] there is simply no mimetic "other side" available. When David Berkowitz claims to be a demonically inspired monster, he is apparently offering fictions; when he confesses to having manufactured fictions to "condone" what he was doing, he is supposedly offering reality; and when he is represented in nonfiction, he is a monster who tried to claim fictional monstrosity to "condone" his monstrous acts. The convoluted logic here points to the slippage between what the killer can say about himself and what can be said about him, between the lesser authority of the acts and the greater authority of their textual representation, between, as Malcolm would have it, the murderer who kills and the journalist who makes monsters.

If the fictions have such ascendancy over the actions themselves (and, given the tenor of the American censorship lobby's decrying of the evil influence of all fictions, at any rate, they are considerably more dangerous than murders because they precede them), then killers like Bundy and Gacy are, understandably, quick to insist that they are not monsters. Clearly, it is far better to be in the camp of the damaged consumers of illusion than it is to be in the camp of the damaging illusions themselves. On the night before his execution in Florida in January 1989, Bundy agreed to be interviewed by the Reverend James Dobson, an evangelist and antipornography crusader. Stressing a causal relationship between real and represented violence, Bundy attempted to exclude himself from the otherworldly demonic: "[t]hose of us who are, or who have been, so much influenced by violence in the media, in particular pornographic violence, are not some kind of inherent monsters. . . . We are your sons and we are your husbands and we grew up in regular families. And pornography can reach out and snatch a kid out of any house to-

day. It snatched me out of my home twenty, thirty years ago. . . . [T]here is no protection against the kinds of influences that are loose in society" (Michaud and Aynesworth, *The Only* 353).

While Bundy's biographers, Michaud and Aynesworth, contemptuously pooh-poohed "Ted's twist on the devil-made-me-do-it defense" (353) in their 1989 afterword to *The Only Living Witness*, screenwriters Rebecca Haggerty and Richard O'Regan took Bundy's claims far more seriously six years later. In their 1995 Arts and Entertainment television biography, "Ted Bundy: The Mind of a Killer," they try to unearth what made him into a killer. First Bundy's attorney, Polly Nelson, remarks on his early reading of detective novels and magazines; then narrator Jack Perkins gives a voice-over commentary while the camera shows photographic stills of the lurid covers of *True Detective*, the "magazines that drove his [Bundy's] fantasies" with their focus on "angry men, frightened women" ("Ted"). The shift here from a human agent to magazines that "drive" fantasies and pornography that "reaches" out and "snatches" kids from their homes, in which the viewer or reader is not only entirely passive and victimized but wholly lacking in responsibility for his subsequent actions, is symptomatic of a shift in perceptions about the influence of fiction. In effect, Bundy's assessment of pornography is, at least metaphorically, the 1989 version of *Poltergeist*, with a synonymy of victimhood between young Ted and Carol Anne, except in the later version there is no demon or Beast on the other side of the illusory TV people. Instead, there is only an absence of human agency—just violent films, detective magazines, TV, pornography, or Hollywood as monoliths that reach out and snatch good sons out of regular American families in Anyhouse, U.S.A.

The fact that the 1986 Meese Commission on Pornography and the Surgeon General's Conference on Pornography, for all they were desperate to do so, could find no significant correlation between those who watched pornography and those who committed violent rapes has no bearing on the ongoing American certainty that there must be a causal relationship between viewed and performed violence.[5] Witness, for example, the mid-

eighties trials of Ozzie Osbourne in California and Judas Priest in Nevada and the trials of Mark Chapman and John Hinckley, in which both heavy-metal music and violent films were argued, albeit unsuccessfully, to be held accountable for their impact on youthful American consumers. Witness Catherine MacKinnon's *Only Words* (1993), in which she insists that pornography should be designated as an "act" that is therefore actionable in court. Such arguments for a direct causality between viewing and do-ing offer a sort of Twinkie defense for the attribution of fictional violence to the motives for real actions.

Certainly such a defense has plenty of support from the American proponents of censorship. The National Coalition on Television Violence used the occasion of Jeffrey Dahmer's trial in 1991 to issue a statement that "TV violence, slasher-type movies, and pornography" were "contributing factors in the Dahmer case" (Schwartz 157). They argued that films like *Night-mare on Elm Street* were really "how-tos for budding killers" because "young people see murderous movie characters like Freddy Krueger . . . as heroes" (Schwartz 157). The coalition's implication, as sociologist Professor James Fox pointed out to Schwartz, is that "Jeffery Dahmers are created by the me-dia" (Schwartz 157). And prosecuting counsel made much of Dahmer's possession of copies of *The Exorcist II* and gay porn like *Cocktales* and *Rock Hard*, just as journalists made hay with Bundy's reading of *True Detective*, Gacy's viewing of "stag" films, Canadian Paul Bernardo's reading of *American Psycho*. Dr. Park Dietz, who served as the state's expert witness on Dahmer's sanity and convinced the jury that Dahmer was sane, encap-sulated the common arguments about fiction's "influence" for the *New Yorker*: "when I get to the bottom of each problem I look at, I keep finding television, Hollywood, the media, an un-regulated industry standing behind the First Amendment, and gaining power despite their harmfulness, because they—un-like everyone else—needn't be accountable or compensate their victims" (Johnson 50). Surely Oliver Stone takes a similar stand in *Natural Born Killers* (1994), which has been viewed almost ex-clusively as a scathing indictment not of killers but of comics,

television, the media—the influences that are, at least accord-
ing to Bundy, "loose in society" and against which we have "no
protection."

Interviewed after the release of *Natural Born Killers*, Stone ob-
served that Mickey and Mallory (Woody Harrelson and Juliet
Lewis) are at once "the children of television" and "the rotten
fruit of [the twentieth] century" (Denerstein 3). Made from TV
and not, like *Poltergeist*'s Carol Anne, recovered from TV's dan-
gerous enticements, Mickey and Mallory are conceived, like
Bundy the vampire, Gacy the Mr. Hyde, Dahmer the demon
seed, as fiction's monstrous progeny. What we have, then, is
fiction as simultaneously monolithic producer and symptomatic
product, as simultaneously monstrous cause and monstrous ef-
fect. Within this construction of fiction's mirroring or looping
back on itself, in which agency resides in the screen itself and a
virtual absence of authorship, there is no possibility of mimetic
representation. Real killers, vaunted as more horrific than fic-
tional monsters precisely because they "exist" outside the pages
or frames of gothic fiction, simply occupy the nether world of
the unrepresentable real, in the same way, ironically, that the
Beast in *Poltergeist* and the other demon-possession films neces-
sarily occupies the "other side" of the representational screen.

As fictions, however, as "literary problems," "personifica-
tions" of novels, or loosed "influences," serial killers are, at least
in terms of articulated cultural fears, far more frightening. Their
transformation or translation into gothic demons may well be
necessary for their representation in true crime and elsewhere,
but the alarmist rhetoric about them as influential fictions "made
by the media" emphasizes eighties and nineties America's fasci-
nation not with serial killers or mass murderers as such, not with
"real" violence and real victims, but with the screen that rep-
resents them. As J. Hoberman observes in "Serial Chic," the
"fetishistic slaughter of successive innocents has become sub-
sumed in the spectacle of American entertainment" (40). But
Hoberman's idea that the slaughter is fetishized obscures the
fetishization of the spectacle itself, the representation that pro-
duces all the affect of actual killing, with the added twist that it

can supposedly produce more killers. Nowhere is this fascination with the culpability and progenitive capacity of spectacle more pronounced than in *Natural Born Killers*, a specular meta-commentary on the American fictions that make monsters. Stone intercuts television sit-coms of Mickey and Mallory with comic strip animation of them as superheroes and throws in clips from *Geraldo*-like talk shows and snippets of video surveillance footage for good measure, all in an effort to explore the external, media ingredients that combine to create the "natural born killer." And to ensure that we don't miss the point, Stone offers a scene of transcendent obviousness—when Mickey and Mallory find themselves confronted by a cartoonishly wise Indian shaman. Naturally, he is able to see the "truth" about them: the words "demon" projected on Mallory's chest and "too much TV" on Mickey's.

While this equation of monster and media, this absolute synonymy of demon and TV, should not surprise us, particularly given the pervasive demonization of the media as being simultaneously too graphic and not truthful, what is interesting about Stone's configuration is that the serial killers are quite literally the screen on which the message is communicated. With the conflation of gothic demon and TV screen, the real is effaced altogether, serving only to present a reflective surface for projected illusions. For all that the serial killer, invested with the architecture of gothic horror, is supposed to be the very icon of real contemporary monstrosity, then, he is not, for, as merely a fictional projection, his villainy can be traced back to the cathode emissions that produced him. As a blank incomprehensibility, the serial killer thus serves as a convenient vessel for the articulation of what American society finds truly monstrous in the late twentieth century—the "TV people," or the authorless but authority-filled killer screen that drives fantasies, reaches out and snatches kids from their homes, and transforms them into demons. And as such a representational cypher, the real American serial killer is, finally, identical to his fictional monster counterpart: a textual figure that can simultaneously expose and occlude what is culturally too horrible to be viewed directly.

NOTES

1. Carol Clover argues that *Poltergeist* presents a common thematic: "[o]ver and over, and in a remarkable variety of ways, modern horror plays out the same adversarial scenario. Film after film presents us with stories in which audiences are assaulted by cameras, invaded by video signals or film images, attacked from screens" (199).

2. Mark Seltzer finds that the killers' repetitious actions are machinelike, that "serial killing is inseparable from the problem of the body in machine culture" (127). But much of his argument in "Serial Killers (I)" and "Serial Killers (II)" focuses on popular accounts of the killers' acts as symptomatic of specific issues emergent in technology-driven culture. Seltzer's focus, in other words, is less on the actual narratives about serial killers—or narratorial problems with their production—than on certain ideologically fraught misconceptions about the killers.

3. Harris's Hannibal Lecter in *Red Dragon* and particularly in *The Silence of the Lambs* has come to represent the quintessential serial killer: attractive, charismatic, intelligent, cunning, individualistic. Perhaps the most fictional serial killer in terms of character and therefore eminently representable, Lecter is nevertheless entirely motiveless in his killings and therefore resists explication in the same manner that the actual killers do. Ironically, convicted serial killer Dennis Nilsen decried Lecter's fictionality, telling his biographer, Brian Masters, that Lecter was a "fraudulent fiction. He is shown as a potent figure, which is pure myth" (quoted in Wilson 310–311).

4. Stephen Michaud wrote in the *New York Times* in October 1986 that Robert Ressler (of the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit) "started using the term [serial killer] because such an offender's behavior is so distinctly episodic, like the movie house serials he enjoyed as a boy" (quoted in Wilson 110).

5. In 1992 Republican senators McConnell of Kentucky, Grassley of Iowa, and Thurmond of South Carolina tried to get the Pornography Victim's Compensation Bill through the Senate's Judiciary Committee; Bill 1521 would have forced publishers and distributers of pornography to compensate their victims. John Irving lambasted the bill, commenting on the "censorial times" and attacking the "moral reprehensibility" of shifting the "responsibility for any sexual crime onto a third party" (24).

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Some Stations of Suburban Gothic
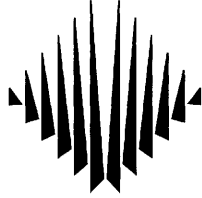
CERTAIN AXIOMS

1. Whatever else, gothic is a mode of fantasy that facilitates the molding of anxiety. It is cognate, then, with desire as a mode of fantasy facilitating libido.

2. As desire is a symptomatic manner of binding the free play of the drive, hence of defending the human subject against the consequences of such free play, gothic is symptomatic binding of free anxiety, hence a defense against the consequences of focusless, drifting dread.

3. As desired objects are *un*representative representations of all those objects to which the drive might affix itself, so the feared or phobic objects of gothic are saving placements (rather than *dis*placements, strictly speaking) of anxiety where that anxiety may be mastered, though it need not be.

4. The object of desire is not the whence of desiring; neither is the gothic object the whence of fear.

5. To speak of objects is misleading. Better to speak of scenes, stage set, in or on which anxiety takes place. (This is, after all, the genius of the game of CLUE: never Colonel Mustard alone; rather, gas-masked Mustard in the solarium with a chainsaw.)

6. Gothic, then, defines a scene, terrain, geography, for something terrible. The indeterminacy of the act is psychically essential as it maintains, within limits, the formlessness of the root anxiety. Not: the cannibal monster *is* in the nursery snacking on the soft skulls of the infant twins. Rather: the cannibal monster *may be* in the nursery, or he may be somewhere else, or she may

be in the nursery disguised as one of the twins. Or: there may be no cannibal at all, though this would be a fine place for one.

7. As with all displacements, there is a relation between the gothic scene and the other scene it masks. Because anxiety exceeds determinate cause, the analyst must locate these relations along extended categorical axes. Thus both the grand epistemological *cri* of the eighteenth-century gothic heroine and the Romantic gothic hero's great revelatory moment of false ontology indicate differing categories in which anxiety has been framed (Michasiw 209–216). Such categories are, however, characteristically and dissimulatively represented by more concrete fears. Will my (surrogate) father rape/kill me? Will some omnipotent being discover and punish me for my crimes? Will something that looks almost exactly human extract my brain stem, cloak me in polyester, and chain me to the gas barbecue?

LOCALES, STATIONS, TERMINI

If, then, gothic somethings-to-be-scared-of are secondary formations designed to obscure, through naturalizing, the primary defensive function of place, it is important for us not to be distracted by trappings. It is important also to recognize that as one of the prime functions of the culture industry is to organize desire in symptomatic, accommodating manners, so too is a primary function of the culture industry to provide appropriate screens on which anxieties may assume appropriate forms. It is an intimation of failed appropriateness, I think, that underlies Fredric Jameson's indictment of gothic as "that boring and exhausted paradigm . . . [in which] a sheltered woman of some kind is terrorized and victimized by an 'evil' male" (289). Recognizing the exhaustion of the paradigm thus stylized registers the inadequacy, the datedness, of the narrative frame to "real" anxieties. The dialectic of shelter and privilege that Jameson sees inscribed in gothic is no longer apt or, if apt, is so only literally. If the early gothic heroine gets herself to the Castle of Udolpho in order to work through the complexly enmeshed fears of and desires for physical freedom, the late-twentieth-century dweller in a gated community only fears random mobility. The essential contributory element of desire is absent, leaving the residual

figure of the auburn-haired endangered Regency female on the supermarket-novel cover, emptily nostalgic.

Jameson mistakes the trappings for the form, but his misprision is useful in illustrating the trajectory of the embalmed scene. The usefulness of the imagined monastery, for instance, as screen on which to give form to anxieties recedes as the scenarios possible on that screen become more and more obviously escapist displacements. The axes of contiguity and resemblance, however distorted, are replaced by conventions of arbitrary metaphor: at this point both psychical and ideological usefulness are at an end, and the observer wanders about this set of trappings like a visitor to a theme-park exhibition of anxieties defunct.

There is, however, something rather disingenuous about Jameson's dismissal of gothic, a point to which I'll return below. For the moment, though, I want to suggest how mass-cultural frames for the play of anxiety operate. To do this I wish to translate to the field of fantasy a pair of terms employed by John Fiske to describe nodal points of "consciousness, position in the social space, and physical place" (34): station and locale. In Fiske's words

> a locale always involves continuities between interior and exterior, between consciousness, bodies, places and times. A locale is a bottom-up product of localizing power and as such it is always in a contestatory relationship with imperializing power.... A station is the opposite, but equivalent, of a locale. A station is both a physical place where the social order is imposed upon an individual and the social positioning (stationing) of that individual in the system of social relations. (12)

This opposition is not lost on those who have social power who attempt "to stop people producing their own locales by providing them with *stations*" (12). My suggestion, then, is that this opposition, though ideally adapted to spatial and geographical relations, is no less appropriate when discussing the cultural provision of fantasy and of fear. Consumers are offered prefab patterns of desire; so too they are given things, and places, to be scared of. These patterns, should they be accepted, station the

subject as effectively as any physical constraints. This suggestion
is obviously unoriginal: recognizing the power of imposed fears
to station elements of the populace is essential to any process of
scapegoating, of demonizing, of giving dogs bad names to hang
them by. The notion of station, however, suggests the possibility
of less determinately objectified fears: not of those notorious for
poisoning wells but of the fragility of the water supply itself; not
of someone arriving to boil the bunny and bleed in the bathtub,
or of the nanny running off with the child, or even—though this
is closer—of the Satanists who run the local day-care center but
anxiety about . . .

The chain of representations begun here is easily enough con-
tinued, especially if one recognizes that the trajectory leads
back, gradually, toward the subject's implication in the scene but
does not in fact arrive there. An exemplary peeling back of the
layers might be useful as witness to the function of the station.
Taking, exemplarily, the series of predatory women portrayed in
a sequence of Hollywood films through the late 1980s and early
to mid-1990s, from *Fatal Attraction* to *Disclosure*, we can see how
such representations serve as screens for a variety of fears. Such
films are made by men and addressed to a "crossover" audience
of men and women (a "crossover" as well between teenage and
adult audiences). The films depend, on the manifest level, on
men's fear of being unable to keep their trousers on and on
women's fears of being collateral damage in the inevitable phal-
lic explosion. Such fears depend in their turn on anxieties con-
cerning the failure of fit between prevailing subject positions and
the duties of the monogamous bourgeois family. That the baggy,
sagging Michael Douglas becomes the object of predatory fe-
male lust and that the straight-from-the-fifties, desexualized
Anne Archer is the endangered mother/wife are sufficient in-
dices of the mixture of melancholy self-pity and more melan-
choly self-congratulation engaged here. The classic American
film hero just says no—unless he is given the far better option of
sending the desiring female off to jail as well. Noir heroes em-
brace their fall to temptation with a fatalistic glee. Michael
Douglas, at most, howls "No" with his trousers down round his
knees. The fear of male weakness, however, depends on a deeper

fear of female strength. Boys can't help it, so women have to—
but what if they don't? This, of course, is the antifeminist text
of such films accounted by Susan Faludi and others. The non-
procreating, successful woman is, of course, a predator who
only wants what the procreative successful-through-her-mate
woman has. That the desires of the two female figures are es-
sentially identical, and identical to the norms of heterosexist
womanhood, marks out a space for darker masculinist fears. This
trajectory leads, I'd suggest, to its parodic apogee in the adver-
tising tag-line for 1995's exemplary predatory *and* maternal fe-
male: the She-Who-Could-Lay-a-Thousand-Eggs of *Species*.

What is important to recognize here, though, is the possibil-
ity that the transparent antifeminism of such films, their rejec-
tion of both the need for employment equity or sexual harass-
ment codes (women are more powerful than men anyway) and a
nongendered workplace (women's real desires are for children
and monogamous pairing), is less what is screened than an es-
sential component of the screen itself. The obvious unaccept-
ability of *Fatal Attraction*'s manifest ideology, at least to a sig-
nificant segment of its viewership, is an earmark of the faux
oppositionality of the gothic station. *They*, those oppressive
spokesfolk for supposedly hegemonic liberal doxa, are telling us
that women don't use sex as a weapon, as a tool in their unre-
lenting, indomitable pursuit of babies and suburban homes, but
this film dares speak the truth. (In a precisely parallel way, the
anti-Catholicism of early English gothics was a "daring" re-
sponse from the prevailing ideology to those progressive apolo-
gists for the Catholic Church who would have allowed Catholics
the vote and would have succored refugee priests and nuns ar-
riving from revolutionary France.) And it is this formation—
where the ingrained reactionary response is recoded as newly re-
vealed, if embattled, truth—that enables the station to function
most effectively to bind free-floating anxiety. A kind of dual
recognition takes place in the viewer. First, that's not what *I'm*
afraid of, given my circumstances, but I can see why other people
would be afraid. Second, even though I'm not really afraid of
that, that's the sort of thing that could only happen in this kind
of world, so "that" can stand, as representative, for what makes

me anxious. The combination of nostalgia (played upon an insistent comtemporaneity, whether of decor, accessories, attributes) and violation (anyone can be the victim, even the bunny) bonds with a disingenuous oppositionality to make the station serve even for those who cannot name their fears.

That the ideological station is defined by its malleability and by its veneer of resistance to a projected orthodoxy may explain the troubling sentimentality inhering in Fiske's "locales," in his image of homeless men cheering as the executives explode in *Die Hard*. Locales, like de Certeau's tactics, Baudrillard's fatality, and Hebdige's impossible objects,[1] offer the possibility of bottom-up alternative takes on mass cultural artifacts and strategies. Yet even without resorting to the tired mantra of "subversive *and* complicit," it is often difficult to discern many utopian locales amid mass culture. Slasher films perhaps, or a certain positioning of the viewer of the slasher film? "Go O. J.!" T-shirts? Private systems of fear cocooning within the latex gloves of riot cops, the selective omissions of baggage handlers, the refusal of the middle class to believe that violent crime is on the wane?

Maybe—but on the logic sketched above the success of the gothic scene depends precisely on its openness to customization, the apparent ease with which the objects of fear may be tailored to individual phobia. In this malleability, though, the gothic scene maintains its occluded extension to the end of the line, the terminus, the terminal forms of power. Thus fears of plagues various or assaults of many kinds may *appear* to contravene the top-down stationing of anxiety, may well defy the express orders of those in power, but in fact confirm the contingent grasp of persons in power on the places they hold. As early gothic heroines discovered on their way to necessary enlightenment, those who appear to rule by tyranny have but temporary authority pilfered from greater, truly unopposable powers, and gothic victory involves the destruction of one level of power through submission to a greater.

TWO STATIONS

After this overextended preface, let me introduce three different ways in which cultural critics have located in the contemporary

American suburb a place with which to be afraid. These need, however, to be distinguished as a group from two other formations, from one of which they, in part, derive and to the other of which, perhaps, they lead. The first manifests itself in the laments of intellectuals in the 1950s at the uniformity of suburban development and the mass conformity it supposedly nourished. Twenty years ago, Herbert J. Gans summarized this viewpoint: "[s]uburbia was intellectually debilitating, culturally oppressive, and politically dangerous, breeding bland mass men without respect for the arts of democracy" (xvi). Gans, as participant-observer, researched his ground-breaking study of suburban life by purchasing a house and living in it for two years in Levittown, New Jersey. After those years he concluded that, whatever might be wrong with the life enforced upon its inhabitants by the structure of suburban development, the assertion that "the suburbs were breeding a new set of Americans, as mass produced as the houses they lived in . . . bored and lonely, alienated, atomized, and depersonalized" (xv), was myth making and *only* that.

But the myth has proved to have greater staying power, at least among the intellectual and artistic classes, than has Gans's attempt to explode it. The underpinnings of this persistence are admirably caught by Lois Craig:

> In retrospect, the anti-suburban literature and imagery, the intellectual and visual neglect [of the suburbs since the 1950s] add up to something more than a curiosity. Rather they suggest a profound class resistance grounded in cultural and aesthetic considerations. . . . Members of the cultured class . . . "[r]ecoil from the commonplace, as the first line of defense in the battle for spiritual dignity and self-identity," denigrating the materialism and technology that are important to the upward mobility of poor people. (29–30; embedded quotation Graña 129–130)

For those who regard the postwar suburb, and especially for those who regard it from the pseudo-aristocratic position of the displaced European intellectual,[2] the suburb was the domain of a lower-middle-class kitsch: it would eat away at all cultural

exertion, would find all the painting and poetry it required on Hallmark cards and all its music on the Perry Como show. The suburb marks the debasement of revolution where the only victory in the class struggle would be won on the only ground about which the ruling orders did not care.

This sort of anxiety finds gothic frames in tales—told both at the drive-in and at the height of social theory—of cloning, podding, one dimensionality, mass uniformity that have distinctly traceable genealogical relations to more recent suburban gothics. (Philip Kaufman's 1978 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is index enough of this.)[3] But truly high-cultural anxieties are harder to locate in the 1990s and harder still to confess. Hence certain shifts, of which more in a moment. There is, however, a second emergent gothic frame deserving of mention in passing, a frame suggested by Brett Easton Ellis's fiction and by such films as *The River's Edge* and, more campily, in a variety of suburban teenage vampire films from *The Lost Boys* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This variation takes note of Gans's demonstration that those who bought homes in 1950s suburbs remain substantially the same people they were when they lived elsewhere. Thus the danger cannot arrive from postwar, "first generation" suburbanites or even from their children, who remain tied somehow to a life and to values outside the suburb. No, the danger will come with the third generation, those growing up in either what are now called the old suburbs—now seen as in decay—or the newest and furthest flung of the developments (which tend, for reasons of land prices, to occupy the top and the bottom end of the price scale). Such children, utterly removed both from the rural and the urban, ignorant equally of nature and civilization, appear perfect candidates for the label "a new set of Americans . . . bored and lonely, alienated, atomized, and depersonalized" that elitist social critics saw in their parents or grandparents.

That this frame has not yet fully been gothicized is evident in critical writing about Generation X, about grunge, about urban primitives. From the slacker aesthetic, through the neotribal rites of tattooing, piercing, and branding, to responses to Kurt Cobain's suicide, the attributes attached critically to a generation

of "kids from the suburbs" have been remarkably free of demon-
izings. Frightening teenagers still tend to come from the inner
city. There have been blips: a plague of "swarmings" a few sum-
mers back, the attempts to imagine ranks of affectless TV zom-
bies, occasional outbursts of casual looting. In general, though,
the economically and socially displaced daughters and sons of
the late seventies and eighties suburbs have yet to appear as
consistently threatening presences. However, "yet" is the cru-
cial word.

THREE MORE

The first is connected with the class anxieties noted above but
differs importantly. Consider the following from Arthur Kroker:

> Most of all, it is the lawns which are sinister. Fuji green and
> expansive, they are a visual relief to the freeway and its ac-
> companying tunnel vision. Even ahead of the golden arches,
> they are welcoming as the approach of a new urban sign-
> value. The frenzy sites of a decaying Christian culture where
> reclining lawn chairs, people in the sun, barbecues and
> summer-time swimming pools can give off the pleasant odors
> of an imploding Calvinist culture, playing psychologically at
> the edge of the parasite and the predator. (Kroker, Kroker,
> and Cook 211–212)

Whatever else the reader is to make of this passage, the separa-
tion between the observing subject and its supposed object is
clear enough. For Kroker the inhabitants here are the "real-life"
descendants of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*'s pod people, each
"equipped . . . with a Harlequin life programmed to Scott Peck's
The Road Less Travelled. Each person in his or her own way 'born
again,' the better to imitate the Way . . . a way of life that grows
on you, feeds from you, parasites you." The suburbanite as the
colonial subject, as the host to a slowly devouring thing, as
fullest embodiment of "postmodern 'rural idiocy' (Marx), or as
Blake has it, 'vegetable consciousness'" (Kroker, Kroker, and
Cook 213).

Kroker argues that his response is keyed to the artificiality
and boredom of suburban life, that his revulsion arises from the

routinization of nature and the compartmentalizing shrink-wrap applied to being and consciousness. There is something else, though. What is unspeakable about the suburbanite is its secret devotion to some criminal obscenity the academic tourist knows not how to name. Kroker's suburbanites, tied umbilically to the television, the mall, the lawn, differ from the lonely, atomized suburbanites of the 1950s because they enjoy. And it is in this that they are both dangerous and frightening. When confronted with the suburban, the critic senses another sort of danger, even when the inhabitants are rhetorically consigned wholesale to vegetable metaphor. Suburban pod folk may be alien, but they are not alien enough. The protective, differentiating cover of acquired high culture and critical stance has grown very thin and worn. Memories of Horkheimer may do nothing to stop the something that might seep from the unnaturally vigorous turf and make us one of them or, worse, the something that might ooze from us and fuse us with the lawn.

In this, Kroker comes across the transferential being proposed by Mladen Dolar: the subject presumed to enjoy. This subject derives from the "supposed existence, in the other, of an insupportable, limitless, horrifying *jouissance*. . . . [T]his subject does not have to exist effectively: to produce his effects, it is enough to presume that he exists" (Žižek, *Sublime* 187–188; Dolar 37). These effects are disgust, envy, and a fear of metamorphosis. Like Harker observing Dracula in his coffin, Kroker observes in the suburbanite access to enjoyments he has denied himself so effectively that they are unnamable. Yet the lure of such unknown pleasures, the possibility of becoming ecstatically enslaved and transformed by them, is exactly vampiric. Hence the charge not that they are undead but that they are unreal. They are the simulacra dwelling "where living means real, imitation life" (Kroker, Kroker, and Cook 213).

But where, one might ask, is this real imitation life taking place? Would we have any more luck in locating Kroker's suburb on a map than we would with Radcliffe's Udolpho, or is his perverse paradise something of an obscure homage to Wallace Stevens, a description without place? This is not an incidental question, especially if the fantasy simulation has replaced en-

tirely that material reality for which it supposedly stands. Is this another instance of what Joel Garreau laments as "the intellectual absence" from discussions of the material conditions of what were once called the suburbs "of so many people I had always viewed as the guardians of our built environment" (232). What has Kroker's hallucinatory vision to do with demonstrable conditions in what practicing urbanologists call "multinucleated metropolitan regions" or, more popularly, "centerless cities," "edge cities," or "technoburbs"?[4] Maybe such prodigal acts of naming are beside the point. Perhaps Kroker is reacting to the sheer weirdness of apologetic claims that provincialism can be defeated by the marketplace, that "cosmopolitan consumption may be marked by driving a German car, wearing Italian shoes, and dining in a French restaurant with other affluent whites" (Poster, 17). Or does he sense something monstrous behind the approving complacency with which Mark Poster claims that middle-class families in Orange County

> are testing new family structures, some of which eliminate to a considerable degree earlier forms of domination in the family. . . . They want to remove restrictions of women's choices; the adults want to achieve emotional and sexual gratification; they want to develop in their children an ability for self-directed personal growth; they want to enjoy the sophisticated technologies available to them. (18)

Yet the absence of a determinate locale of Kroker's suburb, being everywhere and nowhere, being a bower of diseased bliss imported duty-free from the romance tradition, though appropriately gothic, dissolves what Edward Soja has called the "sociospatial dialectic," the productive interplay of the social order and the space within which it unfolds (77–78). The very timelessness of Kroker's monsters of enjoyment, beached in an endless barbecue summer, invokes a banished but grumbling history, slouching off in defeat. As such, Kroker is one of Foucault's "pious descendants of time" who oppose "the determined inhabitants of space" (22). As does his mentor Baudrillard, Kroker keys his terror to a nostalgia for what the excremental present has unalterably replaced. Neither the apparently real space nor the ap-

parently real materials occupying it has any ontological ground in this suburb. The "real, imitation life" has sucked ontology dry, leaving only a husk, and the critic, beside.

Such remnants bring with them consolatory assurances of the critic's own realness and of the realness of whatever urban or rural locale the critic calls "home." But what signifies this real? What are the crosses, wafers, garlic bulbs, and holy water necessary to keep off identification, coalescence, with such places, such beings? Kroker, typically, has no answer here, but our second form of critical gothicizing strives, inadvertently, to provide one.

> [The city bristles with malice.] The carefully manicured lawns of Los Angeles's Westside sprout forests of ominous little signs warning: "Armed Response!" Even richer neighborhoods in the canyons and hillsides isolate themselves behind walls guarded by gun-toting private police and state-of-the-art electronic surveillance. (Davis 223)[5]

Thus begins Mike Davis's "Fortress L.A.," his properly terrifying account of L.A.'s version of what Michael Sorkin calls "parallel suburban cities growing on the fringes of old centers abandoned to the poor" (xiv). As firmly located in geographical space as Kroker's suburbs are removed from it, Davis's scenes for terror sport street addresses and names. We can fly to Los Angeles and take pictures of ourselves outside the walls. In Davis's account the guarded, gated community is bastion and beacon to a barbarian majority. Those suburbanites who cannot afford the armed guards and castellations dream that they could and make whatever gestures at enclaving they can. Thus the gated community becomes the key signifier and reinscribes—in refurbished, Disneyfied inversions—Otranto, Udolpho, and their ilk. The gated community is an architectural avatar of the threatened maiden of gothic fiction, but the threatened maiden has inherited Udolpho, has gentrified and secured its ramparts, and has hired Montoni's demobbed banditti to patrol its walls. For Davis the moment when the heroine, or her surrogates, turns upon the usurper has become an ossified road-to-Damascus moment for an entire population. Convinced of its virtue and its victimiz-

ability, this community is always at the point of appalling feats of
self-defense.

For those inside, the barbarians are always at the gates—and
they are a sort of solution. For those outside, like Davis and
such other urbanologists as Sorkin, Edward Soja, and M. Chris-
tine Boyer, the barbarians are within the gates, capable of any
enormity. Like the gothic succession of abbots and prioresses
who will confine, entomb, and ritually murder to protect their
cloistered spaces, the suburbanites are permitted by their con-
stant state of siege and the knowledge of their cause's justice to
abrogate any law and countervail any principle. These are not
Kroker's pod folk; they are panicked, hystericized beings given
over entirely not to mere growth but to the instinct for self-
preservation, Hobbists who know no bodily sensation save fear.
Such beings see threat everywhere, as in Davis's example of

> Hidden Hills, a Norman Rockwell painting behind high se-
> curity walls, [which] has been bitterly divided over compli-
> ance with a Superior Court order to build forty-eight units of
> seniors' housing outside its gates. At meetings of the city's all-
> powerful homeowners' association (whose membership in-
> cludes Frankie Avalon, Neil Diamond, and Bob Eubanks)
> opponents of compliance have argued that the old folks'
> apartments will attract gangs and dope. (246)

Davis, then, offers the reader something real to be scared of: the
effects of a place in which the dream of security, from which no
bourgeois North American can be entirely free, has (perhaps)
been achieved, but at the cost of delivering those secured into
the hands of a drive to self-preservation indistinguishable from
the death drive (which is, of course, where the dream of security
is rooted anyway—this is an instinctual homecoming of sorts).
For the observer, though, there may be separation, but there is
no security from the suburban guerrillas who have long since
possessed the continent.

But this separation is won at a cost as well. What are the op-
positional signs when protection is the enemy, when the crime-
and-trash-free Disneyscape has escaped the theme park and,
creeping like kudzu, covered the country? While Davis himself

is careful not quite to succumb to the temptations implicit here, others, like Sorkin, Boyer, and some contributors to the collection *Sex, Death, and God in L.A.*, come perilously close to advocating homelessness, criminality, casual street violence, and what we might call, following Dean MacCannell, "primitivity" as the truest markers of the authentic.[6] Without people sleeping on the streets and gunshots in the distance, how would we know we weren't captive behind community gates? In order to separate the critic must embrace and take as real the very set of signs that have raised the security fences.

Which is not a danger, quite, in the third of our forms, a form the more insidious as it assumes an antigothic stance as part of its nest of defenses. (It would argue also that Davis's suburban-ites are neither fearful nor fearsome [Jameson 118].) This is the quietest of our forms: arrives proclaiming utopian hope rather than fear and in fact spends much time explaining that there is nothing left by which we can be scared. In this stational forma-tion the suburb emerges, in metonymic morsels, as revenant, residual—not so much a scene in itself as a specter haunting the postmodern condition, or perhaps as the guilty exposed secret around which postmodernity has wrapped itself. Consider an early manifestation of the suburb in Fredric Jameson's *Postmod-ernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*:

> As you go up the still old-fashioned stairs of the Gehry house, you reach an old-fashioned door, through which you enter an old-fashioned maid's room (although it might just as well be the bedroom of a teenager). The door is a time-travel device; when you close it, you are back in the old twentieth-century American suburb—the old concept of the room, which in-cludes my privacy, my treasures, and my kitsch, chintzes, old teddy bears, old LP records. (118)

First there is/was a maid, then a phantasmatic teenager, then a personal possessive pronoun, redecorating. And this possession maintains itself, despite Gehry's having enclosed it within "the cube [of distended glass parallelograms] and the slab (of corru-gated metal); these ostentatious markers, planted in the older

building like some lethal strut transfixing the body of a car crash victim" (113).

If nothing else, the metaphoric energies of suburban survival are awesome, even when that energy finds its figurative vehicle in a violated corpse. I emphasize these passages because they show a marked tendency in Jameson's reconstructions: the suburban house, especially in its upper interior, becomes by metaphor or metonymy the human. The identity may be occluded, but it endures. This human, though, emerges as gothicized revenant, as the pinned corpse that might get up and shamble, a benign, beneficent, but futile zombie.

This is, of course, another variant on being afraid—not fearing that the undead walk but rather that they don't, that the energies of enlightenment (seen here as Horkheimer and Adorno's remorseless engines of disenchantment customized by Sloterdijk's cynical reason) have fully disinfected the landscape. A number of curiosities inhere in this structure of fear. Some of these must be passed over, but Jameson's recurrent figuration of the suburban doorframe as something like the tree encasing *The Tempest*'s Sycorax radically internalizes the gothic scene and does so in a literal, material way. Gehry's postmodern structures wrap the doorframe just as postsuburbanization encloses the bedroom community, as edge cities encase decaying older suburbs and white flight zones, as the gates of gated communities . . .

And the inhabitants dwell in fear of fear because terror— against which anesthetizing postmodernism sets itself—is one of "the great negative [and negating] emotions of the modernist moment" (117). Thus a kind of utopian gothic founds itself on the spirit ambered, or rather enameled, in the suburban doorframe. And the first word of the charm that breaks the spell and releases the ghost is "nostalgia":

> mourning for a lost object which can scarcely even be remembered as such, a path back through other objects shows them radically modified and transformed as well. The doorframe—the metonym of cultural habitation and the social— now turns out to have been not merely cultural, and a repre-

sentation, but a nostalgic representation of a more natural
form of dwelling. It now "opens the door" to a host of eco-
nomic and historical anxieties. (170)

That is, the doorframe as metonym for the suburban house as
"more natural form of dwelling" produces politically employable
anxieties. In Jameson's formulation "from mere nostalgic re-
flexes, these articles slowly take on the positive and active value
of conscious resistance, as choices and symbolic acts that . . . as-
sert themselves as something emergent rather than something
residual" (171).

Which is to think utopianly indeed, if in an oddly, or appro-
priately, old-fashioned way. The moment here described has its
analogue in much earlier gothic in those moments when the pro-
tagonist is addressed by the signs of her or his past. The purest
version, perhaps, is that of Adeline in Radcliffe's *The Romance of
the Forest* reading the journal of the captive—she does not yet
know that the writer is her father. The captive is a displaced
metonym for the bourgeois family life from which both captive
and reader have been catastrophically torn. As Adeline reads,
however, she firms her resolve to resist all futures except that
continuous with the half-recalled, half-imagined past conjured
by the manuscript. Adeline's nostalgia for what never really was,
a nostalgia present but unformed before the moldering manu-
script, becomes its signifier, forms the basis for her ongoing
project of critical resistance. And this is what Jameson's door-
frame should do. It ought to be the friendly ghost of a lost order
on which the subject may found an edifice of critical thought.

What happens, or may happen, is different. The postmodern
subject is arrested in the merely nostalgic first phase, the mo-
ment before the time of haunting. Gazing anxiously at the not-
quite-lost object, the subject awaits spectral glimmerings that
may not arrive. Jameson assures us that the gothic moment
will arrive on contact with material conditions even if those
conditions are mere local concerns: "real estate speculation and
the disappearance of the construction of older single-family
housing" (170). And these certainly are the anxieties besetting

Douglas Coupland's Generation X characters, though Coupland's figures are anxious only reflexively. And such anxieties may well precede the gating—doorframing writ large and supported with armed response unit—of Davis's communities. That either of these responses has a utopian dimension seems to me unproved.

But even these dystopic versions register insufficiently the reflexivity of Jameson's foundational gothic moment. In gazing at the doorframe, the subject encounters as revenant an earlier version of the subject. The anxiety-nostalgia network set up is constructed upon a sudden recognition of temporal rupture (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 137). The nostalgic gaze laments not time passing but the passing of the *locale* of the gaze; one will never find again the right prospect on the doorframe. Yet that this lost place was ever properly a locale is open to question; that it has been trotted out and marketed as oppositional makes it look perilously like a station. Jameson's suburban doorframe opens not onto the conditions of real estate in the time of savings and loan associations but onto an utterly disrupted temporality in the subject.

Which is something really to be scared of and is why Jameson and those makers of nostalgic works he discusses repress the suburb, except in its most attenuated metonyms. When, in redescribing *Something Wild*, Jameson wonders that there are no conformists, quite, on the landscape, he avoids registering that the track of the film moves from city to small town, a variation of the small town that centers the work of David Lynch. "There are no middle classes left to be found in the heartland," notes Jameson (292–293), having failed to recognize that both the middle classes and the heartland have moved to the suburbs and the suburbs are nowhere to be seen, in *Something Wild* or, excepting doorframes, in *Postmodernism*.

The suburb as all-but-vanished sign of the utopian specter haunting the postmodern condition is, then, the first derivative of a deeper anxiety (kitsch attribution and urban, or college town, or Internet bohemias might be considered second derivatives). This anxiety registers the foundational character of the

suburban moment for the dominant classes of cultural producers and critics, recognizes that the vast majority of cherished cultural chattels are propped against the metonymic doorframe, and acknowledges the postmodern subject's alienation in having lost its connections with that point of presumed origin. What it lies against, covers, *stations*, is the possibility that the utopian hope discerned in nostalgia is itself founded upon a conditioned longing for visitation by that most meager of simulacral figures: the ghost who isn't there, and never was.

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

1. Each of these terms marks the attempt of theorists of the post-modern condition to designate a limited, antihegemonic agency clinging still to individual human subjects. Michel de Certeau's "tactics" designate the appropriation of the tools of the powerful for other purposes (29–42). Jean Baudrillard's "fatality" suggests a deep refusal on the part of what he calls the "silent majorities" to take seriously the directives of power (7–24). Dick Hebdige's "impossible object" is a slipperier notion but suggests that a certain intensity of affective relation with any artifact can heave that artifact out of its mass-produced, dulling anonymity, can confer upon it aura, thus removing the affected subject from the inhuman circuit of consumption/production (47–76).

2. One might remark that the myth has perhaps more power still for those attempting to approximate the position of the exiled European despite the handicap of having come from the very suburbs being described. And this attempt can begin early. Finding copies of such popularizing books as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* on the parental bedside table can do much to explain to the fifteen year old that she or he has been made miserable by the soulless suburbs rather than by being fifteen.

3. This particular trope maintains itself as one of the ways in which the alien presence in signed in the current television series *The X-Files*. Rogue aliens in the series may be distinguishable, but the "naturalized" aliens, those who have adapted to life on earth, are clones and have respectable bourgeois occupations. In the 1995 episode "Colony," Scully and Mulder discover a set of identical alien doctors who are being pursued and killed by an alien bounty hunter. In a further turn, one of these cloned aliens has played father—in the best 1950s television fashion—to Mulder's abductee sister. In the mid-1990s, perhaps *only* podded aliens are capable of "living" out still the dreams of Gans's Levit-

towners. My thanks to Terri Monture for recalling the title of the episode.

4. "Multinucleated metropolitan regions" is a term coined by M. Gottdeiner; "centerless cities" is suggested by Kenneth Jackson; "Edge Cities" is Joel Garreau's term; "Technoburbs" is the proposal of Robert Fishman. Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, while preferring Gottdeiner's term for its descriptive and analytical precision, noted that "it sounds more like something in a chemical laboratory than a place where people live and that they may actually come to love, or at least enjoy." For this reason they embrace the simpler, and temporally predictable, "postsuburban" as their marker.

5. Curiously, the first sentence here does not appear in the version of "Fortress" published in *City of Quartz*. It does show up in the version published in Sorkin (154). The addition appears to reflect the longing for authenticating violence that is so much an unannounced theme in Sorkin's collection.

6. "The term 'primitive' is increasingly only a response to a mythic necessity to keep the idea of the primitive alive in the modern world and consciousness. And it will stay alive because there are several empires built on the necessity of the 'primitive': included among these are anthropology's official versions of itself, an increasing segment of the tourist industry, the economic base of ex-primitives who continue to play the part of primitives-for-moderns, now documentary filmmaking, and soon music, art, drama, and literature" (MacCannell 34).

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