METAMODERN MONSTROSITY: HORROR CINEMA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by

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We the undersigned have read this thesis capstone project and agree that it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Metamodern Monstrosity: Horror Cinema in the 21st Century

"…[Horror] is currently the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism—in a period of extreme cultural crisis and disintegration, which alone offers the possibility of radical change and rebuilding."

– Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" (91)

The above quote is as true today as it was when originally penned in 1978. For Wood and many others, horror cinema is therapeutic as it is both diagnostic--it unearths a society's neuroses—and prognostic—offering a solution to such ills. To suggest such films are always "progressive" would be false, however, as horror can be a tool of repression and oppression itself: famously, *King Kong* (1933) served to both analyze America's paranoia of the breach of the color line and to suggest its continued policing, or else the conservative slasher films, epitomized by *Halloween* (1979), exposed concern over female sexuality and espoused neo-Puritan values of chastity to remedy the situation. Key here, however, is Wood's operative use of the word "possibility." Many instances of horror, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) to Wood's reckoning, contain such a possibility for "radical change." Here Wood is correct—certainly this film, and many others in the postmodern tradition, annihilates the evils of modern heteropatriarchal bourgeoise society, yet it does not, as he suggests, offer any solution for "*rebuilding"* in a progressive way.

Horror, however, is an ever-changing beast, and, like any organism, has evolved in stages. Put simply, these stages are classical, postmodern, and, as will be argued in great detail, metamodern. Classical horror constructs the human/monster binary, showing a glimpse of another way of living but ultimately forecloses "radical change" by defeating the monster;

postmodern horror deconstructs the human/monster binary by demonstrating the monstrosity of human beings and, by extension, society, which in turn allows "radical change" but is unable to "rebuild" what it has deconstructed; while metamodern horror reconstructs the human/monster binary by revealing the of the monstrosity of humans, like postmodern horror, *and* by recognizing of the humanity of the monstrous, which allows for both "radical change" and "rebuilding" in one stroke. In this way, the human/monster dyad is deconstructed then reconstructed as a hybrid, chimera, and new species: the human-monster—putting the slasher victim, the Subject, back together again using pieces of the monster, the Abject. Before continuing with what metamodern horror is, or, more precisely, what it *does,* and, optimistically, what it *can* do, we must examine horror itself and, of course, the evolution of horror to this point. Only once a firm foundation of horror has been established can mutations to its DNA be suggested.

Here we turn to psychoanalysis, specifically, the works of Freud and Kristeva. Each of these theorists is vital to comprehend the inner workings of horror itself before horror cinema can be analyzed fulsomely.

Freud's famous article "The Uncanny" is at the core of horror. The uncanny is horrifying because it produces something which is familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously. According to Freud, with recourse to his native German, heimlich—homelike or "canny"—reaches an "ambivalence, until it finally coincides into its opposite, *unheimlich*"—unhomelike, or uncanny (Freud 4). This ambivalence, and the power it contains, will be examined in greater detail later. For now, the key element is the understanding that horror does not originate when something is purely alien or unknowable; rather, that which elicits fright does so because it is far too close to

home. With respect to horror films, this means that the human/monster is equally ambivalent: the monster can only ever be horrifying because there is something recognizable in it, something homelike, or, dare I say, human.

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, most thoroughly examined in her work *Powers of Horror,* has been utilized to great effect in horror theory, most prominently by Barbara Creed in her article "Horror and The Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." The abject is that which is expelled from the subject to form itself (39-40). The abject, while a threat to the subject, also defines it (40). She argues "the border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which threatens to 'cross' the border is abject" (42). The borders change from film to film, though they typically entail binary oppositions like human/animal, good/evil, normal/abnormal, heterosexual/homosexual, and man/woman, and so on (42-43). Ultimately, for Creed, the horror film is "an illustration of the work of abjection" as it allows the audience to confront this border and abject the monster at the film's conclusion (42). This is essential—if the monster is the abject, it is simultaneously something that was, initially, a part of the subject—the human. In this way, the human/monster binary is blurred. The monster is the taboo, the grotesque, the unclean fragments humans casts off from themselves to become a subject. The return of the abject threatens the integrity—the identity—of the subject, *even though* it too was initially a part of the subject. In a not dissimilar manner to Freud, then, the hard line between human/monster is obscure, as the monster contains an element of humanity—curiously, to become a human subject, one must abject part of one's humanity.

Now that some working psychological definitions of horror have been adduced, the genealogy of horror must be examined. While there are myriad epistemologies of thought to

trace in the history of horror writing, including, but not limited to psychoanalytic, feminist, queer, race, postcolonial, and ecocritical theories, for our present purposes, we will trace the trajectory of the ideological critique born out of Marxist theory, beginning with Robin Wood.

Robin Wood's famous article, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" is not only a thorough description of horror cinema in the United States, it is also a vociferous polemic against systems of oppression. For Wood, social and sexual revolution are "inseparably linked and necessary to each other" and the horror film, being uniquely concerned with sexual repression, has the potential to offer solutions to oppression (73). Wood is interested in the potential of film criticism—using Marxist and psychoanalytic (specifically Freudian) theories, thus tackling social and sexual avenues of control—to expose the dominant ideology and fight back against their co-constitutive forms of oppression. (73-74). It is clear that Wood believes the theoretical—specifically the double-pronged analytic tools of Marxist ideological and Freudian psychoanalysis to deconstruct heteropatriarchal bourgeois society—as practical. Wood, like many postmodern theorists, sees the theoretical devise of deconstruction/demystification—the revelation of the inner workings of regimes of control—as the only available tools to craft this new world in practice. He goes so far as to say, "the struggle for liberation is not utopian, but a practical necessity" (75). Horror films just happen to be the battleground replete with species of surplus repression.

He grounds his analysis of horror cinema in Freudian psychoanalysis, drawing upon Horowitz's work *Repression.* In a summery of the piece, he writes "Basic repression is universal, necessary, and inescapable" and "makes us distinctly human, capable of directing our own lives and coexisting with others" while "Surplus repression…is specific to a particular culture" and

"makes us into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists…" (74). In this way, basic repression is required for any amount of human organization while surplus repression results in the unique combination of taboos which must be repressed to create a specific, neurotic, culture—in this instance, America.

The crux of Wood's thesis lies in the enjoinment of repression to oppression. Woods states that repression may best be understood as "fully internalized oppression" (75). This linkage is best exemplified by the individual's repression of their own natural bisexuality to the oppression of homosexuals—"What escapes repression has to be dealt with by oppression" (75). He enumerates several forms of surplus repression in American society: sexual energy, bisexuality, women's sexuality, and the sexuality of children (75-76). In effect, Wood argues that all of these forms of repression support heteropatriarchal bourgeois culture by constructing fictitious binary oppositions: men/women, masculinity/femininity, and heterosexuality/homosexuality. Those who fall outside the boundaries of what this society permits become the "other" which said society must either "reject" and ideally destroy utterly, or by "assimilating" it into a "replica of itself" (77). Thus, continuing his logic, that which is repressed in one's self is projected onto others, thus making "others."

The horror film can best be explained by the following statement: "they are our collective nightmares" (83). If a desire is too monstrous to be allowed to enter into one's consciousness, it must be repressed—this is how a "dream becomes a nightmare" (83). The slipperiness of "dream" and "wish" is vital here, as Wood believes it horror films allow audiences in theaters our "nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and that our moral conditioning teaches us to revere" (85). In this way, the revelation that the monster represents the other—which is merely

an externalization of the repressed monstrous desires inside the normal humans—leads one to a horrifying conclusion: the human/monster binary is mutually constitutive. Monsters are the externalized repressed desires of normal human beings while humans contain the seeds of the monster. The human/monster binary cannot hold.

Wood provides a "formula" to understand horror cinema: "normality is threatened by the monster" (83). Each of these elements must be analyzed, piece by piece. By "normality" Woods means "conformity to the dominant social norms" (83). Thus, this "normality" is also in a state of flux, being dependent upon the hegemonic ideology of the time and place. The monster is that which is repressed/other (79) and is "protean" as it must conform to be the antithesis of normality (84). That is to say, if normality is evolving, so too must abnormality. Thus, that which is monstrous is a part of what has-already-always-been a part of the Self, the "normal," just concretized via the figure of the monstrous other—the monstrous "abnormal" of the film. The third variable of the formula, which is "the relationship between the two…is the essential subject of the horror film" (84). This relationship "changes and develops" (84). It is the object of the following to track how this relationship has changed and developed and to demonstrate that the most recent evolutionary stage—metamodern horror—lives up to Wood's dream for the potential for horror (or, perhaps more accurately, his nightmare.)

Isabel Pinedo, in her article "Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film" divides horror cinema into two distinct styles: "classical" and "postmodern" (17). Upon analysis, both are informed by two radically different structures: modernism and postmodernism. Classical horror is informed by modernist philosophies--positivism, humanism, universality, teleology—while the former is inflected by postmodernist

sympathies—antipositivism, antihumanism, pluralism, skepticism to grand narratives. Chronologically speaking, the line of demarcation between these two styles, while distinct from that of modernism and postmodernism more broadly, is in flux, with several films being suggested as the heralds of the postmodern horror film: *Psycho* (1960) is cited as the ur-slasher, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) certainly broke classical horror conventions with its tragic ending, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) is hailed as the first—and perhaps greatest—slasher films of all time, the prototypical subgenre of the postmodern horror film. Pinedo, for clarity, cites 1960 as the year of demarcation (17). It should be noted that genre categorizations are at best heuristic devices which seek to organize reality rather than describe that reality in a positive sense. Certainly, it is also vital to note that classical and postmodern horror co-exist today: the domination of one style does not completely elide the presence of the other. In a similar manner, I argue a new species of horror has emerged that is a hybrid and chimera of the two earlier: metamodern horror.

Metamodern horror, as the name would imply, derives from larger metamodernist philosophies which exist in the tension and oscillation between modernism and postmodernism and in the tension between both classical and postmodern horror. Owing to its peculiar Frankenstein composition of such tensions, these films are often miscategorized, with their nuance being smoothed to fit either category, leading to misinterpretation—the assumed genre of a work necessarily informs explication of the work itself. Similar to the blurry period which separates classical horror from postmodern, the exact film which designates this new mutation is mercurial, with possible earlier examples existing as well as more prototypical models being released later.

The differences between these varying subspecies of horror are myriad and unstable. In *The Dismemberment of Orpheus,* Ihab Hassan includes a table of differences between modernism and postmodernism; I extend this with metamodernism, to show how "differences shift, defer, even collapse" (Hassan 269). For the purposes of a project of this scope, the conversation will largely be interested only the most salient feature differentiating these modes: the human monster binary.

Convention	**Classical Horror**	**Postmodern Horror**	**Metamodern Horror**
Dominant	Epistemological	Ontological	Axiological
Conclusion	Human Victory	Monster Victory	Human-Monster Victory
Human/Monster Binary	Constructed	Deconstructed	Reconstructed
Human Body	Pristine	Destroyed	Transformed
Monstrous Body	Destroyed	Pristine	Transformed
Love/Romance	Real, Saccharine	False, Sexualized	Real, Flawed
Monstrous Aesthetic	Monsters are Monsters	Humans are Monsters	Monsters are Human
Human Efficacy	Effective	Ineffective	In/effective
Human Logic	Logical	Illogical	Il/logical
Human Activity	Active	Passive	Active/Passive

Human Morality	Moral	Immoral	Im/moral
Protagonist	Specialist	Everyman	Talented
Authority	Trusted	Impotent	Flawed
Humor	Reverent	Irreverent	Quirky

Table 1: Conventions of Classical, Postmodern, and Metamodern Horror Films

Classical horror, postmodern horror, and, metamodern horror are unique in their use of horror conventions. The classic horror film is distinctly modern and humanist in character: the human protagonist is active, logical, effective, and moral; the monster is inhuman; and humanity triumphs over the monster—the human/monster binary is constructed as being impenetrable. The postmodern film is postmodern and antihumanist in style: humans are passive, illogical, ineffective, and flawed; the monster is humanoid; and the monster either defeats the humans or else continues to exist to threaten humanity in the future—the human/monster binary is deconstructed is blurred because the monstrosity of humanity is revealed. The metamodern film is metamodern and posthumanist: the humans oscillate between activity/passivity, logic/illogic, efficacy/inefficacy, morality/immorality; the monster is both entirely human and nonhuman; and the monstrous is accepted into humanity—the human/monster binary is deconstructed as both the monstrosity of humanity is demonstrated *and* because the humanity of the monstrous is revealed which leads to the reconstruction of the human-monster figure.

The foundational belief of modernity—the bedrock on which classical horror stands—is a resolute belief in the tenets of humanism: humanity has a "universal" and "essential" quality, each human is a "free and unique being," and the teleological belief that humanity is destined to "progress" toward a higher plane of knowledge and morality (Davies 17, 22, 24, 27). Its defining

feature is the "centrality of the 'human'" (Davies 20), as opposed to the centrality of God. Humans—given their immense superiority—are afforded preeminence over all other creation: inanimate, animal, and plants (Davies 119). In humanist models of understanding, "humans are not only *distinguished* from nature, but *opposed* to it," which leads to "hyperseparation": the radical polarization of humanity and nature, privileging the former to dizzying heights above the latter (Garrad 28 emphasis mine). Humans can understand the world empirically, materially, as they are wholly divorced from and superior to it: humanity is the sole acting force in an inanimate universe. Simply put, humanism is human exceptionalism.

Classical horror films—the predominate genre of horror from the invention of film until the nebulous region around the 1960s—roughly follow the same formula, though deviations exist. First, the hero, the bearer of universal humanity, is a white, heteronormative, Christian, capitalist, man. He is almost universally a man of action and reason: a scientist (*Frankenstein* [1931], *Creature from the Black Lagoon* [1954]), a detective (*Them! [*1953]), or an explorer (*King Kong* [1931]). The main victim of the monster and source of conflict is the abduction of the white damsel in distress—a Scream Queen. After the introduction of the human characters, the monster is discovered by them. This discovery takes the form of the exploring of a foreign place (Skull Island in *King Kong* [1931]), invention or scientific discovery of the monster (*Frankenstein* [1931]), investigation (*Them!* [1954]), or some combination thereof.[1] According to Pinedo, "the boundaries between good and evil, normal and abnormal, human and alien are firmly drawn" in classical horror (19). As a result, aesthetically speaking, the monsters in

[1] *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) is an interesting combination of all three: the remains of a member of the creature's species is discovered via scientific investigation which leads to the exploration of the uncharted—from the perspective of the American scientists, at least—territory of the Black Lagoon itself and the reveal of a living specimen.

classical horror films are decidedly inhuman, typically employing Carrol's massification as the horrific aesthetic: the giant ape of *King Kong* (1931), the giant ants of *Them!* (1954), even the amorphous gelatin of *The Blob* (1958).[2] These creatures are uncanny because they are familiar things—animals typically—increased to monstrous size through massification: they are familiar in form yet unfamiliar in dimension. While a threat to humans literally—typically demonstrated by the kidnapping of the damsel—they do not complicate the human/monster binary, as the monsters are never close to being human in classical horror. After the attack or abduction, a logical plan based on an understanding of the monster is formulated to defeat it—using biplanes to shoot King Kong, raiding the tunnels to exterminate giant ants—and then successfully carried out which leads to the death of the monster and the reunion of the hero and damsel. As Pinedo points out, in classical horror films the "military or scientific experts successfully deploy violence and/knowledge to restore the normative order" (Pinedo 19). In sum, the hero discovers the inhuman monster, the inhuman monster abducts or else threatens the damsel, the hero constructs a plan based on his ability to understand the monster to defeat it, and successfully carries it out. The endings of these films are almost universally positive as because it is "imperative that good must conquer evil" (Pinedo 19) in the classical horror film. Humans are demonstrated to be active, logical, effective, and moral. They discover the monster and bring the fight to it; they use reason to understand the monster to combat it; they are successful and moral

[2] *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Dracula* (1931) are noteworthy exceptions to the typical classical monster aesthetic though retain the separation of human from the monstrous. In *Frankenstein*, the monster "never lived" and merely assembled from corpses, including an explicitly "abnormal brain" to highlight his distinction from real, normal humans. In *Dracula*, the titular character is inhuman by merit of his being undead, a vampire, a "Nosferatu"—the film very clearly distinguishes between his appearance as human and his existence as a distinct species from human. He even transforms into a bat to further magnify his difference from humanity.

in so doing: a truly humanistic understanding of humanity wherein the human is the apex predator that hunts the monster. Humorously, the monster should have been afraid of the humans. The status quo is restored and that which is oppressed, from Wood's perspective, is destroyed while the human subject is unscathed. The human/monster binary, while troubled in the narrative, is, at the terminus constructed as insuperable barriers in such films. Ultimately, the takeaway from a classical horror film is to fear not; here be dragons, but we are dragon slayers.

While the classical horror film is grounded in humanism, postmodern horror is its antithesis. It is rooted in antihumanism: a critique of humanism and the centrality of the human to the world at large (Davies 147). Twentieth-century developments in psychoanalysis and linguists broke the humanist foundations of the "sovereignty of rational consciousness" and the "authenticity of individual speech," respectively (57). Structuralism and poststructuralism decenter the "substance of identity" humanists found in "thought and speech" and, subsequently reduced the "self" to a "vacancy" (57). The loss of direct, unmediated access to reality heralded by the linguistic turn, discursive formations, and deconstruction—in short, postmodern philosophy—strikes at "the very heart" of humanism (36). More simply, the "human subject" is reduced to an object: humans are at the mercy of varying systems—linguistic, psychological, societal—who are the real actors in the world.

Postmodern horror films invert the classical formula. First, the protagonist, while still human, is no longer almost exclusively male or white—the protagonist of slasher subgenre—the prototype of the postmodern horror film-- is almost universally a woman, known in Carol Clover's oft-cited formulation as the Final Girl (Clover 35). The human actants are not morally upright and logical scientists, investigators, or explorers, but flawed human beings: licentious

teenagers (*Friday the 13th* [1980]), feckless law enforcement (*Halloween* [1974]), or corrupt businessmen and women and the corporations they create (*Aliens* [1986]). Unlike the classical horror film, where the monster is discovered by the active human characters, in the postmodern horror film, the monster reveals itself, typically by attacking a human who is caught unaware: Michael Myers slays his sister in the first few minutes of *Halloween* (1978), while in *Alien* (1979) the crew of the *Nostromo* have their final meal interrupted by the birth of the monster right in front of their eyes. According to Pinedo, boundaries in postmodern horror "are blurred and sometimes indistinguishable" (20) and, as a result, the monster of postmodern horror is humanoid rather than the inhuman monsters of classical horror: the psychotic killer (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974], *Halloween* [1978], *Friday the 13th* [1980]), the zombie (*Night of the Living Dead* [1968], *The Return of the Living Dead* [1985]), the cyborg (*The Terminator* [1984]), and the humanoid alien (*Alien* [1979]). Here, the border being transgressed is humanity itself: all these monsters are monstrous because they threaten the border between human/monster. This horror is achieved through hybridity: human/psycho killer, human/corpse, human/machine, human/alien. Postmodern horror is uncanny because the inhuman in each binary *appears to be* human. Slashers, for example, impart fear of the inhuman monster wearing a human mask—Michael Myers literally wears a human mask on top of his own. While humans and monsters appear to be the same on the surface, their internal essence is still different.

Thus, humans are made monstrous because all humans have the potential to be monstrous: all homelike things can be secretly unhomelike. The fear stems from the familiar—human beings or at least things indistinguishable from them—having a hidden interiority, something unfamiliar, monstrous. Speaking on The Night of the Living Dead (1968), Pinedo

states, the "forces of law and order" are reduced to monsters, "killing indiscriminately, they are virtually indistinguishable from the zombies" (24). In postmodern horror, the binary opposition between human/monster is eroded because humanity is made monstrous. In metamodern horror, this is also true, yet another dimension is added: the monster is made human. In this way, both sides of the binary collapse, and, instead, of merely deconstructing the binary, something new is constructed: the human-monster, a hybrid and chimera of humanity and monstrosity, and, crucially, something entirely new: something beyond both. This is the figure of the posthuman.

Rather than formulating a plan to fight the monster based on understanding it, emulating the active human characters of the classical films, the humans in postmodern films are reactive: they survive the monster (or not) by running away from it (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1978]); struggling to survive until, based on chance, help arrives (*Halloween* [1979]); or barely surviving and improvising a solution to temporarily postpone the immediate threat (*Alien* [1979]). As opposed to classical horror, wherein the monster is defeated once and for all, according to Tania Modleski, postmodern horror films are "open-ended" and "delight" in "thwarting the audiences' expectations of closure (622). The monster either defeats humanity (*Rosemary's Baby* [1968]); the human survives while the monster is still at large (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974]); or the monster is only temporarily defeated and survives the ordeal, free to threaten humanity in the innumerable sequels (the *Halloween, Friday the 13th,* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchises). In Freud's language, the repressed is released and, at best, repressed again—at worst, it takes over the patient. In any case, the postmodern horror film "is apocalyptic and nihilistic" (Modleski 624). The optimistic humanism of classical horror is replaced by a version of humanity that is passive, illogical, ineffective, and flawed—the monster

surprises and hunts the humans, who are unsuccessful in understanding the monster. The humans do not completely destroy the threat, and institutions of authority, police, military, government, are useless to deal with it. The humans are lazy, selfish, or otherwise cruel. A truly antihumanistic understanding of humanity: humans, who can only run and hide to temporarily forestall the inevitable, are mere prey for monsters. The human/monster binary is deconstructed as the humans are proven to be monstrous—either through the ineptitude, shallowness, or corruption of the human victims or else the actual human form the monster often takes. Even if the status quo is destroyed, there is no subject to live in the new world. Postmodern horror is a game of repression whack-a-mole. The message of the postmodern horror film is thus to always live in fear.

Modleski, in her article, "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory" expatiates upon horror cinema in a manner not dissimilar to Wood—through Marxist ideological critique. In her analysis of the Frankfurt School, she argues commercialized "low art," art for the masses, including cinema, has been a tool to brainwash the collective and prevent change—the motion picture industry, and horror included, are tools to give meaningless and vapid pleasure to the masses, to keep the status quo in line (618). However, in contrast, "high art was a subversive force capable of opposing spurious harmony" (618).

In sum, "low art"—including the horror film—are merely popcorn for the masses: simultaneously filling and vacuous, imparting naught but the much maligned "pleasure" which seeks to reaffirm one's place in society and maintain the status quo—one's position as a subject is never interrogated. "High art," conversely, imparts jouissance, not pleasure; it allows one to realize one is merely livestock and demand change—to shatter one's identity as a subject, to

deconstruct the status quo, to bring about real change. Clearly, she and Wood are cut from the same cloth.

Against the Frankfurt School, which anathematizes "low art" for its indoctrination of the masses, she believes "the contemporary horror film –the so-called exploitation film or slasher film—provides an interesting counterexample…Many of these films are engaged in an unprecedented assault on all that bourgeois culture is supposed to cherish—like the ideological apparatuses of the family and the school" (620). In this way, Modleski is arguing that postmodern horror, epitomized by the slasher, despite being "low art," contains the potential to disrupt pleasure and provide jouissance, to deconstruct the dominant ideology and liberate the masses.

Modleski identifies three components of the then contemporary—postmodern—horror film: open ended structures which frustrate closure, minimalistic character development, thin and disordered plots, and "elicit a kind of *anti*-narcissistic identification" given the empty and unsympathetic characters and monsters alike (623).

Modleski states that because postmodern horror allows identification with the slasher, it literalizes the process of jouissance as the subject, in this instance the hapless, licentious teenager—the surrogate for the spectator viewing the film—is hacked apart (623). Her attention to the mapping of the subject onto the physical bodies on screen is crucial for understanding the trajectory of horror. Classical horror threatens the integrity of the human body but leaves it unscathed while eradicating the body of the monster. Thus, the human, the normal, is spared and the monster, the abnormal, is destroyed—the status quo is preserved, and its antithesis is destroyed: a pleasurable, if not conservative, outcome. In postmodern horror, as Modleski states,

the human body is eviscerated while the monster survives, resulting in jouissance but without a subject as the thesis is eradicated. The subject may have experienced jouissance and now lies in a broken heap, or bloody chunks more likely, but what then? The subject is dead.

The promise of horror that Wood and Modleski see is not yet complete in postmodern horror, as there is no subject to continue. Sure, the status quo—the Christian heteronormative patriarchal capitalist society has been deconstructed, but with a subject, how can anything be built? The nihilism of postmodern horror can only destroy—it cannot create. In metamodern horror, the bodies of both the human and monster are broken to pieces—combining elements of classical cinema which destroys the monster and postmodern films which destroy the human--but they also are reconstructed into something new: the split subject and the destroyed monster are put back together again: the human-monster is formed.

The importance of this fusion—a fusion constantly in flux, as it is unstable—is incalculable. This concept provides a psychological model of the end of repression *and* a healthy reintegration of the abject with the subject. For, according to Wood's formulation, the monster is really the physical instantiation of the repression of human beings and is, thus, a part of the human. For Creed, the abject is the monster, that element that must be cast out in order to define the self, the human. In either instance, the monster has-always-already-been a part of the human just as the human has-always-already-been part of the monster. Metamodern horror narrativizes this psychic healing and, if Wood is correct, and the link between repression and oppression is as overt as he believes, they also chart a way to end oppressive forces as well.

In this way, metamodern horror has its cake and eats it too: there is a subject to continue living, but it is not the old subject. The status quo is destroyed but anarchy does not reign: the

horizon of the future modernism promised is glimpsed and the destruction of the old postmodernism foredoomed is viscerally experienced. Metamodernism, then, results in not quite a synthesis, as an unending tension between the two extremes as it exists and oscillates between them.

If the classical horror film is centered on humanism, and the postmodern horror film, on antihumanism, then their union takes the form of metamodernism: the fusion of modernism, and its humanism, with postmodernism, and its antihumanism. The bible of metamodernism, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, is an invaluable collection of various essays devoted to the task of examining the current "structure of feeling" which now dominates Western society in the wake of postmodernism's decline. Each author—though not all use the term metamodernism-- examine aspects that epitomize the ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and ontology of metamodernism.

Van den Akker and Vermeulen, in the first chapter, "Periodizing the 2000's, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism" articulate metamodernism as being characterized by "the tension, a being with or among, of postmodernist and modernist—and even realist and earlier—strategies and sensibilities across the contemporary metamodern structure of feeling" (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 9). The "tension" here is vital to understand metamodernism. It is not a perfect harmony of modernist and postmodernist sensibilities, but always the torsion, the friction between them, like two positive ended magnets being forced together. In furtherance of this point, they state that metamodernism is not reducible to the sum total of modernism and postmodernism, stating it "identifies with and negates—and hence, overcomes and undermines—

conflicting positions while being never congruent with these positions…" (10). "Metamodernism," they write, "oscillates between… postmodern and pre-modern (and often modern) predilections: between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity, between *deconstruction and construction* and so forth "(11, emphasis mine). This "oscillation" is also vital—at any one moment, a work of metamodern art may be sincere, then the next it is ironic. It is always in flux. Despite this "tension" and "oscillation" between and amongst previously existing positions, "it points to a sensibility that should be situated beyond the postmodern…" thus demonstrating that it is not merely a hybrid, or a chimera of its parents, but a new species in its own right (11). Metamodernism does not merely exist in the tension between and amongst various prior elements, it reuses assets from prior structures of feeling. This is not the cynical "recycling" of postmodernism-- the "pastiche" or "parody"-- which reduces the value of the elements being reused, but rather an "upcycling" which seeks to honor and elevate that which can before in order to "resignify the present and reimagine a future" (10).

With respect to metamodern horror, elements of classical *and* postmodern horror and modern and postmodern philosophy are employed, though such elements are disharmonious, as they are antithetical to each other. In this way, metamodern horror exists in "tension" and "oscillates" between the modernism and postmodernism in the narrative—modernist naivety, hope, and sincerity and postmodern skepticism, pessimism, and irony. Similarly, it is strained and vacillates between classical and postmodern horror cinema—"upcycling" conventions of both. Critically, it employs "construction" and "deconstruction" with respect to the human/monster binary

Van den Akker articulates, in the chapter "Metamodern Historicity" delves into the metamodern sense of history. Unlike modernist historicity, which is characterized by "futurism," evoking Ezra Pound's famous dictum of "Make it new," and postmodern historicity, a constantly cycling "presentism" where there is no past nor future, metamodernism is "multi-tensed" as it attempts to incorporate "past possibilities" and "possible futures" into itself (Van den Akker 22). This bleeds into the realm of metamodern horror—there is a skepticism about the future but a yearning for it which necessarily calls back past hopes with current concerns. The ending of metamodern horror films exist in the tension, a sort of undecidability between classical futurism—a change of events and progress—and postmodern presentism—an intense skepticism of change and the potential for the conflict between the human and monster to endure forever.

James MacDowell in his article "The Metamodern, the Quirky and Film Criticism," articulates what he views to be the prototypical features of metamodernism in cinema. The commonality of metamodern cinema is characterized as a "commitment (or affirmation, hopefulness, sentiment) in the face of a nonetheless-present potential for skepticism (or irony, consciousness of absurdity, affected distance) that is heighted when such moments are positioned at the terminus of the film" (34). He continues, stating, the metamodern structure of feeling is manifested in film by "an overarching tone of defiant affirmation, commitment and sincere engagement in the face of an implicitly acknowledged potential for despair, disillusionment or ironic detachment" (39). These two quotations fit into the metamodern horror film thusly: so astutely pointed out by Wood, the key element, as indicated earlier, is the "relationship between the [human and monster]" which is finalized at the film's end. In the metamodern horror film, instead of merely defeating the monster and restoring the established order—thus being

“hopeful” and having an unambiguous “sincere” ending—or being defeated by the monster and destroying the world—thus “despairing” or having the characters live in false hope of defeating the monster, only to have it rear its ugly head in the last shot revealing it is alive, being “ironic”—metamodern horror combines both elements in an uncomfortable tension, swinging between both extremes.

Lee Konstantinou, in his article “Four Faces of Postironty” articulates that postmodernism’s fascination with irony is giving way to a new development—postirony. He states “Postironists don’t advocate for a simple return to sincerity—they’re not anti-ironists—but rather wish to preserve postmodernism’s critical insights (in various domains) while overcoming its disturbing dimensions” (Konstantinou 88) That is, there is not a call to return to blind naiveite, but rather to craft an informed naivete. He argues, postmodernism, instead of being oppositional or deconstructive, a critique of society, institutions, culture, ideas, meant to explode codes of signification, it becomes the ground, the realist backdrop of narrative, which he refers to as “motivated postmodernism” as it uses postmodernism as “verisimilitude (90-91). Postirony is demonstrated through a rejection of postmodern irony via the “author,” “one or more characters,” or “the reader” navigating a journey from “naivete through irony to cynicism to postirony,” which he refers to as a postironic Bildungroman” (96). The crux of his work, and central to our immediate purposes, is his belief that “postmodern form is used to reject postmodern content, either denying the validity of theories of postmodern reality, or more commonly trying to move beyond its failings” (93). Thus, characters—and the audience member by identification with the characters—engage in this journey, moving through the positions Konstantinou enumerates. In the metamodern works to be analyzed, it is postmodern philosophy itself—the playfulness of

linguistics in *Pontypool* (2008), late stage capitalism in *Us* (2019), psychological incoherence in *The Babadook* (2014), and identity fragmentation in *Annihilation* (2018)—which serve as the content with the films will reconstruct, in the same way that postmodern horror uses the modernism—logocentrism, production capitalism, psychological holism, and a united self—as a ground to deconstruct.

Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk, in their article "Reconstructing Depth: Authentic Fiction and Responsibility" articulate their concept of "reconstruction" in relation to the "in-betweenness of metamodernism (Huber and Funk 152). They argue that "reconstruction," like "deconstruction," is both a feature of a text, a genre, if you will, *and* a method of analysis, or a "strategy of reading" (153). Thus there can be texts of deconstruction—in the postmodern tradition—and texts of reconstruction—in the metamodern tradition. "Reconstructive texts," they argue, "employ the undecidability written into them" not to frustrate "attempts to establish meaning" but to demand the "reader's response-ability" to have an authentic literary encounter with the text (161). Applied to metamodern horror, the broken structure of their narratives—such as the oscillation between diegesis and mimesis in *Pontypool* or the nested narrative of *Annihilation* that has flashbacks within dreams within a frame story-- and the ambiguity of its endings—while similar to the open aperture structure of postmodern horror—is not meant to destroy meaning, but to allow the audience to reconstruct it. Unlike the postmodern film, where the characters are left in a shattered or deconstructed world with the audience in a similar boat with no recourse, the characters, and the audience who identify with them, are invited to reconstruct their place in the world. For the character, this involves repairing the damage to the self through the acceptance of the abject—the monster. For the audience, we must reconstruct a

coherent narrative.

As the metamodern oscillates between modernism and postmodernism, so too does posthumanism vacillate between humanism and anithumanism. According to Ann Weiston in the chapter "(Post)humanism" from the book *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism,* "Posthumanism emerges […] from a tension between the urge to disperse the subject into decentralized agents or more autonomous, anonymous forces and the urge to find a locus for the pursuit of freedom founded on practices of creative self-constitution" (10-11). In other words, posthumanism, like anthihumanism, admits to the agency and authority of nonhuman actants—inanimate, plant, animal, environmental, technological, societal—in the formation of the concept of self, but still, like humanism, believes these pieces focus on the "*one* who becomes and the one who owns those becoming": the human. It is both humanist and anithumanist: the self may be mutually constructed based on myriad nonhuman elements, but there is still a center, a self, these elements coalesce into. Thus, the posthumanist self is the "tension" between the humanist sense of self—complete, autonomous, rational—and the antihumanist self—fractured, structured, irrational—in other words, it is the combination of the self-proposed by classical and postmodern horror: a self that is equal parts human and monster.

Now that a sketch of metamodern horror has been completed, four close readings will be offered to show relationship between contemporary horror cinema and metamodernism. The four films to be examined are *Pontypool* (2008), *The Babadook* (2014), *Us* (2019), and *Annihilation* (2018). Each film demonstrates the key feature of metamodernism: a tension and oscillation between sincerity and irony, hope and nihilism, meaning and nonsense. Further, in each film, the human/monster binary is deconstructed as humans are demonstrated to be monstrous just as

monsters are humanized. This deconstruction of the human/monster binary culminates in a reconstruction of the human-monster—horror has lived up to the potential Robin Wood saw in horror all those years ago—not just the potential for radical change—complete deconstruction of the Self in postmodern horror saw to that—but the potential for rebuilding, in the way that only metamodernism, through reconstruction of the fractured Self, the human, with the fragments the self, the Abject, the monstrous, can allow.

Section 1

Making (Non)Sense: Reconstructing Language in *Pontypool*

Pontypool (2008) is a Canadian zombie horror film directed and written by Bruce McDonald; it is based on novel by Tony Burgess: *Pontypool Changes Everything* (1995). In the film, what begins as merely radio news about on the dreary and quotidian Valentine's Day in a quaint Canadian town turns into a terrifying odyssey of war reporting: Pontypool is the epicenter of a zombie virus that is communicated via language (pun intended), and it is up to a jaded radio man to make sense of what is happening.

Grant Mazzy (Stephan McHattie) is a recently fired hotshot radio personality who takes on a quaint new job at a minor radio station in the small town of Pontypool, Ontario. Evident early on is Grant's frustration with the diminution of his station—he quickly enters into several quarrels with his new boss, Sydney Briar (Lisa Houle), over his conduct on the air, leaving Laurel-Ann Drummond (Georgina Reilly), their young coworker, in the middle. However, what was perceived to be merely a slow news day escalates rapidly—reports of riots are relayed to Grant who does his best to report on the phenomena. Eventually, it becomes clear that it is some sort of virus—those effected by the contagion become violent and start echoing sounds and phrases of others. The radio station is eventually surrounded by the conversationalists (as they are referred to in the novel), trapping the trio inside. Eventually, Dr. John Mendez (Hrant Alianank) enters the station, shedding light on the recent events: the cause of the violence is the result of a virus spread by language, revealing that Laurel-Ann is infected. After Laurel-Ann dies in a horrific display—vomiting a prodigious amount of blood because she could not find a victim—Grant, Sydney, and Dr. Mendez loop a message and play it through the loudspeakers to

distract the infected. However, it does not work, and Dr. Mendez, now infected, sacrifices himself to lead the conversationalists away, saving Grant and Sydney. While secluded, Grant tries in vain to solve the riddle of the virus, as Sydney evinces symptoms of the disease. Eventually, she contracts it full—repeating the word "kill"—until Grant cures her by "disinfecting" the word through linguistic play: moving from "kill" to saying "kill isn't kill" to "kill is kiss," eventually escaping English and forming a new word—"killiskiss." Once Sydney is cured, the two kiss before Grant makes a heroic attempt to "save the world." The two attempt to spread the cure over the radio, culminating in an impassioned speech by Grant, wherein he claims "we were never making sense" and that one merely needs to "stop understanding" in order to be cured. Unfortunately, a countdown starts, as the military prepares to destroy the station to prevent the broadcast; they fear Grant is sick and merely spreading the disease. Sydney and Grant embrace once more, kissing passionately, as the screen fades to black. During the credits, it is revealed that the virus was not contained. In the post-credits scene, Grant and Sydney are depicted in a hyper-stylized manner, speaking (non)sense, evidently escaping their fate and surviving the apocalypse.

Pontypool is the quintessential metamodern horror film, oscillating between sincerity and irony, progress and circuity, hope and despair, meaning and meaninglessness, through its exploration of the vicissitudes of modern and postmodern attitudes towards humans and monsters, the deconstruction and reconstruction of language, and the fracturing and rebuilding of its complicated structure. With respect to characterization, Grant transitions from the modern Author-God—the shock jock radio personality-- to the postmodern solipsist—a man on the verge of breaking as he is confronted by the disintegration of language—to the metamodern hero—the

vexed yet optimistic, would-be savior. Similarly, the humans and conversationalists enter a chiasmus of humanity and inhumanity, both crossing over the barrier from their respective antipodes which eventually erodes the difference between them before attempting to unite them as something new: posthumanity. Conceptually, the film begins assuming a logocentric attitude toward language before eviscerating it with poststructuralist philosophy, deconstructing language, cleaving the signifier from the signified, before finally reconstructing language in a new way that splits the difference between sense and nonsense. Structurally, *Pontypool* is fractured: the film has a hyper-stylized opening that oscillates between hot and cold while never being lukewarm, the main diegesis terminates in a state of undecidability, the credit sequence hints at a diegesis beyond the bounds of the narrative, and a stylized, bizarre post-credit sequence which defies the diegetic logic of the preceding portions. In sum, *Pontypool* deconstructs the notion of humanity/monstrosity, meaning/nonsense, and order/chaos before implicating the reader in a reconstructive act of building something new out of the fragments, knitting together an incoherent cohesion in the process that is more than the sum of its deconstructed parts.

Pontypool opens with a blue sound wave crackling against a black background in sync with Grant's voice intoning a cryptic message. A distortion effect effaces the sound wave, creating a bubble in the middle which destroys it as red, individual letters of the word "PONTYPOOL" comes into relief—beginning with the second "P," then the "O" to its immediate right, then the "T," and the "Y", forming, very clearly, the word "TYPO" before completing the remainder of the film's title (Figure 1). The black background transitions into a night sky, flecks of snow becoming more and more visible. Eventually, the word vanishes, the nondiegetic title sequence blurs into the diegesis of the film as Grant's car enters the shot from

the left of the screen, where a recording of Grant's voice is heard over the radio, reciting obituaries for his radio station (an act he will do later in the film when recording the deaths of the victims of the virus), while Grant himself, behind the wheel, fires his agent over the phone. The narration is equally serious and humorous, sensible and nonsensical:

> Mrs. Frenchie's cat is missing. The signs are posted all over town: "Have you seen Honey?" We've all seen the posters...but nobody has seen Honey the cat. Nobody...until last Thursday morning...when Ms. Colette Piscine swerved her car to miss Honey...while she drove across the bridge. Well, this bridge, now slightly damaged, is a bit of a local treasure, and even has its own fancy name: Pont de Flaque. Now, Colette...that sounds like culotte...That's panty in French. And Piscine means pool... Panty Pool. Flaque also means pool in French. So, Colette Piscine, in French Panty Pool, drives across the Pont de Flaque...or Pont de Pool, if you will...to avoid hitting Mrs. French's cat...that's been missing in Pontypool. Pontypool... Pont de Pool...Panty Pool... Pont de Flaque...What does it mean? Well, Norman Mailer, he had an interesting theory...that he used to explain the strange coincidences in the aftermath of the JFK assassination: In the wake of huge events, after them and before them, physical details…they spasm for a moment, they sort of unlock, and when they come back into focus, they suddenly coincide in a weird way: street names and birth dates and middle names...all kinds of superfluous things appear related to each other. It's a ripple effect. So, what does it mean? Well, it means something's going to happen...Something big. But then, something's always...about to happen. (*Pontypool*)

Here Grant is admitting the theme of the entire piece: to construct meaning in the wake of postmodernity, one must first deconstruct meaning then to reconstruct something new out of the broken pieces. By distorting, or else deconstructing, the meaning of Colette Piscine and Pont de Flaque until they respectively form it into Panty Pool and Pont de Pool, Grant is able to reassemble, or reconstruct, these seemingly disparate and random terms into something meaningful: "all kinds of superfluous things appear related to each other." It is vital to note that Grant is not reading with the grain, simply noting the amusing coincidence, nor does he read against it, suggesting such coincidences are just random chance—he is able to make admittedly meaningless events mean something "big" while admitting that "something's always about to

happen." More simply, only by misreading the words, can Grant read them differently. As a further example, by deconstructing the word "Pontypool" into "Typo," the film makes a typo--a mistake, an error, something broken--into something meaningful. The title of the work, a metonym for the work itself, contains an error. This error, however, does not undo meaning; meaning can, paradoxically be made from this mistake, it is an oxymoron: an intentional typo. Further, this scene is metareferential insofar as it references the structure of the film itself: this stylized, cold opening, blurs the ontological boundary between the peritextual title sequence of the film with the diegesis, which will be replicated repeatedly as the film progresses. These seemingly distinct ontological registers "spasm" and "unlock" and only when activated by the reader's desire for meaning can these jarringly distinct registers "come into focus."

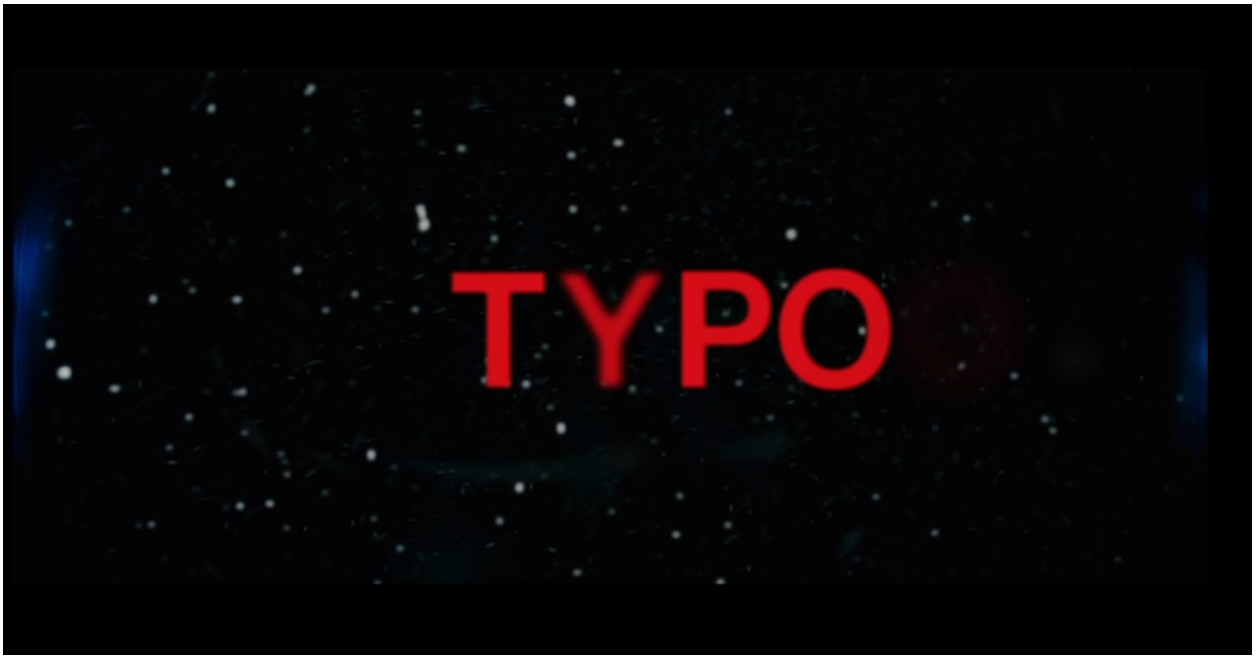

Figure 1. Title Card in *Pontypool*

This film announces, in other words, that it will be about breaking down straightforward belief in the existence of clear, comprehensive narrative truth organized around a coherent

psychological subjectivity. Grant, a prime example of what Konstantinou has termed the positronic Bildungsroman as he moves from sincere naiveite, a belief in logocentrism, to irony, a belief that words are always ironic insomuch as they do not mean what they say, to a positronic position: words are meaningless and meaningful, sincere and ironic, simultaneously.

He begins is a firm believer in logocentrism—words point directly toward "Truth" and one is able to communicate one's ideas coherently from one source to another. He believes his command of language allows him unmediated access to the Truth, that he can effectively communicate this Truth with his listeners over the radio: he believes he/his voice can be present even though he/the source of his voice is absent from the listener. The Author-God, Grant is in an active position to speak while the audience is made passive, existing just to listen. But while he is an Author-God before he encounters the deconstructed language of the disease, he undergoes a transformation. Grant enters into a narcissistic, paranoid solipsistic state before finally emerging as a metamodern savior.

Eventually cracking under the pressure of the outbreak, Grant moves from the naivety of the modern hero to the solipsistic postmodern protagonist, blaming both Sydney and Laurel-Ann for his own confusion: he storms out of his radio booth, and curses them: "You know, I need to feel that there's something *solid.* I need to confirm… I need to… to know that there's more happening to everyone…than just what's happening to just me, you know?" before unleashing expletives upon them: "You are fucking with me! You are fucking with my head!" Here, it is obvious that Grant does not trust language, the reporting of the events exterior, absent from him, as being connected to reality—they are not "solid." He doubts the ability of language to represent reality accurately. Through the course of the narrative, however, after encountering the virus and

its deconstruction of language, his voice is literally taken from him, as he and his companions are reduced to communicating via writing. Amusingly, Grant transitions from speaking over the radio—absent speech--to being writing messages to people right next to him—present writing, which is a playful nod to Jacques Derrida, renowned postmodernist intellectual, and his assault on modernism's believe in logocentrism. Their fear of the virus, and the language which transmits it, causes them to speak in French—they abandon a language in search of another; they concede that English is lost, or broken.

What is key here the idea that, prior to being infected, one is a modernist creator of novel meaning whereas the infected are just that, created by language, unable to make their own meaning, they are merely "broken radio signals" who repeat, quote, or cite that which preexists them. The virus turns people into "conversationalists"—mindless zombies who cannot form original ideas or utter unique words but merely echo the phrases said by others. These linguistic zombies represent the nihilistic existence of the postmodern human: a replica formed ex lingua.

When postulating the nature of the virus, Dr. Mendez states, "We are witnessing the emergence of a new arrangement for life, and our language is its host. It could, uh… have sprung spontaneously out of a… perception. If it found its way into language, it could lead into reality itself, changing everything!" In essence, Mendez is proposing that life—an ontological state—can bound from perception, an epistemologically weak understanding of the world reliant on the senses, to language, a structure that attempts to explain said perceptions, into "reality itself." That is, a sense can become a word, which can become real. According to Mendez, the virus can oscillate between being a subjective experience of objective reality—a "perception"—to a subjective unit meant to describe said subjective experience of reality—"language"—and then

back to objective "reality." However, Mendez continues, expounding upon his earlier idea, "If…if the bug enters us, it does not enter by making contact with our eardrum. No. It enter us when we hear the word and we understand it. Understood? It is when the word is understood, that the virus takes hold, and…it copies itself in our understanding." Here is the crux: understanding the infected words, not merely hearing them, is what allows one to catch the disease. Further, this disease effects an ontological change in the person infected—they transition from being human to a conversationalist.

Grant and Sydney, in classical horror mode, discover the nature of the virus—Grant is able to cure Sydney of her infected word, "kill," by altering the word, bending it. In an effort to cure the virus based upon the premises of Dr. Mendez, Grant begins puzzling it out: "So how do you… how do you not understand a word…How, somethin' we understand automatically...How do you take, you know, a word…How do you make it strange? " Here Grant is attempting to alter his understanding of reality—he is trying to understand how to not understand. At first, he conjectures that the conversationalists are repeating words in order to prevent themselves from understanding it and therefore cure themselves by reducing the word to a mere sound, by attempting to decouple the signifier from the signified by focusing on the materiality of the signifier, and therefore eliminating its ability to connect to the signified. Grant relates that, as a child, he would repeat words until they were "incomprehensible": to defamiliarize a word until it loses its communicative potential and is reduced to merely a bark, a yawn, a series of notes. However, Grant points out this practice of repetition, mere deconstruction of the word, does not prevent the victims from getting "sick," so the answer must be to make it "unrecognizable" instead of "incompressible." The distinction is vital: to be unrecognizable is simply to evade

recognition. That is, it does not fit a prior schema. To be incomprehensible, on the other hand, means to be meaningless. In essence, the difference is between something that is meaningful but is not recognized or does not fit a pattern as compared to something that is impossible to me meaningful. Thus, the goal is not to merely deconstruct a word, to reduce it to a play of endless signifiers, but to reconstruct it as something new. He succeeds not by killing the monster, as do heroes in classical/modern horror, but by reconstructing something out of it.

At first, he attempts to negate the word, stating "kill isn't kill, kill isn't kill," but this proves ineffective. Simple negation is not the answer--merely revealing the disunion between the signifier "kill" and the signified "kill" does nothing to save her. This demonstrates the failings of deconstruction to liberate one from the disease of the slipperiness of language. Similarly, since deconstruction is just that, dissolution, is cannot create meaning, only destroy it, demonstrate its vacuity. As a result, Grant attempts, not to negate the meaning of kill, but to attach a new signified to it, bounding from "blue," "wonderful," "loving," "baby," "Manet's Garden," "beautiful morning," "everything you ever wanted," before finally landing on "kiss." Eventually, Grant not only states "kill is kiss," unbuckling the signifier from the signified and placing another signified in its place (which, if infected, would need to be deferred again), but he reconstructs it as a new word: the phrase "kill is kiss" becomes blurred into the sign "killiskiss" owing to Grants rapid locution. In this way, Grant disinfects "kill" by first deconstructing it and then reconstructing a new meaning out of its atoms: "killiskiss," thus finally escaping the deconstructionist short-circuit. In this way, Grant illustrates the humanist hope for the future by inventing a new word, while employing the circuity of postmodernism, deconstruction, to get there.

Whereas the resolution of the classical horror film would see the humans triumphant, and postmodern horror would have the conflict unending, *Pontypool* exists in the tension between these two antipodes and, in posthumanist fashion, sees the conflict resolve by accepting the monstrous into the human while simultaneously exploring the postmodern convention of humans behaving monstrously. His revelation, after curing Sydney Briar, comes when he emphatically declaims "We were never making sense." Grant thus erodes the difference between humans and the conversationalists—the virus was not the cause of the breakdown of communication or the harbinger of the shattering of the communicative properties of language: it merely made them confront what always was. In an effort to "save the world" Grant blasts his paradoxical mantra over the radio: "You have to stop understanding… Stop understanding what you are saying… Stop understanding and *listen* to me." However, the military, listening to the broadcast, thinks Grant is sick and continues shooting the infected. Here the roles of human/monster are reversed: the humans are acting barbarically, killing that which is different from them, that which they cannot understand while the monsters, the conversationalists, become the victims. In an effort to stop the violence, and save the world, launches into a poetic polemic against their violence:

> You're just killing scared people. It's what you always do. You're killing scared people. You are like dogs... You smell fear and you pounce. Well, what the fuck happened today, folks? Someone took a buzzsaw to your middle...and they pulled out a wheeling devil...and they spilled it right across your anthill. But you know what, friends? We were never making sense. We were never making sense. And today, today when Armageddon leached out in your good, good mornings... You know what? It's just another day. Another day in Pontypool. The sun came up. You did what you did yesterday, and it's exactly what you'll do tomorrow. Today's news, folks... Today's late breaking, development, just across my desk news story is this: It's not the end of the world, folks. It's just the end of the day. This is Grant Mazzy, for CLSY Radio nowhere. And I'm still here, you cock-suckers!

Here, Grant is suggesting that the "monsters" are really just "scared people" and thus humanizes them, while simultaneously, the traditional heroic military are compared to "dogs,"

dehumanizing them. In this way, the human and monster dramatis personae enter a chiasmus of monstrosity, each crossing over their side of the barrier, eroding the difference. Grant has fully transitioned from despondent postmodern protagonist to metamodern hero—his positronic. Bildungsroman is complete—he is able to speak sense while speaking nonsense.

Unfortunately, the military operates in a different interpretive sphere. A countdown begins, suggesting that they are about to level the radio station. Grant, defeated, slouches into his chair, while Sydney rushes over to him: they passionately embarrass in a kiss as the screen abruptly turns black. Here is where the film oscillates between a classical and postmodern horror ending. In the classical sense, the protagonists, true humanists, are able to use their ingenuity and resolve to conquer the monster. Grant and Sydney are able to cure the virus after all, even if they are (presumably) killed before they can share the vaccine. Ironically, the cure of the disease was mistaken for the disease itself and the people who knew the cure were killed. This is quite the postmodern ending, as it would indicate that the only hope for ending the disease was destroyed because of an ironic misunderstanding. However, if Grant and Sydney were able to discover the disease's etiology and find its cure within the span of a day, it is equally possible that others may as well, thus putting a classical and postmodern ending in tension. If the military did in fact kill everyone, as indicated by the fact that the shooting stopped, then it is also equally probable that the military, in its lack of understanding of the disease, paradoxically was able to defeat it with brute, monstrous force--which is more in line with a postmodern ending of mindless brutality. Either way, the ending is thus classical, if not a little vexed: the disease is curable OR it is possible to eradicate the hosts wholesale, effectively removing the disease.

The credits sequence begins immediately after the screen cut to black. Over the credits,

broadcasts are heard commenting on the virus. Nigel Healing (voiced/played by xxx) is heard repeating a word, indicating that the virus has spread to the United Kingdom, suggesting that, contra the classical endings suggested earlier. Either A) the cure remains unknown despite its previous discovery, or B) the Canadian military, while successful in killing the hosts of the disease, did not kill the disease itself. In this way, it is a definitive postmodern ending: the monster wins. However, this interpretation exists, similarly to the title sequence, in a liminal state which blurs the definitions of the diegesis of the main narrative. Thus, to even have a postmodern interpretation of the film, some amount of reconstruction, of knitting the main diegesis to the credit sequence, is required. However, this is not the end of the film.

After the credits, in a hyper-stylized post-credit scene filmed in black in white, Grant and Sydney are depicted in black and white, Grant wearing a western suit, sunglasses, and bolo tie, while Sydney wears an eastern hairstyle and dress, engage in (non)sensical dialogue. Color returns slowly to the image, as the following exchange occurs:

> "Let's get out of here."
> "Where are we going?"
> "I can't play by the establishment rules any longer, my patience is worn thin. We're breaking the limit, stealing cars, leaving the world behind to figure out what they believe is black and white.
> "But what about--"
> "What about? What about 'what about?' It's not a good way to begin a question."
> "But what about my name?"
> "Mine name too."
> "Jonny Deadeyes."
> "Hmm. Lisa the Killer."
> "Where we goin,' Jonny?"
> "To a new place, that isn't even there yet."
> "And then?"
> "And then we steal the loot and knock boots in the free world, baby."
> "Ok, ok, baby."
> "Shh." (*Pontypool*)

What is key is that Grant and Sydney are able to communicate, meaningfully, despite speaking in almost gibberish. They have not purified language, returned to a modernist logocentrism, nor have they abandoned language, succumbed to postmodern deconstruction—they have deconstructed sense to reconstruct (non)sense and can effectively communicate. Held up against the two prior endings, this one suggests that Grant and Sydney are existing in some manner of mass societal collapse, but are able to survive and thrive: the world did not end, then, it merely evolved, and it is possible to exist in this brave new world as long as one evolves with it. To use Grant's words, "It's not the end of the world. It's just the end of the day… and I'm still here."

Pontypool combines elements of both classical and postmodern horror film with respect to its conflict resolution. Similarly, Grant's evolution and transformation of the course of the narrative seems to embody that in the postironic Bildungsroman. The subject matter of the film involves the breakdown of logocentrism by deconstruction only to be reconstructed again. Most. Importantly, for the entire narrative of the film to be coherent, the audience must stitch together the fragmented pieces: the title sequence, main narrative, credits, and post credits scene. *Pontypool* is the quintessential metamodern horror film.

Section 2

Redeeming our Demons: Psychological (In)Cohesion in *The Babadook*

The Babadook (2014) is an Australian psychological horror film directed by Jennifer Kent. After a tragic car accident kills her husband, an exasperated single mother and her troubled son navigate their tumultuous life together. They receive a book, entitled *Mister Babadook,* setting loose the eponymous malevolent entity, which begins tormenting them both. Now, mother and son must work together to survive. Only through their love for each other, however flawed, can Amelia and Samuel survive their haunting.

Amelia Vanek (Essie Davis) and her son Samuel (Noah Wiseman) are struggling to get by after the death of Oskar, their husband and father, respectively, who died on the date of Samuel's birth. After Samuel brings a homemade crossbow to school, Amelia unenrolls him, hoping to find an environment where he can succeed. That night, Samuel produces a book, previously unknown to either of them, entitled *Mister Babadook* and asks her to read it to him for a bedtime story. After the story turns out to be horrifying, Samuel begins crying and Amelia reads him another story to get him to sleep. After he is asleep, Amelia rereads the tome, and places it on top of her wardrobe out of Samuel's reach. Samuel's fears of the Babadook escalate, eventually to an encounter off screen that leaves him curled up under his bed. Amelia rips *Mister Babadook* to shreds and throws it away. While driving back from a disastrous outing at his cousin's birthday party, Samuel has a "febrile convulsion," which leads a panicked Amelia to beg the doctor for sedatives to help him sleep. After a finally being able to sleep, Amelia hears a pounding at the door, opening it only to find their copy of *Mister Babadook* placed on her doorstep: the torn pages have been placed back together and additional writing has been added. This additional

material depicts a woman being possessed by the Babadook then proceeding to strangle a dog and then a child, before slitting her own throat. In response, Amelia burns the book on her grill. That night, while Amelia and Sam are in bed together, the Babadook appears to leap into her mouth. Amelia becomes more and more unhinged. After another horrifying encounter with the Babadook, Amelia locks herself in her room, only to have it enter through the chimney and possess her. She breaks the dog's neck before pursuing Samuel. Eventually, Samuel succeeds in binding her in the basement, which leads to her exorcising the Babadook: she vomits black bile before awaking and taking her son upstairs, only to have an invisible force grab him. She gives chase and protects him from the unseen presence. Oskar steps out of the shadows and is killed again to torment Amelia. Growling emanates from the darkness and Amelia and Samuel stand together in the face of the Babadook. The Babadook shrieks as it spirits down to the basement. A few days later, Amelia collects the worms and places them in the basement for the Babadook who initially frightens her, until she comforts it. In the final scene, Amelia and Samuel celebrate his 7th birthday: the first time they celebrate on the day itself.

The Babadook is uniquely concerned with the binary opposition of human/monster, initially attempting to escape or transcend it, then attempting to deconstruct it, then conquer it, before finally eroding the difference between the two terms and revealing that Amelia and the Babadook were always a single entity: a human-monster. Her refusal to deal with her grief is a central conflict in the film, represented by the book itself. She first hides *Mister Babadook*, fighting and attempting to destroy her feelings; then she tries to destroy it before being possessed by her demon, and though she seems to abject the monster, ultimately, she accepts it as part of her new life. In this way, she asserts the humanist notion of the Self as being individisible—

repressing her feelings—before destroying the Self by allowing the monster inside to take her over, thus being a slave to her deviant psychology and not an autonomous humanist Subject, until, finally she accepts that which is abjected back into the self. The monster is neither defeated nor is it victorious. While it is accepted, it does not sit comfortably between these two extremes—it is obvious that the Babadook is still monstrous, evoking fear, and, simultaneously, is fearful itself. Amelia and the Babadook ultimately enter a chiasmus: the former, the human, becomes monstrous while the latter, the monster, becomes human. Ultimately, the Babadook is both an externalized presence in the vein of classical horror, and, an internalized one, in the vein of postmodern horror.

The text of *Mister Babadook* provides a clear way into Amelia's conflict in the film. The tale begins, "If it's in a word or it's in a look/ You can't get rid of the Babadook." Here the text indicates that the Babadook resides within "word[s]" and "look[s]," indicating that it comes out when certain actions, specifically by saying certain things or performing certain expressions, can summon one's demons: the Babadook is always already inside you, just waiting to come out; it will not go away by ignoring it, because it *is* you. However, the text continues, "If you're a really clever one/ And you know what it is to see/ Then you can make friends with a special one,/ A friend of you and me." Here the text implies that if one is "clever" and is able to "knows what it is to see"--that is, to truly understand—then one can befriend the Babadook. The book foreshadows both the solution and conclusion to the film: by understanding that the Babadook is already a part of you and accepting it instead of fighting it, one can live with it. The initial edition ends with the following: "I'll soon take off my funny disguise/ (take heed of what you've read…)/ And once you see what's underneath…/ YOU'RE GOING TO WISH YOU WERE/

DEAD." This implies that the Babadook is masquerading as something other than it appears to be: what, at first pass, is an externalized evil really is truly internal: the "what's underneath" is Amelia and discovering that these feelings are internal, are her, rather than some external malevolent force, is enough to get her to wish she "were dead."

Amelia begins the film by ignoring or denying her feelings. During her conversation with her sister at Ruby's birthday party, she and Claire have a pointed exchange:

> "As soon as anyone mentions Oskar, you can't cope."
> "That's not true."
> "It'll be seven years. Isn't it time you moved on?"
> "I have moved on. I don't mention him. I don't talk about him. What strain is that on you, Claire?"

Here Amelia exemplifies this unhealthy survival mechanism. When Claire insinuates that just the mention of Oskar is enough to completely forestall her coping skills, Amelia flatly states "that's not true." She goes so far as to state that she has "moved on," despite nearing the seventh anniversary of his passing and clearly not having done so. After Samuel comes into her room at night, terrified the Babadook was in his closet, she says, "It's just a book. It can't hurt you"—she is in denial about having moved on. And neither has Samuel moved on.

Despite her insistence that "it's just a book," she tears it to shreds—she attempts to deconstruct it, as it were, to eliminate its power. The book, however, appears again on her doorstep. It is not merely another edition of *Mister Babadook* but the original, that which was destroyed—it is a *reconstruction* of that which was deconstructed, containing evidence of her violence of it—her rips and tears-- *and* containing new passages which, vitally, also depict signs of the havoc she did to the tome. Thus, the book is the original destroyed copy that has been repaired, but it is, crucially *different* as the new segments, given their scrap paper texture, are clearly reconstructed from other elements of the book she deconstructed. The book is, in its own

way, again suggesting how she might deal with her demons. The additional passages presage events which are to come: clearly, it's not *just* a book.

The new material contains even more frightening information. It begins, "I'll WAGER with YOU, I'll MAKE you a BET, THE MORE you DENY THE STRONGER I GET." Her, obviously, the book suggests that Amelia's denial of her own monstrosity—her hatred for her son, her unremitting grief—empower the monstrosity. Curiously, it is her desire to be human—a good mother, a stoic woman who is surviving after the loss of her husband—that make her monstrous. The following page depicts the Babadook looming over Amelia in bed, screaming, "LET ME IN!" Of course, this is suggestive on several levels: to the first, the Babadook wants to fully control her; it wants her to cease her dismissal of her own monstrosity and let it possess her, and, to the second, this framing is extremely sexually charged. The Babadook wants her to let him *inside* her, to penetrate her, and therefore control her. This ties into her sexual frustration hinted earlier in the film (she is almost caught masturbating by Samuel). The text continues, "You start to CHANGE when I get in. the BABADOOK growing right UNDER YOUR SKIN. Oh COME! Come SEE what's UNDERNEATH!" Obviously, the acceptance of this monstrosity, this Id desire, would alter her and her behavior: were she to shed the Super-Ego and see the Id, the real her "UNDERNEATH" the trappings of societal norms, norms that make one human, she would be free to be the monster she already is. On the other hand, it would suggest a sort of monstrous impregnation: after it is "in", it leads to "change" which causes "growing UNDER [her] SKIN." The suggestion of "Oh COME!" also suggests a sort of sexual release. In this way, her psychosexual union with the Babadook will produce a monstrous prodigy—she is to give birth to her real self. Several pop-ups are depicted: the first, of her strangling her dog, the second

depicts her throttling her son, and the final shows her slitting her own throat. Horrified, Amelia immolates the book on her grill in the backyard.

Amelia does suffer the fate the book foredoomed. The Babadook enters her through her mouth—again, in an incredibly psychosexual, penetrative act. Now clearly possessed, Amelia is enjoined to the Babadook: the human/monster binary is deconstructed as the difference between human and monster is effaced. She begins to descend down the path the book foreshadowed, beginning with the slaying of the dog. She then proceeds to hunt Samuel.

When Amelia has cornered Samuel in her bedroom, the metamodern logic of the film becomes clear. Amelia and the Babadook speak at once and as one: as Amelia-Babadook utter the words once, two voices overlap, creating both harmony and discord. Her voice distorting, Amelia-Babadook accosts Samuel about the central conflict in the film: "You don't know how many times I wished it was you, not him, that died…Sometimes I just want to smash your head against a brick wall until your fucking brains pop out!" By overlapping Amelia and the Babadook, we as viewers are required to interpret in a doubled way. If the Babadook is taken to be the speaker, then the statement is sincere: Amelia/Babadook is actively hunting Samuel down in an effort to kill him. Conversely, if Amelia is the speaker, then the phrase is ironic: she does not literally want to kill her son. If the speaker is considered to be Amelia-Babadook, however, then the expression is both sincere and ironic: she sincerely admits to having monstrous, unspeakable, designs for her son while, simultaneously, desiring and fighting against such stratagems, as evinced by her horror at brandishing a knife at her son earlier and her obvious rescuing of him later. Similarly, when Samuel responds, stating, "You're not my mother," his statement is both sincere and ironic in the same manner. There is a slipperiness here, rendered in

language. The second person pronoun “you” can either have a singular or plural referent. If the “you’re” references Amelia, the statement is ironic, as she is literally his mother, despite her monstrous behavior. If the “you’re” refers to the Babadook, then the statement is sincere. Finally, if the “you’re” references Amelia-Babadook then the statement is both sincere and ironic: she is in fact his mother and is something else—a monster.

Samuel leads her on a chase which ends up in the basement—the unconscious of the house. He ties her down and, through love for his mother saves her. After exorcising the Babadook from her, Amelia succeeds in resisting its control. Her both Samuel and Amelia wrest control of the narrative of *The Babadook* from *Mister Babadook.* They are able to char their own path. Amelia literally ejects the Babadook, vomiting sable ichor, thereby figuratively casting off that aspect of herself which is abject: her monstrous feelings toward her son. By separating Amelia from the Babadook literally, the film aesthetically and thematically externalizes the monster, ala the material inhuman monsters of classical horror. However, abjecting the monstrous from the human is not the solution—this would be the classical horror resolution, reinscribing the slash, the boundary which separates Amelia from the Babadook, the human from the monster, by redrawing and emboldening the “/” between them, creating an insuperable line between them, defining humanity in opposition to monstrosity.

Shortly after, the Babadook attempts to destroy Samuel, thus threatening to finish the film in a postmodern fashion. Instead, Amelia is able to withstand its assault, and the Babadook retreats from her, thus inverting the human/monster relationship: Amelia is the source of fear while the Babadook is the one afraid. In an effort to flee from its monster, Amelia, the Babadook retreats to the basement. Inverting the typical cinematography of the postmodern film, wherein

the camera operates to identify the viewer with the monster before switching to the perspective of the Final Girl for the final stretch (Clover 45), at the terminus of *The Babadook* the point of view switches from the heroine to the monster. Cinematographically, the film ends with the camera identifying with the monster, thus humanizing it and, simultaneously, dehumanizing the human. Amelia locks the Babadook inside, thereby again separating it physically and psychically from herself, thus traveling to the classical side of the spectrum. However, the monster is extant, forcing it toward the postmodern pole.

Finally, and significantly, Amelia enters the basement to feed the Babadook, reinforcing the metamodern qualities of the film as a whole. The monster is externalized aesthetically yet internalized psychically. It is defeated in that it is controlled and abjected—in its excluded inclusion within the house, occupying its own liminal space within the basement—thus exemplifying a classical ending. In this sense, the ending is sincere: the monster was banished to the dungeon and is controlled and dominated by the human. However, it is extant and a constant threat whose very existence threatens the newfound peace established at the film's conclusion: it is one sequel away from being unleashed again. In this sense, its continued survival is thus a postmodern presentism, there is no future except the inevitable cycle of its recursion into Amelia and Samuel's life. Ultimately, the conclusion is ironic: the present circumstances, which literally demonstrate the superiority of humanity over the monstrous, are not stable and suggest it cannot last forever. This ending is beyond both such designations.

Ultimately, the boundary between Amelia and the Babadook is constructed, deconstructed, and then reconstructed as something unstable but new. The human and the monster are mutually constitutive, symbiotic but not parasitic. Amelia feeds the Babadook,

allowing it to survive. This relationship is not stable, however. In one of the final shots, from the Babadook's perspective, the camera rapidly dollies up to Amelia, pedestals upward above her while simultaneously tilting downward on her. In response, Amelia reels backward, her balance momentarily lost. In this way, the monster is in the ascendancy: it overpowers her, she is afraid of it, thus evoking postmodern horror. Eventually, she rocks forward, causing the camera to pedestal downward and tilt upward, such that the camera is completely level with her: she has reached a temporary power equilibrium. She begins to soothe the Babadook, shouting, "It's all right! It's all right!" before lowering her volume and repeating the phrase, then cooing "Shh." Eventually, the camera reverses its approach: it dollies backward, pedestals down, and tilts upward, such that Amelia is above the camera looking down at it. In this way, the human is in the ascendancy: she is literally and figuratively over the monster, the Babadook is afraid of her, evoking classical horror. What is vital to note, is that the way this interaction is filmed suggests the process repeats every time Amelia feeds the Babadook. In this way, Amelia and the Babadook are constantly oscillating between human and monster, hunted and hunter, source of fear and the one afraid. The abjected Babadook is reintegrated into Amelia.

The anniversary of her husband's death was always-already the birthday of her son. By celebrating her son's birthday, while admitting it is also the day her husband died, Amelia is able to reconstruct the day with new meaning. It is the first time they celebrate Samuel's birthday on the day: Amelia looks straight at Prue, and states, calmly, "My husband died on the day Samuel was born." The final words of the film come from Amelia, as she cradles Samuel, a babe in her arms, and lovingly states, "Happy birthday, Sweetheart." The film ends with a closeup of her face, as she, both pained and joyous, closes her eyes in a sort of rapture: her fight will never be

over, but it will, as her son encouraged earlier, “get better.”

In this way, *The Babadook* oscillates between classical and postmodern horror by using metamodern strategies. The binary opposition between the human and the monstrous is constructed, deconstructed, and finally reconstructed. First, the Babadook is a classical, externalized threat, existing to define the human and the monstrous. Then, the monstrous possesses Amelia, thus deconstructing the difference between them and in postmodern fashion internalizing the monstrous. Next, the monstrous is abjected from Amelia, externalizing the unwanted internal monstrosity, a classical movement. Finally, through the power of love, the monstrous, the abject, is reintegrated with the subject, allowing the binary construction of Amelia/Babadook to be deconstructed and then reconstructed as something new: Amelia-Babadook. Amelia is able to redeem herself, and her demon, by admitting she and the Babadook were always already a united human-monster.

Section 3

Reuniting the States of America: Postirony in *Us*

Us (2019) is a doppelgänger horror film directed and written by Jordan Peele. Because of the nature of the monsters in the film—doppelgängers referred to as the "tethered" within the film—many of the actors are doubled. The film stars Lupita Nyong'o as Adelaide Wilson/Red, Winston Duke as Gabriel "Gabe" Wilson/Abraham, Shahadi Wright Joseph as Zora Wilson/Umbrae, and Evan Alex as Jason Wilson/Pluto.

The film opens with some montage; a title card stating the existence of vast unknown underground networks that wind through the United States is juxtaposed with an advertisement for the charity event Hands Across America, replayed on a television screen that, as the camera pulls back, is itself revealed. The stage is set—1986. Adelaide celebrates her birthday at a carnival at the beach with her mother and father, who display an obvious tension. She wanders off from her parents and enters a funhouse, where she discovers a reflection of herself that does not mimic her, causing her to panic, immediately ending the scene. In the present, Adelaide and her family—husband Gabe, daughter Zora, and son Jason—arrive at their beach house to start their vacation. A flashback shows young Adelaide, now evidently suffering from PTSD after her ordeal at the boardwalk, overhearing her parents at a psychologist's office arguing over what to do with her. In the present, Adelaide and her family, against her desires, eventually go to the beach to meet with Tyler family. After returning to their beach house, she expresses her desire to return home, revealing the story of her of encountering her doppelgänger in the hall of mirrors to her husband. The power goes out, and a family of four people, holding hands, appear in their driveway. The Wilson clan new huddles together as Gabe attempts to scare them off. The new

family breaks into the house and captures the Wilsons. The invading family is revealed to be the Wilson's doppelgängers, each clad in an identical red jumpsuit, armed with a pair of scissors. After an unsettling speech delivered by Red, Adelaide's double, the Tethered, the name of the body of doppelgängers, divide the Wilson family: each copy pursues the original. Gabe is able to kill his double, Abraham, and rescues the others, who have managed to individually escape their respective plights. The Wilsons watch the news and are shown that the uprising of the Tethered is not just an isolated incident, but happening everywhere. The family commandeers the Tyler's car, with Zora driving. She runs down Umbrae, her copy, killing her. The family eventually makes their way to the carnival again where Jason kills his mirror, Pluto, in a blaze of fire. Adelaide pursues Red into the tunnel network, who has kidnapped Jason during the confusion. Adelaide and Red fight in a hyper stylized sequence, interspersed with flashbacks of Adelaide's time as a ballerina. Eventually, Adelaide impales Red before brutally executing her. She rescues her traumatized son and reunites with her family. The family, all together, commandeer an ambulance, and drive off together. Adelaide experiences a flashback while driving which reveals that, as a child, the original Adelaide was replaced by Red in the hall of mirrors: the protagonist, Adelaide, the narrative has been following has been Red all along and, of course, the antagonist, Red, has been Adelaide the entire time. Adelaide-Red smiles as her son pulls his mask down and the camera pulls back, revealing a massive chain of Tethered joining hands, mimicking Hands Across America as "Les Fleurs" by Minnie Riperton climbs toward its crescendo.

Us[3] is a prime example of metamodern horror cinema that seeks to reunite the fabric of

[3] *Us* is ripe for examination with respect to race in America. It is, sadly, beyond the ken of our current project to delve into this aspect of the film. This is in no way to diminish its importance, only to lament there is not enough space to pursue such a line of enquiry in addition to the one undertaken.

both the nuclear family and the larger family of United States, not by a return to naïve modern belief in Americana (Make America Great Again), but by deliberately constructing this fantasy, deconstructing it, then reconstructing it in a new way. This is done by simultaneously uplifting the American Dream, showing its reality as an American Nightmare, then presenting an alternative fantasy that oscillates between the two. In this way, the film is an example of postironic Bildungsroman: the film presents modern/humanist conceptions of both the nuclear family and the US, deconstructs this narrative by examining the human/tethered binary, then reunites the human and the monster by collapsing the binary opposition of Adelaide/Red from both directions, resulting in Adelaide-Red.

The Tethered, ultimately, are monsters because they represent humans severed from the Symbolic Order[4]. In this sense, they are metonyms for the horrifying Real. First, with the notable exception of Red, none of them seem capable of speech and, as such, never enter into the Symbolic Order, only ever experiencing unmediated reality, uncorrupted by the play of signifiers. The door to the labyrinth of signifiers never opened for them, and therefore it never shut behind them. As a result, they exist outside the maze, are able to walk around it; they never chase meaning, they experience it directly. In this sense, they have a completely authentic existence, contrasted to the humans above who are inundated by language. They embody the human body, its materiality, its Realness, without the obfuscation of language. They are a terrifying, radical return to modern senses of genuine experience. In this way, by parodying the humans above, they reveal that, contra common sense, the humans above are inauthentic monsters. The Tethered are authentic, the humans above are derivative, dependent upon systems

[4] The Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real are concepts developed by Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst in the poststructuralist tradition.

of representation to protect them from the rawness of reality.

Continuing from this logic, the Tethered ape the life above in horrific ways. During the encounter in the classroom, Adelaide shares memories with Red, comparing and contrasting the experience of Adelaide at the carnival as a child with the mirrored version of Red in the tunnels. For every event that occurs above, the same event occurs below, but without the glitz and glamor—and conventions of meaning—of the surface, revealing the horrific pantomime these actions are in the Real. What we take to be meaningful actions—riding roller coasters, playing carnival games, eating boardwalk viands—are replaced by a room of bodies convulsing, moving stiffly, and barbarically consuming rabbit flesh. For example, Adelaide's father, in the overworld, plays whack-a-mole, a carnival game replete with delightful sounds and flashing lights. When parodied, Red's father merely awkwardly punches a wall, mimicking the material actions of the father above, without any significance: the signifier, the action, is severed from the signified. Paradoxically, while at first blush the horror of the Tethered is their meaningless actions, these vapid performances reveal the hollowness of the same actions above. By stripping the signified form, the signifier below, the same process occurs above—the Symbolic is returned to the shocking Real.

Taken together, the Tethered have an entirely sincere, authentic existence *and* are an ironic parody of the world above. They are pure in the sense that they are living completely authentically without Symbolic mediation. The horrific nature of their performances ironizes the world above: the above world purports to be real, genuine, but it is really just empty signifiers; only the Tethered live in the Real as it really is, without the veneer of representation nestling over it, creating a comforting meaning. In this way, the Tethered are sincere—living

authentically, demonstrating the irony of the world above via mimicry—and ironic as their performances are merely empty repetitions of things which have meaning to others but not to them. The humans, living the world of the Symbolic, are ironic—as their "meaningful" performances and symbols, when viewed from the perspective of the Real, are reduced to meaningless, vacuous physics and sincere—as their existence of living in the Symbolic gives them the ability to enjoin signifiers to signifieds: meaning what they say. Despite existing in the Symbolic, they do not ape actions of others, as the Tethered do: they authentically live them. In this way, both the Tethered and the humans are constantly oscillating between states of sincerity and irony. This oscillation is best examined via the film's fascination with Hands Across America.

After the cryptic opening words, the film begins the diegesis in earnest with a flashback: the camera slowly zooms into a television set which portrays an advertisement for Hands Across America, a participatory charity event from 1986 wherein participants joined hands to form a human chain from the east coast to the west to raise funds to combat hunger and homelessness. The film ends with the Tethered forming a chain, mimicking Hands Across America. There are three ways to interpret this event: unironically, ironically, and by explicating, but not resolving, the tension between them resulting in a postironic reading.

The way the flashback that contextualizes the film functions creates an atmosphere of heartfelt nostalgia, on the one hand, and historic irony on the other. The advertisement is both sincerely nostalgic and historically ironic for its mentioning of the human chain reaching from "The Twin Towers to the Golden Gate Bridge," as the mentioning of a time before the War on Terror returns the audience to a state of naivete while simultaneously being ignorant of the

horrors to come. First and foremost, the first iteration of Hands Across America, as demonstrated in the film, is distanced in four ways: first, it is set in a flashback; second it is mediated by a television set; and third, it is advertisement for the event, not portraying actually it; and finally, instead of *presenting* the people in need, the chain is formed by those *representing* them. It is earnestly nostalgic in the sense that the event involved 6.5 million people (Coates), a call back to a time when America was ostensibly less divided—it can be read as a sincere gesture attempting to reunite us as people. However, it is also historically ironic—the event intended to "raise between $50 and $100 million" but only ended raising $34 million (Coates). The mediation of the television represents the event instead of presents it—being diegetic instead of mimetic. In this way, the film disallows the audience active participation in the event—we are only told of it. By only referencing it in a postmodern intertextual gesture that hints at a depth behind the surface, but never gets there, the film demonstrates metamodern "depthiness" as it uses multiple levels of representation, multiple surfaces, to suggest depth without getting there. According to Vermeulen in the chapter entitled "Metamodern Depth, or 'Depthiness'" in the larger work of *Metamodernism*, "depthiness," is the metamodern application of "depth onto the surface" (149). Finally, the nature of the mediation is an advertisement for an event that will take place in the (then) future. This creates a sincere atmosphere of hope, as at the time the advertisement was played, it was entirely earnest and promised a future of change. However, again, it is historically ironic because it made a promise of a future that amounted to very little.

With respect to the event itself, this chain could never have existed—it is impossible to literally form an unbroken chain across the contiguous United States, owing to the staggering number of participants required and the exorbitant cost of the logistics involved. In one sense,

then, the effort is sincerely symbolic, as the participation of individuals, being a signifier, is matched by the signified of unity. Alternatively, it is ironic in the sense that it purports to accomplish what it literally cannot and did not achieve—the unbroken, singular, universal line of people was in fact comprised of broken, individual, multiple line segments, a prime example of the breakdown of modern beliefs in a single narrative for the postmodern deconstruction of the grand tale for smaller, individual stories. In sum, Hands Across America is offered as a lens through which the work of the film should be seen. It is at once representation of sincere optimism: human actions can alter the fabric of reality, and human beings can transcend differences to acquire universality. Out of individuals can come a single chain. Conversely, the event could also be read as postmodern ironic fiction: for a modest fee of $10-35 (Coates), and an ephemeral amount of time, one could purchase and experience comradery and, in a sanitized way, without actually doing any actual charity work, could contribute to the cause (and receive a commemorative t-shirt to showcase their charitable nature to earn cultural and moral capital). Either way, it involved persons who were decidedly not suffering from hunger to participate in the event. For it to be charity, it requires those that have give to those that do not: those suffering are *represented* by their advocates and are not *present*.

In *Us*—which necessarily implores "us" the audience to participate--the Tethered seek to recreate this confection of the 1980s. Their version of Hands across America diverges from the original across all four registers mentioned earlier—instead of occurring within a flashback it occurs within the present; instead of being mediated by television, diegetically, it is presented for the audience, as mimesis; it does not hint at a future scenario but is currently taking place, and instead of being comprised of "good Samaritans" *representing* the downtrodden, it is formed by

the dispossessed *presenting* themselves. In one sense, then, they are ironizing the original. While the original was symbolic—the participants were wealthy enough to donate to charity and thus only alleviated the issue temporarily and partially, without the actual formation of a contiguous chain—the Tethered version is literal. In the Tethered's chain, the participants are the persons supposedly needing charity; they directly help those in need (themselves) by removing their oppressors; they truly do form a coherent chain of people; and, owing to their revolution, they do (one is led to believe from the ending of the film given the staggering number of them) effect lasting and powerful change. In this way, the Tethered show the hollowness of the original. Yet, simultaneously, their mirroring is not merely an ironic parody, demonstrating the faults of the original by holding it up to a funhouse mirror. It is also entirely sincere—those forming the chain *are* really connected and real change *will* occur. The film revels in this undecidability: the original idea was valid while the original implementation was insincere. The redux of Hands Across America is ironic *because it is sincere*. In other words, it is ironic because it ironizes the original: the original is transmuted from a sincere gesture revealed to be hollow by a hollow gesture which, by aping the original, apes its hollowness while being completely sincere.

Every family member kills their respective doppelgänger: in chronological order, Gabe eviscerates Abraham, Zora runs over Umbrae, Jason incinerates Pluto, and Adelaide impales Red. Fundamentally, this allows the first three to annihilate their duplicate. In this sense, they are recouping their American individuality, but only at the cost of destroying part of themselves, their reflection. In other words, in order for them to exist as individuals, they must abrogate that part of themselves which represents their shared inhumanity. To be human, in this sense, is to be radically individualistic. Adelaide's slaying of Red, however, takes on quite another dimension.

There is a protracted fight sequence between Adelaide and Red in the tunnels underground; by the end of the conflict, Adelaide's white clothing is stained with red blood. After a brutal contest, Adelaide kills Red by impaling her; Adelaide removes the key from Red's neck, releasing her own handcuffs, which have shackled her for most the film. At the film's conclusion, we see a flashback revealing to us that the original Adelaide was swapped with the original Red in the hall of mirrors. In this way, the Adelaide we have been following has always-already Red and vice versa. What is vital to note, here, is that her copy, her own body, had the keys the entire time: the only thing preventing her from unlocking her restraints, from freeing herself, was herself. Because we have been following Adelaide, the narrative anchor of the film, and have assumed she was the human battling the monstrous doppelgänger, we, in effect, humanize the monster (Adelaide) by empathizing with her and dehumanize the human (Red) by rooting against her. Recalling this, Adelaide smiles: she recognizes that she was not Adelaide, that she destroyed—deconstructed-- Adelaide, but now, must live as Adelaide—she must reconcile the deconstruction of herself with a need to reconstruct a new self from the pieces. She does not simply become Red—she becomes a hybrid of both and something more. As a result, the binary opposition of Adelaide/Red collapses—the human has always-already been monstrous, and the monstrous has always-already been human. There is no original and therefore no copy. Because the difference between Adelaide and Red is eroded, the question of origin is moot and in this way, the structuring binary is deconstructed. However, instead of simply deconstructing Adelaide/Red, the film encourages us through our act of critical viewing to reconstruct them as Adelaide-Red, as, in Red's words, "the soul remains one, shared by two." By killing Red and gaining her memories, Adelaide does not extinguish this other half; rather, she

comes to possess it. Two souls coalesce into one body: Adelaide-Red. The rest of "us" in the audience are thus invited to participate in this act: we too have-always-already-been the monstrous downtrodden proletariat: the time is now to rise up and demand change.

Section 4

Horror Evolved: (Re)constructing the Posthuman in *Annihilation*

Annihilation (2018) is a science fiction horror film directed by Alex Garland based on the novel *Annihilation*, the first book in the Southern Reach trilogy, by Jeff VanderMeer. After her husband returns home from unexpectedly from a clandestine operation and falls dangerously ill, a biologist is recruited into an expedition, alongside a team of fellow female scientists, into The Shimmer—a bizarre region where the laws of physics themselves are warped—in order to save him.

The film is framed by an interrogation of biology professor and former solider Lena (Natalie Portman) who extols her harrowing journey with team up with three other women—psychiatrist Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh), geomorphologist Cassie Sheppard (Tuva Novotny), paramedic Anya Thoreson (Gina Rodriguez), and physicist Josie Radek (Tessa Thompson) into the Shimmer—a region that baffles the imagination and eludes science. Lena volunteers for the mission when her soldier husband Kane (Oscar Isaac) returned from the Shimmer after a year of unexplained absence and quickly began disintegrating. While he is in quarantine, the team ventures into the Shimmer. There, they encounter hybrids of plants, animals, plant/animals, human/plants, human/animals, and even human/energy all the while uncovering how the last expedition sunk into madness and lost their humanity. After an encounter with her alien doppelgänger at the center of the Shimmer, Lena commits metaphorical suicide by gently handing a grenade to her duplicate, whose immolation destroys the Shimmer. She is reunited with her husband—revealed earlier to be his doppelgänger, as Adelaide and Red are revealed in *Us*. It is clear, too, that Lena is not necessarily the Lena we have come to know; subsequently,

the narrator of the entire film has always been not-Lena. The couple embrace, while their eyes give off the characteristic refraction of the Shimmer: it is a part of them.

Annihilation is characteristic of metamodern horror. The film exists in the tension between classical and postmodern horror, and humanism and antihumanism, eventually terminating in posthumanism. First, the film oscillates between classical and postmodern horror tropes through the character of Lena forcing her to emerge as a metamodern protagonist. Secondly, the film deconstructs notions of humanism and antihumanism, allowing the audience, through empathy with Lena, to vicariously join in her development: we are allowed to figuratively ascend to a posthumanistic perspective while she literally becomes transhuman. Finally, and peculiarly for horror[5], the film structurally requires the audience actively participate: the film is comprised of a frame story, intertitles, films within the film, flashbacks, and dream sequences within flashbacks, which erode the boundaries of diegesis and mimesis. All of this, I argue, is not done in an effort to fracture meaning, but to invite the reader to reconstruct the narrative as Lena herself has been reconstructed.

A scientist, a solider, and a woman, Lena straddles the traditional identities of classical horror—the scientist that understands the monster, describes the solution to it, and the soldier that implements the solution and defeats it—and typical victim and heroine of postmodern horror—the Final Girl who merely survives. In this way, she embodies the conflict between classical and postmodern understandings of human, as she is both the humanist hero who,

[5] The vast majority of horror films do not have flashbacks, let alone frame stories. Even in *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980), which depict events before the main narrative, such segments occur before the main thrust of the story with respect to fabula *and* syuzhet chronologies—they are not flashbacks by definition. A curious exception is *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) which does have a flashback near the terminus of the film to give a curt (and unsatisfactory) explanation for the killer's motives. Succinctly put, most horror operates linearly, with fabula and syuzhet unwinding in lockstep.

through reason and agency, is able to comprehend and combat the monstrous region of The Shimmer, being a hunter, superior to nature, while, simultaneously, she is baffled by what she encounters and struggles to combat it, becoming the hunted. Lena is thus an exemplary protagonist of the postironic Bildungsroman. Through this tension and eventual transition from classical hero, humanist, and positivist, to postmodern hero, antihumanist, and antipositivist, she seeks the source of horror—the Lighthouse—and participates in the creation of her doppelgänger. Yet, like Dr. Frankenstein, she also seeks to destroy it, all while being hunted by the denizens of the Shimmer who reveal themselves to her. She is logical and illogical—she is a brilliant scientist, yet resorts to mindless violence against her doppelgänger. She is effective and ineffective—she defeats the doppelgänger only after repeated failures and at the loss of her "self" and her team. She is moral and immoral—she ventures into a phantasmagoria of horrors in an attempt to save her husband, yet previously carried out a sordid affair with a coworker. Lena is the quintessential metamodern horror protagonist: she is the humanist ideal *and* its anithumanist reflection; she exists in the tension between them. Lena's original humanist ideology will be rattled by antihumanism and will evolve toward a posthumanist ideology at the film's conclusion.

In *Annihilation*, both humans and monsters transgress the human/monster binary before eventually deconstructing it utterly as they reverse poles and reconstruct something beyond these rigid definitions: something posthuman. Posthumanism, according to Cary Wolfe, is not reducible to transhumanism: a sort of humanism with science fiction aspirations for human perfectibility of via genetic therapy or cybernetic prosthetics (Wolfe xiii), not does it "reject" the human, but allows "*greater* specificity" of the human subject by accepting that subject *and* the

accompanying features of culture, language, the animality of human beings, etc. (xxv). In this way, it combines an understanding of human beings with humanism—focusing on the human subject—*and* anti-humanism by appreciating that humans are enmeshed in web of processes and systems that create and contort them beyond their own making—the unconscious mind, ideology-- thus hollowing out their humanity from a modernist perspective. In the sense I use the word "posthuman" here, largely in reference to Lena's transformation, is not to suggest she *becomes* posthuman so much as she is *revealed* to be posthuman. She moves from the humanist Subject—rational, moral, effective—to the anit-humanist vacancy—controlled by ideologically systems of control (impotent science, language, marriage)—to the posthuman subject—she oscillates between both, she is a constellation of human and nonhuman—monstrous, even—elements.

*Annihilation'*s rogue's gallery of monsters consists of classical bogeys and postmodern foes, alike. Mutant animals and the alien, human psychopaths and dopplegängers. The mutant animals are humanized, by locating the humanity, the homelike, nestled within the unhomelike visage of an aberration. And, the human is rendered monstrous by discovering the monster, the unhomelike, wearing human skin. The film abounds in these transgressions, but two will serve as the best examples: the bear and Anya.

After Ventress and Lena sound the alarm that something is amiss while on guard duty, Cassie investigates, only to be attacked and dragged off by a bear, mixing classical and postmodern tropes: the monster is merely understood, at this time, to be a bear—an animal—that attacks and defeats a human—thus placing humans in the position of prey. Later, Lena discovers her mutilated body: her throat has been gashed open. This same bear reemerges later, interrupting

the interrogation—and the impending murder—of the remaining scientists by Anya, who has become deranged after discovering her human identity is slipping away. She registers in horror that her fingerprints, which designate her as a stable, unique personality, have begun to move and shift. The bear, now revealed to have a human skull embedded on the side of its face, screams "Help me!" in Cassie's voice. The damage to her throat earlier is thus revealed to be the removal of her voice box. In the ensuing conflict, the Cassie/bear hybrid—the humanized monster-- kills Anya—the monstrous human, thus saving the rest of the expedition before it too is killed by Josie. In this way, Cassie and the bear both transgress the threshold that separates them in both directions—the bear becomes human by gaining the gift of speech and Cassie becomes monstrous by her voice being housed in a horrific bestial body. Similarly, the seemingly human Anya becomes monstrous because the classical? definition of her selfhood—the stable, unique personality implied by her fingerprints—is taken from her. Reflecting on the horror of hearing Cassie's voice coming out of the mouth of the bear, Josie states, "I think, as she was dying, part of her mind became part of the creature that was killing her." Cassie and the bear become something new through their hybridity—something beyond human or monster. This exact situation also occurs with Josie, letting us know as viewers that these are not filmic coincidences, but part of the narrative and thematic structure of the text itself.

When the team rests at the town, they encounter what appear to be topiaries in the shape of human beings. When Josie suggests that the HOX genes of the plants could allow them to grow in the shape of a human being. She continues, "The Shimmer is a prism, but it refracts everything. Not just light and radio waves. Animal DNA. Plant DNA. All DNA." Josie has ultimately accepted the posthuman ideology: she no longer hyperseperates humanity from

animals and plants (Garrad 28). All are equal in their mutability, share universal features, and are mutually constitutive. Before wandering off, stems and flowers growing out of her skin, she explicitly states the crux of the film: "Ventress wants to face it. You want to fight it. But I don't think I want either of those things." Both Ventress and Lena are playing the role of classical horror hero. Ventress wants to encounter the monster—discover or understand it in order to gain apperception—and Lena wants to fight it—it is anathema to her. Both Ventress and Lena are in a dialectical model with the Shimmer, while Josie sees a way beyond the dialectic: she turns into one of the topiaries. Josie dies in the sense that she is no longer completely human, but she lives on as a plant, as with Cassie and the bear. Thus, Josie complicates the binary oppositions of alive/dead, human/plant. Unlike the humanist tradition, which would place her as neatly one or the other, or the postmodern, which would see this categorical confusion as revealing the flaws of humanism, Josie accepts it: she has fully accepted a posthuman perspective.

What is key here is the idea of the complete fluidity both physically and temporally of the human/plant hybrid. The topiaries are assumed to have been plants that, through a refraction of their HOX gene, owed to the Shimmer's interference, grow to resemble humans. Josie's transformation into a plant, owing to this same interference, is the reversal. In effect, nonhuman actants become human and humans become nonhuman: they exist in a cycle of change; the boundary can be transgressed from both directions and both humans and animals and humans and plants are in a constant state of becoming. Rather than being a classical/humanist hyperseperation of human and plant that necessitates the death of one or the other, or else a postmodern horror/antihumanist understanding of human and animal or plant being in conflict, the metamodern/posthumanist erases the binary opposition entirely: the human-animal and

human-plant exists in a spectrum, co-constitutive of the other, constantly in flux, existing in a strain between two categories yet moving beyond them.

Once in the lighthouse, Lena stumbles upon a video camera on a tripod, a trope through which the film stages its central question and literalizes our role as watchers and creators. She hesitantly turns it on, as the audience watches her watching it, before the entire shot transitions to the film within the film itself. The footage depicts a series of disturbing scenes before ending with Kane, giving a soliloquy, cross-legged on the ground, in a pose of enlightenment:

> "I thought I was a man. I had a life. People called me Kane. And now I'm not sure. If I wasn't Kane, what was I? Was I you? Were you me? My flesh moves like liquid. My mind is…just cut loose. I can't bear it... You ever seen a phosphorous grenade go off? They're kinda bright. Shield your eyes. If you ever get out of here, you find Lena."

At this point, another voice, which sounds identical to Kane, located behind the camera says, "I will." Kane then proceeds to commit suicide with the grenade, before another Kane enters the shot and looks at the camera, causing Lena to panic and shut it off.

This video dramatizes Kane's movement from a modernist/humanist perspective to a postmodernist/antihumanist one. He begins, stating, "People called me Kane. And now I'm not so sure. If I wasn't Kane, what was I?" Here Kane evinces his grasp of the postmodern slippage of language and the fragmentary nature of identity: others "*called*" him Kane, which is distinct from *being* Kane. Further, his use of "*what"* instead of *"who" when he asks "what was I?"* is paramount: whatever he is, it is not a person, a human, at least not in the humanist sense of the word. He is something else. Kane continues his monologue: "Was I you? Were you me?" Here,

Kane is questioning the separation between himself and his doppelgänger as well as the audience, as it is vital to note the doppelgänger, being positioned behind the camera, causes slippage wherein he is speaking to both. Is there a difference? Does it matter? If Kane never existed as a distinct identity, then it could be said the doppelgänger is as much not-Kane as Kane was. "My flesh moves like liquid. My mind is cut loose." Kane's body is fluid, indeterminate. His mind, therefore, is allowed to be "loose" and gain true insight and understanding.

Lena realizes, as does the audience, that the Kane that returned to her from The Shimmer, the one in quarantine, is not the original Kane. In effect, she discovers, much to her horror, that the Kane who came back to her and for whom she entered the Shimmer—because she "owes it to him"—has *never* been Kane. This Kane was always-already monstrous. She unwittingly went on this harrowing journey to save this not-Kane. Despite this revelation, Lena continues, delving further into the lighthouse where we, like Lena and the other scientists, might hope to find an answer.

Lena encounters Ventress in the womb-like subterranean antechamber under the lighthouse. Ventress states:

> "We spoke. What was it we said? That I needed to know what was inside the lighthouse. That moment's passed. It's inside me now. What's inside you? It's not like us? It's unlike us. I don't know what it wants. Or if it wants. But it will grow until it encompasses everything. Our bodies and our minds will be fragmented into their smallest parts until not one part remains. Annihilation."

Upon intoning "Annihilation," Ventress begins convulsing and its deconstructed, atom by atom, into a stream of luminous motes which are reconstructed into a ball of energy. Lena figuratively impregnates this ball of energy when a drop of blood is ejected from her eye into the mass, and her doppelgänger emerges from it. In effect, Lena created the monster from herself—it exists

because of her. This doppelgänger perfectly mirrors Lena: it does not fight her; it only reflects her actions. Each, then, forms part of a binary opposition, original/reflection, each defines and opposes, literally, the other. Both are mutually constitutive of the other and therefore Lena cannot escape the dialectic by pushing back onto it. Her resistance only empowers her doppelgänger. In order to surmount this obstacle, Lena performs a "suicide" via self-immolation: she figuratively destroys, deconstructs, her humanist Self—authentic and hyperseperated from the nonhuman world and the monstrous doppelgänger-- by accepting her anti-humanist self—enmeshed within the material world and altered because of it. This deconstruction of her humanist Self, the Subject and acceptance of the monstrous Other, the Abject, allows to her realize she was always-already posthuman. Once the doppelgänger is immolated, it engulfs the lighthouse as well, which in turn destroys the Shimmer.

After this destruction, the frame interview—which the action of the film has been a representation of—reaches its conclusion. When asked about the violent nature of the doppelgänger, Lena defends it, stating, "It mirrored me. I attacked it." The doppelgänger only copied her behavior; it is a reflection of her, not just in appearance but also in performance. When the interviewer states, "it [the entity] was destroying everything," Lena rejoins, "It wasn't destroying. It was changing everything. It was making something new." Here, Lena evinces a posthumanist perspective. In opposition, the interviewer's understanding of destruction is framed as entirely anthropocentric. The entity did alter human society—human bodies and human buildings—but he cannot construe this alteration as anything other than destruction. The interviewer views the Shimmer as a storm—a nonhuman capable of destruction—but creation, to him, is entirely in the realm of humanity. Lena affords agency and creation to the other entity and

understands and respects the alterations that have been made to human entities without human control that are generative. In this way, the interviewer can be said to read the situation from a perspective of both anthropocentrism and critique: he does not extend agency and generativity to nature, and he is critical of its effects. Lena, conversely, evinces a reparative/reconstructive reading: admitting, obviously, the entity's deconstruction of human constructs while suggesting it is able to reconstruct these deconstructed pieces into something new. As the entire film operates to focalize on Lena, the audience is able to empathize with and hopefully mirror her perspective. Similarly, Lena's reconstruction of her narrative of her experience in the Shimmer functions as a mise-en-abîme of the narrative of of *Annihilation* itself. In this way, the audience is tasked to join Lena and reconstruct the narrative itself, to lend it a reparative reading.

At the terminus of the film, Lena and Kane are reintroduced. Lena is allowed to enter the quarantined room housing Kane, and the camera follows her into the room. Upon meeting Kane, Lena calmly states, "You aren't Kane" before immediately questioning her declaration: "Are you?" Kane curly states, "I don't think so," causing Lena to sniffle and nod her head, accepting this new reality reluctantly yet bravely. Kane then asks, "Are you Lena?" Lena slowly raises her eyes to meet his as Kane stands and walks to her—the camera is now outside the plastic sheeting housing Kane and Lena, creating a double framing effect which creates a degree of separation between the audience and the couple. However, this separation is incomplete—the barrier is transparent and does not occlude seeing them, only creating a thin membrane that allows sight, if not matter to pass through. They embrace in a platonic hug as the camera zooms out and the solid door to the quarantine room slowly closes, framing the couple in the glass window of the metal door, thus sealing them off from the audience more robustly than the screen, but still allowing

vision of them. The two are left in the right of the room, framed by the plastic screen, the glass window in the door, and, finally, the actual camera shot creating a retreating effect which calls attention to itself: the audience is inhibited from identifying with the characters as literal barriers, first one translucent and flimsy, then one solid and opaque, obscure our view and thus our intimacy with the pair. Further, by the camera locking both into the quarantine, we isolate them from us, and as a result Other them, abject the monstrous to define ourselves as human. However, the final shots of the film are two close ups on the character's eyes shot from *inside* the room, thus undoing this distance. Both of Kane's and Lena's eyes display refractions of light and color, characteristic of the Shimmer, indicating its presence is inside them both: they are both fully Kane/Lena and not Kane/Lena while, simultaneously, existing as something far more.

What is also vital from this final image, that of Lena's eyes, is that it retrospectively forces the audience to accept that they have identified with a monster the entire film. That is to say, the narrator of all the events depicted, from whose vantage the entire film is portrayed, was always already a monster.

The monster of this film is not destroyed ala the classical model nor does it elude defeat only to threaten humanity later: the monster is accepted *into* humanity through its integration with Lena and Kane, and, ultimately, the audience. Just as Lena continued her journey after discovering the replacement of Kane, so too is the audience invited to continue the posthumanist journey after learning our guide and narrator, Lena, has always been the monster. Just as Lena has been shaped by the environment of the Shimmer, the audience member has been changed by the film. Lena, Kane, and the audience are neither fully human nor fully monstrous—they exist in the tension between them, becoming posthuman.

Conclusion: The Dream and the Nightmare

In *Pontypool*, a postironic Bildungsroman, Grant moves from logocentric Author-God to a paranoid postmodernist when language breaks down around him, to a postironic hero: he deconstructs language to reconstruct it into something meaningful, all the while admitting "we were never making sense"—thus accepting they always-already were monstrous. The final scene demonstrates Grant and Sydney slipping out of the confines of the narrative, speaking a beautiful (non)sense to each other: they are human-monsters, believers in sense who use nonsense to communicate it.

In *The Babadook*, Amelia's repression and suppression of the monstrous within herself makes her a monster. The flawed love she shares with her son allows them both to wrest control of the narrative of *The Babadook* from *Mister Babadook*. Only after she accepts the Abject, the monstrous, can she become more fully human: a human-monster.

In *Us,* the Tethered ironize Hands Across America's charitable message by presenting themselves, rather than being represented, yet, by living out the dream of Hands Across America, demonstrate the initial undertaking to be completely sincere. Adelaide, after slaying her doppelgänger, Red, frees herself with the keys the latter possessed. Through a flashback, she—and the audience simultaneously—discover that she was always-already Red, deconstructing the difference between them. However, she is still driving the car with her family, thus choosing to live as Adelaide-Red: the human-monster.

In *Annihilation,* the frame narrative of the film reveals that the narrator has always-already been posthuman. She deconstructs her doppelgänger in a symbolic destruction of the Self in order to accept the Abject and reconstruct a new identity as something more than she was: a

human-monster.

This list of four films is far from the other films in this emergent genre. Other entries within the genre include *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Let the Right One In* (2008), *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), *It Follows* (2014), and *The Girl with all the Gifts* (2016), though doubtless a myriad of films not enumerated could easily be added. All the films in this genre reconstruct the human/monster binary as the human-monster by demonstrating the monstrosity of humans, the humanity of monsters, and the acceptance of the Abject back into the Subject—creating the posthuman.

Speaking personally, I had the tremendous pleasure (jouissance, at times) of teaching a course on horror films to a group of high school students. My desire was to use horror as a method to teach critical theory: we applied critical race theory to *King Kong* (1933) and *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), feminist theory to *Halloween* (1978), ecocritical theory to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), . I began to notice how radically differently we spoke of the films. For the classical horror films, I wanted to show them the hyper-repressive beliefs about the color line and human sexuality, instilling in them a desire to notice tyranny when they alighted upon it in the arts. For the postmodern horror films, I lamented with them that the entity which strove against a repressive and oppressive society was still figured as the monster which predicted no future for its emancipatory aspirations. When watching *Pontypool, Annihilation*, and *The Girl with all the Gifts,* however, I discovered that I could be proud of these films—we did focus exclusively into problematic nature of their message ala classical horror[6] or explore the

[6] It is vital to note at this juncture the use of Brownface and Islamophobia in *Pontypool*, which we did go over as a class. However, as the film made it clear that the "domestic terrorism" of the their own monsters—White Canadians who spoke English-- was the real threat, the use of these elements, while offen-

nihilism of postmodern horror—rather, we focused on a reparative reading which allowed for movement forward: the horror films transitioned from a lesson in what one ought not to do, to a lamentation of what has been promised but not happened, to a celebration of what is possible. In the same way that I would suggest showing children *Zootopia* (2016) in order to have a constructive conversation about race relations, I would suggest screening *Annihilation* to teenagers cultivate a biocentric ethic and respect for nature or else *The Babadook* to encourage us to accept that which we have repressed in order to accept ourselves.

Metamodern horror alone allows the "radical change" and "rebuilding" which can satisfy all his criteria. The posthumanism of metamodern horror allows the human—the Subject—and the monster—the Abject—to be reintegrated into a single, flawed, yet beautiful being—the Human-Monster posthuman Subject. Only though reconstruction of the human/monster binary as the monster-human can horror cinema realize Wood's nightmare.

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sive, seemed more to lampoon such bigoted attitudes than condone them. Nonetheless, the film employs them, irrespective of their seeming intention. It should be noted *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which we also screened, depicts extreme incidents of racism only to anathematize them as well. Whether either film is justified in this sort of exploitative practice, even with noble, progressive goals, is beyond the scope of this paper, though did make for interesting class discussion.

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