
Learning Spirits

Spectral Pedagogy and Vegan Horror

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IF IT—LEARNING TO LIVE—remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone. What happens between the two, and between all the “two’s” one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost. So it would be necessary to learn spirits.

—Jacques Derrida (1993)

Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International

Horror, it seems, is everywhere. As a broadly considered mode of storytelling and image-making, it never really left, of course. But—from the success of studios like Blumhouse to a steady roll-out of genre classic reboots to Jordan Peele’s zeitgeisty, commercial, and critical acclaim to Guillermo del Toro’s friendly, monster-loving personage presiding over us all—horror’s aesthetics and formal conventions have enjoyed a renewed popularity in recent years. We no longer live in a moment characterized by anxious, critical defenses of its appeal or relevance, as though horror were a feisty, marginal underdog; the whole idea seems decidedly outmoded.

It’s only the genre’s latest moment of aesthetic recuperation in cinema’s first century-and-a-quarter. But horror and the projected image were always a natural fit, even as horror’s traditional position on the margins of respectability imbued it with an occasionally radical “outsider” potential. The wobbly foundations of cinema—of shadow-play and the magic lantern—are rooted in the uncanny, something immediately evident to the first film goers. Even before Georges Méliès unleashed the skeletons and spirits onto the modern cave-walls and into the Old Dark Houses of our collective experience, Maxim Gorky described a “Kingdom of Shadows...a world without sound, without colour.” In 1896, there was already something eerily indescribable in “Lumière’s cinematograph” itself, the mention of which could lead to suspicion “of madness or indulgence in symbolism” (p. 25). This was cinema as a dream-place, a separate country of the image, to visit and be startled: “If you only knew how strange it is to be there” (Gorky, 1896, p. 26).

We would learn. And then, through familiarity, forget. Horror’s enduring popularities are at least partly attributable to its capacity to viscerally puncture the complacent image, to make things weirder and more true. And horror’s weird truths, its perennial returns of the repressed, have frequently revolved around the figure of the animal: the first subject of painting itself, its body at

the heart of the first metaphors, smuggled across the borders of the image onto screens (Berger, 1980). What does this figure teach us? How does it structure what we learn, and see? And how does this spectre relate to the actual nonhuman animals who give it form?

The desperate bolstering and insurgent breach of borders between the seen and unseen, as between the human and the nonhuman, is the essence of film horror's spirit world. Within a decade of Gorky's pronouncement, a different kind of shadow would infuse horror's earliest big business: on January 4, 1903, an abused elephant named Topsy, who had trampled several people in response to her abuse, would be "executed" in front of a crowd on Coney Island as a publicity stunt. The execution would be filmed. "Two technologies, both developed by Thomas Edison, converged on the execution of Topsy—electrocution and the moving image" (Gregersdotter, Hoglund, & Hallen, 2015, p. 2). Offscreen, in an early warning that we should take care with the spells cinema casts, Topsy was poisoned and strangled for good measure.

The surviving film—titled *Electrocuting the Elephant* (Porter & Edison, 1903) and intended for viewing at nickelodeons where Topsy's shadow would die again and again like a GIF produced for a coin a play—represents the first animal death on film. At the same time, it contains the seed of what would become animal horror cinema. Our spectral relation to it now and our revulsion from its implications help map the borders of a tendency I term "vegan horror."

Vegan horror can first be delineated by identifying what it is not. It is not, for example, eco-horror, or not *only* eco-horror—a tradition of particular interest to students and teachers in the Anthropocene, in which human transgressions, articulated or not, lead to punishment at the hands of nature. Films—often, but not always, remembered more for schlock than shock—like *The Day of the Triffids* (Pitcher & Sekely, 1963), *The Day of the Animals* (Montoro & Girdler, 1977), *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* (DeBello, Peace, & DeBello, 1978), *The Day After Tomorrow* (Gordon & Emmerich, 2004), and *The Happening* (Mendel, Mercer & Shyamalan, 2008) belong under this heading. Arguably, eco-horror can be expanded to include any narrative in which human despoilment of the natural—usually by way of concerns like toxic waste spills, nuclear bombs, or radiation, born of large-scale social anxieties and contemporaneous with the birth of environmental and social movements—results in unnatural creations, living or undead or possessed by unknowable spirits, who imperil our protagonists and the world at large.¹

Nor is vegan horror a subset of animal horror cinema, a category adjacent to eco-horror but one in which actual animals are given the (sometimes exaggerated) agency to commit crimes against man and are, thus, deemed eligible to receive punishment (Gregersdotter et al., 2015). The example of Topsy—a "bad" or "ugly" elephant who had transgressed laws (i.e., was deemed capable of "murder," at least for the purposes of publicity notices and was found eligible for "execution" in the public square)—could serve as the real-world prototype for this narrative, and *Electrocuting An Elephant* as the documentary of its fashioning.

The "moral schizophrenia" in animal horror cinema is evident (Francione, 2000): in order to punish, we must assume ill intent; to assume ill intent, we have to grant agency; to grant agency, we have to affirm a meaningful interiority or sentience; and by affirming sentience, we call into question every other aspect of our treatment of nonhuman animals. It is a cousin to the paradox at the heart of animal experimentation in medical science: any animal sufficiently similar to a human to guide such research would also be sufficiently similar to invalidate their instrumental use on moral grounds. (It is for this reason that we don't sanction medical testing on human prisoners, though we've found some predictable ways around that, too.) In theory, we rely on either Cartesian dualism, utilitarian calculations, or brute behaviorist reductionism to justify our actions as far as

nonhuman prisoners are concerned. In daily practice, we tend to “resolve” such paradoxes by simply refusing to think about them. Vegan horror refuses our refusal.

Vegan horror overlaps with both of these categories. Like eco-horror, it imagines the chickens coming home to roost, and like animal horror cinema, it foregrounds questions of agency and destabilizes distinctions between “man” and “beast” with an emphasis on hybridity. However, vegan horror goes further in presenting narratives in which humans are treated *as though* they were nonhuman animals, making visible the various absurdities of speciesism, and it tends to focus on material construction of these categories through social processes. Finally, it foregrounds, as the name suggests, what we *eat* and, therefore, how we *understand* the “limits of digestion” (Birnbaum & Olsson, 2009, n.p.). It both engages with and challenges the “figure of the animal,” making possible the recognition of kinship.

In a passage specifically concerned with establishing such critical borders, Gambin (2012) contrasts the “natural horror film”—meaning eco- and animal horror—with other genre traditions:

the real evil that will destroy us is not from another planet, not at the hands of the devil, not from supernatural beings like ghosts or vampires, not at the mercy of malicious psychopaths like Norman Bates, Leatherface and family, but from nature itself. (as quoted in Gregersdotter et al., 2015, p. 32)

That Bates, Leatherface and family, and other “malicious psychopaths” are not themselves “of nature”—that, despite the first two being based on the same, real-life serial killer, they are “supernatural,” like ghosts and vampires—raises a number of questions that a consideration of vegan horror can help address.

“I like meat! Please change the subject.”

-Sally, in The Texas Chain Saw Massacre

From the start, long before the Revolting Nature entries of the eco-horror catalog or the rampaging, villainous nonhumans of exploitation cinema and the drive-in circuit, the figure of the animal loomed large in the horror imaginary. Almost any cursory glance will land upon them: the rats and bats, and their associative transference to the feral face of their master in Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (Dieckmann, Grau, & Murnau, 1922); the hybrid monstrosities of the Universal classics—*Dracula* (Browning, Laemmle, & Browning, 1931), *The Wolf Man* (Waggner & Waggner, 1941), the Gill Man of *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Alland & Arnold, 1954), along with their uneasily dead-flesh counterparts like *Frankenstein* (Laemmle & Whale, 1931) and *The Mummy* (Laemmle & Freund, 1932); and Simone Simon’s repressed Serbian jungle cat in Tourneur’s *Cat People* (Lewton & Tourneur, 1942) and Acquanetta’s gene-transplanted gorilla girl in Dmytryk’s *Captive Wild Woman* (Pivar & Dmytryk, 1943). The animal is so inscribed on the genre, so “in its DNA,” that “creature feature” was a familiarly fuzzy shorthand long before the irradiated ants, sewer alligators, and teleportation-pod flies.

On one level, we can understand many of these examples, with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as the paradigm, as the illegitimate but inevitable children of their moment’s technologies and as rebellions against an Enlightenment-confidence in reason itself. Though there’s a strand of the mythological running through (from, say, 1920’s *The Golem* (Davidson, Boese, & Wegener) straight through the Val Lewton pictures at RKO), it’s the figure of the mad

scientist (or the hyper-rational one, if we grant the distinction) and his rogue creation (not always simply a vision of fear, but often one of pity) that initially looms largest over monstrous hybridity. This would continue to be evident in the vast, anxious Nuclear Age menagerie of movie monsters and Cold War mutants, who were frequently the products of warped positivism, lunatic political machinations, or the inevitable outcome of uncontrollable biotechnologies.

This would start to shift in the 1960's, as audiences overly familiar with “creature features” had turned horror into something of a joke about itself. An entirely new sensibility, grounded in more “realistic” narratives and an independent filmmaking approach less bound to established studio dictates, took hold; Peter Bogdanovich's *Targets* (1968), which overtly contrasts a meta-turn from past-his-prime Boris Karloff—reduced to kitsch costume intros at drive-in screenings of movies that necking teenagers ignore—with the random sniper killings of a shell-shocked Vietnam vet, can serve as our particularly on-the-nose representative here (Zinoman, 2011). But these changes also indicate another level on which to understand the tendencies of the genre more generally.

The figure of the animal was never simply about animals themselves, and hybridity was never simply about technological anxieties. At their hearts, the earlier genre entries reflected anxieties about humanity's proximity to animality itself, the thin, maybe porous, borders between the two, the possibility of category confusion, and the lingering, unshakable terror that we are behaving in morally indefensible ways to fellow inhabitants of the world. That “vegan horror” should largely be characterized by the marginalization or outright *absence* of actual animals from the frame is a cultural reflection of their larger, historically-distinct absence from our lives (Berger, 1980). Despite almost unthinkably vast numbers being constantly brought into the world only to be extinguished from it,² most of us do not regularly encounter animal life, or death—and certainly not those lives and deaths as situated in a world to which they respond and from which they draw meaning. The fin-de-siecle spectacle of an elephant electrocution inaugurated the birth of cinema; now court cases are fought, “terrorism” designations devised, and legislative battles waged over the right to film at all inside our bio-factories and slaughterhouses (Potter, 2011). Animals are everywhere and nowhere, increasingly identifiable mostly from the shadows they cast.

Vegan horror fixates on this. In its particulars, the animal was not excised from the horror text as the texts were updated to match what audiences found horrifying. To the contrary, removing the animal from the center of the frame only reinforced its status as the image's focus, an absent referent of the cinema (Adams, 1990). By drawing on animal metaphors, depicting human/nonhuman power relationships, and emphasizing the perceived slippery slope between human and animal status even in narratives ostensibly emptied of animals themselves, vegan horror only underscores that it's the animal that we'd been talking about all along, trying to zero in on, blurry as any amateur Bolexed Bigfoot. They're ghosts in the image machine.

If the contemporary, American horror movie is marked by a sense of unexpected terror lurking in the commonplace rather than the fantastical, that shift is largely traceable to one figure: the Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein, already invoked to contrast with the “natural horror” of ecological nightmare scenarios. Gein's influence is hard to overstate, not least because his story forms the textual crux of *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Bozman, Saxon, Utt, & Demme, 1991), a kind of grisly genre trinity of perversion (Eggertsson, 2006). His real-life acts—not just murders and grave-robbing, but the instrumental use of corpses as furniture, clothing, and food, and their erotic, fetishistic use as objects of self-definition and identity—inserted a queasily familiar sense into the cultural imaginary. Horror wasn't merely located *over there*, nestled in the Carpathian Mountains or at the

bottom of murky lagoons or in the dubious underground labs of wild-eyed scientists, but literally next door, behind the barn doors at the end of the road (Humphries, 2002).

Gein's disturbing contributions to the genre didn't end there. The contents of his house—first and foremost, the discovery of the body of 58-year-old Bernice Worden in his shed, a local shopkeeper and one of multiple victims Gein is suspected of killing and mutilating—also raised uncanny parallels to animal use. Indeed, it may have been this that many observers found most jarring:

When investigators came across the body of Mrs. Worden they found her hanging upside down from a meat hook in the woodshed of Gein's farm. Her head had been removed and her body slit open in the front. The act was performed in the exact same manner as the process of treating deer bodies for meat. Her head was subsequently found in a box, along with her intestines, and supposedly her heart was found in the dining room. Ironically enough, when deputy Virgil "Buck" Batterman was called in to investigate the Gein house he was returning from deer hunting.... He specifically mentions that she was "cut open like you would a deer" and how that would make "anybody kind of sick." (Eggertson, 2006, p. 31)

Further investigation of the house would reveal the degree to which Gein, with disturbing but resonant consistency, treated his victims in ways we reserve for nonhuman animals: skin sewn together like leather for lampshades and couch covers, chairs made from bones and cups from polished skulls, stuffed and mounted faces like hunting trophies. Gein also ate parts of his victims, and although there's no evidence to suggest actual necrophilia, Gein's crimes were shot through with a distinct eroticism. The act of adorning himself in macabre attire (a "woman-suit" comprised of a corset, leggings, and other articles fashioned from flesh) indicated a desire to merge with them and be changed, while also symbolically resurrecting his mother, the woman he seems to have loved and feared. The animal, specifically its domination, rendering, and metaphorical transference, is figured here, as well. Gein cited his earliest memory of his mother as covered in blood, butchering a pig in the family shed.

All of these details would appear in the various films Gein would inspire, but none would emphasize their rootedness in our treatment of animals like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (TCSM)* (Hooper, 1974). Held up as "the ultimate pro-vegetarian film" and a mainstay of think-pieces featuring "films with hidden activist agendas" ever since, the subtext of Tobe Hooper's horror classic is already so well-established that "subtext" seems something of a misnomer. Ask Hooper himself: "It's a film about meat" (Jones, 2005, p. 158).

His phrasing is hardly accidental—not merely about the *animal*—the living being capable of sentience and suffering—but "meat"—the end-product of a transformative process, a rendering. Hooper's film goes further into the biopolitical mechanics of converting animals into "meat" than other riffs on the Gein nightmare, explicitly locating its (vegan) horror in the larger social context of slaughterhouse work and economic privation.

The plot of *TCSM*'s bruising 83 minutes can be quickly dispatched here. A group of young people, including siblings Sally and Franklin, travel to cattle-country to visit the old cabin once owned by the duo's grandparents. There has been a rash of grave-robbings and disturbances in the area, with parts of bodies missing and corpses arranged into strange public art, and they want to make sure everything is alright. Everything is decidedly not alright, and the group is slain one by one by members of a local family—laid-off slaughterhouse workers living together in a very Gein-

like residence on a neighboring property—until Sally, a paradigmatic Final Girl (Clover, 1993), manages to escape.

Throughout, Hooper’s camera underscores the Gein subtext with almost subliminally photographed images of skull cups, a room full of chicken bones, suspiciously skin-like lampshades, and more, but he also sets up an extensive network of links between human and nonhuman. The film’s opening features a dead armadillo on the road that foreshadows a later, dinner table tableaux, and the oppressively muggy atmosphere, delivered in sweaty 35mm images, teems with hints of the unseen and ordinarily absent rising into view. An early scene forces the viewer to engage in a politics and pedagogy of sight (Pachirat, 2013):

In their van, and right before they pick up the hitchhiker, the teens become overwhelmed by a stench. Looking out the window, Franklin declares (with some excitement) that it’s the “old slaughterhouse.” “You see that building there,” he says, gesturing beyond the van, “that’s where they kill ‘em. They bash ‘em in the head with a big sledgehammer.” Immediately afterward, the camera uncannily gives us a view the group would actually not be able to see from their van—a close-up the head of one of the cows in the slaughterhouse.... Almost immediately, though, the camera pulls away and offers the view the teens do have—just a building, the living animals invisible somewhere inside it, a cattle mass, a mere blur as the human protagonists speed by on the adjacent highway. (Keetley, 2015, n.p.)

Nothing shocking happens, but we are immediately aware of distance, both physical and moral. The slaughterhouse is the dominant fixture in *TCSM*—the killers are slaughterhouse workers all, from a long line of the same; it’s the technical development of the captive bolt gun as the primary mechanism for killing cows that puts sledgehammer-wielding “brain bashers” like the family out of work—and yet, it is barely glimpsed. Even the cover of the *American Astrology* magazine read by the (possibly vegetarian) Pam menacingly alludes on its cover to “The Shocking Results of Food Pollution!” This detail flashes by while Franklin, anticipating the “happy meat” fantasies of modern-day urban homesteaders, waxes nostalgic about the more honest, tactile human/nonhuman relationships of bygone slaughterhouses.

It’s a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it touch, in a film discourse preoccupied with what we miss when we blink. This is crucial to a film in which not only animals and death but blood itself is also largely absent from the screen, despite what many audiences feel they remember about it. As vegan horror, *TCSM* is interested in teaching us how to see. Humans are bashed on the head with sledgehammers (just as Franklin excitedly relates about cows), hung on meat hooks (like Bernice Worden), their carcasses thrown in freezers or stretched over lamps and windows (like Gein’s collection of useful dismemberments). But, as in the world outside the film, the mechanics of killing and consumption both are omnipresent and invisible, a “mere blur as human protagonists speed by” (Keetley, n.p.). The only actual blood in the film appears on an intentionally cut palm and, then, divorced from its source, smeared on the side of the van in a cryptic splatter the kids try, and fail, to parse for meaning.

The shot that follows the teens’ passage across the slaughterhouse threshold, however, reverses perspective, and we see the van from inside the pen. We are looking at those humans through cows’ eyes. By complicating the point of view (POV), Hooper reroutes our gaze, placing viewers in the subject position of livestock, just as the protagonists will find themselves as the film progresses. This reversal is one of the key formal components of the “posthuman cannibalism” of

TCSM's vegan horror, “a trope that transgresses the human-nonhuman boundary to undermine speciesism and anthropocentrism” (Üçoluk Krane, 2019).

As Üçoluk Krane (2019) details, perspectival reversals and conceptual shifts, especially as they relate to human and nonhuman animal bodies, are key to *TCSM*'s aesthetic throughout the film, indeed from its opening credits. Those come staggered with abstract red splotches and accompanied by the sound of camera flashes, muffled radio reports of grave-robbing, and a distinct sizzling noise. *TCSM* is full of this sizzle. It will be the same sizzle we hear at the gas station BBQ (“We Slaughter!”), when the food on offer is desirable to the travelers, and again later, when their numbers have thinned and only a bound, terrified Sally remains, staring at the sausages with different eyes:

In light of the barbecue scene, the unidentifiable and fluid red shapes of the opening credit sequence may now be understood as abstractions of unidentified meat whose viscosity suggests fluidity across forms, boundaries, and species. That is, these formless patches of red in motion are abstractions of a common flesh, wherein human and animal are no longer separately conceived. (Üçoluk Krane, 2019)

The close-up of a cow's eye, which closes out the slaughterhouse's introduction, prefigures the climactic sequence, set (naturally) at the dinner table. A similar close-up of Sally's bloodshot and panicked eyeball almost seems to pulse due to the camera's proximity, while her would-be renderers sit down for their version of a family meal. Eyeballs have a long history of prominence in horror, notably in the Italian *giallo*, at least in part for the deep discomfort any penetrative threat to them evokes in viewers. The act of watching itself becomes implicated, and cinema's voyeuristic component is foregrounded through an imperiled POV, but this awareness of lines of sight opens up different possibilities for identification. Traditionally, the predilection of the slasher genre—and variants like *gialli*—for simple instruments (“knives, hammers, axes, ice picks, hypodermic needles, red hot poker, pitchforks, and the like”) already invoke animality, a “pretechnological” “emotional terrain” in which “closeness and tactility” render the threats “personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace” (Clover, 1993, pp. 31-32.). In *TCSM*, the recurrent image of the eyeball, and its link to human and nonhuman perspectives, serves to reinforce its status as “a film about the politics of seeing and most importantly not-seeing that are crucial to the meat industry” (Keetley, 2015, n.p.).

The dinner sequence is a skin-crawling picture of near-wholesomeness and funhouse-mirror bourgeois domesticity. The image of Sally at the dinner table, screaming in front of a plate of meat, registers as an almost parodic rendering of “vegan horror” but, as part of a tapestry about instrumental use, also as a deadly serious enactment of it. In the wider context of *TCSM*'s deliberate destabilizing of boundaries, these liminal images are inscribed with a new, resonant terror—not just the provenance of this flesh that's being consumed, but the queasy act of flesh-consumption itself and the kinds of ghosts it demands remain unseen.

The killings themselves, all perpetrated by the now-iconic figure of Leatherface (the chainsaw-wielding brother so-named for the Gein-inspired flesh mask he wears, an uncanny face of faces), are each short vignettes about nonhuman animal slaughter. Each an echo of the last, with visual motifs and identical framing drawing out a repetitious dread, they feature a slow walk to a front entrance, a quicker passage through a narrow, chute-like hallway, an unseen assault by a “knocker,” and the twitching body removed from the kill floor as a steel barrier slams shut. Hooper's structural analogy is unmistakable.

In his landmark investigative study *Every 12 Seconds*, sociologist Timothy Pachirat (2013) wrote about his time working in slaughterhouse environments and the ways in which the politics of sight are manipulated, maintained, and obscured through divisions of labor and physical separation. In an interview, he elaborated:

The slaughterhouse as a whole is divided into compartmentalized departments. The front office is isolated from the fabrication department, which is in turn isolated from the cooler, which is in turn isolated from the kill floor. It is entirely possible to spend years working in the front office, fabrication department, or cooler of an industrialized slaughterhouse that slaughters over half a million cattle per year without ever once encountering a live animal much less witnessing one being killed. (Solomon, 2012, n.p.)

Leatherface serves as the knocker in *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*: a damaged, almost child-like figure, but one of mystery and malevolence. Meanwhile, the space between the two structures come to assume something like the division between the “clean” and “dirty” sides of the kill floor, as Pachirat explains:

To give another example of how the work of killing is compartmentalized, the kill floor is divided spatially into a clean side and a dirty side. The dirty side refers to everything that happens while the cattle’s hides are still on them and the clean side to everything that happens after the hides have been removed. Workers from the clean side are segregated from workers on the dirty side, even during food and bathroom breaks. This translates into a kind of phenomenological compartmentalization where the minority of workers who deal with the “animals” while their hides are still on are kept separate from the majority of workers who deal with the *carcasses* after their hides have been removed. (Solomon, 2012, n.p.)

For Pachirat, the logistical demands of slaughterhouse morality, cloaked as a concession to “food safety,” have crept into the mechanics of daily life (and death). A similar division is at play in *TCSM*—it’s a vision of violence without blood, bodies mutilated behind thunderingly slammed doors. The evidence of this violence manifests in Gein-like objects (lampshades, skin-masks, rooms full of bones) and the steadily diminishing cast of characters.

It’s an illusion of sanitary compartmentalization. If the relative safety of the cabin marks a kind of clean floor, that’s only because we’ve allowed it to seem so. If we can’t see it, it’s because we don’t believe it, and if we don’t believe it, it’s because it remains unseen. The visceral perspectives and metaphors of vegan horror allow for glimpses of these ghosts “between the two,” rendering “the figure of the animal” unstable and open to re-routing. This is a useful approach, because too often our abstraction of the animal eclipses the lives it is meant to signify.

Confined within this catch-all concept, within this vast encampment of the animal, in this general singular, within the strict enclosure of this definite article (‘the Animal’ and not ‘animals’), as in a virgin forest, a zoo, a hunting or fishing ground, a paddock or an abattoir, a space of domestication, are all the living things that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbours, or his brothers. (Derrida, 2002, p. 34)

We risk concealing actual nonhuman animals within their representations, imprisoning them in constructs meant for liberation. Noting that the “first subject matter for painting was animal,” Berger immediately adds: “[P]robably the first paint was animal blood” (Berger, 1980, p. 7). How can kinship be learned through such gory marks of difference, a static metaphorical figure that “violently reduces the multiplicity of animal life?” (McMahon and Lawrence, 2015, p. 5). Instead of deploying animals to reveal aspects of the human, vegan horror places the human in the position of the nonhuman animal and directs our attention to the nonhuman animals haunting human spaces; the horror we arrive at is the monstrosity of our own species’ violence against the nonhuman animal other. This uproots familiar landscapes of the sign and disrupts viewer identification, but it also seeks to alter our relation to the “figure of the animal” itself.

Vegan horror’s challenge is formulating the grounds for a kinship with the unseen. If Derrida’s *hauntology* indicates a nostalgia for lost futures, one of these must be a world in which the nonhuman animal other is recognized, not as a “general singular,” but as a multiplicity of interests and desires. Its pedagogy is spectral, and its gestures aim to disturb fields of vision. In *Zama* (Catani, Domenech, Gallelli, Roveda, & Martel, 2017), her anticolonial horror, Lucrecia Martel charts the ruinous biopolitical legacies of European conquest, but some of the film’s most resonant moments are those in which the nonhuman animals interrupt the self-important human proceedings. In particular, a llama’s intrusion into a speechifying context punctures grandiose posturing and our expectation that every story is psychological in nature. This “recalibration of our attention turns, of course, on power,” Rosalind Galt (2019, n.p.) notes. “[T]he llama directs us to the margins rather than the center of the image and to the soundscape beyond speech” (Galt, 2019, n.p.). Our awareness of the margin awakes a kinship with the unseen, or at least its possibility. The hegemony of the center is wounded, ridiculous. We are learning to see.

A vegan horror tendency is identifiable both before and after *TCSM* and continues to proliferate in this latest moment of the genre’s popularity. Eggertsson tracks variants through *The Hills Have Eyes* (Locke & Craven, 1977), *Calvaire* (Gentile, Gérardon-Luyckx, Tavier, & du Welz, 2004), *Zombie Honeymoon* (Reilly & Gebroe, 2004), *Hostel* (Briggs, Fleiss, & Roth, 2005), and *Wolf Creek* (McLean, 2005), with a detour back to *Eyes Without A Face* (Borkon & Franju, 1960). Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* has already been noted, with its distinctly feminist rendering of the Gein story (Brek, 2018), the centrality of its titular animal metaphor, and its pithy summation, spoken by Jodie Foster’s Clarice Starling, of the vegan horror case against instrumental use: “If he sees her as a person and not just an object, it’s harder to tear her up.” *Ravenous* (Fields, Heyman, & Bird, 1999) constructs a vegan horror of the frontier, literalizing its story of borders and linking the figure of the nonhuman animal other to masculinity and colonialism (Kelley, 2016). The Milk Mothers and blood bags of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, Mitchell, Voeten, & Miller, 2015) also envision dystopian modes of production that draw on the warped “figure of the animal” in immediately recognizable ways.

The possibility of invoking spirits multiplies into our cinematic moment. On its face, a film like *Get Out* (Blum, Hamm, McKittrick, Peele, & Peele, 2017) seems more firmly rooted in the Cartesian and only unclearly relates to the kind of undermining of it characteristic of vegan horror’s posthumanism. A closer look reveals how much this isn’t the case. Jordan Peele, a horror director whose liminal sensibility is rooted in the classical but remains very much of our moment, crafted a diabolically clever debut: the mind/body split is central to its narrative of racial programming, in which Black bodies are selected for desirable attributes by liberal white supremacy, and then agency is stripped away by literally sublimating the true selves of the victims in a murky abyss called The Sunken Place. It’s a state of indeterminate, eternal bondage of the

spirit, inside a manipulated body, and the power of Peele’s vision is evident in all the manifold ways it can be interpreted (and how immediately familiar and resonant they all feel to viewers).

But *Get Out* also takes the animal into the postmodern.³ As Peele himself notes in *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror* (Blackwell & Burgin, 2019), the Sunken Place is presented as a cinema, its lone occupant watching the film of themselves, and those are films of subjugation. Perhaps *Get Out*’s most striking moment comes after its reveal, when one of the white conspirators sits on her bed, innocently drinking a glass of milk with a straw. It’s a “self-aware connection between the image of whiteness, gender, purity, and milk,” which invokes the real-world fixation of white supremacists on lactose tolerance as a “natural” indicator of master-race status (Stănescu, 2018, p. 116). The power of vegan horror bolsters Peele’s anti-racist allegory and furthers the genre tendency more generally. From the roadside abattoirs of *TCSM*’s grindhouse to the absent referents of *Get Out*’s Sunken Place cinema, these spirits linger, offering glimpses of different ways we might see.

Notes

1. There is ample reason but insufficient space to include zombie films more generally here as an eco-horror variant concerned with naturalness. *Night of the Living Dead* (Hardman, Streiner, & Romero, 1968), for instance, never conclusively attributes the “wave of mass murder” to a single cause, though an expert opines it has something to do with radioactivity from an exploded space probe. *Return of the Living Dead* (Fox & O’ Bannon, 1985) revolves around military experimentation gone awry. David Cronenberg’s *Shivers* (Reitman & Cronenberg, 1975) takes a typically Cronenbergian tack, with sex zombies originating in a rogue scientist’s attempt to combat the sanitized over-intellectualization of modern society with the development of a venereal disease aphrodisiac. In each case, the root cause of zombie outbreaks are mutations of the natural brought about by the technological.
2. Drawing on USDA livestock and poultry domestic data and commercial slaughter inventories, *The Animal Kill Clock* (Humane Ventures, 2019) estimates more than 8 billion land animals killed for food in the U.S. alone annually and more than 55 billion land and aquatic animals in the U.S. annually.
3. The animal is not entirely off-screen, however, either in *Get Out* or *Us* (Blum & Peele, 2019). The former’s narrative pivots on a car collision with a deer en route to the plantation-like house of whiteness in which the story unfolds; the more recent film, explicitly centered on confrontations with sublimated and subterranean others, returns again and again to rabbits. In both, the animal functions as an additional doppelganger or otherwise haunting element, the fear of which, Peele states, is “really the fear of self—the fear of that which we suppress as individuals. What is the shadow version of ourselves?” The director identifies himself in this figure: “I make cameos in my films as dying animals” (Smith, 2019, n.p.).

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