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The Rhetorical Use of the Other: An Analysis of Symbolic Disability in Contemporary Horror Films

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THE RHETORICAL USE OF THE OTHER: AN ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLIC DISABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILMS

A Master's Thesis

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By

Seth Hadley

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ABSTRACT

In this research, I examine the concept of the Other in horror films. I use Kenneth Burke's identification, Jean-Francois Lyotard's metanarrative concept, and Lennard Davis's bell curve of normalcy to describe the Other and how otherness relates to disability. First, I discuss how horror films have portrayed the Other historically in a negative context and slowly transition to the virtuous Other, the final girl. Next, I discuss the trend of portraying disability or otherness as an asset or tool in contemporary films like *A Quiet Place*, *Birdbox*, and *Don't Breathe*. Then, I examine how current horror films explore the implications of donning otherness for personal gain as seen in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Us*. My analysis leads to a discussion on how the practice of adopting otherness or imitating the Other may be reflected in current identity politics, the struggle for clout, or protection from cancel culture.

KEYWORDS: horror film, disability, Kenneth Burke, identification, apocalypse, Jordan Peele, otherness, the Other, cancel culture, Lennard Davis

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INTRODUCTION

Horrified and Paralyzed

I cannot breathe. Blankets surround my immobilized body and bury me alive. Although my eyes are closed, and I am aware they are closed, I see the room around me. The image of my surroundings may be a simple visualization like a dream, but it feels real. Despite the latter being impossible, I can no longer tell the difference in my panic. Time is running out, and I have to take that next breath or I may never breathe again. I must move. If I move, then I can wake up and breathe.

I send mental commands to move my arms, but my unconscious nerves refuse to carry the message. I begin to panic, and the little oxygen I have left starts slipping away faster like I'm holding my breath underwater. I remember a specific scene from Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, the protagonist waking up from a coma and working slowly to regain control of her legs. I start to focus on just a small movement like she did. If I can twitch a finger, then I can slowly move my hand. Surely, my arm would follow. Slowly, I feel a twitch, or at least I think I feel it. It is still unclear whether I am affecting any physical change or if I simply imagine the progress I believe I'm making.

I am out of time; my oxygen has finally run out as I send one final scream of mental energy to my body. I gasp and throw off my blankets; I survive my first encounter with sleep paralysis. I am no longer physically immobilized, but the horror of the experience stays with me.

Fear, Horror Films, and the Other

I fear being disabled and powerless like I am in my sleep paralysis. I know I should not conflate being disabled with being powerless, but the culture I have grown up in has married the two concepts with almost no chance of separation up until more recent attitudes towards disability have shifted away from inferiority. Regardless of the stigma I have internalized, it is not disability itself that is threatening; what really scares me is the threat of being othered. Anytime someone feels outside of the norm, and especially when they are intentionally made to feel that way, they are being othered. Just what is the norm and what makes someone the "Other" is a matter of perspective. People throughout history have been othered according to race, gender, sexuality, and disability. My sleep paralysis had simulated disability, and this horrified me. The paralysis I experienced symbolized the potential alienation I fear as a gay man. In some countries I would be killed, imprisoned, or brutally tortured for my sexuality. In my own country, the United States, I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop and my marriage to be invalidated or my rights to be infringed in a variety of ways. My subconscious simply represented my otherness as disability, and this same symbolism is a trend I see in current horror films.

Horror films have a rich history of featuring otherness, and the goal of this research is to examine how contemporary horror films extend the rhetorical use of the Other by using disability as a form of othering. It uses Kenneth Burke's concepts of identification, alienation, and consubstantiality as a lens to view one rhetorical outcome of horror films, catharsis; additionally, it continues the legacy of film theorists such as Harry M. Benshoff, Noel Carroll, Jamie McDaniel, Isabel Pinedo, Paul Santilli, and Andrew Tudor by exploring how horror films portray otherness, how this relates to disability, and how their themes reflect current cultural attitudes

towards the Other. Specifically, using the work of disability studies scholars Lennard Davis, Tobin Siebers, and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, as well as the foundational concept of the social model of disability, I examine a recent trend of horror films integrating disability within their plot, and I discuss what this might mean for current feelings towards otherness. These films imply a shift from viewing disability as an inherent flaw, the medical model of disability, to a product of circumstances, the social model of disability, that may even be desirable in some situations.

In the first chapter, I focus on the function of horror films and describing how the genre has used the Other within its stories throughout its history. In chapter two, I provide an analysis of a recent trend in horror films: using disability to symbolize otherness. In many of the films, a disability is actually an asset for protagonists that helps them survive, challenging the medical model of disability and embracing the social model of disability. In others, the characters emulate or adopt disability as a tool for survival. Lastly, some of the films suggest the notion that disability and otherness can be coopted for selfish gain as villains attempt to claim otherness for themselves when it is not truly needed for survival but some other benefit. When the world no longer enables them, the villains will adopt disability to maintain their privilege according to the new social order. In chapter three, I conclude with a discussion of this trend's implications given the rise of identity politics, clout chasing, and cancel culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identification: An Outcome of Horror as a Genre

Research on horror films often attempts to define the genre. That is not one of the goals of this research. However, I would be remiss not to mention esteemed leader in cinematic studies and philosophy, Noel Carroll's, seminal interpretation of what he calls art-horror, a feeling which he asserts as the deciding factor of what is or is not part of the horror genre. A horror film must create the feeling of art-horror within the audience (15). He defines this feeling as being the result of a specific set of conditions within the film. Art-horror requires that the audience is "in some state of abnormal, physically felt agitation" such as wincing or screaming evoked by the idea that a monster could exist, be "physically . . . threatening in the ways [it is] portrayed . . . ," and possess some quality of corruption or impurity (Carroll 27). Carroll's definition has remained a staple in horror film criticism, but it has seen some changes as the genre and scholarship have evolved.

In recent years, critics have questioned the narrowness of Carroll's definition of what constitutes a monster. Specifically, Carroll implies that a monster must be based in fiction and separate from the natural world (27). Carroll's monster according to the principles of art-horror excludes a population of horror films such as *Psycho*, *Halloween*, or *Scream* containing monstrous human killers because they are based in reality rather than a fictional existence. Attempting to resolve this conflict, Phillip Nickel expands Carroll's definition to include the monstrous rather than just the "evil supernatural" (15).

Although these definitions are important to understand the genre, I propose to look not at what the horror genre is but rather at what it does. I find that one of the genre's outcomes is

creating a feeling of identification within viewers. As various cinematic studies theorists have noted, horror films produce physical and emotional responses within their audience that are similar to the characters portrayed on-screen (Carroll 17; Crane 2; Gross 207; Nickel 15; Tallon 34). This mirroring effect is an example of how horror uses rhetorician Kenneth Burke's concept of identification to connect with its audience. Burke refers to identification as when two separate, non-identical entities' "interests are joined" (Burke 1325). Burke emphasizes that this relationship is consubstantial because the two things are "both joined and separate" (Burke 1325). Horror audiences are an excellent example of this identification and consubstantiality because they remain distant and distinct from the fiction on-screen but also experience a similar fear towards the monstrous and drive to survive that allows them to identify with the film's characters and other audience members.

In fact, the potential identification between one viewer and another is just as important as how a viewer relates to a film. While identification may seem like it occurs only on an individual level, and many horror critics focus on audiences as individual viewers such as Julia Kristeva, a literary critic and psychoanalyst who emphasizes the individual psyche's interaction with horror films, or Katerina Bantinaki, a lecturer of aesthetics and philosophy who discusses the individual physiological and psychological responses of horror audiences, others such as communication research scholar, Jonathan Crane, note how this point of view often discounts the importance of the audience as a whole (39). Identification and consubstantiality not only allow viewers to identify one-on-one with a film, but they naturally allow the viewers to identify with each other to form a group separate from those who have not experienced the film. Burke supports in-group identification by commenting, "in acting together men have common sensations . . . [and] attitudes that make them consubstantial" (1326). This concept of larger, group identification

makes sense when considering the experience of a theater where members often laugh, cry, or scream in tandem. As an audience watches a film, they individually relate it to themselves, but as a group they pull a common theme and that moral or lesson changes their point of view. It allows them to see life differently than those who have not watched the film. As we experience a film within a group setting, each member can contribute to the meaning of that experience. Those who are not part of the group lose this ability, but they may still feel the repercussions of the group's consensus when the film and its message are incorporated into mainstream culture.

Although more contemporary methods of viewership are based within the home, they also treat the audience as a group even if these methods seem individualized. Despite viewers watching a film alone either with physical copies or through streaming services, they are watching what they know others have seen; as Crane points out, just the act of watching a film or consuming some other form of multimedia is a social experience (38). As previously stated, this experience creates a natural division between those who have watched the film and those who have not. There cannot be a feeling of identification without division (Burke 1326). As stated above, the division decides who determines the meaning and applicability of the film. As the film becomes more popular and affects more people, the theme the group decides the film holds impacts even those who have not watched it. One such division among viewers and non-viewers is whether horror films can even hold a deeper meaning. The line between the horror film fan and detractor is a topic of contention, and it has inspired much research into answering why someone would enjoy horror.

The question of audience motivation regarding the horror film genre has persisted in scholarship for decades. In answering this question, many scholars like Katerina Bantinaki or psychology professor Paul Priester build on Burke's concept of identification and suggest

audiences experience a cathartic pleasure while watching horror films. Films allow viewers to watch a fictional person similar to themselves grapple with the same dangers and fears through a symbolic on-screen struggle (Crane 30). As Crane suggests, horror films can act as a "reality check" (8) in this way by reflecting everyday dangers and fears back to the audience in a more extreme form (1). While audience reaction to these films has been viewed as aversion by researchers like Carroll who requires the viewer to feel aversion to the monstrous in his definition of art-horror, this sort of reaction seems to reflect the more temporary, initial response rather than the audience's full feelings towards watching the films. Acknowledging how viewers continue to watch the horror genre rather than avoid it, this connection between the audience and the film could be said not to result in a negative feeling but, as professor of comparative literature and theatre Robert Gross emphasizes, an opportunity for growth when the genre is embraced by the viewer (208). Still, for all the ways a viewer identifies with the film, it is their own separation from the situation that makes it so appealing.

Horror films provide an opportunity for the audience to encounter threatening or fearful objects and concepts in a space that is removed from the actual danger or reality (Bantinaki 390). This concept of safety tied to difference and distance leads back to Burke's concepts of identification and consubstantiality. As audiences watch characters go through an ordeal on-screen and see at least one usually survive it, their identification with that character is cathartic because it serves as a more symbolic saving of the self (Gross 200, 207). Since the character survives, the film serves as a symbol of hope for the viewer that they can solve their problems just like the protagonist. The horror film provides a platform for processing real life that enables learning without the risk of failure.

While this concept of catharsis in horror films may seem highly theoretical, it can and has been observed in active research. Psychiatrists Jeffrey Turley and Andre Derdeyn demonstrate the cathartic potential of horror films in their case study involving the treatment of a 13-year-old boy. In this study, the boy was placed into therapy for deviant and violent behavior such as the use of substances and destruction of his guardians' property (942). While in therapy with the boy, the doctors discovered that the onset of the bad behavior began as he approached puberty, a few years after the boy's mother abandoned him and he began living with his aunt and uncle (Turley and Derdeyn 942-943). As they began to know the boy better, they found out that he enjoyed horror films, specifically *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. When the boy pointed out the uselessness of adults within the film, Turley and Derdeyn began to see how he connected the films to his own conflicts, and they started using the plot of the film to discuss the boy's own issues. He seemed to be in awe and jealous of Freddy because of the power and total control he had over the teenagers he stalks, and the patient also heavily identified with the victims who almost all came from some form of broken family just like him (943). All of this analysis helped the patient to realize that his disruptive behavior outside of the home stemmed from his repressed conflicts with his uncle, who leveraged total power over him similar to Freddy and his victims. However, he also wanted to be more like his uncle and Freddy, so he realized he needed to communicate with his guardians about his emotions to gain the same sense of agency his role models had instead of acting on repressed impulse (944). Following this series of treatments, the patient's behavioral issues were resolved after his revelation regarding his sense of self in relation to the films, and no further treatment was required.

This case study certainly supports the idea that Gross suggests: horror films allow viewers to better see necessary changes in themselves and shape their sense of self (200). In

other words, horror films are platforms for cathartic self-growth. However, in order to produce catharsis and establish identification, the films must evoke common emotions within the audience. Primarily in horror, these feelings are fear and its many variants. One concept is inherent to both identification and fear: the Other.

Alienation and the Other

One result of identification is to bring people together through consubstantiality. However, as mentioned previously, this creates a natural division between those who have identified with each other and those who have not. The latter's differences from the former are now emphasized since the former is grouped together by their similarities. As the bond of consubstantiality becomes more established, a natural consequence is that those who are not part of the group become alienated and take on the role of the Other. The Other is a common philosophical concept referring to an individual or smaller group who cannot or refuse to relate to the main group who are united by some commonality that produces identification and consubstantiality. In reality, the Other is almost never one single individual, and what makes one group the Other is usually decided by which group is larger or currently holds more power.

These systems of power determining who is the Other change over time and can be more easily described if we think about them using French theorist Lyotard's concept regarding metanarratives. A metanarrative can be thought of as a lens or perspective that defines all other aspects in life according to how they relate to the focal point of the metanarrative. In another sense, it can be a paradigm for deciding what is legitimate (Lyotard 35) and a way of categorizing and labeling. Metanarratives work in tandem with the binary created by identification because a person is either part of the in-group or they are the Other. For example,

someone is either a feminist or misogynist, rich or poor, conservative or liberal, and—in the case of horror films—a victim or a killer. The power that horror films have through identification cannot be disregarded. They can reinforce or criticize various metanarratives. This influence can be disparaging for those labeled Other like the disabled by perpetuating negative stereotypes and portraying the object of horror, the monster, as disabled. Yet, the way horror films have portrayed the Other has slowly changed throughout the history of the genre from negative to positive.

Disability studies scholars have developed two popular metanarratives that reflect this shift from negative to positive. The medical model, the metanarrative of ability that has disenfranchised certain bodies throughout modern Western history, sees the disabled as inherently deviant due to biology or appearance compared to norms. Lennard Davis details the beginning of the modern notion of the "norm" by describing a bell curve. The norm is the majority of people who are in the middle of the bell (Davis 6). Davis describes the norm as tyrannical because it pushes the disabled to the fringes of the bell (6). The notion of the "medical model" is connected to this idea of the norm because it defines the disabled as inherently abnormal requiring aid to fix the disability (Todorovska 183). The alternative model, commonly called the "social model of disability" argues instead that disability is a result of the environment and culture around an individual rather than something inherent to their body**.** This cultural construction of disability is further examined by Tobin Siebers, who sees the cultural role of disability as, at least in part, linguistic because the body is “a language effect rather than a causal agent” deciding whether someone is disabled (2). The body is defined as abled or disabled by the language, or culture, it exists within. And Rosemarie Garland-Thompson has illustrated how the social definition of disability affords the opportunity to see disability as not only intersectional

but analogous to other types of minoritized bodies. Minority bodies beyond those labeled disabled experience the world differently. These bodies are just as much affected by the culture surrounding them as it defines them as abnormal and complicates or challenges their existence (Garland-Thompson, 336).

A HISTORY OF OTHERS IN HORROR

A horror film can be thought of as an argument for what scares or should scare viewers during the time of its development and release. In general, society always has an underlying fear of the Other since the group in power often portrays the Other as a threat to current ways of life. In this way, the Other becomes a scapegoat that the majority shuns or otherwise looks down upon. In order to produce the consubstantiality and catharsis that they need, horror films most often adopt new portrayals of the Other to symbolize real-life fear more effectively. As the Other in the real world changes, the fictional, allegorical Other must transform to match it. In some cases, otherness may even begin to be shown in a virtuous or noble light like what is attributed to victims or martyrs.

The Monstrous Other

One of the first demonstrations of the Other in horror films was the simple monster in the "monster movie." These monsters are figures like Dracula, Frankenstein, the wolf man, etc. This iteration of horror films spanning from the 1930's to the 1950's features the Other in a way most closely associated with Noel Carroll's idea of the supernatural monster in art-horror previously mentioned. Largely, these films perpetuate the message of Otherness being monstrosity that, as disability studies and media scholar Jamie McDaniel states, must either be destroyed or normed (432). Additionally, the Other in these films is usually one individual among a larger group that alienates them. In this way, monsters often represent minorities or the oppressed; they are "nothing more than [converted humans] . . . cursed with damnable abilities and frightening characteristics that make [them] an oppressive and oppressed minority" (Crane 74). Monsters are

oppressive because of the threat they pose to normed life, but they are oppressed in that they are usually outnumbered by the angry mobs that eventually fight them off.

The idea behind the mob movement and the clear solution to the mob's monster problem, either killing the monster or somehow restoring it to the norm, provided clear guidance on how to fight off real-life Otherness and protect the majority from any deviance that may corrupt it. In these stories, humanity is able to easily reaffirm its power through collective action against the deviant monster (Crance 11). However, this simplicity can be complicated by viewing the monster not just as the negative in a binary of power but also as an individual that complicates the current metanarrative that society believes in at the time. Professor of philosophy and identity scholar Amy Kind asserts monsters like the vampire or werewolf are rejected not because of some inherent morality, but because they are confusing contradictions to what is known about life (88). Is a vampire considered alive or dead? Its label, undead, does not make it alive, but it certainly is not dead either. Likewise, the werewolf is neither just man nor wolf; it is both. Furthermore, Frankenstein's monster defies all that is known about life and the limits of science. While one could view these monster movies as simple morality plays (Crane 32) demonstrating to viewers the importance of adhering to normed behavior and identity, they are also highly coded, complex stories regarding the struggle of in-groups to adjust to the Other who challenges their way of life simply by existing.

The monstrous Other could represent various minorities at the time that were seen as singular deviants rather than a group. One example could be homosexuals. During the era of these films, the existence of homosexuals was thought to be rare. If one happened to be in your neighborhood there may very well be a mob that forms to shun them and force them out. Science and technology were also thought to be able to explain the cause of homosexuality and cure it

much like it could explain how Frankenstein or Dracula were created and how to eliminate them. These views towards otherness are now outdated, so this monstrous Other no longer feels relevant to contemporary otherness. Even the attitudes towards these types of monsters like the vampire have changed from fearful to sympathetic or even romantic.

The Thriller: Othering the Protagonist

Another way horror films portray the Other is by considering if the protagonist may unwittingly be othered. The psychological thriller does this by introducing a main character for the audience to identify with that is later revealed to be an unreliable point of view and often taken advantage of because of this. The Other is often isolated from the group, and in this sense the protagonist's distance from their own mind and body others them. In a thriller, rather than being confronted by the object of their fears like victims in a monster movie, the victims are afraid that they cannot trust their own senses (Nickel 21). For example, the theme of unreliable senses is especially present in Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film, *Vertigo*, where the main protagonist, Scottie, is duped into covering up a murder by an old friend from college and his mistress. They use his fear of heights, and the mistress impersonates the friend's wife to make her death look like a suicide. This sort of plot twist is common in thrillers, which often also others the viewer by establishing consubstantiality with the protagonist who is also shocked by their own misconceptions. Both the audience and the protagonist are left in the dark until the truth is revealed to them, usually at the same time.

In a sense, the thriller begins to show audiences how the Other may actually be a victim by forcing them to see the story from the unwitting Other's perspective. One such thriller that more obviously places the Other as a victim is Terrence Young's 1967 film, *Wait Until Dark,*

where Audrey Hepburn's Suzy is terrorized by robbers. Suzy is blind, and her condition is part of what makes the situation even more horrific to viewers. The viewers see her with a sense of pity due to her disability. Choosing to make Suzy the one the audience identifies with is a clear rhetorical technique to other the audience and start to divide the Other from the monstrous using pity. The Other was not seen as a positive figure, but it was someone the majority could feel sorry for. The idea that a disabled person is an object of pity was generally accepted without question during the release of *Wait Until Dark* during the height of the medical model of disability, but the same cannot be said for the modern viewer. This fact is made clear by the subversion of expectations in one of the films I analyze, *Don't Breathe*.

Zombies and Various Global Others

Another common premise in horror is an apocalyptic setting, and this type of horror film demonstrates another use of the Other. In an apocalyptic film, there is usually some mass or global Other identified as the threat such as zombies, aliens, or a natural disaster. Iconic zombie films like Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, released in 1968, are able to continue the legacy of the monstrous Other previously mentioned while also expanding its scope.

What makes the apocalyptic Other different from the previous movie monsters is its appearance in a mass or horde rather than being an isolated figure. This difference alludes to real-life Others who are now seen as a group vying for power on grand scale, and comparative literature expert John Lutz implies these films often symbolize a fear of systemic change (135). This interpretation makes sense especially when considering how zombies could represent the growing population of minorities such as the lower economic class trying to fight for their place within the world (Lutz 122). Thus, the rhetorical use of this global Other often reinforces the

more tribal nature of identification. One is either a member of the living or gets bitten or scratched and becomes a zombie. The only way out of the situation is if everyone becomes a zombie and the world is changed, the living kill all of the zombies, or if some miracle cure is found to restore the zombies back to the side of the living. In other words, the Other either takes over and becomes the norm, is destroyed, or is somehow returned to the norm and rejoins the original majority. This is only one plotline that apocalyptic horror can take.

In other storylines the focus may not be a monster like a zombie or an outsider like an alien but an unstoppable natural disaster. This form of the apocalypse was incredibly common during the turn of the millennium, and one influence in this occurrence was a history of biblical prophecy (Thompson 4). The idea of a fate that one cannot stop is what Kirsten Thompson, a film and media scholar and professor at Seattle University, refers to in one of her many definitions of apocalyptic dread (21), and this dread is not just based in a biblical notion of end times but also acts of nature that are uncontrollable and often also attributed to the divine. Films such as Michael Bay's 1998 film, *Armageddon*, or Roland Emmerich's *The Day after Tomorrow* from 2004 are good examples of this subset of horror. In many cases, especially the former film's case, this specific style of apocalyptic horror film reflects tensions relating to climate change (Thompson 12). Still, beyond the more literal connection between natural disasters and the real dread of climate change, viewers can also view this plotline as a reflection of more intangible political and social changes they fear will sweep through their culture en masse. The only difference between the Other in a disaster movie is that the film is more focused on otherness or change as a concept rather than the Other that may enact the change the audience fears.

Twin Others: The Monstrous Slasher and the Virtuous Final Girl

The slasher subgenre is one of the most well-known types of horror films because of the popularity of its killers and its survivors. Films such as Carpenter's *Halloween (1978)*, Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)*, Cunningham's *Friday the 13th (1980),* and Craven's *Scream (1996)* featured both heroines viewers could hope survived against all odds and iconic villains. Whereas monster movies used the monstrous Other as a villain, and thrillers used the protagonist as a pitiable Other, slasher films use both. These films include an often-disfigured killer who exists somewhere between the realm of human and supernatural just like the creatures from monster movies. The killers' disfigurement serves as an especially harmful form of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's narrative prosthesis. Jamie McDaniel summarizes narrative prosthesis as a reliance on disability as a symbol or metaphor that is often used to indirectly characterize figures within the story (423). In the case of the slasher, the killer's disfigurement is used to shock the viewer and stereotype them as evil or frightening based on appearance alone. As film studies scholar Sotiris Petridis describes, killers in slasher films often have human forms or have been human at some point, but they possess supernatural strength and recovery abilities (77). For instance, no matter how many times *Halloween*'s Michael Meyers was shot or thrown out of a window his body would always be gone when the survivors went to look for it, and Jason from *Friday the 13th* always found a way to come back to life even when he was chained and thrown in a lake. Additionally, slashers often held a backstory that painted them as Others even before they turned monstrous. Jason is characterized as repulsive even before he kills when he is just a disabled child; Michael Myers became a deviant child who is thrown into an asylum at a young age after committing his first murder during an almost trance-like state; and Freddy Kreuger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was a creepy janitor accused of abusing children and

burned alive. These backstories seem to hint that the audience should pity the monstrous Other, but this pity is short-lived as the killer encounters and threatens its more virtuous twin.

Along with the familiar monstrous Other, slasher films featured a newfound emphasis on adolescent victims and creating a virtuous Other who resisted the deviance of the teen group that surrounded her: the final girl. While up until now the Other has been seen as negative or at best pitiable, the final girl provides a new insight into how someone can be on the fringes of a group in a positive way. While she is still part of the group, the group often leaves her behind or pokes fun at her for not partaking in their drugs or sexual activity. However, her otherness is actually to her benefit. Just like the monster movie focused on negatively coding social deviance, the slasher film does the same thing by punishing its teenage characters for their moral deviance with death. Specifically, like Andrew Welsh, a criminology professor and researcher, observes sexuality active characters are killed (770). This morality-based killing system leads to the rhetorical use of the sole survivor, the final girl, as a virtuous Other, and it aligns with Davis's bell curve of normalcy. In the middle is the majority, which are the adolescents doing typical but flawed behavior. On the left side of the bell, there are killers, the negative Other who display deviance and corruption beyond the norm. Lastly, on the right side of the bell, there are final girls, representing the ideal of virtue that few people embody. Both ends of the bell are equally distanced from the norm.

The use of these mirrored Others, slasher and final girl, creates a compelling narrative that brings audiences back to watch sequels both for their favorite killer and survivor. However, popular slasher franchises seem to fade once they inevitably have to say goodbye to their original final girl and introduce a new main character.

A CONTEMPORARY RHETORICAL USE OF OTHERNESS

Shame and the Other as a Tool

I am a teacher, and during the time leading up to my first year of teaching I, as a gay man who had experienced homophobia frequently during my own school years before I even fully knew my own identity, was dreading the inevitable encounter with it as an authority figure. I contemplated how I would handle a student calling me a slur or refusing to comply with my directions because of my identity. However, it was quite a shock that I was the one to bring up the topic and to use it as a tool to build rapport and eliminate undesired behavior—a rhetorical strategy to help me survive as I found my footing in the classroom.

Anyone who is considering teaching middle school students needs to know that one of the best ways to get them to modify a behavior is through peer pressure and shame. While they may be teenagers in theory, many of the behaviors a teacher has to correct are immature patterns inherited from their elementary years. For instance, many of my students still like to mimic voices. They will do this to each other and to teachers out of some almost automatic impulse. I had been teaching eighth grade students for a few months when a student mimicked something I said. In the span of a second, I made the choice to use my identity—something my students knew about since the first day when I introduced myself—as a way to teach them all a lesson. After my student mocked what I said with a high-pitched voice, I redirected her with a grave expression, "Why did you make my voice so high? That's kind of homophobic." The entire class went silent.

I saw panic register on the face of what is normally a well-mannered girl. She said, "I'm so sorry. That's not what I meant at all. I don't know why I did that. I wasn't thinking."

In that moment, I cracked a smile, and I told her, “I know you didn’t mean it that way. It was scary when you thought I had taken it that way. Let’s not mimic anyone else. You never know how someone might interpret your actions.” I never had an issue with mimicry from her or any of the other students again. She and the others were so scared that they might be seen as hateful or discriminatory. The students fear being shunned by the group for shunning others. I’ve dealt with a lot of immature behaviors in the past two years, but I have not had to deal with homophobia.

Furthermore, when I first introduce myself at the start of each year I see many students show excitement when I show the picture of my husband and I with our dog. I see the flicker of identification in their eyes based on many of their own minority statuses. My otherness is one of the best multi-use tools in my arsenal in the classroom. Sometimes it is a flag to unite with my students, a badge to allow me to speak about subjects I otherwise could not authoritatively discuss, or a weapon used to silence.

Observations and Film Choice

Historically, horror films have portrayed disability and otherness in a negative manner. Monsters to be killed, disfigured killers, or at their best victims to be pitied—something that is still not desirable for the Other, especially a disabled person. However, many film and disability critics like Melinda Hall, Massa Cossette, and Raphael Raphael have noticed a shift towards more positive representation of disability starting in the mid-2010’s that inspired this research. Many new franchises have begun with similar premises that heavily feature disability. Some of these films are apocalyptic, a couple are slashers, and others would probably be considered thrillers. However, they often blend many of the different subgenres and, as a result, are hard to

define. One common element is that the disabled seem to actually have an advantage in many of the films. Disability is used to symbolize otherness and how it is used as a tool for survival just like I used otherness to survive my first year of teaching.

In my research I analyze the following films: *Bird Box*, *Get Out*, *A Quiet Place*, *The Silence*, *Hush*, *Don't Breathe*, and *Us*. I chose these films because of their success since all of them have either spawned sequels, given a director critical acclaim, or—in the case of *The Silence*—sought to imitate the premise and popularity of another film on the list. My analysis will track elements of disability, otherness, and symbolism that demonstrate how otherness is used in order to survive.

Disability as a Symbol of Otherness

I have briefly mentioned disability as an identity that exhibits otherness, but I need to clarify how disability operates symbolically as the Other. In one sense, like otherness, disability defies what is considered the norm. According to English scholar and disability studies advocate Tobin Siebers, disabled people "resist standard ideas about the body" (2). This is reminiscent of the way I describe the monsters in early monster horror films. Those creatures "deviate from the norm" and are pushed to the edge of Lennard Davis's bell curve (6). In the same way, the disabled as deviants living a full life while having their disabilities threaten the narrative of the normed body and what qualities or abilities the body needs. Both the creatures, the symbolic, disabled Other and the real-life counterparts fight the tyranny of normalcy that Davis describes. This phenomenon is a clear example of the way identification creates the Other by establishing the majority or norm both in reality and in fiction.

If the Other is established as whatever the majority is not, in other words the minority, then disability will almost always symbolize the Other because it is a minority identity (Siebers 3). In fact, disability acts "as an othering other" (Siebers 6). When the majority is confronted by a minority identity that truly threatens its power, one way it undermines the credibility of that minority is by considering it disabled. Disability functions rhetorically as the "last frontier of unquestioned inferiority" (Siebers 6). For example, when heterosexual and cisgender society has clashed with homosexuals and transgender individuals it has historically labeled them as clinically disturbed and tried to have them psychologically diagnosed as such.

When considering both its challenging of norms and its interchangeability with the minority, disability is a prime symbol of otherness. One can explain this symbolism in greater detail when taking Siebers' idea that the body can represent ideology (33). Ideologies require people to accept only one metanarrative to use as a lens for experiencing the world. This is the same as the majority or in-group that Burke's identification creates. Anything that cannot be conflated into that ideology is a competing group that must be alienated and eliminated. Minorities, including disability, are separate ideological bodies. They are othered because they "expose [the majority] to critique" (Siebers 33). In this way, the Other may not always be an objectively negative or inferior figure but will be portrayed as such by the majority. For instance, the final girl, the epitome of morality, can still be a threat to the majority, her peers, because her character traits highlight their flaws. Therefore, they find ways to criticize her in order to preserve their own concept of what is or should be normal behavior.

Disability is inextricable from the Other. It challenges norms, embodies the minority, and acts as an allegory for competing ideologies. This symbolism is rampant in the films I will

analyze. Even when physical disability seems sparse, just the spirit of the disabled is present and represented in other minority identities in the films.

Analysis

Deaf Survivors in a Silent World. Three of the films all feature deaf survivors: Mike Flanagan's *Hush*, John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place*, and John R. Leonetti's *The Silence*. While each film features nuances in its portrayal of its deaf characters, one common thread is that these characters survive at least partially due to their disability. The situational irony of deaf characters benefiting from their disability in the films challenges the common attitudes of ableism and the medical model of disability. In fact, the way their circumstances change to make their disability a benefit reflects the social definition of disability.

In 2016's *Hush*, Maddie is a deaf author living alone in the woods with only one nearby neighbor shown. She became deaf after contracting an unnamed illness as a child. This film is a callback to the slasher subgenre because the main point of conflict comes from a brutal killer breaking into her home to add her to the literal tally of victims he keeps on his crossbow. Maddie's otherness is fully demonstrated through both her disability and her choice to live in isolation. She and her sister, Max, argue about this as she tries to convince Maddie to move in with her back in the city. Maddie tells Max, "Isolation happened to me. I didn't pick it." This signed line could refer both to how she became deaf as well as a more recent bad breakup she had with her ex, Craig, that appears to have prompted her move away from the city. Society rooted in ableism naturally isolated her symbolically, so she has moved to demonstrate this alienation in a more literal way.

Whereas Maddie's forebearers, the survivor girls in classic slashers like *Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, or *Scream*, are othered as women versus a powerful male killer and by their good virtues when compared to their peers, the primary focus of her otherness is her disability. The emphasis is not on her being a woman striving to overcome a man but her being deaf struggling to outmaneuver the killer who can hear. Near the end of the film, when Maddie is trapped and considering her options, she talks to herself in her mind and states, "He is coming in here . . . Once he is in this house it is over…He's got the advantage. He can hear you." While Maddie mentions other differences like size and strength, this line shows her main reasoning for considering him to have the upper hand is her disability. The importance of her disability is echoed by the killer. While he has already killed many people according to the tally marks mentioned previously, he is weirdly obsessed with the idea that Maddie will be his first deaf victim. His obsession is demonstrated late in the film by the killer saying, "I bet I can make you scream," when he is creeping up behind her and talks to her knowing she cannot hear him. This alludes to the fact that Maddie chooses to communicate only with sign language despite being able to speak, and the killer wants to mock this choice by forcing her to use her voice. Although both Maddie and her killer view her otherness, deafness, as a detriment to her, the film actually proves the opposite as her home is an environment tailored towards her disability with modifications like alternative alarms. According to the social model of disability, this enables Maddie while disabling the killer.

Just like previous survivor girls survived due to their virtuous otherness, Maddie's deafness helps her survive and benefits her by thinking in ways the hearing characters cannot as well as protecting her from harmful noise. Three other characters in the story illustrate this with

their deaths: Sarah, Maddie's neighbor and friend, John, Sarah's boyfriend, and the killer, who is unnamed.

Sarah is the first to die in the film. The viewer sees her running from the killer and banging on Maddie's door and yelling trying to get her attention. The killer quickly catches up to her and stabs her to death. Sarah making noise does not cause her to be killed, but it demonstrates how she has not yet fully understood Maddie's experience as a deaf person. Sarah has been learning sign language and coming over to visit Maddie recently. She is a fan of Maddie's writing, and she seems to genuinely want to educate herself on the deaf experience to connect with her neighbor. Still, when there is a crisis like the killer chasing her, Sarah is unable to think like Maddie and reverts to making noise to try to get her attention. Sarah is killed because her circumstances, her dire need for Maddie to notice her, no longer privilege sound as a way to get help. She is socially disabled.

John arrives at the scene much later in the film and is oblivious to the situation. He only knows that Sarah is not answering her phone and is not home. When he goes to Maddie's home to see if Sarah is there, he sees signs of struggle, but the killer pretends to be a sheriff's deputy responding to the situation. John slowly becomes more suspicious and plans to use a rock to attack the killer. However, in the middle of this, Maddie runs up to the front door from inside and bangs on the door to get John's attention and warn him. When she does this, John looks away from the killer and toward the noise. The killer uses this distraction as an opportunity to stab John in the neck. This does not immediately kill him, and he attempts to fight the killer with the remaining strength he has. Sadly, he bleeds out before he can eliminate his assailant. In the moments just after John's death the killer remarks, "Yeah, I never would have won that fight," implying that John would have survived if he had not heard Maddie banging and gotten

distracted. In this case, John's hearing is actually the reason he was killed. His vulnerability towards distracting noise makes him socially disabled in this case. This is also reflected in the death of the killer.

Finally, in the case of *Hush*'s killer, his hearing and Maddie's lack of hearing often allow her to evade him and even fight back in ways he does not suspect. Maddie uses loud noises like her car alarm or throwing objects through branches as diversions to distract the killer while she hides elsewhere or attempts to get help in various ways such as grabbing Sarah's phone off of her corpse outside. Additionally, in her final confrontation with the killer, Maddie plays dead until he approaches her, blinds him with hornet spray, and triggers her fire alarms. These alarms are modified for her, so they are much louder than the standard and flash strobe lights. Overwhelming him in this way allows her to wound him enough to the point that she can reach the corkscrew she uses to kill him in their final struggle as he attempts to pin her down and stab her. Maddie creates an environment that disables her attacker and enables her. This type of reversal is a clear example of the social model of disability portrayed to the extreme in the film.

Maddie's disability also helps with her survival because it enables what her mother calls her "writer brain" from a young age. Her deafness helps her to disconnect from the world around her to imagine all outcomes or different paths a situation may take much like how she writes different drafts for the endings of her novels. The disability quiets the noise and world around Maddie to let her focus only on her internal voice that works as a problem-solving mechanism. She uses her "writer brain" throughout the film to test out various actions in her head and make sense of what is the best choice for her survival. It plays a prominent role in the final act of the film when Maddie considers whether she should run, hide, or fight the killer after she sees him stab John and the two wander off in a struggle. During this moment, she realizes the only choice

she can make that has any chance of her surviving is to fight back. This entire plot device is a good example of what is called the supercrip trope. As disability scholar Sami Schalk recalls, a supercrip is someone who overcomes despite their disability or even because of some hyperability they possess due to their disability (Schalk 73-74). Maddie's "writer brain" fits this definition not only because it allows her to defeat the killer but also because it is the only time Maddie hears during the film, listening to her mother's mental voice to work through the different options and outcomes of any situation—implying that her "writer brain" is compensating for her lack of hearing following the illness that made her deaf.

The supercrip trope, despite showing disability having a positive effect, is a negative stereotype. Giving a disabled person superpowers is still separating them from the norm, it simply moves them from the negative end of Lennard Davis's bell curve to the positive end. However, as film scholar and critic Gwyneth Peaty emphasizes, *Hush* mitigates the negative implications of Maddie's "writer brain" by showing how Maddie is "a flawed, realistic character" who "makes mistakes and gets injured" throughout the film despite the advantage her deafness often gives her.

Another deaf protagonist is Regan from John Krasinski's 2018 film, *A Quiet Place*. In *A Quiet Place*, the world has become an apocalyptic landscape with creatures that are blind but have advanced hearing. Regan, a young teenager who is deaf, and her family have survived over a year in this new world largely because they can all communicate in sign language due to her disability. In contrast with Maddie, Regan does not fit the supercrip trope. If anything, her family, especially her father, treats her like a liability. Her father treats her this way due to an accident that happened earlier.

A couple of months after the world changed, the family is scavenging together, and one of the two younger sons finds a toy rocket he wants to keep. His father signals him to stop by approaching him slowly with his hands out in front of him almost as if the boy is carrying a gun or a bomb. The father carefully removes the batteries from the toy and shakes his head to indicate that the boy cannot have the toy. He signs to the boy, "Listen to me--too loud." However, later as the family is leaving, Regan grabs the rocket and gives it to her brother with a finger to her lips and a wink telling him to keep it a secret. Unknown to her, her little brother grabs the batteries that were removed and puts them back in. As they make their way home, the boy begins to play with the toy, and it makes loud rocket sounds that result in a monster carrying him away and killing him.

While the father claims he does not blame Regan, the event creates a rift between them. One expression of his true attitude towards Regan is his need to "cure" her deafness. In one scene Lee, the father, stops Regan from going into the basement. They argue about her not being able to go down there and when she signs asking him, "Why not?" he replies, "You know why." His avoidance for actually saying the reason suggests that it is because she cannot hear the sounds she might make, and this is reaffirmed by her rebuttal: "I'm not a child! I won't make a sound!" He again tells her no but follows up by offering her his latest attempt at making hearing aids from "small amplifiers from the stereo." Regan is obviously frustrated by what is the latest in a string of attempts as she signs, "It. Won't. Work." Even as he explains why they could be different this time, she cuts him off saying, "It. Never. Works." Lee responds by saying "but we will keep trying," and caressing Regan's face. Regan still tells him to stop and is clearly tired of the implication that she needs to be fixed. Her father's attitude is reminiscent of the medical model of disability. As philosophy and disability studies scholar Marija Todorovska points out,

the medical model refers to disability as physical or mental conditions which result in one being perceived as abnormal and requiring treatment to fix these conditions (183). Lee's attitude towards Regan mimics this sentiment in many other instances as well.

In another scene following shortly after the argument described above, Lee prepares to leave the farm to scavenge and teach Regan's surviving brother, Marcus, about survival in their new world. Marcus does not want to go on the trip and signs to his mother, Evelyn, "Please don't make me go." Yet, when Regan tries to tell Lee that she wants to go he tells her "to stay and help [her] mother." Only after Regan repeats that she wants to go does he finally reveal his true motive by responding, "Just stay here. You'll be safe." Lee's actions are hypocritical to say the least. If he wanted Regan to be safe and viewed her being deaf as more dangerous, then teaching her about survival with her deafness would make her safer than keeping her from the training. This dissonance further demonstrates how Lee embraces the medical model and views Regan as only being able to survive if she can somehow recover her hearing.

The film seems to support the father's idea that Regan is a liability. It features multiple moments where Regan makes sound without her knowledge of it or is implicated as the cause of danger for the family in general. In one scene, she and Marcus, her surviving younger brother, are playing Monopoly after dinner and as she reaches for money she knocks over their lantern creating a huge crash of glass and crackling fire that must be put out while the family also anticipates creatures coming. The creatures do not attack, but they do come closer to the farm. Even though this incident is not related to Regan's hearing, it follows a trend of her being considered a responsible party for conflict within the family. It especially echoes her part in her late brother's death, which was also not actually related to her deafness. Regardless of whether or not Regan could hear, she still had knowledge that the toy would make noise that is too loud.

This is why she gives her brother the toy without any batteries. Even if she could hear, this would not change the affection and nostalgia that motivate Regan to give her brother a toy that is a reminder of the old world. The father's overprotective attitude towards Regan's disability after the death implies her deafness leaves her not only unable to hear but unable to do anything.

It is because of this sentiment that Regan feels not only othered by her deafness but also isolated from the rest of her family. Film and disability scholar Dolphia Butler also notes this "alienation" (18). However, Butler notes Regan's resistance to the hearing aids her dad builds "pays homage to Deaf culture" (19). The film eventually takes a turn in Regan's favor. Just like Maddie's otherness ended up leaving her the only survivor in *Hush*, Regan's disability saves the family. After leaving on her own to visit her brother's grave while Lee and Marcus go for their training day, Regan encounters some of the creatures on her way back to the farm the family stays at. Unbeknownst to her, Evelyn, her mother, was injured and made noise that attracted the creatures to the area around the farm. Regan's skirmishes with them lead her to discover that the hearing aids her father made, which do not work, create a sort of feedback when the creatures try to use their sonic hearing. The sound is painful to Regan but also unbearable for the monsters. As a result, Regan's hearing aids save her multiple times including when she reunites with Marcus and saves them both after they become trapped with a creature in the grain silo. The film ends when Regan and Evelyn, who has just given birth, kill one of the creatures after the daughter combines the hearing aid with the basement's PA system to stun the monster and her mother shoots it with a shotgun. They set the system up again as the area's two remaining monsters approach on their network of cameras.

While many critics like Ashley Mendoza may say the family's rescue is more attributed to Lee who built the hearing aids than Regan (37), I argue the film uses the aids to position Lee

as misguided rather than heroic. The revelation surrounding Regan's hearing aids seems to reject the medical model viewpoint the film proffers in the beginning alongside Lee's own attitude. Yes, the hearing aids are initially meant to be a cure or way to fix Regan's deafness. However, they never work to do this. They actually fix what the father should have been focusing on this entire time: the monster problem. Regan's otherness is not a liability but actually reveals one of the few effective weapons against the creatures. She discovers the true use of the hearing aids as a weapon incidentally because she wears them for her father despite them not working. After only a couple of encounters with the monsters where she experiences the feedback caused in her "broken" hearing aids she realizes they are only broken if you view them as a cure for her. As-is, they are a perfectly functioning weapon against the creatures that plague the family. Neither Regan nor the hearing aids are broken; they simply appear that way in Lee's incorrect point of view. The film suggests he should think more socially rather than medically regarding disability.

The rejection of Lee's beliefs is further cemented in the film because he is the only member of the family to be killed during this conflict. He dies because he believes Regan and Marcus need him to save them after they become trapped in a car on the way back to their parents. He chooses to yell in order to draw one of the creatures to him and away from the children and sacrifice himself even though it is actually unnecessary. Lee acts based on the assumption that his children, especially Regan, are helpless. However, what he does not know is Regan is the family member with the greatest advantage against the monsters since her hearing aids can hurt them and force them to leave her alone. The father's ableism leads to his death. Again, those who are the Other survive while those who do not adopt otherness die.

The final deaf protagonist I examine is Ally from John R. Leonetti's 2019 film, *The Silence*. This film takes the underlying theme of using otherness for survival that both *Hush* and

A Quiet Place suggest and reveals it explicitly through the portrayal of Ally. Like Regan from *A Quiet Place*, Ally is a deaf teenager within a family struggling to survive in a world nearly identical to the one Regan's family also navigates. There are batlike creatures, accidentally released from caverns that have been sealed off for thousands of years, called vesps which are blind but hunt the humans using super-hearing. Consequently, people must learn to live in silence to survive. However, while Regan is consistently considered a liability for her deafness, Ally, as the only deaf member of her family, is somehow considered the leader. Furthermore, unlike Regan, Ally never has moments where her deafness causes her to make accidental noise endangering herself or her family. *The Silence* and its portrayal of Ally embody the social model to a fault: ignorance of the challenges the deaf face.

Similar to Maddie from *Hush*, Ally exemplifies the supercrip trope. Her family constantly looks to her for news, which she reads about on her tablet. What should be an everyday task that any of the family could do is somehow exaggerated into a special ability unique to Ally. Since she cannot hear, reading has been hyperbolized into a superpower only she has. This occurrence in itself is grounds for the supercrip label because it paints an ordinary task as an extraordinary accomplishment. Yet, Ally is given even more of the superhero treatment complete with a tragic backstory and brief flashback to the origin of her disability.

During the beginning of the film, before the apocalypse has begun, as Ally comes back inside from a talk with her grandmother, she overhears her parents talking and tells the viewers: "Three years ago, I lost my grandparents and my hearing." This narration is accompanied by a dramatized flashback to glimpses of bodies being thrown around in a car with the sounds of tires squealing and glass breaking. None of the other films I examine feature this type of dramatized origin story, and the scene feels like an odd choice more similar to what viewers might see in one

of many Batman films as they watch Bruce Wayne lose his parents and gain the motivation for his crimefighting. This film's direction quite literally puts the super in supercrip and establishes Ally as a special Other that is a known survivor.

Ally and her family surviving thanks to her being disabled is no secret theme. In fact, the film states it explicitly on two different occasions. In a scene directly following the family's first encounter with the monsters Ally seemingly talks to her family and the audience at once as she remarks, "I know how to live in silence. We all do." Additionally, at the end of the film, the family finds a group of survivors to the North. The final scenes cut to sometime in the future where Ally and her love interest Rob are hunting. Speaking directly to the audience again through narration, she questions if the monsters "will evolve and adapt like they did in the past" like they did after living in the dark caves for hundreds of years, and she wonders if "the rest of humanity will evolve in this new world of silence" just like she did when she became disabled. Ally truly epitomizes the idea of otherness being used for survival almost to the point that it feels unrealistic in *The Silence*.

Unlike *Hush* or *A Quiet Place*, *The Silence* does not curtail the supercrip trope in any way. Whereas both Maddie and Regan make mistakes and are flawed in their films, Ally never seems to make a mistake. Her deafness is never a liability. The only time it is somewhat shown to be negative is in the beginning of the film when some classmates are making fun of Ally literally behind her back when she cannot hear them. Chrys Weedon, Entertainment Editor of *The Western Howl*, shares this critical view of *The Silence* and Ally. Along with its problematic portrayal of deafness without any obstacles, it makes the odd choice to demonstrate this deafness with "sounds [being] muffled" or even "a sharp ringing noise." The film seems to forget its own title and never realizes it could show deafness simply with silence.

One of the more interesting aspects of the film, and a meaningful counterpart to Ally, is a group of cult-like survivors Ally's family fights off called The Hushed. Whereas Ally gains her ability to live in the new, silent world through an accident from her youth, The Hushed try to give themselves this same power. The entire group has cut out their tongues in order to live without speaking. The inclusion of The Hushed suggests even those who are not the Other may impose a disability upon themselves in order to survive.

Emulating Otherness and Confusing Metanarratives. Even in films that do not include a physically disabled protagonist, a common survival strategy is to don otherness. Susanne Bier's *Bird Box* and Fede Alvarez's *Don't Breathe* both use the idea of someone who is not othered creating or leveraging a disability to survive. The concept of creating disability for survival is seen most literally in *Bird Box*.

In 2018's *Bird Box*, much like *A Quiet Place* and *The Silence*, an apocalypse comes, but in this case invisible monsters appear. These monsters drive victims who see them, or at least their camouflaged forms, insane to the point that they kill themselves. The people in this world try many different alternatives to keep their sight. For instance, when the protagonist, Malorie, joins a group of survivors, they begin to wonder if the monsters can be safely viewed as images in mirrors, photographs, or videos. As one of the other survivors, Greg, says, "We can't look at whatever it is with the naked eye, but maybe we can with a translator." Malorie tries to talk him out of it because if what he suggests isn't true then he will most likely die. Sadly, this is exactly what happens to Greg. Consequently, the group eventually accepts the idea that they must wear blindfolds when going outside. The people of *Birdbox* must simulate blindness in order to survive in the new world order.

As part of this blindness, Malorie and her lover, Tom, create a system to survive using various other senses to guide them. One sense they use is hearing. In the beginning of the film, Malorie is pregnant, and she eventually meets another pregnant woman and is left in charge of both of their babies after that woman's death. Later in the film, only Malorie, Tom, and the two children are left as a group. One thing they do to work around their blindfolds is give the children bells to ring if they get separated or in trouble. Rather than trying to look for them, they will listen and follow the sound of the bells. This technique becomes especially important because the monsters actually imitate voices to tempt people to look at them. Near the end of the film as Malorie is on her way to a new safe haven with her two children, they encounter the creatures and Malorie hears the whispered tauntings of her sister, Jessica, who died when the apocalypse first began. The monsters, speaking with Jessica's voice, tell her to, "open [her] eyes" because she is "right here." They then use Tom's, her dead lover's, voice to shock her and cause her to trip, fall, and become separated from her children. The sound of the bells, which the monsters cannot imitate, helps to reunite them.

Another sense Malorie, Tom, and the children use rather than sight is touch. The group creates a tether with materials like fishing wire or bungie cord whenever they must explore outside of the house that they have made their base. During Malorie's journey with the children along the river, this pulley and tether system becomes crucial when they lose the blankets they packed, and she must shore the boat and find new supplies while the children stay behind. Malorie consistently references the tether as she runs back to the boat frantically when she senses there are monsters nearby. While this could be seen as a negative since it does show a vulnerability when one is without sight, the tether actually helps the portrayal of blindness to be more positive. The tether explains how blind people develop strategies to maneuver in daily life.

This is crucial to the authenticity of blind experience according to critic Kaiti Shelton, who has residual vision (55-56). Shelton also points out the importance of Malorie's motivation for wearing a blindfold.

The reason Malorie and the children are taking their journey is to find a supposed safe haven. At the end of the film, Malorie and the audience both see the group of successful survivors, which are largely made up of the blind and based in what used to be a school for the blind. The lasting message that can be inferred is that in this world one must either be blind or adopt blindness like Malorie did with her blindfold in order to survive. A person survives either by being the Other or using otherness as a survival tool. In the new world of *Bird Box*, those who do not limit their sight in some way like a blindfold will die from seeing the monsters. Only the blind are safe because even those with blindfolds can still be tempted to take them off and look. Blindness, what the ideology of ability considers a limitation or defect, becomes the only definitive safeguard against the creatures in *Bird Box*. Shelton distinguishes the motive of survival versus stunt as she discusses the "*Bird Box* Challenge" that followed the release of the film. Many social media users attempted to do various tasks that resulted in a wide range of consequences. All of these posts ignored the nuance of the blindfolded characters' motivation and also disregarded the training the actors who were blindfolded received (Shelton 56). Ultimately, the challenge perpetuated negative, medical model sentiments while the actual film embraces the social model of adapting to circumstances.

While Alvarez's *Don't Breathe*, released in 2016, does not involve an apocalypse or monsters like other films I examine, it does connect with the theme that an Other who would usually be considered weak actually has more agency than those without his disability. It embraces the social model of disability with an alarming twist. The film follows a trio of young

robbers named Alex, Rocky, and Money who steal from the rich in order to better their lives in the slums. What is supposed to be their last job goes horribly wrong as they realize that the blind man who they believe will be an easy target is actually a violent kidnapper, rapist, and murderer. In the beginning, it seems that the blind man is the Other given his disability and how he lives alone in a Detroit neighborhood that is basically abandoned. However, he actually has the advantage over the trespassers in many ways. He falls under the supercrip trope and is shown to have a superior sense of hearing as well as smell to find and hunt them down.

The blind man, who is not named in the film, goes beyond defending himself. When he first encounters Money, he believes he is the only robber. While pretending to be scared and meek, the man overpowers Money and takes his gun. Money lies to him about being the only trespasser, and the man shoots him in the head despite Money telling him he would just leave if allowed. Eventually, the man discovers there are other robbers by smelling their shoes in another room with a hypersensitive sense of smell that compensates for his lost sight. As the two remaining robbers, Rocky and Alex, continue to evade the man, the film reveals his true, sinister nature; consequently, any sense of sympathy the audience as well as the characters may have felt for him dwindles since he is not the true Other in the situation. While the world and viewesr initially see the man as inferior and pitiable since he is blind and all alone, an outdated view of the disabled, Alvaraz reveals he is the opposite of helpless despite his disability. Additionally, his isolation is at least partially motivated by the need to hide crimes he is committing.

While running from the man and trying to get the money he has hidden away, Rocky and Alex discover he has a young woman held hostage in his basement. As more scenes unfold the film reveals that the man has kidnapped the woman because she was responsible for the car accident that killed his daughter. Despite getting settlement money from her wealthy family, the

man kidnapped and impregnated her to give him another child since he believes she owes him one. Contrary to first appearance, it is Alex, Rocky, and Money who are the true Others of the film because they are isolated by circumstances beyond their control, their social class, rather than the blind man who uses the appearance of otherness to hide his malignance.

In the beginning of the film, the bleak Detroit setting is remarked on, and all three of the robbers talk about feeling alienated and compelled to leave the city. There is nothing left in Detroit for them, and their only prospects involve dangerous robberies. Money does not appear to have anyone tying him to the city except for Rocky, who is his girlfriend. Alex would like to leave with them and also has feelings for Rocky, but he does not want to leave his dad who he appears to take care of at least emotionally. Rocky, the final girl in the film, has the most motivation to leave. She lives with her mother in a verbally and fiscally abusive situation with very few resources beyond what Rocky can scrounge up to take care of herself and her younger sister who the mother ignores in favor of her boyfriend. They need one last heist to make the money to finally leave to find a place where they can belong. In this sense, the audience can feel sympathy for the robbers who desperately need the money they steal and have limited opportunities to better their lives legitimately in a society that others them according to their financial and social class.

The situational irony, how the role of Other is actually reversed from the initial premise, is best illustrated in the final moments of *Don't Breathe*. As Rocky, the only survivor of the group, prepares to leave town and start a new life with the money she took from the man, she sees a news story on the television at the station telling her that the blind man is still alive despite her leaving him for dead. Yet, no one else knows he is a killer because the news channel perpetuates the false narrative that he only defended himself from the robbers who he killed

inside his house. This metanarrative, the ideology of ability, recognizes the blind man as the Other. Rocky, Money, and Alex are vilified because the otherness that drives them to rob the man conflicts with that ideology, and society rejects the idea that they are Others. The audience as well as Rocky, are left with a sense of dramatic irony as the news anchor describes how inspirational it is that the war veteran, blinded in combat, single-handedly eliminated his attackers. By embracing the metanarrative that others him, the blind man is able to avoid the consequences for his actions and live to make a sequel, *Don't Breathe 2*. Unlike the previous films, it is not the protagonist of *Don't Breathe* who uses otherness to survive but the villain. Still as Alvarez reflects in an interview with *Film Journal International*'s Maitland McDonagh, he wants the audience to feel conflicted by this. Where most films have a clear person to root for, Alvarez says, "'the lines are kind of blurry here,'" and that makes the viewer unsure of "'how they want it to end'" (McDonagh).

The plot twist described above poses an intriguing question: Can those with cruel intent use otherness to benefit themselves? The events of *Don't Breathe* would suggest yes, and this is further supported by Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Us*.

Examining the Selfish Imitator. In 2017's *Get Out*, Chris is planning to visit Rose's, his girlfriend's, family for the first time. The conflict of the story arises from the fact that Chris is black while Rose and her family are white. The entire neighborhood that the family lives in is predominantly white and upper-class, which clearly delineates Chris as the Other. Chris anticipates this conflict from the beginning of the film where he asks Rose if she has told her family he is black. He is worried by how the family may perceive him as unworthy of Rose. The matter of race in the neighborhood is further complicated by the presence of very few other black individuals. The handful of other black individuals work as servants for the family such as

Georgina or Walter or are weird consorts like Logan who Chris meets at a lunchtime party. All of these black characters surprise Chris by acting strangely formal or almost like they are being held hostage. What Chris does not know is that they actually are hostages though not in the way he thinks.

The neighborhood is not simply keeping the black individuals there against their will; Rose's family has developed a procedure that is allowing their neighbors to inhabit the bodies of the black visitors—trapping the original person within their own mind. The original mind is down in what Rose's mom calls "the sunken place." They can see what is happening, but their consciousness is buried and has no control over their body anymore. The family and neighbors believe that there are many genetic factors that actually make the black population stronger. They demonstrate this belief in various parts of the film. First, when Chris and Rose arrive at her family's home, Rose's father is showing Chris old pictures, and they discuss how Rose's grandfather competed in the Olympics only to be beaten by a black contestant named Jessie Owens who made history by competing and winning in Berlin right in front of Hitler. The implication is that Jessie Owens won because being black gave him a physique that made him better at running than the grandfather. Later, when Chris meets Rose's brother named Jeremy during dinner, Jeremy is obsessed with what sports Chris plays and tries to goad him into fighting him since he knows Chris could be a "beast" in MMA or UFC if he trains the right way. Again, the implication is that Chris has a natural figure that would make him better at sports due to his race.

Just like the people of *Bird Box* wear their blindfolds or how the blind man in *Don't Breathe* can hide his killer nature behind a meek martyr archetype, the people who pay for what is called the Coagula procedure want to wear blackness or otherness. They want this because

they believe it will help them benefit in a world that they believe now privileges blackness. They fear that they are now the minority in a world full of Others. They do not want to be othered, so they adopt blackness, what they believe to be the majority now, to avoid that. However, unlike the previous films, the villains in *Get Out* adopt otherness for personal gain rather than survival.

During his visit, Chris consistently attempts to compartmentalize the part of himself, his otherness, that has been suspicious and somewhat afraid of the white family and neighborhood. Even when his initial worries about Rose's family treating him differently than her other boyfriends are proven true during the awkward welcome he has with her father or the fight her brother tries to start with him, Chris remains composed and resists the urge to lash out at any of their microagressions or even tell Rose "I told you so." In a weird way, his best friend, Rod, symbolizes the suspicion Chris tries to distance himself from when he visits the family. Chris talks to Rod multiple times throughout the film, and Rod is always very forward about his conspiracy theories regarding the situation Chris has placed himself. He thinks Rose's family is part of a cult and making black people into sex slaves or other similar theories. Chris laughs this off. The way Rod is discredited as crazy or paranoid relates back to the idea of how minority identities are othered using mental disability. When Chris tells Rod about how weird Logan acted at the party Rod is the one to identify him as a missing man named Dre. Additionally, Rod tries to tell Chris to be more careful around Rose's mother who is known for her hypnotherapy. He partially predicts how she uses this ability to keep the black visitors captive as they undergo the mind implantation process. Finally, it is Rod who shows up in the end to help Chris escape as he fights his way out of the Armitage's house and kills the family one by one when they attack him. The white people in the film think that they can benefit by coopting black identity to bolster

their athleticism or style, but this leads to their downfall when they are confronted by black individuals who truly are othered like Rod and Chris.

Although the premise of *Get Out* is terrifying, the conclusion of the film is somewhat hopeful. Those who try to exploit the culture of Others and imitate them for purely selfish reasons will be held accountable so long as the minority identities they steal from are vigilant. The same cannot be said for Jordan Peele's follow-up film from 2019, *Us*. This film features the concept of the Other more prominently than any of the other films I examine. It uses an apocalyptic event similar to other films in this study, but in the world of *Us* Addy, her husband, and their children must face off against murderous doppelgangers.

The doppelgangers in *Us* are a clear representation of Others as oppressed people who seek equality. They were inexplicably born and live in an underground system of tunnels reminiscent of the Underground Railroad during periods of slavery in the United States. They live parallel lives to their aboveground counterparts that mirror each choice and event they experience but with a darker, traumatic twist. Because of this inequality, the doppelgangers have made a coordinated plot to overthrow the versions of them who got to live with the luxuries they did not have. This symbolism is made clearer when Addy's family first encounters their unfortunate doubles. When asked who they are, Red responds, "We're Americans." This line plays on the flawed foundation that all Americans are treated equally and have equal rights and opportunities. Red quickly debunks this myth as she describes the difference of experiences that she and Addy have had throughout their parallel lives. While Addy enjoyed delicious food aboveground, Red "had to eat rabbit raw and bloody." When Addy got toys that were "soft and cushy" Red received toys that "were so sharp and cold, they'd slice through her fingers." This difference of privilege is echoed as Red and Addy meet for a final battle and Red wonders aloud,

"How it must have been to grow up with the sky. To feel the sun, the wind, the trees." She tells Addy, "But your people took it for granted. We're human too, you know." Finally, in explaining her plans, Red says, "I needed to make a statement that the whole world would see. It's our time now. Our time up there." This solidifies the doppelgangers' motives for killing their privileged doubles, and it calls back to the ideas Kenneth Burke puts forward. In identification there is inevitably division. For one group to come together and identify with each other they must isolate and exclude all who do not belong.

On the surface, *Us* supports the same trend that I have extrapolated from all of these texts: otherness can be used as a tool either for survival or for personal gain. The struggle between Addy's family and their doppelgangers lasts the entire film. Ultimately, Addy is able to kill Red by embracing a similar anger and brute strength that the doppelgangers possess, stabbing her with her own shears. Yet, something appears to be not right in this ending. This appears to be a tale of adopting otherness to survive. However, it is an extension of Peele's hypothetical question from *Get Out* that I previously posed as well: What if people with bad intentions can use otherness to hide their true nature and benefit from being the Other?

"Addy" is the perfect answer to this question in *Us*. The film opens with a scene showing a young Addy wandering away from her father while at the Santa Cruz boardwalk. She eventually goes into the mirror maze called "Vision Quest: Find Yourself" as it begins to storm. The power to the attraction goes out, and she becomes stuck in the maze until she sees a reflection of herself. Her eyes widen and she runs away at the sight of the young doppelganger that will eventually find and torment her later when they are both grown women. Young Addy is traumatized and will not speak for a long time after the experience, or so Peele makes the audience believe.

At the end of the film, as "Addy" finally kills her doppelganger, Red, down in the tunnels where she comes from, she begins laughing. Later, after Addy finds Jason, her son who Red kidnaps and takes down to the tunnels, and she brings him back to the rest of their family, Jason stares at his mother as if unsure that she is really herself. "Addy" side-eyes him and slowly smiles, and the audience finally sees her memories of what happened when she was young. The young doppelganger chokes Addy and drags her down to the tunnels before going back aboveground and taking her place. The narrative that Peele feeds to the viewers in the beginning of the film is not the truth. The "Addy" that audiences cheer for this whole time is not a hero, and "Red" was not some inherently evil twin to despise. The signs of the switch are planted throughout the film. From "Red" knowing where the spare key to Addy's grandmother's old home was to "Addy" violently killing another of the doppelgangers with their own scissors—a signature detail that differentiated the doppelgangers from their counterparts on the surface land. There was even the fact that "Red" was the only doppelganger who could actually speak and not only communicate with guttural noises or screams, which is one of the other key differences between who was or was not an underground double. Usually those born in the underground have no voice. This disability is a literal metaphor for how Others are often silenced. This fact about doppelgangers also helps explain why "Addy" cannot talk after the event in the hall of mirrors. The young doppelganger has to learn to speak after she begins living aboveground. Watchful viewers could anticipate this plot twist, but many could be too trusting in the established narrative that was given to them at the beginning of the film. Where Peele's *Get Out* showed that the white people could not simply adopt otherness without consequences, *Us* is more pessimistic. The true Red imitates Addy for the majority of both their lives and succeeds.

The line between who is Other and who is not is so blurred the viewer cannot tell who is the Other.

Overall, all of the films I examine demonstrate the usefulness of otherness. In some cases, this is represented by a disabled protagonist who finds themselves in a world where their disability helps them survive. This represents a shift in thinking from the medical model of disability to the social model. In other cases, otherness is imitated either for survival or for personal gain. These films often demonstrate how those who attempt to coopt otherness with malicious intent will face consequences like the Hushed in *The Silence* or those who partake in the Coagula procedure from *Get Out*. Yet, the twist in *Us* seems to question if this will remain true as audiences and society struggle to differentiate the Other from the selfish imitator. It is this line of thought that leads to real-life implications of this film analysis.

IDENTITY CRISIS: CONTEMPORARY HORROR'S AMBIGUOUS OTHER

> I think all great horror has a social message of some sort. When it works, it's because it's tapping into something that we're suppressing. As a society, as individuals. Horror is often grounded… it allows something crazy to be going on, but you try to marry it with reality. —Jordan Peele, "The Duality of Us," *Us*

The films I examine all demonstrate that otherness is now used as a rhetorical tool for personal gain. However, the audience's reaction to this gain varies depending on if one simply benefits by being an Other or if one imitates otherness for one's own benefit. When faced with the latter, there is an even greater distinction between those who imitate otherness for survival versus selfish greed.

Authority, Ethos, and Virtuosity: Byproducts of Being the Contemporary Other

Reflecting back on the teaching experience I described earlier in Chapter 2, one of the byproducts of my otherness that I used was ethos, an appeal to authority, character, or expertise. As a teacher, I already have a degree of authority over my students. Authority is my sense of power or right to be in charge. They look to me as an expert not only on my subject but school procedures, news, and life in general. Beyond my status as a teacher, my minority identity, my otherness, allows me to talk to my students about certain topics with an authority that other teachers may lack. For instance, when my students say things to each other that are not only hurtful but borderline discriminatory, I can address the behavior more effectively since I am a minority. Many of my students who are minorities think their identity gives them the right to say offensive things about their own minority group, but I can correct this behavior by pointing to

the behavior I model to them as a fellow minority. They are more receptive of the correction since I have a shared minority experience.

Why would otherness grant me this authority or expert status? In the past, otherness would do the opposite, and people could discredit each other by trying to use otherness to imply the Other's experiences were not trustworthy. The thriller protagonist is a good example of this as an Other who is an unreliable point-of-view. However, for those who are truly othered, visibility and the recognition of their experiences has become a staple in society that seeks to become more understanding, diverse, and equitable. Lived experience and testimonials from various Others help to educate those who do not experience the same alienation, isolation, and discrimination. The Other is no longer someone people should listen to due to pity but because they have a unique perspective. Rather than discrediting people, otherness grants authority just like it does for me in the classroom.

The authority that is attributed to otherness now is what allows the Other to appeal to ethos. In many cases, this appeal may not even be intentional by the Other, and just a natural result of being an Other. This authority can be beneficial, but it can also be a burden. Minorities are often expected to educate those around them about their identity, and this is another example of how they are given authority. They are viewed as experts on their entire demographic and feel the burden of teaching others about their otherness. For instance, as a gay man, many people will ask me about what that experience is like, and in some cases even ask about aspects of what they view as gay culture that I really have no connection to or knowledge of.

One outcome of otherness that feeds into its authority and ethos is the perception of virtuousness. In the horror films I analyze, disability is used to symbolize otherness. Within an ideology of ableism, this type of otherness is read by viewers as a weakness. Therefore, it

produces an unintended emotional response to the Other: pity. Over time, the Other stops being a monster and begins to be seen as a pitiable figure. As society sees them struggle to live and persevere despite their disenfranchisement, pity begins to turn into admiration. This is similar to how later slasher films feature final girls who are different from the majority of their peers. They are the last survivor and the audience pities and admires them while they watch the final girls struggle to survive. The Other is not just a negative deviant separated from civilized society but is also now a virtuous victim who has endured much hardship under systemic alienation and discrimination.

An important distinction to note is that the virtuous Other does not intend to use their status for their own gain despite often unintentionally benefiting from the virtuousness, ethos, and authority attributed to otherness. For instance, the final girl, a representation of the virtuous Other, does not embrace the benefits this perception of virtuousness brings her; she is simply trying to live her life. A perfect example of this is Sydney Prescott from the *Scream* franchise. In later entries to the series, she is looked at in awe for having survived all of the many attempts on her life, and many reporters try to capitalize on her trauma for inspiration-craving audiences. While third parties can marvel at the final girl's situation and even show jealousy at the admiration she receives, they are tone deaf and completely disregard the true hardship she has experienced. These attention-seeking and power-hungry individuals want to use the Other's ethos and authority for the natural result of virtuosity, ethos, and authority: clout.

Clout and Protection: The Motivation of Imitating the Other

The films I analyzed portrayed three iterations of the Other. The Other who simply by existing gained some sort of benefit or advantage, those who imitated the Other for survival, and

those who imitated the Other for personal gain. Individuals who belong to the last category are judged by the audience for their selfish motivation: power. At its simplest, clout refers to someone's power or influence. Those who are not the Other are beginning to observe the power otherness has gained as attitudes towards it have shifted from repulsion to admiration. The pity the Other receives and the corresponding virtuosity attributed to otherness are partially what can explain this power. The virtuous are seen as remarkable, and this admiration gives them esteem or respect simply for living as the Other. For example, in the films I analyze many of the deaf protagonists were revered by the hearing characters.

In *Hush*, Maddie's neighbor, Sarah, was fascinated by her ability to use sign language as well as her writing abilities. Yet, to Maddie, these are commonplace skills she uses for her daily life and career. The fact that Sarah asks her about both of these aspects of her life at the same time even suggests Sarah connects the disability with Maddie's writing skills—painting her as a supercrip—even though the connection is tenuous at best. Whether Maddie wants to be friends with Sarah or not, her otherness draws Sarah to her, and she has sway over how Sarah perceives deaf people as a whole. Maddie also helps Sarah learn new signs and, in that sense, directly controls her understanding of sign language. This power, as mentioned earlier when I discussed authority, can also be a burden since Maddie's interactions with Sarah force her into a teacher role.

Ally, the deaf teenage daughter in *The Silence*, is also given a teaching role. In fact, she is a great example of how the Other's authority and ethos result in clout. Ally's family never seem to regard her disability as a negative thing. She became deaf after a car accident that also killed her grandparents, but the family does not view her deafness as tragic. Early in the film, as the family realizes the monsters they now face cannot see and rely on hearing, Ally's ability to

communicate silently is clearly established as an asset. For some reason that is never fully explained, the family comes to rely on her for news and information about what is happening. She has an iPad that she took with her when they left their home, and throughout the film she provides the family with updates. Why this is her job or why her family members act like she is the only one who can do this job is unclear. The implication is, because her deafness gives her an advantage in the new world, she should be a leader. The writers use this completely banal ability to cement Ally as a supercrip. She has clout over what the family does because of this job that is awarded to her simply due to her otherness. The ending of the film reinforces Ally's power by stating humanity will either have to continue to adapt like Ally did when her world changed after the accident, or they would die out. Ally and *The Silence* provide a hyperbolized view of the esteem granted to the contemporary Other for simply existing.

Therefore, in their quest for that clout, many who imitate the Other do so by playing the victim. Imitators see otherness as victimhood and try to use victimhood to falsely other themselves. Gender studies and social theory scholar David Savran observes this trend and predicts its future rhetorical popularity as he describes white masculinity during the late 1900's. He refers to the militant white male as a masochist who "gains a certain authority by proving that he or she can take whatever is being dished out" (Savran). The white male tries to play the victim to "enforce his will" (Savran) against the Others that he sees as a threat to his power such as feminists, homosexuals, persons-of-color, etc. He distorts his rival identities' quests for equality into an attack on his identity to gain sympathy for himself, impede their progress, and maintain his current privileged position. If the white male creates a narrative where he is the victim, then these Others are perceived as the oppressors. He uses this rhetoric for personal gain. He is able to maintain the current ideology that keeps him in power. For the white male and other majorities,

victimhood is something to don when needed to attack any Other that steps out of their place in the power dynamic. The victimhood and virtuosity otherness brings are a "lambskin he wears [hiding] a wolf" (Savran). The malicious individual recognizes how otherness can be used as a shield but weaponizes that shield for personal gain when given the chance.

Even when the imitators cannot weaponize otherness, at their most passive, they can use it for protection. Alienation and isolation are a natural human fear, and one of the biggest threats individuals face in a contemporary, digital society. Cancel culture is the most recent form of these Burkean concepts, and the fear of being canceled is one motivation behind imitating otherness for personal gain. To summarize acclaimed author and psychology scholar Rob Henderson, cancel culture is the phenomenon of trying to take away someone's power or career because of a behavior or past action that is now perceived as immoral. As he notes, the trend has been beneficial in catching many predators like Bill Cosby or Harvey Weinstein and helped "impose long overdue consequences for unacceptable behavior" (Henderson 37). However, cancel culture is also very flawed because it does not fully account for how cultural attitudes shift over time, and it can "stifle debate" (Henderson 37) because it calls for near-instant action against the party that has been assumed guilty.

Cancel culture is so dangerous because it feeds on the human instinct "to seek connection and belonging" (Henderson 36). By identifying a public enemy and taking part in their cancelation, individuals can feel that they belong to the larger group that are all alienating the cancelled person. This idea is supported by Burke's idea that identification will naturally create division. In effect, cancel culture is used to identify who should be the new monstrous Other based on moral deviance. Because minorities, who were once conflated with the monstrous

Other, are now seen as the virtuous Other, the mob majority requires a new scapegoat to retain its cohesion and power.

Aside from seeking clout, one reason people imitate otherness selfishly is for protection against cancel culture. Because this culture is so steeped in fixing the wrongdoings of the past, an imitator can try to discredit this new system by portraying themselves as one who has also been wronged, the Other who is now deemed virtuous. For example, acclaimed actor Kevin Spacey was cancelled in 2017 when allegations were made that he had solicited sex and even assaulted a fellow actor, who was a minor at the time, in 1986. Many other allegations from various people followed. In the wake of the initial allegations, Spacey responded by giving an interview where he tried to apologize for any actions he may have made while drunk, labeled the situation as a misunderstanding, and announced he is gay. Spacey, regardless of whether he truly belongs to this minority group, sought the protection he thought the reveal would give him. The gay community is often misrepresented as pedophilic, and one might think supporters of gay rights would come to the aid of a gay man accused of this stereotyped behavior. In Spacey's case, it did not help him since the public saw the choice as deliberate imitation of otherness for personal gain.

Spacey's situation is incredibly complex, and the implications of it require some clarification. It is reasonable to ask if Spacey's coming out might not be considered imitation for personal gain but for survival, which usually garners the support of the viewer. When faced with cancellation, something that could be equated to social execution, would this tactic not be similar to the blindfolds in *Birdbox*? If Spacey really is a gay man, is it wrong of him to use the power his new virtuous status would give him? Can the public ever really judge if Spacey is a real Other or simply an imitator? How should the public treat him now that the court has ruled in his

favor on two separate occasions against the allegations? The answer is ambiguous. No one can truly know if Spacey is gay or just came out to try to avoid the alienation of cancel culture. Although the films I analyze suggest those who attempt to coopt otherness with malicious intent should and will face consequences, some of the films, like *Don't Breathe* and *Us*, reflect the idea that people may no longer be able to identify who is the Other and who is the imitator. Under cancel culture, the public often cannot even decide if someone deserves to be canceled or not, and this ambiguity is horrifying.

CONCLUSION

After examining the trend of using disability in contemporary horror films using the lens of Burke's identification and the concept of the Other, I find that the films use disability as a symbol for otherness. Historically, the Other has been represented in horror films in a multitude of ways: monsters that challenge the very systems of what is possible and threaten society, protagonists to be pitied for how their senses are used to trick them as well as viewers, mass threats to the world as we know it like zombies or natural disasters, and opposing twin others like the killer and final girl representing the conflicting deviance and virtuousness of otherness.

The films I analyze demonstrate that disability can be used effectively as a rhetorical tool. These films portray disabled protagonists who survive because of their disabilities, their otherness, rather than in spite of them, and promote the social model of disability. They question if those who are not othered can imitate otherness to help themselves. If the motive is for survival, like in *Bird Box*, the answer seems to be yes. However, the films also illustrate that those with bad intentions can also use otherness. Films like *Get Out* scrutinize this practice and show that there will be consequences for it. Still, *Us* questions if those who use otherness in bad faith will eventually reap the benefits without any punishment as it becomes harder to distinguish who is the imitated Other from the true Other.

My analysis of these films illustrates a critical change in attitudes towards the Other. While the Other was once easily identified and alienated because their otherness was deviant and made them clearly inferior, as the medical model of disability would say, new representations of disability in horror films demonstrate how both disability and otherness have been slowly disengaged from negative connotations. Disability in these films is often shown as an asset, and

otherness is now nearly impossible to identify. The Other horrifies us now because we cannot tell who is the Other and whether or not the Other is a negative phenomenon. How can something be negative if many people desire to imitate it? Who is or is not imitating? These questions haunt the public subconscious.

The implications of this analysis reflect current rhetorical patterns using authority, ethos, virtuosity, and clout. Otherness has become recognized not as pitiable but virtuous due to the plight of minority identities. As a result, many individuals claim otherness in order to portray themselves as a victim and enjoy the benefit of the authority and clout it provides. At its most aggressive, this clout is used by those who have enjoyed power historically in the majority to vilify the true Other that is threatening to shift the power dynamic. These militant individuals and groups take what serves as a shield for the Other and weaponize it for themselves. On the other hand, imitators use this clout passively for protection against alienating cancel culture. The ambiguity of who is and is not the Other, and the question of whether anyone should be able to use the clout that otherness now possesses are a hereto unsolvable problem. In a current climate of identity crisis, the resolution of this conflict, much like that of Alvarez's *Don't Breathe*, will just have to wait for a sequel.

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