

The Importance of the Proletariat Monster

One of the most difficult questions about the horror genre is “why horror?” What is it that keeps audiences returning for gore and the grotesque? Robin Wood’s essay, “The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s”, provides an explanation of this fascination using Freudian psychoanalysis. Wood demonstrates that horror films are a way for us to release the *surplus* repression that “makes us into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists” (Wood 25). Wood then comes to the conclusion that “central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral condition teaches us to revere” (32).

It is quite clear in Wood’s article that the idea of repression caused by the oppression of bourgeoisie ideologies is central to horror films. As Wood develops his argument, he identifies the *proletariat* as a monster figure, an “Other” that “bourgeoisie ideology cannot recognize, but must deal with” (27). This paper will analyze a sample of three notable horror films, Erle C. Kenton’s *Island of Lost Souls*, Jack Clayton’s *The Innocents*, and Brian De Palma’s *Carrie*, to demonstrate how the model of interaction between the monstrous and dehumanized proletarian “Other,” and its bourgeoisie oppressor, not only demonstrates Wood’s theory about the release of surplus repression, but also how it appeals to an audience’s desire to release basic repression: our violent and primal frustrations towards a larger, demeaning force, and the need to see its destruction. It is not enough that the monster visually and characteristically embodies our repressed desires (cat-like claws for repressed female sexuality); it must also carry with it a horrific physical vengeance that will stop at nothing to become larger and more destructive than the force that oppresses it.

The first film that demonstrates the proletariat “Other” backlash is Erle C. Kenton’s *Island of Lost Souls*, where the monster takes the form of animal creatures under the bourgeois

“law” of Dr. Moreau. The bourgeoisie character model is only embodied in human characters such as Edward, Ruth, and Dr. Moreau, who are often depicted in pure white and partaking in what would be considered elite activities: smoking pipes and drinking tea, characteristics that place them as a dominant and manipulative force over the dehumanized proletariat “lower class” animals. This can be applied to basic repressed desires, as it connects to the repression of frustrated animal tendencies that coincide with the oppression of bourgeoisie dehumanization, the response to being demeaned and belittled by a larger force. This release of the basic repression is, of course, in the concluding scene where the animal creatures destroy their oppressor by violently tearing him apart with his own tools. These sympathetic proletariat monsters come with a violent vengeance that will mercilessly rip apart and destroy the bourgeoisie social norms that keep them from developing their human experience.

Jack Klayton’s *The Innocents* also provides this tension between bourgeois forces and the sympathetic proletariat monster. To understand this, we must look at the two spirit hauntings as part of Miss Giddens’ psyche, her repressed and violent feelings towards wealthy bourgeois constructs. The two spirits, Miss Jessel and Quint, are considered to be “low” people, both morally and economically; they were known for sharing intimate relations in front of the children and other domestic workers. Even Miss Giddens mentions her small house and the rough economic status of her childhood. Certainly they can be seen as sexually repressed monsters oppressed by the rich bourgeoisie constructs of their wealthy employer. The fact that the refined and bourgeois-like Miles authoritatively calls Miss Giddens a dirty hussy while an image of Quint appears in the window demonstrates her repressed violence toward the children, their belittling and dehumanization of her, and their privileges as part of the bourgeoisie class. The psychological breaking of Flora and the death of Miles are not as violent as the uprising in the *Island of Lost Souls*, but because they are the violation and the ruin of children, it makes it even more disturbing. However, this should not be taken as a desire for the destruction of children, but rather the stuffy propriety and oppression of the upper class: the “innocents,” or those who are perfectly without fault or shame, unlike the proletariat class.

Another prime example of the proletariat monster is found in Brian De Palma's *Carrie*. Here, the bourgeoisie and proletariat interaction is measured on the scale of high school hierarchy, particularly high school *female* hierarchy. In beginning of the film, we get the sense that Carrie White is oppressed by the flashy and sexually dominating girls of the school, most notably Chris Hargenson. Carrie is classified as a lower social class "freak" who is known as the girl whose mother goes door to door preaching and collecting donations. What makes this link even more apparent is the disgust that the popular girls have with Carrie's menstrual blood being wiped on their clean clothes, as it demonstrates being oppressed by the bourgeoisie obsession with cleanliness, "which psychologically shows to be an outward symptom closely associated with sexual repression, and bourgeoisie sexual repression itself, finding their inverse reflections in the myths of working-class squalor and sexuality" (Wood 27-28). The bourgeois girls of the locker room are repulsed by Carrie's sexuality as a socially unrefined (proletariat) individual, and Carrie's transcending of her social class by going to the Prom with Tommy Ross prompts the bourgeoisie to suppress and dehumanize by extinguishing her humanity with the blood of a pig. Carrie's repressed sexuality finally backlashes in a way that demonstrates both the fantastical release of surplus repression (sexual power), and our primal desire to see the oppressive bourgeoisie smashed to pieces in a violent manner: the longing for a vicious and destructive backlash of human sexuality.

Certainly, Wood's explanation of horror movies as fantastical representations of our surplus repression is valid; however, one must acknowledge the appeal of horror movies to basic repression as well, or the things that keep us from being violent, out-of-control animals. This idea is very prominent in the horror movie proletariat "Other," and the struggle between a larger, dominating force and weaker force made insignificant. We desire to see a backlash at these dominating forces in a horrifying (but safe) way. The monster cannot only embody our repressed desires through powers or a disturbing aesthetic; it must also carry with it an unbridled, monstrous violence that will stop at nothing to smash the larger force that inhibits the development of its humanity.

Works Cited

- Wood, Robin. "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s" *Horror, the Film Reader*. Ed. Mark Jancovich. London: Routledge, 2002. 25-32. Print.