

American "Othering" In Wartime Horror Cinema

When America panics over the possible loss to an outside threat, we internalize it against each other and create a demonized American "other". We can directly trace our division into horror films, where we take real life threats on our country and converted it to entertainment, formed to fit a 2-hour-long fight for survival with a deserving victor and an ending that makes sense. Our nation has perfected the ability to "other" ourselves, as we've never had an overwhelming majority. Constantly battling with stubborn internal oppositions: patriots versus British loyalists, Confederacy versus Union, which only transformed into North versus South, and Republicans versus Democrats, America never really unites as just one people. Escalating this, and making a hierarchy of othering, is a paradox of Americans balancing individualism or community cooperation.

At the top of America's inverted otherness hierarchy is America against other nations, but the all-too-real threat of international conflict has Americans preferring to find an internal battle, easier for them to fight themselves. By the 1960s, Americans were realizing the reality of the Vietnam War. Too many resources were spent on this fight already and it wasn't even half-way over. America was supposed to have the upper hand- more equipment, more training, democracy and God on their side, but the Viet-Cong weren't weakening at all. In fact, their forces kept growing as ours were running out of resources. Panic began to set in; people, especially the younger generations and the hippies, were starting to ask how many people the government would sacrifice for this unjust war. Adult Americans were choosing whether or not to support their government and that choice came with a side. Americans were paranoid of their neighbors, terrified of the future, and confused at the Viet-Cong's strength. After all, they were just dirty

backwoods people, who had nowhere near the weapons the soldiers had, and yet they were still holding their own (Blake, 2012). In 1964, the movie *Two Thousand Maniacs* brought this frustration and confusion to a more entertaining light. Converting the Cong threat to one we're more familiar with, Herschell Lewis reminded America of their own deviant backwoods neighbors and reminded the modern American that not all was forgiven and the South never forgets.

Two Thousand Maniacs (TTM) introduced the tradition of heartland horror. McCollum explains heartland horror as the exploitation of America's rural badlands also known as, "its sick, sordid, malevolent, nasty underbelly" (McCollum, 2016. pg 15). "The United States has a very long history of representing the inhabitants of its own isolated rural places or backwoods communities as monstrous, grotesque, diseased and polluted" (Blake, 2012. Pg 128). Rednecks were now America's savages, meant to be ignored and left alone with their unfamiliar land. Mainland America still knew they were there, of course, but what they knew of they didn't like. Backwoodsmen were far disconnected from society, outside the grips of government and "a mongrel breed, half civilized and half savage" (Blake, 2012. Pg 128). Proof of a lack of humanity is their connection to and skill in hunting, choosing to stay close to the forest to collect innocent blood. Heartland horror opens the screen up to inform us of the unfamiliar, remind us of the mongrel breed, and remind the audience just how different these people are from us. *TTM's* premise is of six Northern youths being tricked to come down to the deep South to celebrate a Centennial celebration that, in reality, is the chance for the town to get revenge from the Civil War. No stereotypes were off limits, Lewis portrays the Southern residents as low-brow banjo-playing humanoids out for blood. They brutally hunt and murder four of the Northerners

before the last two are able to outwit them and escape. Rednecks are the absolute American "other", making heartland horror or "hick flick horror" a go-to when America needs a domestic scapegoat.

America now is going through a period very similar to that of Vietnam. The heartache of 9/11 caused another unending, unwinnable, and likely unjust war. The nation is just as divided as ever and, as expected, that has meant a return to hick horror (McCollum, 2016). To show the return to Southern othering, I'll be analyzing *Wrong Turn*. In this paper, I'll be comparing it against another form of othering, the community. While both are forms of "othering" Americans, the distance from the intended other creates different forms of how it's shown through horror films. I'll be displaying these differences by analyzing the portrayal of the "other", killer's motives, the victims, and the final survival.

The beginning of *Wrong Turn* gives background information by combining the credits with pictures of backwoods, dead bodies and missing people's signs, and newspaper clippings and articles about the cannibals. Snapshots tell us they're deformed from inbreeding, are resistant to pain, have increased strength and psychosis. The main characters of the film are six college kids who break down on a back road in West Virginia. A car containing a pre-med student named Chris, on his way to a residency interview, hits a car already broken down containing the five other students. The five others: Carly, Jessie, Francine, Evan, and Scott, are all stranded because they ran over barbed wire that was lying over the road. All but Francine and Evan start walking down the road in an attempt to find a phone or someone to help. It's introduced that Francine and Evan are a couple and Carly and Scott are engaged, with Jessie's breakup being the

Brooks,

American Othering

reason for their vacation. While staying with the cars, Francine and Evan smoke weed, have sex, and steal from the doctor's car before Evan suddenly disappears leaving Francine alone and searching. She finds Evan's bloody ear before a large being grabs her from behind and chokes Francine with an animal foot trap (similar to a bear trap without the spikes). The scene cuts back to the other four who have just found a cabin surrounded by junk and a variety of cars. They call out for help and knock a few times before deciding no one's home and they should go inside to find a phone. Jessie, "You can't go barging into someone's house like that."

Carly, "Well, I have to pee"

Scott, "Well, I have to remind you of a movie called *Deliverance*." *Deliverance* is a classic urbanoia/heartland horror film, so this reference creates a homage to *Wrong Turn*'s inspiration as well as creating a sense of danger for audience members. They enter the cabin and find the inside is tiny and filthy. The camera zooms in on rotten food that doesn't resemble anything we're used to eating and a pile of bones. The students look around, finding random belongings that the audience recognizes from the missing persons posters in the credits. They play with and joke about everything until they find body parts in jars. Carly finds the bathroom and discovers a body in the bathtub so they finally start to panic and try to leave, but a tow truck is pulling up in the driveway. Carly and Scott hide in a closet while Jessie and Chris hide under a bed. The camera focuses on one of the cannibal's sneakers as they walk in and stays low to the ground to lightly mimic Jessie and Chris' view, rising just enough to show the cannibal's hand showing a bloody saw. The cannibal drops Francine's body directly in front of the bed switching the angle to shot-reverse-shot between Francine's lifeless gaze and Chris and Jessie's reaction. The cannibal drags Francine to the kitchen table and picks up butchering tools. The camera focuses in

through the closet's keyhole and into Carly's eye, which is reflecting the first cuts into Francine. It then switches to extreme close ups of parts of the cannibal's faces as they butcher. There's a close up of one cannibal—Saw Tooth's—ragged and decaying teeth. It then zooms out to show Threefinger moaning in delight as he butchers. As we finally get to see the cannibals, they're portrayed exactly as you would expect from a hick flick.

Urbanoia is the term that would explain the depiction of the cannibals. Clover explains the portrayal down to a T. "Represented as adult males with no ascertainable family attachments... country people live beyond the reaches of social law." (Clover, 1992. Pg. 125). Clover accurately predicts their lack of hygiene, rotten teeth, dirty clothes, and slow mannerisms. Throughout the movie, they're portrayed as unintelligent and can't even speak English. Clover also points out the poverty of the country man and it's direct struggle with social class. Just as the students are obviously much more well-off than the cannibals, they're also part of the cannibal's exploitation. In *Wrong Turn 2: Dead End* it's explained that a large metropolitan company used the woods to spill their chemical waste, creating a lack of wildlife and leading the woodsmen to have to murder for food. Even if the students aren't involved in that exploitation- and it's not even mentioned in the first movie- they were consistently mocking the "rednecks" before arriving at the cabin and felt they were entitled to explore and use their things. (Clover, 1992). Even before finding out they were cannibal murderers, they'd already labelled the "rednecks" as the other. Even more of their portrayal comes from the simple fact that they are cannibals.

Throughout colonizing history, indigenous peoples were claimed to be cannibals to dehumanize them and justifying why they must be annihilated (McCollum, 2016). The fact that

the cannibals eat humans because they have to is on account of their poverty and exploitation, but the fact that they enjoy it creates a struggle of power between them and the students (Bernard, 2011). Part of the reason people "other" the South is due to their connection with hunting, and though the cannibals may be deformed and not as smart as the students, they've perfected hunting and now the students are their game. Their predatory skill is proven throughout the movie every time the students try to escape. Scott runs through the forest, as if he was a deer, and gets shot with an arrow. An arrow being a flaunt, as archery is a skill known across civilized cultures and significantly more difficult than using a gun. Carly's stricken with shock and absolute panic after his death, turning her into nothing but her instinct. When Jessie and Chris use their logic to make it to a watchtower, the cannibals burn it down and they avoid the fire by jumping into the treetops. Chris and Jessie work as a team to use a tree branch as a catapult if the cannibals near them, but Carly attempts to outrun them in the trees and doesn't even see Threefingers sneak up on her. Just as in *TTM*, the chance the Northerners have to escape is by outwitting the hunter, but first they have to stop reacting as prey, stop trying to outrun, and use their civilized brains.

In the end, Jessie's been kidnapped by the cannibals and Chris sneaks a ride under the truck as they drive back to the cabin. He uses molotov cocktails to start fires, which distracts the cannibals as he unties Jessie. They attempt to use their combined strength against the cannibals but are barely slowing them down. Chris steals a gun that he knows only has one bullet and instead of using it on the closest cannibal as might be instinct, he shoots a gas tank causing an explosion between them. This may or may not have killed the cannibals, but it gave them time to escape. The enemy may not be defeated but we'll escape with whatever life we have left.

This is the same philosophy President Ford had in 1975, but the conclusion of the Vietnam War was still considered an overwhelming loss. The threat of defeat by inferior strength was unacceptable to admit and blame instead turned to inside forces. Instead of facing the idea that we may not be better than other nations, the American government insisted the fight was lost from within. Counterculture, the younger generations who fought against participating in the war, were instead the reason for our loss and therefore traitors responsible for the loss of American life and democracy (Blake, 2012). This made for another level of "othering" **within** one's own community. The constant American struggle between being part of a community and being an individual seemed to have failed and it was time to choose yourself. When everyone else is against you, it's every man for himself. Directors like Romero translated this phenomenon into movies such as *Night of the Living Dead*, where Americans were against Americans and there wasn't significant remorse over the loss of community. Horror movies continued to divide Americans as "us" versus "them" and get satisfaction from fighting and punishing the opposition. Even if they lost in the end, the victims died with superiority. To explore the post-9/11 era equivalent of community othering, I'm using *The Purge*.

The Purge starts with a blank screen and text: America. 2022. Unemployment is at 1%. Crime is at an all time low. Violence barely exists. With one exception... Then it shows the pledge. "Blessed be the new founding fathers for letting us purge and cleanse our souls, blessed be America, a nation reborn." All the rest of the context you see is clips of random violence throughout the country, brutal murder, fires, people running and screaming for help. Our main character, James Sandin, is using his handheld phone while driving around his nice gated

community. He makes multiple calls about selling security systems and his assistant announces that he's the number one seller, immediately followed by him turning to a radio station talking about the Purge. "The poor can't afford to protect themselves. They're the real victims tonight." The show goes on to remind Americans to buy blue flowers to show their support of the Purge and James does just that, gifting them to his wife Mary. All throughout the day there are experts claiming the good of the Purge and the nationwide catharsis it brings. The camera is brought up to their teenage daughter's room where we find Zoey and her 18-year-old boyfriend Henry. Because of age difference, they've been forced not to see each other and Zoey tells him to leave before lockup. We're then introduced to Charlie, the younger brother, as he's being comforted by his mother. He's uncomfortable with the Purge and his mother assures him, "Just remember all the good the Purge does, that's all that matters." A neighbor comes by and chats with Mary about the beautiful new addition they added to their house, "You know, some people are saying this neighborhood paid for that new addition." While it seems like the neighbor is joking, it gives the audience the sense that the Sandins don't really fit in with the community all that much, even though the husband seemed to have friends earlier. When it comes time for lockup the family arms security (metal bars around all windows and doors), grabs some precautionary guns, and watches the broadcast of the beginning of the 2022 Purge. A tradition similar to families watching the ball drop or watching the Thanksgiving day parade. The broadcast lists the only limitations: weapons grade 4 or lower are allowed and government officials ranked 10 or higher are the only people immune and to be left unharmed. Throughout the broadcast, Charlie seems frightened and continues to get reassurance from his mother. The father seems unphased and only comments, "I know bad things happen tonight but we can afford protection so we'll be fine."

Charlie asks why the parents don't participate in the Purge and he responds, "Because we don't feel the need to. That's all."

"So if you felt the need to, you would kill someone tonight?"

"Look I know this is difficult to understand at your age, but tonight allows people a release for all the hatred and violence and aggression that they keep up inside them. Yes, if your mother and I were so inclined we would participate, because it works. You remember how bad it was, Charlie? The poverty, all the crime? This night saved our country." Both of the children storm off, Charlie about the disappointing answer and Zoey still sulking about the boyfriend. Who we then proceed to see was hiding in the bedroom and claims he wanted to talk to her dad about reconsidering their relationship. As they begin to make out, the camera shifts back to James's perspective. While he works on business plans he's listening to the television talk about how the Purge is really about eliminating the burdens from society. "The poor, the needy, the sick, those unable to defend themselves. The eradication of these non contributing members of society ultimately unburden the economy." Charlie catches sight of someone running down the road and trying to hide behind their fence but then perspective switches back to Henry about to confront the dad. Then to father talking to Mary while relaxing in bed, "Ten years ago we could barely afford rent, now we're thinking about buying a boat." Pictures of luxurious boats switch back to the security footage of the man hiding outside and crying for help. When you start to hear gunshots down the street behind him, Charlie unlocks the security and allows the man to get inside. All racing to the front door seeing what's going on, James pulls a gun on the stranger but immediately has to turn to Henry, who's attempting to shoot him. James retaliates and hits Henry who runs off with Zoey. The stranger has a chance to hide and Henry's dies in Zoey's room.

James goes out to check on Zoey and finds Henry's body. While checking for a pulse, the audience can see the stranger behind him but he leaves James unharmed and sneaks back away. Charlie then sees on the security camera a group of people dressed in terrifying costume approaching their house. The camera shows shot-reverse-shot between the reaction of the family and the security monitor, but your eyes are drawn to the top left block where a man in a mask stands at the front door. He rings the doorbell and it zooms in to just that block, he then start to explain. "Hello, Mr. Sandin, your home tells me you're good folk, just like us and your blue flowers tell us you support the Purge." They explain that their target escaped and that's the stranger Charlie let inside. "The man you are sheltering is nothing but a dirty homeless pig. A grotesque menace to our just society who had the audacity to fight back. Killing one of us when we attempted to execute him tonight. The pig doesn't know his place and now he needs to be taught a lesson. You need to return him to us, alive, so we may purge as to which we are entitled... we don't want to kill our own." The deal he makes is that they have until the purger's tools arrive to release the "pig" to them or else they'll break in and kill everyone inside. During the conversation the camera switches between showing the security block and scanning around the family to catch reactions. After the man is done explaining, they cut the lights making the camera go dark. A few moments of silence and then the generators kick in, giving a slight blue tint.

The purgers' portrayal is scary mostly due to their chosen costume. They dress in plastic smiling facing, made creepy by a sense of uncanny. The boys are all dressed in black suits and the girls are all in white gowns resembling baptism gowns. All of them are young and blonde (or have blond highlights). They try to dress scary, to strike fear in their targets which would give

them more power. This is a similar idea to that of the hunting. It also creates a stark contrast between them and the stranger let inside. He is an African American veteran with ragged clothes and dog tags, covered in dirt and blood. The comparison of the two lands the family in the middle, dressed in fancy clothes (heels, private school uniforms, dress shirts) but with dark hair, James has stubble, and Charlie with unkempt hair. This reflects their social stance as well. While they are much richer than the stranger, they also used to be like him. The purgers obviously are much more wealthy, as they have the equipment to break into their high-cost security system. The family is put into a position where they can choose their side.

Aligning the family with the purgers, James attempts to find the stranger to sacrifice him while his son is still trying to help him hide. Zoey tries to hide in the spot that Charlie showed the stranger, allowing the stranger to use her as a hostage. He explains that he doesn't want to hurt them and that he doesn't deserve to die either, but Mary sneaks up on him causing James to have the ability to tie him up. While tying him, James insists that Charlie hold the light up so they can see and forces Mary to torture the man's wound to keep him immobile. The family proclaims their disgust at James' actions and decisions and abandons him. The stranger tells James the right decision is to sacrifice him, but it's too late anyway as the purgers have their tools and are breaking in. The family separates as James picks off the purgers one by one. He puts up an impressive fight before being stabbed by the lead purger, who seems upset having to kill James for saving the stranger. Perspective changes to Charlie quickly, who's watching the security cameras which show someone killing the purgers outside. It then jolts to Mary who's been pinned down and being tortured by two purgers until they're shot and Mary's able to escape. While she didn't see her rescuers, the audience saw that they were the neighbors from earlier.

Mary collects her children and they all huddle against a dying James while the neighbors again save them when the leader purger returns. The neighbor from the beginning announces, "We saw that you were having some trouble and decided to help you." Before Mary can thank them she continues, "Truth is, you are ours not theirs." They tie them up to torture them as they explain they hate the family because they sold them expensive security systems then flaunted the money in front of them with the new addition. We find out that her name is, ironically, Grace. The neighbors finish tying them up and start to say the pledge. The stranger sneaks up and uses Grace as a hostage and forces the rest of the neighbors to drop all their weapons. After the family is released the stranger asks Mary what to do and she declares that she's going to allow them to live. The camera shifts to all the adults sitting around a table waiting for the purge to end while the children pray over their father's body. Grace takes one last lunge at a gun and Mary breaks her nose with the butt and slams her face into the table (the same move her husband made with a purger, showing their similarity) "Didn't you hear what I said before? No more killing tonight. Is it that hard to understand?" Soon after, the sirens announce the end of the purge and the neighbors leave. The stranger begins to leave and Mary asks if he's going to be alright, when he nods, she thanks him. We follow the family's gaze as the stranger leaves and the movie ends with the morning news announcing, "It was the most successful purge yet."

James being the patriarch in *The Purge* and also the only one innocent to die isn't a coincidence. Family is part of the American foundation and it's, historically, fronted by the father. Most of the responsibilities are thought to rest on the father and that also means his word is law. With the image of family comes the image of children and, therefore, also of parenting. It's the parent's job to form their children into cooperative Americans and parents tend to assume

the best way to do that is to suppress their children and reject their individualities. They assume they know best, no matter what. (Williams, 2014.) This was James's assumption and, in the end, the cause of his death. His disconnect with his children arose from his disregarding their individual decisions and logic. We're introduced from the start to the idea that he rejected his daughter's choices and it almost got him killed when he overreached his authority, as his decision affected Henry as well. We were also introduced to the parents' rejection of Charlie's thoughts in the beginning. His favorite toy is a robot he built, which obviously shows his intelligence. The robot is a reflection of himself as he uses it to move around, see, and even communicate. The fact that the robot is in the form of a broken, burnt baby doll is also relevant to its reflections of Charlie. His stance on the Purge is obvious and yet his parents only continue to answer his concerns with the same propaganda he's hearing from the television and radio. This caused him to know not to trust his father's opinion, so when it came time to make his own decision for right or wrong he made it alone. William explains that parents' overaggressive attempts to force their children to conform to society can turn into torture and can turn the children themselves into threats (Williams, 2014.) This falls true with *The Purge*, emphasized in the scene where Charlie is forced to hold the flashlight and watch as his father attempts to sacrifice an innocent man. James even goes so far as to treat his wife as a child, trying to persuade her morals and make her torture the stranger. In horror cinema, the depiction of family is often the male patriarch attempting to save himself and his family from their own carelessness and threats but in the end causes harm himself. It's to act as both an individual and part of a community, a balance necessary for survival.

An American's duty to herself versus her duty to others has already established itself as a theme and as the answer to survival. Individualism is core to American culture, because it's the idea of self-reliance and reward from hard work. Without this idea, capitalism and the very idea of the "American dream" would fall through. On the other hand, communitarianism is the idea that societies work best when citizens work together and that is also an important part of being a good American. The United States is, generally, based on Christian concepts and the idea of "love your neighbor" is central to that of being a good person. Leah Murray's interpretation of Hobbes's theory of social contract as assuming men are naturally selfish and brutish and that fear is what binds us. Her own argument is that in apocalyptic times, community is to be favored but it will only succeed if everyone is civic minded (Murray, 2006). *The Purge* is a perfect representation that this is a difficult concept for Americans to grasp. The first thing that people did when social construct broke down was protect oneself and eliminate anyone that was a burden on them. Poor people were eliminated first, leaving only the rich. Since the rich don't need to rely on others for protection against threat, the idea of community broke down, even for those who weren't a burden on them. This also proves it's not the answer to success, however, as the family representing communitarianism were the ones to survive (mostly). *Wrong Turn* would also agree with Murray's argument as the final two survivors made it thanks to help from other people, even when it was against their better interest.

When comparing the different level of othering, the movies show us who it's easier to see as a monster. The rednecks are portrayed as disgusting and deranged humanoids while the purgers have to specifically try and dress up scary. The cannibals are forced to eat humans after their land was exploited and even the students act as if they own them and invade their home.

Brooks,

American Othering

The purgers murder for fun and because they view the poorer as pigs for slaughter. When the students risk their lives for each other, the audience commends them and uses it as proof that they're better than the monsters. When Charlie and the family save a veteran, the audience is, at least momentarily, irritated they'd risk their own safety. At the end of *Wrong Turn*, the heroes try their hardest to kill the rednecks. At the end of *The Purge*, Mary lets them go. If Murray's argument is correct and the answer to surviving the end of the world is to team together, which she elaborates to mean across diversities not just in your own community, it may mean that in a broader sense America is doing everything wrong. We automatically "other" people across an imaginary North or South line, assuming they're less than human. We can even "other" people like us in our communities. We'd rather blame them than see our own mistakes and that's acting just like the father that thinks he knows best. He dies in the end.

Works Cited

- Bernard, M. (2011). Cannibalism, Class and Power. *Food, Culture & Society*, 14(3), 413-432. doi:10.2752/175174411x13046092851073
- Blake, L. (2012). *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity*. Manchester University Press.
- Clover, C. (1992). Urbanoia. In *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender In the Modern Horror Film*(pp. 124-137). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- DeMonaco, J. (Director). (2013). *The Purge* [Video file]. United States: Universal Pictures. Retrieved December 19, 2018.
- Lewis, H. G. (Director), Friedman, D. F. (Producer), & Sinise, R. (Writer). (1964). *Two Thousand Maniacs* [Video file]. United States: Box Office Spectaculars. Retrieved December 18, 2018.
- McCollum, V. (2016). *Post-9/11 heartland horror: Rural horror films in an era of urban terrorism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Murray, Leah A. "When They Aren't Eating Us, They Bring Us Together: Zombies and the American Social Contract." *Zombies, Vampires and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*. Ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad. Chicago: Open Court, 2006. 211-220.
- Schmidt, R. (Director), & McElroy, A. B. (Writer). (2003). *Wrong Turn* [Video file]. United States: Summit Entertainment. Retrieved December 18, 2018.
- Williams, T. (2014). *Hearths of Darkness The Family in the American Horror Film, Updated Edition*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.