

Haunting Our Homes: Nightmares of Gentrification

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“Where all are guilty, no one is; confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits, and the very magnitude of the crime the best excuse for doing nothing.”

—Hannah Arendt

In the course of fifteen years as a tenant organizer, my friend and mentor Artemio Guerra has become intimately, disturbingly familiar with the process of gentrification—the shifting demographics, the clash of old and new tenants, and the monstrous machinations of landlords bent on pushing out rent-controlled tenants. The threats and harassing late-night calls. Whole buildings left without heat. Bombs planted in lobbies. INS called on immigrant tenants who fight back. A nightmare so pervasive it would surely rate broader attention if it wasn’t a “normal” consequence of capitalism.

Artemio and I always end up having long discussions about horror films and politics, so he called me up after seeing the haunted house film *Cold Creek Manor*. “It’s all about gentrification!” he said. “It’s a piece of crap, but still.”

He was right on both counts. In the film, an upper-middle class family from New York City moves into a rural working-class community, and find themselves under assault by a crazy handyman who used to live in the house, as well as the angry spirits who haunt it. Rich city folks move out into the country and find themselves up against nasty poor locals and a ghost in another recent vengeful-spirit film, *Wendigo*. The more I thought about this recurrent motif, the more I realized: the modern haunted house film is fundamentally about gentrification. Again and again we see fictional families move into spaces from which others have been violently displaced, and the new arrivals suffer for

that violence even if they themselves have done nothing wrong. This thriving subgenre depends upon the audience believing, on some level, that what “we” have was attained by violence, and the fear that it will be taken by violence. In the process, because mainstream audiences are imaged as white, and because gentrification predominantly impacts communities of color, the racial Other becomes literally monstrous.

The biggest cliché in the modern haunted house film is that of the Indian Burial Ground. In *Poltergeist*, *Pet Semetary*, *The Shining*, and *The Amityville Horror*, the source of the problem is that the real estate parcel in question has desecrated sacred ground. The conquest of North America could be classified as our most extensive gentrification, where thousands of communities of color were violently pushed out by white settlers manifesting racist destiny. The ubiquity of the Indian Burial Ground points to screenwriter laziness, but it also constructs a movie-going public all too willing to accept that our homes are literally built upon genocide, and terrified that those dead Indians will come back—not to scalp us or to take “our” land through armed force, but to suck our children into the television or make our husbands go insane and try to kill us with an axe.

Guilt over the North American genocide persists, in spite of centuries of racist history that have clouded the general public’s grasp on the extremity of violence perpetrated against the Native Americans—the broken treaties, the Indian Removal Act, the smallpox blankets. With the death of the Western as a film genre and the success of the Civil Rights Movement in challenging the blatancy of racism in mainstream culture, the Indian-as-bloodthirsty-savage was transformed into the Indian-as-murderous-ghost. That’s one of the main ways the horror genre, on its surface so apolitical, connects to the United States’ histories of genocide. How far a leap is it from the menacing ex-slaves in

Birth of a Nation to the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*? Even though its subtext of displacement and gentrification might foreground race and violence and displacement, the haunted house film participates in the mystification of demographic change by convincing us that we are innocent, and the people we have displaced are monsters.

Displacement creates a paradox: we acknowledge the wrong that has been done but feel powerless to do anything about it. A sort of collective guilt springs up: a sense that we are insignificant cogs in the machinery of economic and social factors that create gentrification. This is particularly true for the middle class, who are often forced by economic necessity to move to gentrifying neighborhoods or to new suburban developments that have demolished pre-existing space.

Regardless of their place on the political spectrum, most people acknowledge that their government does some very bad things, and that they themselves might have to face the consequences. As in Malcolm X's famous comment on the assassination of John F. Kennedy—"the chickens are coming home to roost"—and following the Golden Rule, a system that maintains itself through violence will engender a violent response. The price of living in the comfort that globalizing imperialism can provide is the chance that we will be the victims of retaliatory violence—like the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11. In the same way, the consequences of gentrification flicker on our radar regardless of whether or not we feel personally culpable. The question is: can we do anything about it? The modern haunted house film tells us that we can't—that the only way to live in peace is to destroy the monsters we have already replaced.

From its roots in the Gothic tale, the haunted house story has often been about guilt visited upon the innocent for things their ancestors (or husbands, or cousins) did.

Somebody did something wrong, and somebody else is paying for it. Think of Jane Eyre, taunted by the madwoman in the attic who turns out to be the wife her lover has locked up. The children in *The Turn of the Screw* are destroyed by their governess's sexual frustration, manifested in ghost form. In what might be the most influential literary example of the "bad house" story, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, the "evil" has its source in its owner/architect's repressive patriarchal Puritanism. The assumption has always been that "innocent" beneficiaries of privilege won through violence will be made to pay for that violence. This construction of innocence is disingenuous, since real guilt does exist, even though the complex mechanisms of modern markets fog the issue in ways that play into "our" desire to feel like we have no role or power in the process.

Race is structured out of haunted house films, because the horror film is largely intended to allay guilt—scary movies invoke it only to exploit and then banish it. *Candyman* and *The People Under The Stairs* represent attempts to expose the racial underpinnings of the genre, but even they depend upon the audience (constructed as white) having a pre-existing fear of "black" spaces—housing projects, tenements, the inner city—since those spaces are represented in exaggerated forms that exploit middle-class misconceptions. And even this exploration has come to an end with the current glut of horror films—witness *Dark Water*, about an urban renter whose affordable housing is haunted by the ghost of tenants past, and which takes place in a New York where somehow both ghost and victim (and just about everyone else) manages to be white.

"What is a ghost?" Stephen Dedalus wonders in *Ulysses*. "One who has faded into palpability through death, through absence, through change of manners." The haunted

house film mimics the workings of the real estate market, where gentrification and urban renewal push people of color into homelessness, into shelters, into prisons. People of color register as monsters—homeless boogeymen, gangsta rappers, violent crack addicts waiting outside your house.

Gentrification is itself something of a ghost—trivialized by the mainstream media, ignored by government, distorted in academia as “impossible to quantify,” or obfuscated by policymakers—as in a report from the Brookings Institution that somehow wonders “Does Gentrification Harm the Poor?” Because the “audience” for gentrification is always the poor, people of color, immigrants, working class seniors, and combinations of the above, the realities of gentrification are usually “invisible” to those who shape the public’s understanding of the issues. In my day job, organizing homeless folks who have been displaced by the tens of thousands by rising rents to fight back against city policies and practices that abet gentrification, there is no question that the poor are harmed by gentrification, and that poor people of color are disproportionately harmed (currently, 90% of the 35,000 people in NYC homeless shelters are Black or Latino). The other thing that’s painfully clear is that everyone wants to do *something* about it. In spite of the mainstream media’s demonization of the homeless as crazy violent substance abusers, many people acknowledge that the presence of homeless people is the result of systemic problems, and that homeless individuals are not “garbage.” Despite the claims of local government and real estate interests (if one can indeed claim them as separate) that “neighborhood improvement” will transform poor crime-infested communities into bright green utopias, most people are able to see the realities and are eager to support grassroots efforts to transform blighted neighborhoods in ways that do not negatively impact

existing demographics. The survival and success of the haunted house film indicates a considerable (subconscious?) guilt, which in turn indicates acknowledgement of culpability and oppression.

Horror films give us back our sins as monsters. The parents who burned Freddy Krueger alive find their randy teenaged offspring butchered. Nuclear testing wakes up Godzilla. In slasher films, sexuality is a capital offense. Dr. Frankenstein's hubris leads to the deaths of everyone he loves. And starting with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, class antagonism has been at the heart of the horror film. These days, the two most popular plotlines in the dozens of scary movies that come out each year are: (1) a middle class family or group of teenagers wanders into the wilderness and the clutches of a depraved monstrous lumpenproletariate (*The Hills Have Eyes*, *Wolf Creek*, *The Descent*, *Wrong Turn*, *Cabin Fever*, *Chainsaw Massacre*, *Silent Hill*) or: (2) a similar configuration of victims menaced on their own luxurious turf by monsters who symbolize "our" paranoid fantasies of the violent dispossessed working class even if they do not actually come from it (*When A Stranger Calls*, *Cry Wolf*, *Cursed*, *Scream*, all the slasher films that do not fall under category (1)). The spate of slow-moving zombie films that followed in the wake of *Night of the Living Dead* represent a capitalist nightmare of communist revolution: the brain-dead bloodthirsty working class, desiring nothing but our destruction, rises up to besiege "us" in our comfortable homes, our malls, our military bases.

Would a haunted house film have any resonance in a communist country? Is it possible to imagine *The Grudge* in an economic structure where housing is guaranteed—however problematically—and where people have extremely limited freedom to choose their own housing? Present-day capitalism leads to an inevitable

fetishization of *home*, of “our” space, rooted in our understanding that nothing is guaranteed. The haunted house film expresses the universal human fear that your home is not safe, that it will be taken from you by violence. *House of Sand and Fog* is an honest look at the emotional costs of a system where housing is a commodity, and not a right—the film can be read as a haunted house tale with no ghosts or monsters, just “normal” human beings whose basic needs are in direct opposition and cannot be reconciled.

Haunted-house escapism allows us to evade two fundamental truths: that on some level we participate in the displacement of others, and that we ourselves are vulnerable to displacement and homelessness. At the same time, the stigmatization of the homeless in media and in governmental policy has become so extreme that “we” equate the homeless with monsters. When you lose your home, you lose your membership in the human community. You become something else. A ghost; a monster.

Not all haunted house films end with the ghosts getting brutally exorcised, or the humans packing up and running for their lives. Although the dynamics always play out as a war of Us-vs-Them/ Good-vs-Evil/ Old-vs-New, the battle sometimes ends in a draw. The parody *Beetlejuice*, also about clueless rich urban gentrifiers colonizing a haunted house in the countryside, ends with the dead and the living recognizing that they are fundamentally the same, and learning to co-exist in harmony. The nature of scarcity economics makes this precise solution impossible with real-life gentrification, but active cooperation across the lines of class and race is not only possible, it’s essential.

Expecting a mainstream horror film to give us a road map towards fighting gentrification is as absurd as hoping that an anti-war film will tell us how to stop a war.

Instead, art—bad art, good art, corporate art, independent art—should prompt us to examine our fears and our assumptions, and move us to a deeper inquiry of how they impact our reality. The haunted house film makes assumptions that are worth questioning—who are “we” as an audience? to whom do these films address themselves? who haunts “our” homes? whose homes do “we” haunt?—but it also contains the seeds of a real dialogue concerning the human costs of the housing crisis, and our responsibility, and our power to do something about it.

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