

Horrors of Society: The Reflection of Societal Fears in American Horror Films

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The foundation of the Hollywood horror film industry has always included metaphors of what haunts American society. This industry capitalized on these fears in movies such as *Poltergeist* (1982) and the 2015 remake of the same film. These two films worked to represent current issues regarding technology in society while also predicting what America would become if these issues were not properly resolved. Analyzing the two films reveals the fears of past decades, how those fears have evolved in contemporary American culture, and where these representations of cultural fears will lead us next.

American ghost stories, although often not considered to be seeded in legitimate historical evidence, are paramount in representing, expanding, and building upon the framework of American culture. In recent decades, Hollywood manifested the concept of hauntings and various supernatural phenomena to elaborately explain and dissect cultural anxieties which, despite many Americans turning a blind eye, still haunt a majority of the American population. Hollywood largely relies on the increasing complexity of these anxieties, which scare people with haunted ideas, such as a demon possessing a loved one or *something* taking up residency in a home without the owner's consent. In the past, the fears that

circulated through American culture were concrete and visible, thus prompting horror films starring monsters such as vampires, werewolves, and zombies. American horror films, however, took a sharp turn into the realm of ghosts and demons as society's fears of enemies and threats we could tangibly identify and see warped into fears of terrorism, mental illness, and technology. One of the subcategories of ghosts is the poltergeist, which is a spirit that typically attaches to a person, not just a place. *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Poltergeist* (2015) offer deep insights into the representation of societal fears—more specifically, into America's fear of lack of privacy and control as a result of technological advancements.

Both *Poltergeist* films represent one of the widest spread fears of the American culture: the fear of technology. The newer *Poltergeist* (2015) serves as a reminder of the original film's warning: if we bring more technology into our homes it will consume our lives. In the first *Poltergeist* (1982), the fear of a technological invasion in the late 1970s and early 1980s provides Americans with the nuances of modern horror through the depiction of a young girl trapped in a TV void. This depiction perpetuated the growing fear that children would be "lost" in television programming and created a long-lasting fear of someone or something watching from the other side of a screen. This fear only intensified as cameras became commonplace on phones and computers, leaving the fear of having nowhere to hide. Looking through the lens of *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Poltergeist* (2015) reveals the fears of past decades, how those fears have developed in 2010s American culture, and where these representations of cultural fears may lead society next. Depictions of cultural hauntings demonstrate how it is not the ghosts or hauntings that conjure societal fears, but rather what manifested those ghosts and hauntings that conjure true fright.

Bodo Winter, author of "Horror Movies and the Cognitive Ecology of Primary Metaphors," argues that all horror movies are largely, if not entirely, composed of longstanding metaphors for fear that may stretch as far back as humans' primitive states of hunters and gatherers living in the wild. Winter states that metaphors for fear are strengthened "in the minds of the people who witness these representations, which helps to keep the metaphors alive" (164). More specifically, Winter asserts, horror films have three main effects of metaphors on culture: elaborating, reinforcing/maintaining, and creating/re-creating metaphors (164). These effects have infiltrated almost every horror movie the film industry has produced in the last five to six decades. In both versions of *Poltergeist*, the plots are anchored in the metaphor that the poltergeist itself is a manifestation of a repressed fear of technology, the unknown, or financial instability brought into the home. Many of the scariest aspects of movies may not have originated in the human mind as "scary." When moving away from monsters towards ghosts and hauntings, the American film industry had to create these new metaphors for fear to pass down through the generations. In fact, Winter also states that "cultural representations may create new metaphors... in the minds of new generations" (164). The instinct to fear werewolves and vampires stems from early humans' fear of predators, since people did not always live indoors with large semi-automatic weapons to protect them from the beasts of the wild. Older "monster movies" more directly played on the instinct to avoid animalistic predators; newer horror films still play this "monster" angle to some degree. Jonathon Norman, author of "Personality Types and the Enjoyment of Horror Movies," states that "Horror movies portray [ghosts and monsters] as very strong, incessantly hungry, and unstop-

pable...,” and he suggests that these traits “...would somehow trigger in humans their very basic survival instincts” (60). Of course, these survival instincts are still imbedded in humans’ biological make-up, but the reality of an animal attacking people in the wilderness is no longer a common fear in society. As a result, horror movies needed some new tactics to represent this fear and keep it alive in American culture. The most prominent expression of this fear in the *Poltergeist* movies is when Carol Ann and Maddy, the two poltergeist victims, are speaking to TVs. From the static, viewers can hear growling noises masked by the static buzzing of the televisions; where Carol Ann and Maddy seem to hear a voice speaking to them, viewers hear malicious animalistic intent.

Poltergeists are not simply spirits that have been introduced into the realm of horror in the last few decades, but rather phenomena occurring for centuries. Poltergeists are most literally classified as “noisy spirits,” which captures exactly how they operate (Bynum 222). These spirits typically attach to young children, most often girls, and cause mayhem for several days or weeks. Most people will never experience poltergeist activity as these spirits rarely manifest. As knowledge of this phenomenon has grown, however, it opened the door for Hollywood to utilize its unique markers of a haunting, including objects or people being moved, loud noises, shaking furniture, or even sounds that mimic human voices (Bynum 222). According to Joyce Bynum, author of “Poltergeists—A Phenomenon Worthy of Serious Study,” “poltergeist activity may represent the repressed feelings and fears that find expression in interaction with the outside world” (225). *Poltergeist* (1982) invokes American parents’ brewing repression of technological fears and the impact these fears have on children who watch too much TV, whereas *Poltergeist* (2015) uses repressed fears of financial instability in an economy recovering from a recession to conjure the poltergeist figure.

The original 1982 release of the film centered around the Freeling family which includes three children (Dana, Robbie, and Carol Ann) and their parents (Diane and Steve) who “are in their 30’s, happily married, and doing all right financially” (Canby 6). The family’s financial situation allows for Steve to be the sole bread winner and for the family to live in a newly developed neighborhood in California. The opening scene in the film depicts Carol Ann, the youngest daughter, speaking to the living room TV just after midnight programming has ended. She asks questions such as “What do you look like?” (0:03:46) to the static, but she also seems to answer questions we cannot hear with a simple “yes” (0:04:21-0:04:25). This occurrence happens a second time, but with the TV in her parents’ bedroom, which happens to be when the spirits emerge from the TV. The following morning, the spirits begin interacting with the whole house (i.e., moving chairs, bending silverware, and playfully sliding Diane and Carol Ann across the kitchen floor). The family does

not know their neighborhood has been built on the grounds of a cemetery from which the bodies were never moved. The decision to build on top of the graves prompted spirits to communicate with Carol Ann and even to open a portal to the “other side” through her bedroom closet. As the movie progresses, Carol Ann is pulled through her closet to the “other side,” leaving her family with no way to communicate with her other than through open channels on their television set.

It is not difficult to see the significance of the family's predicament in the 1980s. Not only was it more common for families to own one or more television sets in their homes than ever before (the Freelings have multiple sets), but stations knew exactly what times of the day to draw in different audiences. According to a television schedule published in the *New York Times* in the mid-1970s, the bulk of children's television shows were broadcast between 7am-8am and 3:30pm-8pm (“Television”). These would be the most common times for school-attending children to be home. These would also be the common times that parents would have to spend with their children. With TV to occupy children, however, they spent less time with their parents, reading, or activities and more time devoted to television programming.

Around the time the movie was released, worldly news started becoming more widely available as cable TV became commonplace. According to Martin Bass's article “Television's Day in Court” published in the *New York Times* (1981), the concept of putting cameras in courtrooms was beginning to be seen as “a rational adaptation to an era in which most Americans get much of their news from television” (Bass). The newspapers were no longer a fast enough or convenient enough means to receive news. Although many parents purchased TVs because news and information grew more accessible via TV, it was not the only purpose they ultimately served in the household (McCoy). An increasing number of the population craved easy access to entertainment and news. It appears that adults never assumed children might choose a broadcast of *The Brady Bunch* over interacting with their parents or friends. Elin McCoy published the article “Limiting Children's TV Habits” just a year before *Poltergeist* (1982) was released. This article states that, in 1981, “the average child between the ages 2 and 11 watches [television] for about three and a half to four hours a day.” McCoy goes on to discuss the lack of interest children had for other activities such as reading and playing outside when television programming became an option. With TVs in the living room, kitchen, and master bedroom, watching was always an option for the Freeling children. Even after the spirits exit the TV in the master bedroom, Carol Ann turns the TV in the kitchen on to an “empty” channel hoping to find her friends in the static instead of playing or helping her mother clean up breakfast. Diane doesn't suggest Carol Ann go and play either; she simply makes a comment on how the static will hurt her eyes and changes the channel to a war

show/movie. Even the parents only interact with their neighbor when it's a matter of their TV remotes being on the same frequency and accidentally changing each other's channels.

Between the 1980s and mid 2000s, there was an economic boom in which inflation rates were incredibly low, thus giving money more purchasing power (Samuelson 21). As Americans began spending more money purchasing homes and acquiring mortgages, overspending became more widespread. This mode of thinking resulted in the Great Recession, from which the American economy took almost 10 years to recover. During this recovery, the Bowen family finds themselves down on their financial luck. In the 2015 remake of *Poltergeist*, the family is not as financially stable as they were in 1982. The father, Eric Bowen, has lost his job and their mother, Amy, does not work. The family loses their home because of their employment statuses and must look at a new house in a neighborhood built on a former cemetery from which, unbeknownst to them, the bodies were never moved. Since money is so tight, the deciding factor in purchasing their house in this neighborhood is the realtor who informs them, "Foreclosures have hit this neighborhood really hard. There's some wiggle room on the price" (0:06:46-0:06:50). Thus, from the first 10 minutes of the film, Gil Kenan, director of *Poltergeist* (2015), reflects America's established overwhelming fear of financial instability in the plot's framework.

In the five years leading up to the release of *Poltergeist* (2015), the iPad was released, artificial intelligence was being developed (i.e., Siri, Alexa, Google Home), and larger portions of Americans owned iPhones or Androids, etc. If "Alexa" is always listening and cameras on our phones and laptops are always watching, people may as well pull out a Ouiji board and invite ghosts into their home—exemplifying the modern collective lack of privacy. Kenan gives us this reality in his film on several counts. One of the first "selling points" the realtor mentions about the house is, pointing to a security system panel, "That security system works. The owner was a bit of a technophile, so this house is wired for whatever you might need" (0:03:25-0:03:28). Essentially, the entire house is one big gadget. While programming the security system, the Bowens' son, Griffin, asks Eric countless questions about how "bad guys" could cut the security system wires and break in. Eric responds to these questions by saying they would die of electrocution and "if they're dead then they can't get in the house" (0:10:12-0:10:13). Through this dialogue, Kenan establishes a false sense of security for the family; they believe their home is protected from any intruders by the technology. Later that same night the house experiences what Kenan refers to as an "electrical awakening" in an interview with Brendon Connelly. As Maddy begins speaking to the spirits through the TV in the living room, lamps, phones, iPads, and toys begin turning on and off on their own. Just as Carol Ann does in the 1982 film, Maddy begins speaking to a static TV channel. When Griffin finds

her speaking to the TV and asks what is happening, Maddy replies, “They’re coming” (0:25:45). The house is thrown into an electrical fit immediately after; all devices and electronics are sent into a frenzy, including the security system. When the parents rush downstairs as the alarm goes off in the house, Maddy informs everyone, “They’re here” (0:26:25). Thus, Eric’s earlier statement that a dead person cannot get past the security system is quite literally disproven.

No matter how many new devices humans surround themselves with, people have a natural instinct to survive by either fleeing or fighting. Horror movies provide a buffer for looking at what truly haunts our thoughts and culture. Jonathon Norman suggests that “...the cross-cultural appeal for horror movies provides useful insights into understanding human evolutionary psychology processes” (59). Essentially, what scares people on the screen may also comfort them because the conflicts are almost always resolved in the end; the “good guys” win, the evil is sent away, or a majority of people escape to safety. *Poltergeist* (1982 and 2015) both provide that cushion when forcing viewers to face the horrors of their technological surroundings which are primarily represented through the abduction of Carol Ann (1982) and Maddy (2015) through their closets and into the “other side.” By the end, the Freelings’ and Bowens’ houses may have been destroyed, but the families escape the horrors within. The depiction of a relatively happy ending for main characters gives Americans a false sense of security that the fears of what society is becoming and the technological advancements that have haunted American culture since before the release of *Poltergeist* (1982) can simply be walked away from or, in the case of the films, driven away from.

The infestation of technology in homes and relationships, however, did not end in the 1980s; instead, it grew into something unrulier than Spielberg’s spirits could have mustered in the original film. The 2015 remake of *Poltergeist* takes America’s original fears of the invasion of technology into their families and homes to a new level. Spielberg may have created and established the metaphor of poltergeists or hauntings in relation to the invasion of technology, but Gil Kenan’s remake reinforces this fear in American society. Though both the Freelings and the Bowens escape from their haunted homes in the end, the Bowens are not given the satisfactory ending of rolling a television set out of a hotel room symbolizing an escape from the sole cause of their torment like the Freelings. In the final scene of the 2015 movie, Eric Bowen is depicted as being employed as a high school baseball coach, and the family is going to look at a new house. Instead of boasting about technological capabilities of the house, the realtor mentions that “...the place is just swimming in closet space” (1:34:08), which prompts young Maddy to say, “Our last closet ate me” (1:34:13). When the realtor moves into the house to show them around, the camera pans back

outside to show the Bowens driving away, presumably because of the abundance of closet space in that prospective home. They clearly still value technology and see a closet as the cause of their previous problems, not technology. The Freelings could recognize the TVs as their main problem, which is why removing the TV was their first thought when arriving at the motel, not worrying how much closet space the room had. Despite escaping their home, however, the Bowens do not escape the horrors of technology and, thus, neither has the rest of America.

A constant example of Winter's created and reinforced metaphor is the appearance of Gothic architecture in many representations of the horror genre. In fact, these ever-present structures "entertain [people's] imagination[s] given that the thought of an old and dark castle would bring to people's mind the idea of secret passages, dungeons, and gloomy forests" (Norman 58). The Bowens' house is a modern interpretation of this architecture in the sense that the home's exterior consists of grey siding surrounded by dying trees and a flower garden that won't stay alive. Even the attic houses a secret compartment of creepy clown toys left by a previous owner. This automatically invokes more fear in viewers than the original film because people innately recognize similar structures with scary stories. Kenan's remake exemplifies Winter's main effects of metaphors on culture. While the film was not considered as nightmarish as the original, it still holds the originality of the metaphor while adding a few new twists.

Aside from the obvious updates to the plot, such as the family names and the lack of land-line phones in the house, Kenan elaborates on Spielberg's metaphors by adding nuanced details. The most notable of these details is how the characters describe what is after Carol Ann and Maddy once they are pulled to the "other side." In 1982, the clairvoyant the Freelings use to rescue Carol Ann, Tangina, claims there is a "terrible presence" with Carol Ann and refers to it as "the beast." This beast is a singular entity that represents television and its ability to pull children away from their families. In 2015, Kenan alters this detail when Carrigan Burke, the Bowens' clairvoyant, claims they're all around her (1:11:22-1:11:31). Even though there were multiple spirits on the "other side" with Carol Ann in the original film, the significance of this detail lies in the fact that the singular "beast" was the one who wouldn't let Carol Ann go, but none of the spirits in 2015 would let Maddy go. These malicious spirits represent all the forms of technology that withdraw people from society in the 2015 film: phones, tablets, laptops, TVs, and even the speakers and wired walls throughout the Bowens' house. Another detail Kenan alters in the 2015 film lies within the fear of clowns. In the original film, Carol Ann and her brother Robbie have a clown doll that attacks Robbie in the end of the movie. In 2015, Griffin finds multiple old clown toys in a hidden compartment of his attic bedroom. Clowns "have the capacity to provoke fear and horror given that their

make-up can conceal their true facial expressions, thus triggering people's instinctual need and desire to understand others through their facial expressions" (Schmidt and Cohn, qtd. in Norman 60). As the aforementioned "beast" represents the fear of television and the spirits represent the fear of all forms of technology, the clown dolls represent not just technology but what consumers cannot see behind it. In both films, neither the families nor the audience get to see the faces behind the screens until the end of the films, and American citizens never see what's behind the screens in their living rooms or the phones in their pockets. Having only one clown doll in the original film represented the singular fear of what hid behind the screen. Kenan, however, utilizes multiple clown dolls to symbolize all the forms of technology that people feared in the 2010s because they could not understand them. As we fear what we cannot see behind a clown's makeup, we fear what we cannot see behind the screen.

Unfortunately for American culture, Kenan points out in *Poltergeist* (2015) that technology is not the only issue facing the Bowen family. The entire premise of the movie is based on the fact that their father, Eric, has lost his job due to the de-unionization of skilled workers. This perspective seems to contribute to the lukewarm responses to the remake of the film. Since the reviewers failed to detect this financial struggle as a form of haunting upon the family, their reviews reflected an inaccurate representation of the film's nuances. Neil Genzlinger, in his *New York Times* review "They're Baaack, With Tech Upgrades," writes, "... parents might find it an enjoyable trip down memory lane, even if they do now recognize it as largely a well-served collection of horror-movie tropes." Seeing the films as a collection of horror tropes is valid in its own right, but closer analysis reveals that the tropes morph into metaphors that will force viewers and the next generations to wonder if the phones they keep in their pockets or the TVs in their rooms are something to fear rather than lull people to sleep. Critic David Blaustein states on ABC News Radio that he viewed the film as "a remake that lacks creativity, hoping to trade on an established brand," but he is wrong on each account. Kenan connects the hardships of unemployment and exacerbated debt due to a need for constant technological advancements in their lives directly to poltergeist encounters. After the electrical awakening of the house, Kendra claims that her phone is "fried." In response to being told they can't afford a new phone, Kendra says, "This isn't a luxury item, Dad. It's a necessity. What if you need to reach me in an emergency?" (0:27:20-0:27:24). Kenan is making a statement that Americans view the ability to be constantly connected to everyone and everything as a necessity; calling friends or checking the news channel at the end of the day simply isn't enough. Even though Eric can barely afford to buy squirrel traps for the squirrel living in his son's room, he still buys his daughter a new iPhone and his son a drone. He buys into the idea

that in order to be happy and fit in, they need to have new technology because the fear of living without it was greater than the fear of what bringing it into the house could invoke. Naturally, as the collection of technology within the household grows, so does the poltergeist activity. Working from Bynum's earlier mentioned theory that "poltergeist activity may represent the repressed feelings and fears that find expression in interaction with the outside world" (225), the connection of unemployment and debt-induced stress to the Bowens' poltergeist problem is clear. The Bowen family not only suffered the financial consequences of having no working parents, but they also suffered supernatural consequences that they could not escape because of the weight of their debt.

Culturally informed viewers of *Poltergeist* (1982 and 2015) are left wondering; what's next? The original film predicted the chaos of technology would continue to ensue over generations if people did not restrict their technological access, and the remake demonstrates the horrors of ignoring that warning along with how the need for technological updates inflames financial struggles affecting many lower to middle class American families today. Americans are always seeking the "next best thing," but at a quite literal cost. Elin McCoy discusses the effects of peer pressure on the youth of the country to be "up to date" on the latest tech. In her 1981 article McCoy states, "Many parents cite peer pressure, when many other children are watching particular programs and their child would feel left out if he or she could not watch too, as one reason they do not throw out the [television] set altogether." The fear of being less connected to the world than everyone else has survived from the original release of *Poltergeist* to the present day. Even if someone cannot afford the newest iPhone or Google Home mini for each room in their house, they want them so that at least their children can "fit in" with the rest of society. The Bowens suffered this dilemma and ultimately caved into reaching for a "higher standard" of living even if they could not afford the standard of living in which they already lived. Looking back at Bodo Winter's concept of how "horror movies play a role in maintaining and potentiating metaphor within the larger cultural system," American horror movies clearly serve as warnings to human error and guides to what we fear most in America. From *Poltergeist* (2015), we can see how cultural fears developed from a fear of television taking over children to a fear of technological advancements taking over everyone's lives. Following this pattern, America is headed down a path that will end in fears of spending money on any luxury, especially technological luxuries. Both *Poltergeist* films are comprised of more than horror tropes; they are built by America's cultural fears which make them scarier than the harmless nightmares they seem to be. If we are not careful, the long-perpetuated fear of technology truly ruling us will one day come to fruition.

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