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## ***It Follows: Precarity, Thanatopolitics, and the Ambient Horror Film***

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### **Abstract**

In the 2014 horror film *It Follows*, a teenage woman is terrorized by a fatal curse that passes from victim to victim via sexual intercourse. The subject of the curse is relentlessly pursued by vacant-minded assassins that take the form of friends, loved ones, and strangers. The film is set near the infamous dividing line of Detroit's 8 Mile Road, between what remains of the suburban working-class and the sacrifice zone of post-industrial urban triage. I argue that *It Follows* confronts audiences with the spectral manifestation of precarity: the deliberate and unequal redistribution of human fragility to populations who are the most socially and economically vulnerable. First, the generic shift from a specific monster to an anonymous and relentless force redeploys horror convention to draw attention to the conditions that induce horror within the prevailing socioeconomic order. Second, the film renders such precarity visible by contrasting the *mise-en-scène* of the suburban enclave with zones of postindustrial ruin, the relative comfort of the former predicated on the vulnerability of the latter. The film maps a landscape of postindustrial ruin, enacting a visual and narrative critique of *thanatopolitics*, the biopolitical organization of death under late capitalism.

**Keywords:** horror films, body genres, precarity, postindustrialism, thanatopolitics

*It Follows* (2014) opens on a quiet dusk in a pristine upper-middle-class Detroit suburb. A woman in high heels flees her home in a panic to a score of intense percussion. A stationary 360-degree shot captures the woman traversing the street and circling back to her house.

Visibly terrorized, she continually glances back as if to observe something in pursuit but visible only to her. She reemerges from the house and absconds in her parents' car, destination indeterminate. The next morning her bludgeoned, disarticulated body appears on a remote beach with no clue as to her killer's identity. The geography should be familiar to horror film audiences: the idyllic suburban enclave so frequently infiltrated by psychotic and supernatural killers in Hollywood features such as *Disturbia* (Caruso, 2007), *Halloween* (Carpenter & Hill, 1978), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984), *The Last House on the Left* (Craven & Cunningham, 1972), *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2009), and *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982). The monster, however, is remarkably unfamiliar: no backstory, motive, affliction, voice, or identity. Visible only to its casualties, the monster is a manifestation of a fatal curse that passes from victim to victim via sexual intercourse. The subject of the curse is relentlessly pursued by vacant-minded assassins that take the form of friends, loved ones, or strangers. If the monster kills its victim, the curse returns to its originator, ad infinitum. "It" is unhurried but relentless, always moving toward its victim with a promise of certain mortality. It cannot be killed, restrained, persuaded, or deceived, only temporarily evaded.

According to Wood (2003), Hollywood monsters represent the "return of the repressed," whereby what society disavows reemerges as "an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of oppression" (p. 68). The monster symbolizes radical Otherness: people, behaviors, or ideologies that society can neither recognize nor completely eradicate. Cohen (1996) writes that "the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabiting the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again" (p. 4). If monsters, then, are traumatic substitutes for what society casts out—the alien, abject, uncanny—then what is the "it" that "follows"? In other words, what repressed element of the unconscious has returned in our "collective nightmares" as a measured yet ceaseless force that can be neither avoided nor eradicated (Wood, 2003, p. 70)?

Popular critics praised *It Follows* as a this decade's low-budget breakthrough in the horror film genre, akin to Hooper and Henkel's (1974) *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or Craven's *The Last House on the Left*, both of which advanced the genre's gritty aesthetic and captured dehumanization in post-Vietnam War America (Bradshaw, 2015; Debruge, 2014; Holden, 2015; Mulcahey, 2015; Robey, 2015). Cruz (2015) contends that the film unsettled audience expectation about monsters, about whom they typically know "what makes them angry, why they kill, and sometimes, how to stop them." In Phillips' (2005) terminology, *It Follows* produced a "resonant violation" uniquely situated to a cultural context in which a ceaseless and depersonalized guarantor of mortality would register with such profound dread (p. 11). The film returns to its audience a new monster that is uniquely befitting the total fear that saturates the day-to-day lives of millions of Americans who find themselves antagonized by systemic, structured vulnerability: unemployment, limited upward mobility, substandard health care, crumbling infrastructure, environmental degradation, and divestment in the public good. Set in the eroding middle-class buffer zone between the poorest major city in the United States and its wealthiest outer suburbs, *It Follows* crafts a monster and mise-en-scène that are emblematic of the slow yet steady intensification of vulnerability in postindustrial America.

In this essay, I argue that *It Follows* confronts audiences with the spectral manifestation of *precarity*, or what Butler (2006) characterizes as the uneven yet organized redistribution of bodily vulnerability throughout postindustrial society. First, I argue that the generic shift from a specific monster to an anonymous and relentless force draws attention to the ubiquitous conditions that induce horror within the prevailing socioeconomic order. A genre preoccupied with bodies in pain, such horror identifies the *it* that *follows*: the systematic and existential threats to the human condition under late capitalism including poverty, racism, and deindustrialization. Second, the film renders such precarity visible by contrasting the *mise-en-scène* of the suburb with zones of postindustrial ruin. The film uses the iconic dividing line of Detroit's 8 Mile Road to convey the horrors of impoverishment that accompany America's urban stratification: miles of abandoned buildings, foreclosed homes, collapsing infrastructure, and brownfields sparsely populated by vulnerable communities. *It Follows* maps a landscape of postindustrial ruin, enacting a visual and narrative critique of *thanatopolitics*: the biopolitical organization of death under postindustrial capitalism. This essay illustrates the potential of ambient horror to indict the organized abandonment of the inner city as a source of structural violence.

### **Precarity, *thanatopolitics*, and ambient horror**

In *It Follows*, the "terrible place" so common to the horror genre is diffused into the architecture of postindustrial society, woven into the manifold layers and permeable borders of urban infrastructure (Clover, 1993, p. 30). Instead of specific monsters, the film casts the environmental, infrastructural, and material stratification of society as the primary source of dread. In previous films, urban stratification has frequently resonated with moral panics over the nightmare of racialized inner-city violence. Thus, there is a facile division between urban threat and suburban safety, the latter zone under siege and whose borders must be solidified to contain the monstrosity of the inner city. Tracing the city-as-nightmare trope, Macek (2006) argues that "mainstream films invariably depicted the urban landscapes as terrifying and crime-filled," and thus confirmed "suburbia's racist fantasies about ghetto culture, and embraced conservative mystifications (and exaggerations) of the cities' problems" (p. xvi). Macek contends that films throughout the 1980s and 1990s transcoded right-wing characterizations of urban life as plagued by street crime, gang violence, and a parasitic underclass. For instance, Hollywood's Detroit in *Robocop* (1987, 2014), *Dreamgirls* (2006), *8 Mile* (2008), and *Four Brothers* (2005) is portrayed as a cesspool of unavoidable crime and lawlessness. Thus, urban horror films have contributed to ideological discourses supporting the tough on crime politics of mass incarceration. Similarly, Grant (1996) observed the rise of the "yuppie horror film" in which a "wrong turn" into a bad inner city neighborhood resulted in the torment of affluent white characters by "crime, madness, squalor, and poverty" (p. 5). By contrast, the clean brightly colored Hollywood suburb is either under siege (Kennedy, 2000) or "nostalgically tinged," emplacing privileged individuals "into the bosom of imperfect but loving white families" (Dickinson, 2006, p. 213). In sum, cinema blames the ostensibly monstrous inhabitants of the inner city for violence, poverty, and urban decay. Urban horror forecloses a structural critique of urban/suburban stratification by fortifying the permeable boundaries between the two.

By contrast, *It Follows* engenders a different politics of spatial mapping as it addresses the city-as-nightmare trope. The film portrays the spatial organization of the postindustrial city as a series of stratified yet connected layers: the inner city, the proto-suburbs, and the newer outer suburbs. The nightmarish aspect of the city is that relative comfort of its outer layers is predicated on the abandonment of its formerly robust industrial center. More importantly, the suburb is subjected to the same laws of entropy as the inner city and, thus, as the health of the inner city wanes, so too does the suburb. Postindustrial ruin is portrayed as a suburban problem as much as it's an inner city problem, though the inner city suffers disproportionately. In contrast to urban horror, I intend to show how the film represents the suburb as permeable, a crumbling façade of security, rendered vulnerable by the slow yet relentless creep of postindustrial decay. Hence, the subgenre of *ambient horror* addresses bodily vulnerability as the byproduct of the structural organization of the postindustrial city. Such a film augments the city-as-nightmare trope by exchanging the racialized threat of inner city criminals for an anonymous monster whose vague features stand in the place of the ceaseless existential threats of structural violence. Hence, the film is significant because it intervenes into the political commonsense of urban/suburban divide by identifying an underlying thanatopolitical structure in the postindustrial city. Rather than highlight the threat of inner city monsters, the film constructs a concept of postindustrial ruin for which the organized abandonment of the inner city serves as the conditions that ground the production monstrosity.

At the same time, urban horror films are also about bodies. Film scholars have characterized horror as a "body genre," a low cultural form that traffics in graphic displays of bodily sensation while attempting to elicit affected bodily responses from spectators (Clover, 1993; Cruz, 2012; Wester, 2012; Williams, 1991). Like melodrama or pornography, horror films aim at stirring bodily impulses—revulsion and fear—rather than engaging the audience's faculties for critical reflection. Williams argues that body genres are so often maligned on account of the "perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen" (p. 4). As a genre preoccupied with bodies in pain, I add that horror is particularly attentive to the source and nature of bodily vulnerability, mortality, trauma, and death. Horror subjects audiences to both vulnerability through visceral experience and invites them to peer behind the façade of *invulnerability*: once inviolable bodies disarticulated, gored, and turned inside-out. The taboo of horror, then, is that it transgresses society's elaborate symbolic defense mechanisms that are designed to insulate us against knowledge of own mortality (Becker, 1997). In some cases, those defense mechanisms are tied to structural privilege; affluence, whiteness, and geographic advantages temporarily under siege.

Hence, this essay also illustrates how *It Follows* maps the vulnerability of individual bodies as a structural byproduct of social and environmental factors. Throughout the film, bodily vulnerability is contextualized as part of the organized abandonment of the inner city, whose decrepit manufacturing infrastructure and decaying suburban neighborhoods once supported an upwardly mobile working class. While Hollywood has produced a number of urban horror films, *It Follows* diverges in its emphasis on the horrors engendered by the stratification and precarity of life in postindustrial society. The film redeploys this spectacle of the body in pain as a social index of human vulnerability, particularly as

it is unequally distributed throughout the postindustrial city. The film evolves the genre's engagement with mortality by shifting the locus of fear from specific Others to the structural conditions under which some lives are more precarious than others.

As a form of *ambient* horror, I contend that *It Follows* invites audiences to consider the relationship between precarious life and postindustrial society, exposing those elements of spatial stratification that open populations to structural violence. Here, two important concepts explain how such films draw attention to the politics of bodily vulnerability. First, the concept of precarity explains how bodily vulnerability is a structural feature of social stratification whereby the economically and politically marginalized are uniquely exposed to preventable risks to health and safety. Butler (2016) writes that

precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. (p. ii)

Precarity is reflected in environmental injustice and the abandonment of poor communities in the American rust belt. It is the condition of being exposed to extraordinary structured vulnerability and, thus, existing in constant state of confrontation with mortality.

Cinematically, precarity registers as an existential horror in which victims are made acutely aware of mortality, a consciousness previously evaded by those living in the privileged zones of the stratified city. For audiences, the resonant violation of ambient horror occurs at the moment when the border between sacred and disposable populations is crossed, when structurally protected bodies become subjected to the everyday vulnerability typically experienced by a permanent underclass. Ambient horror thus engenders the steady intensification of precarity throughout the populace.

A second feature of ambient horror is that it cultivates dread not through gory spectacle but rather a haunting *mise-en-scène* that indexes the social geography of everyday vulnerability. In this way, *It Follows* invites audiences to read bodily vulnerability through the biopolitics of death or *thanatopolitics*: how a society organizes which lives are considered sacred and which are considered disposable (Agamben, 2000; Foucault, 2010; Murray, 2008, 2006). Thanatopolitics marks the line where precarity is rationalized in the name of life; in short, for "us" to live "they" must be allowed to die. Thus, Agamben (2000) argues that the concentration camp is the hidden paradigm of the modern polis, a governing logic premised on the sovereign's power to decide who is incorporated into the political body. Agamben (2000) finds informal camp logics at work in the social stratification of the American city, observing

even certain outskirts of the great postindustrial cities as well as the gated communities of the United States are beginning to look like camps, in which naked life and political life, at least in determinate moments, enter a zone of absolute indeterminacy. (p. 39)

As such, there is a thanatopolitical structure to the city that is encoded within the ambient horror film: a *mise-en-scène* that can be read according to how death is organized along lines of geographic dis/advantage.

In this case, the *mise-en-scène* of Detroit's 40 square miles of abandoned properties conveys a sense of disposability, particularly when contrasted against the relative comfort of the suburb (Sugrue, 2014). In the popular imaginary, the dividing line of 8 Mile Road has become a powerful signifier of racial and economic stratification in postindustrial America (Galster, 2012; Watts, 2005). *It Follows'* representation of Detroit bespeaks the horrors of postindustrial capitalism by which corporate outsourcing, shrinking government, and divestment in the public good ceaselessly impoverish the American working class. Apel (2015) observes that Detroit is now

at the center of a vast network of ruin images, making the former Motor City the poster child of ruination in the advanced capitalist countries today. Although images are never the same as the real, the global network of ruin imagery visually constructs the nature of modern decline and shapes collective ways of seeing. (p. 4)

Ambient postindustrial horror enlivens such visual imagery with shocking and traumatic narratives of life in precarious times. The subgenre captures the scope of industrial ruin and invites the audience to consider economic and environmental stratification as the source of everyday horror.

### **The *It that Follows***

In the remainder of this essay, I examine the multiple symbolic registers of ambient horror in *It Follows*. I attend to both narrative and visual cues to explain how the film invites a critical engagement with the (thanato)politics of precarity. This entails an analysis of three specific moves that recur throughout the film. First, I examine the film's anonymous monster as a metaphor of contamination that conveys the experience of precarity. Second, I attend to how the film maps the postindustrial landscape through the construction of *mise-en-scène* and a series of travel montages. Finally, I turn my attention to how precarity is addressed by the protagonists' efforts to defeat It, which involves perpetual engagement rather than eradication. This analysis demonstrates how the film invites audiences to examine the condition and scope of structured inequality and directs them away from the strategic indifference that enables those conditions to intensify.

### **What is "It"?**

The film's monster is part curse, part sexually transmitted infection. As a kind of supernatural contagion, it slowly pursues and ultimately kills its victims unless they transmit the affliction to another. This act only delays mortality since the monster invariably returns to the previously infected once it dispatches its victim. Presumably, the young woman's death that introduces the film has returned the monster downstream. Jay Height, the film's protagonist, enters the chain of infection after she has a sexual encounter with a young man

she knows as Hugh. Jay, her sister, and friends Paul and Yara continually fail in their efforts to evade, destroy, and understand It's source and nature. Thus, the film's monster defies singular explanation: it is not a psychopathic killer, ghost, poltergeist, demon, alien, zombie, or beast. The film refuses to provide explanations such as evil, psychosis, or repressed memories that might enable audiences to domesticate or dismiss the underlying threat posed by the monster. In deviating from horror convention, the film's refusal to assign the monster a particular motive, pathology, or origin draws attention to It as a form of displacement. With no identity of its own, the monster is legible only as a spectral manifestation of mortality. Yet, the monster does not represent morality as part of the general human condition but rather an acute sense of mortality that accompanies precarious life.

"It" is a contamination metaphor that organizes the film around questions of systemic vulnerability. While sex and sexuality are central features of horror, it would be difficult to categorize sexual transmission in this case as a kind of punishment for immoral behavior featured in slasher films such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980). But the recurring association of sex and death makes sexual transmission a convenient way to represent vulnerability, particularly as it is inflicted upon others. Transmission implies that mortality can be symbolically managed by relegating vulnerability to others. In this case, Hugh intentionally passes the curse to Jay so that he might return to his extraordinarily privileged life in the opulent outer suburbs. Jay lives closer to the 8 mile dividing line which, in light of the film's emphasis on geography, renders her more vulnerable. Moreover, sex is an encounter with the abject, or those elements of uncleanness and bodily interiority that provoke an uncanny mixture of revulsion and fascination (Hahner, Varda, & Wilson, 2013; King, 2009; Kristeva, 1982). Abjection is also a response to vulnerability in which we fortify the self against foreign elements that threaten to contaminate the body. In this regard, the monster is not a form of moral retribution but a harbinger of intense exposure to the brutal realities of human existence. It transgresses our illusory borders of invincibility, coming to victims by way of a common act that symbolizes our susceptibility to dirt and abjection.

As a contagion, the anonymous It manifest three characteristics that menace the characters privileged sense of invulnerability; a privilege owed not to youth alone but their whiteness and class status. First, the monster is slow yet unavoidable. This characteristic registers a different kind of dread than the teen slasher film. It's not the killer's physical prowess, speed, or supernatural strength that forebodes but instead the steady and measured certainty of death; the latter more a condition or feeling than a physical body. Jay's first encounter with It is particularly illustrative. As shown in Figure 1, to ensure that the monster follows Jay, Hugh forcefully sedates her, ties her to a chair inside the building, and awaits the monster's arrival. He explains to Jay:

This thing, it's going to follow you. Somebody gave it me and I passed it to you back in the car. It could look like someone you know or it could be a stranger in the crowd. Whatever helps it get close to you. It could look like anyone. But there's only one of it. Sometimes I think it looks like people you love to hurt you.



This ceaseless protean monster then appears as a naked woman steadily crossing the railroad tracks at the building's edge, itself a dividing line signifying class and wealth stratification. The audience is introduced to a monster with even pace, which not only builds tension but cues the audience as to the relationship between time and mortality. Like mortality, the monster is slow; yet, it also imposes on its victims an accelerated countdown to death. It *speeds up* the temporal processes of mortality, but if the victim can evade the monster, It's pursuit also *slows down* time to the extent that victims are compelled to anticipate their impending demise. Hugh relays this experience on an earlier date with Jay when the two play a people-watching game. He chooses a small child and asks "how cool would that be to have your whole life in front of you?" This comment is perplexing coming from a teenager who ostensibly has his whole life in front of him. But, with an understanding of how It operates, his comment suggests that the monster's measured pace brings with it a brutal consciousness of mortality.



**Figure 1.** Jay's first encounter with the monster was shot inside the ruins of the Detroit Packard Plant.

Second, the monster is abject. It, thus, permeates the psycho-symbolic barriers we erect to stabilize our identities and expel that which signifies sickness, decay, uncleanness, and impurity. In a majority of instances, It takes the form of hosts who are diseased, frail, and dirty. When it is not naked, its garments are often disheveled, torn, or incomplete, exposing skin and genitalia. It appears to Jay a second time as frail elderly woman in a hospital nightgown, who stalks her through the hallways of her high school. Her third encounter is with a sickly woman dressed as a sex worker, clothes torn, breasts exposed. The monster reappears shortly after as tall man in torn sleepwear. At other times, it is in pajamas, underwear, or other clothing that is typically considered inappropriate for public wear. Ironically, It takes the form of people at their most vulnerable: sleeping, sick, hospitalized, and unclothed. By inhabiting abject bodies—diseased, promiscuous, and abhorrent—It provokes a dread of contamination and uncleanness. Like It, abjection can never be eliminated, always returning as revulsion of that which symbolizes death and decay: bodily

fluids, waste, and filth (King, 2009; Kristeva, 1982). Both terrorize their victims by reminding them of the instability of their identity and the certainty of their mortality.

Moreover, *how* it kills is particularly abject. Jay's neighbor Greg offers to unburden her of It by having sex. Beleaguered by its relentless pursuit, Jay agrees. Of course, Greg is no less able to evade it than any of the others. Taking the form of his mother, It kills Greg via sexual intercourse. Here, the monster violates the incest taboo but more significant is how it fuses two forms of abjection: sex and death. Copulating with its victims as a form of killing draws attention to the vulnerability of life across the biological continuum from reproduction to death, and the impossible fantasy of its transcendence. That life processes might induce death captures the perversity of thanatopolitics: a form of life that requires death. The monster is thus a manifestation of how casting out the abject and alien is as much a social as it is a psychological phenomenon. That is to say that for virtuous populations the fantasy of invulnerability requires classes of disposable persons to take on the burden of precarious life: that the laboring classes contribute the comforts of the leisure class, that the poor and people of color bear the burden of industrial pollution and wealth inequality. Moreover, a monster as infection or instrument of abject-ification is painfully well-suited to the health disparities produced by postindustrial decline. Squires and Kubrin (2006) argue that spatial and racial inequalities are directly linked to poor access to health care, clean air, water, housing, and food. Uneven development in postindustrial cities creates disparate rates of infant mortality, obesity, and preventable disease. In addition, sex work flourishes in the postindustrial city without the allocation of corresponding resources to address sexual and reproductive health challenges (Dewey, 2011). Thus, a monster who embodies infection represents one of the primary externalities of deindustrialization: spatial inequalities that leave many without adequate health resources.

### *Mapping the ruins*

Using the landscapes of Detroit, the film provides a social and geographic map of economic privilege and marginalization in postindustrial America. This map provides a portrait of life in three different rings of the city: the inner city, the suburbs past 8 Mile Road, and the outer suburbs past 20 Mile. The closer to the inner city the older and more antiquated the infrastructure, the more modest the housing, the more ominous the living conditions. The protagonists—Jay, her sister Kelly, and her friends Paul, Yara, and Greg—live in a liminal zone; a space provisionally secure but at risk of urban contamination. Jay and Paul are the film's primary protagonists, but their friend Yara informally narrates the existential threats the characters face as they navigate the city by reading aloud parts of Dostoevsky's (1887) *The Idiot*, the story grapples with ontological questions about mortality. The group's movement between the inner and outer ring of the city visually maps the city's thanatopolitical structure, its zones of security and sacrifice. This visual map illuminates the atmospheric conditions that produce normalized everyday horrors and draws critical attention to the *mise-en-scène* industrial decay as a zone of sacrifice.

The film begins with a map of the protagonists' location, a suburban neighborhood near 12 Mile Road. The film's portrait of the neighborhood conveys a sense of liminality, that the place is both spatially and temporally in/between security and vulnerability. Spatially, Jay's house and neighborhood show subtle signs of disorganization, corrosion, and decay.

While pleasantly modest at a distance, close-up shots of Jay's midcentury home reveal that the exterior has yellowed, cracked, and become stained with dirt and mildew. The ornate glass atrium that faces the backyard is discolored and unkempt. The balcony of Jay's room appears unsafe. The above-ground backyard pool, full of leaves and dirt, stands as a cheap imitation of bourgeois luxury. As the sole wage earner of two teenagers, Jay's mother's demanding work schedule accounts for the lack of routine home maintenance.

Temporally, Jay's environment is disorienting, a kind of purgatory outside of time. The film takes places in no particular decade, year, or even season. For instance, the morning of her date, Jay is shown relaxing in the family pool, yet later that afternoon she and Hugh are waiting in line for the theatre surrounded by patrons in heavy winter coats. Piles of dead leaves seem to indicate that it is autumn yet later in the film the group spends a morning swimming and sunbathing on the beach. At other times, neighborhood lawns are bereft of dead leaves and the trees appear in full summer bloom. Moreover, Jay's house and neighborhood appear trapped at the apex of their midcentury ascendance, but with little update or improvement. Her family's home décor consists of a distinctly post-War aesthetic: ornately patterned wallpaper, black and white family portraits in antique frames, and linoleum floors. The home is filled with outdated household items, including midcentury kitchen appliances, bathroom and light fixtures, rotary phones, and antique furniture. In several scenes, Jay and her friends watch black-and-white cartoons and 1950s science fiction films on a retro television set with rabbit ears. All the cars throughout the neighborhood are functional though clearly decades old. While in atrophy, these vehicles and homes are trapped in the time period that marked the peak of the Motor City, when the automobile and manufacturing industries supported a robust working-class (Binelli, 2013; Ewen, 2015; Sugrue, 2014). Thus, the film's spatial-temporal arrangement engender a sense of a melancholy, of a place and people trapped spatially between a collapsing inner city and the wealthy enclave and temporally between the city's grand industrial past and postindustrial present. The city's overall decline means that the dividing line between rich and poor has slowly but steadily crept northward, trapping the residents of what used to be considered suburbs. This spatial-temporal ambiguity signifies the slow but steady expansion of precarity that accompanies deindustrialization and intense wealth stratification.

Next, the film maps the stark differences between the extreme poles of the city. Through a series of travel scenes, the film tours spectators through the vast expanse of the crumbling and uninhabited postindustrial infrastructure of the inner city. To understand the source of her curse, Jay and her friends search for Hugh, who claimed to live in an impoverished area south of 8 Mile. Through the car's front window, the camera moves over street after street of abandoned properties, graffiti, rusted and immobile vehicles, and entire neighborhoods of boarded up homes. As shown in Figure 2, the travel montage captures streets and sidewalks of once vibrant city blocks now littered with garbage, weeds, dead trees, and piles of rubble and scrap metal. The collapse of the auto industry is visible on nearly every street corner as they pass closed car repair shops and automotive parts suppliers. While sparsely populated, indistinguishable groups of men and sex workers are shown congregated on street corners. The use of light and sound create an ominous atmosphere. The natural low light of cloudy skies gives the inner city a foreboding gray hue while a

soundtrack of synthesizers reminiscent of 1980s slasher films convey a feeling of dread and despair.



**Figure 2.** The mise-en-scène of 8 Mile.

The mission to find Hugh illuminates how precarity is distributed throughout the city and how the city's racial and class segregation protect the privileged. Shown in Figure 3, Hugh's temporary residence is overgrown with ivy and its windows darkened with newspaper. The house is empty save garbage, cans, a mattress, and pornographic magazines. The group discovers that the home does not belong to Hugh and his family, nor is Hugh who he claims to be. "Hugh" is Jeff who lives in the wealthy outer suburbs. Infected after a one-night stand, Jeff ventured to the inner city to find someone disposable to whom he could pass his affliction. Jeff's actions reflect what is visible in the mise-en-scène: pain and mortality passed on to those less fortunate. The group, then, travels to the outer suburbs. Figure 4 shows how this travel montage utilizes natural high key sunlight to capture the bright vibrant colors of manicured lawns, beautiful landscaping, large homes and estates. Jeff's family lives on the edge of a park where children are shown playing and friendly neighbors walking and congregating. In contrast to the dark hues and low-key lighting used to represent the largely uninhabited inner city, the brightness and straight lines of the outer suburbs create the appearance of comfort, civility, and safety. In mapping the different environments throughout the city, the film both represents the structural organization of precarity and engenders the feeling of its lived experience.





**Figure 3.** Hugh's "home."



**Figure 4.** The outer suburbs.

*The refusal*

With a rudimentary understanding of the monster and a map of the city that produced It, the group sets out to do battle. The group's preparations and final confrontation with It invite the audience to consider how precarity might be addressed on a structural rather than individual basis. The film refuses to eradicate or domesticate the monster, offering no singular or satisfactory response that might return Jay and her friends to the fantasy zone of invulnerability. As a displacement or metaphor for precarity, the monster cannot be killed, only relegated or directly addressed. Their more conventional effort to unlock the monster's vulnerability and defeat it ultimately fails, forcing the group to a decision as to

whether or not to pass the affliction or accept perpetual confrontation. The group's final confrontation with It invites the audience to consider more difficult and discomforting solutions to structural inequality than those that merely resecure the physical and symbolic borders of the privileged. Ultimately, there is no resolution, only a sustained encounter with the monster and what it represents.

The group's efforts at evasion and eradication fail. In part, these conventional horror film resolutions misdiagnose the affliction, assuming that the monster is some kind of aberration that, once defeated, will return their world back to a state of normalcy. In one sense, the protagonists' world only provided an appearance of invulnerability, its slow motion incorporation into the zone of the precariat visibly manifest in their homes and on their streets. In another sense, the monster is a kind of total displacement that represents a social condition that cannot be eradicated without a radical transformation in the economic organization of society. Social and environmental stratification make passing It the simplest and most convenient solution; however, such a solution only ensures the inevitable "return of the repressed" and the cyclical imperative to again push it downstream. While all of these solutions are misguided, the group's failed effort to eradicate the monster does not impart fatalism. Instead, their failure illustrates that as a complex and systematic problem, precarity defies individualized piecemeal solutions. "It" must be acknowledged and confronted as a force that structures postindustrial society. While the film provides no lasting solution, it invites prolonged and uncomfortable engagements rather than the relief of eradication.

The group's first failed strategy is evasion. They drive north to Greg's parents secluded lake cabin in the hope that they will misdirect It. Predictably, the monster returns and a near fatal encounter leaves Jay hospitalized. Believing he can more skillfully evade the monster, Greg convinces Jay to have sex and pass the monster to him. Greg's delusion ultimately consigns him to death. Yet, this failure is productive in that it illustrates the impossibility of denial or escape. The group then agrees that they must directly confront the monster. This decision acknowledges the inevitable return of the repressed yet still clings to the fantasy of eradication. But, it is at this point that the group acknowledges that their whole lives have been structured around evading the vulnerability relegated to those south of 8 Mile. They choose a site near the border, an indoor pool the group used to visit in their childhood when the neighborhood seemed much safer. As the group walks along a row of abandoned homes they acknowledge their place and role in the city's segregation. Yara remarks:

When I was a little girl my parents wouldn't let me go south of 8 Mile. And I didn't even know what that meant until I got a little bit older and I started realized that's where the city started and the suburbs ended.

Jay responds, "my mom said the same thing." This conversation demonstrates the importance of critical consciousness that, though not a panacea, forces individuals to confront their place in the structure of spatial and racial privilege.

Indeed, Yara is a fitting character to introduce such an insight. Throughout the film she is portrayed as simple, clueless, and unaware of her surroundings. Even while the group is

in danger, she continually reads from a clamshell-shaped electronic tablet—an anachronism among other antiquated technologies. Her dialogue is minimal yet subtly narrates the character's growing awareness of mortality. She reads passages from *The Idiot*, the story of a wise man whose good nature and openness is mistaken for unintelligence. The parts she reads aloud focus on the protagonist's grappling with the painful knowledge of mortality. One passage she reads states "the worst thing is that it [death] is certain." Despite Yara's outward appearance of simplicity, she too imparts a symbolic and literary engagement with mortality to match their burgeoning awareness of its inescapability. Yara's brief reflections on mortality and the politics of the city both narrates the group's change in consciousness and cues the audiences as what It represents.

Despite their newfound awareness, the group tries to defeat the monster by luring it to a final confrontation. Their plan to electrocute the monster in a pool makes little sense as the monster is both invulnerable and adaptive. Indeed, Jay's efforts to calmly lure It to its death are countered when it takes the shocking form of her deceased father. But, this confrontation proves important in illustrating the politics of mortality. The confrontation disabuses both the protagonists and the spectator of the fantasy of permanent resolution. There is no escape, no authority figure to appeal to for help, and no socially just way to divert the monster without disastrous results. The film thus returns to the uncomfortable choice: pass on the infection or die. The conclusion of the film is, however, ambiguous as to whether or not Jay and Paul pass It to another unsuspecting victim. In one reading, Jay and Paul refuse the choice as a false binary that, either way, participates in broader organization of thanatopolitics. After accepting It from Jay, Paul returns to the ruins south of 8 Mile with the intent of passing the monster to an unsuspecting sex worker. He hesitates, lingering at the sight of precarious bodies situated in a *mise-en-scène* of postindustrial triage. Yet, the film leaves Paul's actions ambiguous. The film concludes with Paul and Jay walking hand in hand through their neighborhood with It in slow pursuit. Neither Jay nor Paul seemed panicked, nor unaware of It's presence. Regardless of Paul's actions, the two appear to have accepted It's presence in their life, ultimately disrupting the chain of disproportionate suffering.

### *Accepting the return*

This essay illustrates how the ambient horror film invites audiences to rethink the organization of bodily vulnerability in postindustrial society. Namely, *It Follows* illustrates how precarity is structurally organized by a postindustrial economic system that has divested in and abandoned both the urban and suburban working class. The film accomplishes this task by mapping the ruins of Detroit—the birthplace of the Fordist model of production—exposing audiences to the layers of decay that cascade across the permeable boundaries of an economically and geographically stratified city. Moreover, the film constructs a monster that embodies the characteristics of precarity in postindustrial age: a slow yet ceaseless force that delivers to its victim not only inevitable mortality but consciousness of their ever-present vulnerability. Ambient horror—in which the source of dread is atmospheric and structural—shifts the audience's focal point from specific monsters to one that can be neither eradicated nor domesticated, and, thus, to structural forces of fear and violence that have no easy solution. In terms of its construction of monstrosity, this analysis of *It Follows*

explores a new form of engagement with the “return of the repressed” wherein the privileged protagonists refuse to cast out the monster and instead choose to live uneasily with its presence. Visually, the film links monstrosity to the conditions of America’s postindustrial decline, by which the myths of upward mobility have transparently disintegrated.

Such a transformation in the horror film is politically significant in as much as it interweaves into the ideological commitments engendered by Hollywood’s repetition of the city-as-nightmare trope. In horror films, the inner city has been attributed as the primary source of violence and criminality in society. The inhabitants of the inner city have been portrayed as monstrous opportunists who torment visitors or assault peaceful suburban communities. Such films cast blame for the urban decay, violence, and poverty on inner-city residents, and thus, promulgate the white conservative panic over supposedly violent minorities. It is such reactionary fear that accelerates the flight of people and capital from America’s urban centers. In this context and cinematic milieu, this essay suggests that *It Follows* is remarkable for its divergence from the city-as-nightmare trope. In one sense, the monster is not a reflection of urban violence and criminality but instead a stand-in for the structural violence that produces poverty. As total displacement, the monster represents the precarity of the working-class living amongst the ruins of postindustrial society. Thus, the film invites audiences to rethink the urban nightmare as a problem to be addressed at a structural level rather than as an aberration to be eradicated or repelled. Unlike the suburb-under-siege motif, suburban residents must acknowledge and, to a certain extent, take on the precarity once thought to be relegated exclusively to the inner city. The decline of the postindustrial industrial city is presented as a concern that connects populations across lines of stratification, a problem only evaded temporarily by fortification and flight to the gated community.

Take, for instance, the film’s resolution. The protagonist’s acceptance of mortality defies the logics of thanatopolitics by accepting the return of the repressed. This conclusion directs the audience to consider its own role in distribution of precarity. Although not revolutionary, it illustrates the structural conditions that produce horror and agency within those structures. Thus, the film invites its audience to refuse complicity with how vulnerability is encoded into social and physical architecture of postindustrial. At the same time, such an ending is not wholly unproblematic, as Jay and Paul still retain their relative position of privilege even as they accept the return of the repressed. Indeed, the two walking hand in hand suggests that Jay and Paul have little to worry about this monstrous manifestation of postindustrial Detroit. Yet, the two cannot return to their youthful suburban innocence when they were blissfully unaware that the city, along with their suburb, has ceased improving the human condition. Ultimately, the film refuses to right or refortify the suburb against the problems of the inner city.

To conclude, the film attends to the common sense of who lives and dies within the geographies of late capitalism; which bodies are sacred and which bodies are disposable. The film is an intervention that contests the ideological narratives that support the flight of capital and people from the inner city. Hence, this analysis contributes to how critical media scholars might address the politics of horror cinema in postindustrial society. That is, a critical emphasis on the atmospheric worlds reproduced on screen evince how the genre has been adapted to visually map the geographic contours of who lives and dies in



precarious times. Ambient horror provides the symbolic resources to understand and resist the nightmare of postindustrial ruin.

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