

Halloween in Urban North America: Liminality and Hyperreality

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Halloween, a relatively free-form holiday under no particular jurisdiction, has managed to retain the revelrous, liminal nature characteristic of many festivals in the past. With its roots in the pagan festival of Samhain or summersend, All Hallows Eve remained a festival of popular divinatory practices, of bonfires to ward off evil spirits or to help souls in purgatory, and of omens and magic. Rites of masking, treating, revelry, and mischief were well established before the major waves of Irish and Scottish immigration to North America, but Halloween did not attract much public attention until the 1880s as rival holidays declined. Halloween's modern popularity, however, also stems from its immersion in consumer culture and in the hyperreality of films, videos, spook houses, and "terror trains", in which the distinction between the real and the imaginary is blurred.

La Halloween, un congé à forme relativement libre ne relevant d'aucune autorité particulière, a réussi à conserver la nature festive et ésotérique de bon nombre de festivals d'antan. La veille de la Toussaint, qui remonte au festival païen de la Samhain, ou de fin d'été, demeure un festival de pratiques divinatoires populaires, de feux de joie pour chasser les mauvais esprits ou pour aider les âmes au purgatoire, de présages et de magie. Les rituels du port du masque, de la sollicitation de friandises, des festivités et de l'espièglerie étaient bien établis avant l'arrivée en vagues massives des immigrants irlandais et écossais en Amérique du Nord, mais la Halloween intéressa peu la population jusque dans les années 1880, au moment du déclin de fêtes rivales. La popularité moderne de la Halloween tient toutefois à son immersion dans la culture de la consommation et dans l'hyperréalité des films, vidéos, maisons hantées et « trains de la terreur », où se confondent le réel et l'imaginaire.

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IN 1983 A WASHINGTON journalist described the Halloween street parade at Georgetown, albeit in a campy style and with a profusion of mixed metaphors. He wrote:

At Wisconsin and M, in the belly of the blast, it was like an Easter parade of freaks ... to say nothing of the flashers who offered outrageous peaks. As Washington staked its claim as San Francisco East, glitter and gloss were everywhere and the roar of the grease-paint and the swell of the crowd engulfed Georgetown, magically transpoofing it into an androgynous and anthropomorphic street fair. Men dressed as women; women dressed as men; ... men and women dressed as things that could heal the sick, raise the dead and make little girls talk out of their heads. Acting out their most sublimated fantasies, strutting their stuff, whirring and purring like figurines on an elaborate cuckoo clock. As Butch [Cassidy] said to [the] Sundance [Kid], “Who *are* those guys?”¹

“Those guys” were part of the anonymous crowd who participated in annual street carnivals that punctuated the decade. From Halifax to Vancouver, from New York City to L.A., revellers congregated in downtown cores to commemorate All Hallows Eve in their tens and sometimes hundred thousands. Halloween went big-time in the 1980s, eclipsing the child-centred rituals of trick-or-treating with what another journalist described as “escapist extravaganzas” that “more resembled Mardi Gras than the candy-and-apple surfeits of yesteryear”.² In San Francisco, alongside huge gay promenades at Castro and Polk streets, the Trocadero Transfer Club ran a three-day bash on the theme of the Australian cult movie, *The Road Warrior*.³ At Salem, witchery generated 40 events for some 50,000 visitors. Even in Salt Lake City, where the Mormons frowned on public profanity and excess, private clubs promoted Halloween parties with gusto. One observer remembered pregnant nuns and lewd priests cavorting on the dance floor and three gold-painted angels mimicking the figure atop the city’s Mormon temple.⁴ Amid the voyeurism and exhibitionism, the carnivalesque seemed irrepressible.

How can we account for the continuing fascination with Halloween, not only among children, but among adults? What is it about this Celtic festival that has generated national appeal and made it the most carnivalesque of national festivals? Part of the answer stems from the fact that Halloween, a relatively free-form holiday under no particular jurisdiction, has managed

1 *Washington Post*, October 31, 1983.

2 *Time Magazine*, October 31, 1988, p. 82.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Russell W. Belk, “Carnival, Control, and Corporate Culture in Contemporary Halloween Celebrations” in Jack Santino, ed., *Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), p. 106.

to retain the revelrous liminality that was characteristic of many festivals in the past. Halloween constitutes a time of transition when orthodox social constraints are lifted, a moment of status ambiguity and indeterminacy when ritual subjects can act out their individual or collective fantasies, hopes, or anxieties.⁵ As such Halloween has an intoxicating and sometimes spontaneous ludic quality that distinguishes it from the largely spectatorial, mass-produced culture and more institutionalized commemorations.

At the same time the popularity of Halloween does not simply stem from its pre-modern attributes of play. It is in many respects a profoundly post-modern festival whose motifs and symbols continually engage mass-produced culture, particularly the Hollywoodesque. Indeed, Halloween increasingly belongs to the hyperreal, to a world of reality-effects where the distinction between the real and the imaginary has become blurred, if not radically ruptured.⁶ Halloween has become a festival without any stable historical referent, a festival of imploding signs and shifting intertextualities.

As commentators occasionally remind the public in October, Halloween is derived from the pagan festival *Samhain*, or summersend. The festival marked the beginning of the Celtic New Year, when sacrificial fires were offered to the gods for the harvest, when crops and animals were gathered in for the forthcoming winter, and when prayers were offered to commemorate the dead. In Druidic lore it was commonly believed that this was a time of other-worldly spirits when the boundaries between the living and the supernatural were erased. Replicating human memories of transhumance, elves were on the move from the fairy raths during *Samhain*, when the *fe-fiada*, the magic fog that rendered people invisible, was lifted.⁷ *Samhain* was thus a quintessentially liminal or “threshold” festival, marked by a series of borderlines: between summer and winter; between the mortal and the supernatural; between fire/solar energy and darkness. It was eventually christianized as All Saints (or All Hallows) and All Souls’ Day, but incompletely. All Hallows Eve remained a festival of popular divinatory practices, of bonfires to ward off evil spirits or to help souls in purgatory, of omens and magic. Until well into the nineteenth century it was customary in Celtic parts of Britain to light bonfires and torches on Halloween, to partake in “rough and dangerous fun”

5 The concept of liminality is taken from Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (1969; London: Penguin ed., 1974), chaps. 3–5, and *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), chap. 2. The concept of liminality (derived from the Latin *limen* or margin), originally taken from Arnold van Gennep, was developed by Turner to explore the liberative and positive aspects of social processes of transition (often highly ritualized) that are juxtaposed in some way to normative social structures. The liminal aspects of Halloween and its antecedents are explored briefly in *The Ritual Process*, pp. 161–162, 170–172.

6 On the hyperreal, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext, 1983); Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

7 E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folkways* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 277; P. W. Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland* (London: Longmans, 1920), vol. 1, pp. 264–265.

as one Scottish folklorist observed in 1860,⁸ and to use apples, nuts, crow-dies, kail stalks, and even stones to test the fidelity of lovers or to predict forthcoming marriages and deaths. Many of these practices crossed the Atlantic and became part of American folklore.⁹

Hallowtide was also marked by forms of masking, treating, and revelry. On All Souls' Day mummers went "a-souling", that is, begging for alms in return for prayers for the dead in purgatory. The practice was officially banned at the Reformation, but some version of the custom persisted in Catholic and Celtic areas of Britain into the nineteenth century. In Scotland children went from door to door carrying turnip-lanterns and asking for festive tributes or soul-cakes.¹⁰ Souling was also vigorously observed in Ireland, where on Allhallows Eve or *Oidhche Shamhna* (the vigil of *Samhain*), Charles Valencey reported:

[T]he peasants ... assemble with sticks and clubs (the emblems of laceration) going from house to house, collecting money, bread-cake, butter, cheese, eggs, &c &c for the feast, repeating verses in honour of the solemnity, demanding preparations for the festival in the name of St Columb Kill, desiring them to lay aside the *fatted calf*, and to bring forth *the black sheep*. The good women are employed in making the griddle cake and candles; these last are sent from house to house in the vicinity, and are lighted up on the next day, before which they pray, or are supposed to pray, for the departed soul of the donor. Every house abounds in the best viands they can afford: apples and nuts are devoured in abundance; the nut-shells are burnt, and from the ashes many strange things are foretold.¹¹

Mumming, or masked revelry, was also very much a part of Halloween. In Tudor England the holiday opened the official reign of Misrule, when urban leaders were temporarily usurped from power by mock-mayors and sheriffs in a ritualized upside-down world replete with "subtle disguisings, masks, and mummeries".¹² In country districts "the wilde heades of the parish" chose "a grand captaine of *mischiefe*" to play the fool during the festival of misrule, so Philip Stubbs observed, "dauncing and singing with such a confused noise that no man can hear his own voice" and demanding tributes from the neighbourhood to maintain their "heathenish devilrie".

8 Mary Macleod Banks, ed., *British Calendar Customs: Scotland* (London and Glasgow: Folklore Society, 1941), vol. 3, p. 113.

9 See Wayland D. Hand, Anna Casetta, and Sondra B. Thiederman, eds., *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions*, 3 vols. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), *passim*.

10 Macleod Banks, *British Calendar Customs: Scotland*, vol. 3, pp. 158–160; A. R. Wright, *British Calendar Customs*, ed. T. E. Jones (London: Folklore Society, 1936–1940), vol. 3, pp. 121–122.

11 Charles Vallancey, *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicus* (Dublin: T. Ewing, 1770–1804), vol. 3, p. 444, cited in John Brand and Henry Ellis, *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (London: F. L. & J. Rivington, 1813), pp. 311–312.

12 John Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. Henry Morley (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1890), p. 123.

Those who declined, he noted, were “mocked and flouted shamefully, yea, and many times carried upon the cowlstaff, and dived head and ears in water, and otherwise most horribly abused.”¹³ Halloween was thus closely associated with the festive and shaming rituals — rough music, skimmingtons, charivari — that were an integral part of early modern popular culture.¹⁴

The patrician-sponsored lords of misrule disappeared during the seventeenth century, but the festive rites associated with those revels survived, making Halloween not only a night of magic and of foreboding, but also one of disguise and mischief-making. In the Shetland isles *gruliks* or *skeklers*, young men dressed up in fantastic costumes made of animal skin or straw, went from house to house on Halloween, dancing, singing, and begging for gifts.¹⁵ At Barra in the Hebrides, lads and occasionally girls cross-dressed and went “in disguise this way among the neighbours, and play every trick they can think of”.¹⁶ In Ireland, Halloween was sometimes known as *puca* night to denote the imp (or human variant) who busily befouled the fruit and vegetables that had not been gathered in by the harvest. From the eighteenth century onwards, Halloween faced stiff competition from Guy Fawkes’ Night as a night of impish acts in England, but in the Celtic north and west its supremacy was preserved. Here gangs of youths blocked up chimneys, rampaged cabbage patches, unhinged gates, stoked up huge fires on knolls and hillsides, and exacted revenge on unpopular or antisocial neighbours. “If an individual happened to be disliked in the place,” observed one Scot in 1911, “he was sure to suffer dreadfully on these occasions. His doors would be broken, and frequently not a cabbage left standing in his garden.”¹⁷ Such was Halloween’s reputation as a night of festive transgression and recrimination that in some parts of Scotland the imperatives of community justice prevailed over private property, to a point that even the Kirk found it impossible to enforce law and order.¹⁸

13 Cited by Joseph Strutt, *A Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England*, ed. J. R. Planché (London: Henry Bohn, 1842; reprint 1970), vol. 2, pp. 200–201.

14 On the charivari, see Violet Alford, “Rough Music or Charivari”, *Folklore*, vol. 70 (1959), pp. 505–518; Natalie Z. Davis, “The Reasons of Misrule” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), chap. 4; Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, eds., *Le Charivari* (Paris: Mouton, 1981); Martin Ingram, “Ridings, Rough Music and the ‘Reform of Popular Culture’ in Early Modern England”, *Past and Present*, no. 105 (November 1984), pp. 79–113; David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), *passim*; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), chap. 8.

15 Mary Macleod Banks, *British Calendar Customs: Orkney and Shetland* (London and Glasgow: Folklore Society, 1946), pp. 76–77. For mumming on the Isle of Man, see John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore. Welsh and Manx* (London: Clarendon Press, 1901; reprint New York, 1972), p. 318.

16 Macleod Banks, *British Calendar Customs: Scotland*, vol. 3, p. 163.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 124, 156, 162–163. The importance of Halloween as a community festival is also underscored by the fact that in the western isles of Scotland common grazing begins on *La samha* and unharvested crops were considered common property. In crofter communities Halloween was an important date for “souming”, that is, apportioning the pasture for cows and sheep.

Most of these rites of masking, mischief, and divination were well established before the major waves of Irish and Scottish immigration to North America. How vigorously they were observed before 1880 remains a moot point. Mid-century newspapers rarely made more than a fleeting reference to masks and mischief-making. One exception was the *Kingston Daily News*, which in 1866 reported that “the youngsters of the city ... had their maskings and merry-makings, and perambulated the streets after dark in a way which no doubt was mightily amusing to themselves.”¹⁹ Two years later the newspaper reported a case in which a band of street urchins had plagued an unpopular neighbour by knocking his door, bespattering his windows with mud, and even pitching dead cats in the passage beside his house. These nocturnal pranks culminated “in a perfect carnival of juvenile horrors” on Halloween, provoking the householder to attack one of the band and ultimately to defend his actions in the local Police Court.²⁰

Such revelations of youthful revelry were none the less rare in the mid-nineteenth-century newspapers. More attention was paid to the divinatory practices and superstitions that Robert Burns immortalized in his poem “Halloween.”²¹ In fact the *Montreal Herald* gendered these practices, assigning the pranks to the young lads of the neighbourhood and the divinations to the young women who yearned for some glimpse of their future married life.²² Most accounts of the festival convey the impression that these traditional practices were dying out in favour of more innocent, secular, and “civilized” pastimes. Indeed, Halloween was publicly represented in the New World as a pre-eminently ethnic festival; “that time-honoured festival in folklore and legend”, the *Montreal Gazette* remarked, “recalling to the minds of the sons and daughters of ‘Auld Scotia’ [or Erin] patriotic reminiscences of fatherland and fond remembrance of friends ‘at home’.”²³ In mid-nineteenth-century Montreal and Toronto Halloween was taken up by the well-heeled and influential Caledonian Society as a celebration of “Scottishness”, with Highland reels, jigs, and ballads and poetic renditions of Robbie Burns. The same was true of the Orkney and Shetland society in Hamilton, which organized a Halloween concert with “a strong Scotch flavour” at the Alexandra arcade.²⁴ The holiday was also commemorated by various Irish fraternities such as the Young Ireland Literary Society, although Orange lodges appear to have preferred November 5, the

19 *Kingston Daily News*, November 1, 1866.

20 *Kingston Daily News*, November 3, 1868.

21 *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), November 2, 1865; November 1, 1866, 1867, and 1869; *New York Times*, November 1, 1872. In 1869 Foy’s American Theatre on Walnut Street, Philadelphia, put on a pantomime entitled “Mishaps of the Night”, probably an allusion to Halloween pranks. For the best annotated version of Burns’s poem, see James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), vol. 3, pp. 152–163.

22 *Montreal Herald*, November 1, 1872.

23 *Montreal Gazette*, October 31, 1885.

24 *Hamilton Spectator*, November 1, 1892; November 1, 1893.

anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot and Prince William's landing in England in 1688, to celebrate their particular heritage.²⁵

As an evening of youthful pranks and masked merriment, then, Halloween was marginalized by the respectable press. It did not really attract public attention until 1880 or thereafter, and even then sometimes cryptically, as in the *Torontonian* lines:

Now the urchin hath his fun,
The reign of terror's now begun,
For Hallowe'en is here.²⁶

Until then, Halloween competed on unfavourable terms with Boston's Pope's Day, Philadelphia's Christmas Mummings and Belsnickels, or New York's Callithumpian New Year celebrations as a festival of youthful revelry.²⁷ It was even upstaged by Guy Fawkes' night in Orange-dominated Toronto when it was customary for local lads "to tear down fences and burn things generally".²⁸ So incidental did Halloween appear in the popular calendar that the *New York Times* could boldly and prematurely declare in 1876, "The glory of this once popular festival has departed. Its triumphs and rough jollities, festivals and strange rites are a matter of history, and live only in the immortal verse of Burns and traditional lore."²⁹

How, then, can one account for the growing popularity of Halloween at the turn of the century and its reviving reputation for revelry? The answer lies partly in the fate of its rival holidays. By the end of the century Christmas had become a more domesticated, family-centred affair, even in working-class Philadelphia.³⁰ At the same time ethnic organizations celebrated their holidays more decorously and discouraged any rowdyism that might tarnish their newly won social and political reputation.³¹ Pope's Day (or Guy Faw-

25 See *Hamilton Spectator*, October 26 and 29, 1872; October 30, 1873; *Toronto World*, November 6, 1890. On the development of November 5 as a popular anti-Catholic festival, see David Cressy, *Bells and Bonfires: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989); Robert Storch, "'Please to Remember the Fifth of November': Conflict, Solidarity and Public Order in Southern England, 1815-1900" in Robert D. Storch, ed., *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 71-100.

26 *Toronto Evening News*, October 31, 1882.

27 Susan A. Davis, "'Making Night Hideous': Christmas Revelry and Public Order in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia", *American Quarterly*, vol. 34 (Summer 1982), pp. 185-199; Fay McAlfee Winey, "Belsnickling in Paxtonville", *Pennsylvania FolkLife*, vol. 19 (Winter 1969-1970), pp. 10-13; Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 253-260.

28 *Toronto Evening News*, November 6, 1883.

29 *New York Times*, November 1, 1876.

30 Davis, "'Making Night Hideous'", pp. 197-199; Leslie Bella, *The Christmas Imperative* (Halifax: Fernwood Press, 1992).

31 For complaints about the rougher element spoiling public enjoyment of holidays, see *Evening News*, July 11, 1896; *Toronto Daily Star*, May 26, 1913.

kes' Day), moreover, proved too anti-Catholic a festival to serve as a general holiday of youthful exuberance after the mid-century wave of Irish immigration to North America. Halloween, however, did not. A Celtic festival that was never exclusively identified with any one ethnic minority, it was relatively easily detached from its ethnic moorings and its revelrous past reinvigorated. Consequently, in the late nineteenth century Halloween was appropriated by university students at McGill and Toronto, who celebrated their own liminal status by heckling theatre audiences, uprooting railings, and immobilizing street-cars. If they were medical students, they also hung skeletons and sometimes even cadavers from trees and lampposts.³² Local youths, occasionally of both sexes but more often male, added to the merriment by tooting horns, banging pots and pans, lighting bonfires, shooting peas, and swarming grocers and shopkeepers with cries of "Shell out!" Young lads were not above pulling down smokestacks either, believing Halloween permitted such devilment.³³ The same was true south of the border. "It is to be regretted that the spirit of rowdyism has in a measure superseded the kindly old customs," William Walsh observed in 1897.

In towns and villages gangs of hoodlums throng the streets, ringing the door-bells or wrenching the handles from their sockets and taking gates off their hinges. In Washington the boys carry flour in a bag. Care is taken to have the web of the bag so that a slight blow will release a generous supply of white powder.... These the boys use upon one another as well as upon non-belligerent passers-by.³⁴

As the *Montreal Gazette* mourned in 1910, "the new Hallowe'en of American cities is quite unhallowed."³⁵

During the first decade of the twentieth century Halloween moved westwards. The festival went unmentioned in the Detroit press of the 1870s, but 30 years later Halloween was well established throughout Michigan with high school parties, university street parades, and enough pranks to keep the police on full alert.³⁶ The same was true of Chicago, where by 1903 Hal-

32 Keith Walden, "Respectable Hooligans: Male Toronto College Students Celebrate Hallowe'en, 1884-1910", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 68 (1987), pp. 1-34. For the cadavers or skeletons on display, see *Toronto Telegram*, November 2, 1885; *Toronto Evening News*, November 2, 1882. The McGill students were normally out in force on Academy Music Night in late October, but sometimes their student rag spilled over into Halloween. See *Montreal Gazette*, November 2, 1888, and November 2, 1901.

33 *Hamilton Spectator*, November 1, 1892; *Toronto Evening News*, October 31, 1883; *Toronto Telegram*, November 1, 1912.

34 William S. Walsh, *Curiosities of Popular Customs* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1897; reprint Detroit, 1966), p. 511.

35 *Montreal Gazette*, November 2, 1910.

36 *Detroit News*, November 1, 1904 and 1905. The paper notes celebrations in Detroit, Port Huron, Ann Arbor, and Chicago. In 1892 the *Detroit News* ran an article on Halloween, but it was written as if it was a quaint British, Celtic festival. See *Detroit News*, October 30, 1892.

loween was observed by blacks as well as whites. Five years later newspapers were reporting how “Halloween roysterers” at Belton, Texas, burned freight cars, houses, and 1,000 bales of cotton in a night of fire that cost \$250,000.³⁷

In the face of this sort of mayhem, strenuous efforts were made to contain youthful revelry within acceptable limits. The customary modes of mischief-making — removing garbage cans, soaping windows, deflating automobile tires, even privy-tipping — were usually tolerated and complicitly endorsed by the community. In 1936 the jailing of seven boys who splattered tomatoes over a newly painted veranda in Richmond Hill, just outside Toronto, led to howls of protest from local residents, who believed that the police had overreacted to what was nothing more than a customary prank.³⁸ Youthful street masqueraders who besieged corner stores with cries of “shell out” on Halloween were also generally tolerated, even by the police. The *Toronto Telegram* reported in 1923 that “dozens of the frolickers roamed unmolested by the big policemen, who respected the privileges that juveniles claim for the occasion.”³⁹ But police patrols were stepped up to deter youth gangs from obstructing street cars and vandalizing property, and brigades were put on full alert to extinguish fires. In Chicago officials even sought to discourage vandalism by having students formally pledge respect for all citizens and their property, but this practice never took hold on a national scale.⁴⁰ Indeed, high-school pledging may not have been altogether successful in Chicago, for at the closing of the World Fair on Halloween in 1934, thousands of merrymakers were said to have taken complete control of the streets and concessions, “drank everything in sight except Lake Michigan and snatched everything moveable as souvenirs.”⁴¹

Rather more successful was the promotion of alternative events to roving rascality. Church groups, high schools, and rotary clubs all strove to sponsor Halloween parties and dances featuring costume contests and games. A few towns promoted community street fairs and parades. Fort Worth staged a peace pageant on Halloween for 4,000 school children in 1916; New Castle, Pennsylvania, organized a public parade for as many as 10,000 marchers in 1933, and again the following year.⁴² The most famous of these sponsored events occurred at Anoka in Minnesota, where the local Commercial Club and Kiwanis first organized a large-scale festival in 1920 to wean youth from their revelrous vandalism on Halloween, inventing a tradition that has

37 *Montreal Gazette*, November 2, 1903 and 1908.

38 *Toronto Telegram*, November 2, 1936.

39 *Toronto Telegram*, November 1, 1923.

40 Tad Tuleja, “Trick or Treat: Pre-Texts and Contexts” in Santino, ed., *Halloween*, p. 88.

41 *Toronto Telegram*, November 1, 1934. The report in the *New York Times*, in contrast, was a good deal more circumspect, talking only of a “riot of fun amid impromptu festivities”. *New York Times*, November 1, 1934.

42 George William Douglas, *The American Book of Days* (New York: H. N. Wilson, 1937), p. 544.

continued to this day.⁴³ These efforts to sanitize the carnival spirit melded well with the general commercialization of Halloween, for by the 1920s the modern motifs of the festival — cats, bats, witches, scarecrows, jack o’lanterns, pumpkins, ghosts — were in full bloom, and leisure entrepreneurs were busy promoting cards and handbooks on how successful Halloween parties might be staged.⁴⁴

The culmination of this civilizing process was the trick-or-treat. Originally introduced into North America around 1939, trick-or-treating radically altered the dynamics of festive licence without eliminating its masking or ludic features. Earlier conventions of festive doles always carried with them a heavy weight of social obligation and the threat of recriminatory action if such expectations were not satisfied. Patrons were expected to deliver, and if they failed to do so they could expect to pay the consequences. Early-twentieth-century Halloween reproduced these conventions in the swoops upon shopkeepers and the pranks played upon cranky, unpopular, or richer neighbours.⁴⁵ Trick-or-treating, in contrast, defused the antagonism inherent in the festive tribute, or at the very least erased its social ambiguity, transforming the exchange into a rite of consumption. Children dressed up, increasingly in commodified costumes, and unreflexively requested candies from local neighbours with little sense of what “tricking” might mean. As Gregory Stone observed in the 1950s, post-war Halloween, like other national observances, overridingly prepared children for mass consumption. In his words, “It was a rehearsal for consumership without a rationale.”⁴⁶ The holiday was a boon for food manufacturers who had earlier attempted to annex a Candy Day to the public calendar.⁴⁷ In these days of E.T., Darth Vader, and Ninja Turtles, it has also become a boon for costumemakers, for it is not uncommon for American families to spend \$30 or more on Halloween gear for each child.⁴⁸ By making Halloween consumer-

43 See the account of the Anoka festival by Garrison Keillor in the *New York Times*, October 31, 1991, p. A27. For other examples of street fairs and parades in small towns outside Toronto, see *Toronto Telegram*, November 1, 1923 and 1928.

44 For two examples of these handbooks, designed principally for a middle-class audience, see Lettie Van Derveer, *Halloween Happenings* (Boston: W. H. Baker, 1921); Marie Irish, *Hallowe'en Hilarity* (Dayton, Ohio: Paine, 1924). On the commercialization of Halloween, see also Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Commercialization of the Calendar: American Holidays and the Culture of Consumption, 1870–1930”, *Journal of American History*, vol. 78 (December 1991), pp. 887–916.

45 On the discriminatory nature of Halloween pranks, see Winey, “Belsnickling in Paxtonville”, pp. 10–13. For a different interpretation, which emphasizes the links between Halloween pranks, agricultural cycles, and communal solidarities in rural areas, see Steve Siporin, “Halloween Pranks: ‘Just a Little Inconvenience’ ” in Santino, ed., *Halloween*, pp. 45–61.

46 Gregory P. Stone, “Halloween and the Mass Child”, *American Quarterly*, vol. 11 (Fall 1959), p. 379.

47 Schmidt, “The Commercialization of the Calendar”, pp. 913–915.

48 In 1986 a Darth Vader mask could cost over \$50. Bunny costumes were priced at \$27.50. *Washington Post*, October 31, 1986. The rental of more elaborate costumes can cost between \$75 and \$100. See *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1989, p. D1.

oriented and infantile, promoters hoped to eliminate its anarchic features. By making it neighbourly and familial, they strove to reappropriate public space from the unorthodox and ruffianly in the interests of social order.

The domestication of Halloween proved most successful in suburban North America. It was less so in inner-city areas where the older conventions of misrule persisted. Camden, New Jersey, retained a raucous Mischief Night. So, too, did Detroit, where civil authorities and a huge army of volunteers have had to battle arson on a grand scale, with over 800 fires reported during a three-day rampage in 1984. Yet even in leafier suburbs the decorous, child-centred Halloween of the immediate post-war decades came under threat, not from pranks or vandalism, but from a series of sadistic “legends” fanned by the media.⁴⁹ From the 1970s onwards, rumours of razor blades in apples and contaminated candies circulated widely, accentuated, no doubt, by the increasing popularity of horror films peripherally linked to Halloween and also by the growing unease that Americans felt about the safety of their cities. The great majority of these rumours were unfounded, but there were enough reports of adulterated gifts to make parents nervous about taking their children to trick-or-treat. In the wake of the Tylenol scare of September 1982 and the scheduled execution of Ronald O’Byran on Halloween for the murder of his son with cyanide-tainted candy exactly eight years earlier, the panic reached crisis proportions.⁵⁰ The Associated Press noted 175 reports of candy tampering on Halloween in 1982, emanating from as many as 100 cities. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration listed 270 such incidents from the time that the Tylenol scandal broke, very few of which had any credibility and most involving pins and razor blades rather than chemical pollutants: an indication of the degree to which the “slasher” films of John Carpenter and others had gripped the public imagination in what one official described as a bout of “psychosomatic mass hysteria”.⁵¹ Candy manufacturers spent \$400,000 that year in an attempt to dispel public anxiety, campaigning for a sane and safe Halloween and encouraging hospitals to provide radiology units to x-ray treats.⁵² Despite these efforts, public participation in trick-or-treating declined dramatically. Many U.S. towns banned the practice altogether; others imposed strict curfews; and the search went out for alternative modes of celebrating the holiday. These included school- or church-sponsored parties, shopping-

49 Joel Best and Gerald T. Horiuchi, “The Razor Blade in the Apple: The Social Construction of Urban Legends”, *Social Problems*, vol. 32, no. 5 (June 1985), pp. 488–499; Jan Harold Brunvand, *Curses! Broiled Again! The Hottest Urban Legends Going* (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 51–54. I thank Catherine Saxburg for this last reference.

50 Sylvia Grider, “The Razor Blades in the Apples Syndrome” in Paul Smith, ed., *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1984), pp. 128–140.

51 *Times Picayune*, November 1, 1982; Best and Horiuchi, “The Razor Blade”, p. 491; Brunvand, *Curses!*, p. 53.

52 *Washington Post*, October 26, 1983; Bill Ellis, “‘Safe’ Spooks: New Halloween Traditions in Response to Sadism Legends” in Santino, ed., *Halloween*, pp. 24–44.

mall treats, spook houses, and simulated horror at museums, zoos, and community centres. Trick-or-treating did revive after 1982, but on a diminished scale. A 1985 poll reported that only 60 per cent of all parents with children under 15 were planning to take them trick-or-treating, even on a restricted round to friends and immediate neighbours.⁵³ The days of the ubiquitous trick-or-treat were over.

At precisely the time when trick-or-treating faltered, the public visibility of adults on Halloween increased. Halloween parties or dances for adults were not new. They had been a standard feature of the holiday since the 1920s. But in the more permissive climate of the 1970s Halloween celebrations reached beyond the church hall to encompass the bar, the night club, the disco, and the street. This expansion of public space was encouraged by an entertainment industry that sought to profit from a licensed moment of conspicuous consumption, whether that meant cruising bars or parading around in rented costumes.⁵⁴ Yet the new style of Halloween also represented a public demand for cathartic release. As one journalist remarked of the Georgetown promenade in Washington: "In a city where work is the chief narcotic, fun is the prescribed antidote." A Folger librarian put it in personal terms: "You have to follow rules in everyday [life], but on Halloween you can dress up according to your fantasy."⁵⁵ Those fantasies were often drawn from the modern motifs of Halloween, with witches, werewolves, ghosts, and vampires in abundance, but they were increasingly derived from television and Hollywood, especially the horror genre, with gruesome beasts from *Return of the Jedi* and Jason look-alikes cutting through the crowd with a chainless chainsaw.⁵⁶ Sometimes the costumes parodied mass culture à la Warhol: a gasoline pump, a vending machine, a trash can, a tube of Crest toothpaste, a piece of masticated chewing-gum, a corn flake, a six-pack of beer, a hot dog, a couch potato.⁵⁷ Others echoed the sick jokes of a Lenny Bruce by, for example, replicating Tylenol bottles at the height of the contamination scare.⁵⁸ Halloween masquerading also allowed one to parody the consumer ethic by handing out fake money to passers-by. "Here's \$10,000," declared one Georgetown money-tree. "That ought to hold you till tomorrow."⁵⁹ Halloween could thus become a satire on the vacuity and banality of consumer society, on the production and disciplinary function of false needs. Masquerading also gave one the oppor-

53 *Washington Post*, October 31, 1985. The poll was conducted by the *Washington Post* and ABC News just prior to Halloween in 1985.

54 Raymond McGrath of the American Beer Institute noted in 1995 that 80% of all costumes rented for Halloween were worn by adults. See *Toronto Globe and Mail*, October 20, 1995, p. A20.

55 *Washington Post*, October 23 and November 6, 1983.

56 *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, October 29, 1990.

57 *Washington Post*, October 31, 1983; November 1, 1987; *National Review*, vol. 41, November 24, 1989, p. 57.

58 *Washington Post*, November 1, 1982, p. C1.

59 *Washington Post*, November 1, 1985.

tunity to mimic politicians, especially when American presidential campaigns were in high gear, or to promote a range of causes, whether national or local. In 1987, the year of the Wall Street crash, one Greenwich Village guiser portrayed Death as a Chicago future. Another, more ecologically conscious, depicted the fate of Californian grape-growers labouring under hazardous pesticides in the shape of the Grim Reaper.⁶⁰

The political dimension of Halloween is important in one other respect that bears directly on the identity politics of postmodern culture. Feminists have from time to time tailored Halloween to their needs. In 1968, for example, the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH) descended upon Wall Street demanding an end to the "death-dealing sexual, economic and spiritual repression of the Imperialist Phallic Society" and advocating full equality for men and women within a "truly cooperative society".⁶¹ Two years later, "sister witches" at Ann Arbor paraded through the streets banging pots and pans, "haunting and hexing" nine symbols of male dominance, including the house of the university president and a pornography store, and chanting "male chauvinists better start shaking, today's pig is tomorrow's bacon."⁶² More recently feminists have appropriated the witch motif of Halloween to reassert its inverse image: the inner wisdom and spirituality of women in a bellicose, macho society.⁶³

Yet it has been the gay community that has most flamboyantly exploited Halloween's potential as a "liminoid" festival.⁶⁴ Indeed, the gay community has been most responsible for Halloween's adult rejuvenation. Transvestism has long been part of Halloween, albeit as a temporary transference of gender identity. In Toronto at the turn of the present century, to give a New World example, a 16-year-old lad named William Lee "thought to honour the occasion by arraying himself in a girl's skirt and bodice" and parading the streets: a "metamorphosis", the *Mail* remarked, that drew comments "more pointed than polite".⁶⁵ Not surprisingly, gays have appropriated this role reversal to celebrate their own sexuality and to affirm their right to public space. In the 1970s in many metropolitan cities gay men took to the streets on Halloween, staging extravagant promenades that

60 Jack Kugelmass, "Designing the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade" in Santino, ed., *Halloween*, pp. 191, 207. For an example of a local issue under protest, see the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, November 1, 1975, which described a "Phantom tax group" that denounced Duquesne Light for failing to pass on a tax credit to consumers.

61 Cited in David Cate, *The Year of the Barricades* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 267.

62 *Michigan Daily*, October 31, 1970.

63 I owe this information to Dr. Cynthia Wright, Women's Studies, University of Toronto.

64 In his later writings Victor Turner described the modern Halloween as a "liminoid" rather than "liminal" festival on the grounds that it was no longer closely associated with any well-defined rite of passage in which participants were ultimately and formally incorporated into the social order. See *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 28. For a summary of his distinction between liminal and liminoid, see pp. 53–56.

65 *Mail & Empire* (Toronto), November 1, 1898.

included drag queens and all manner of sexual parodies. In 1979 the Castro Street parade in San Francisco featured several super-macho hard hats, a Miss Piggy, an eighteenth-century courtesan, a bevy of moustached, muscular cheerleaders of the Oakland Raiders, and a number of Jackie Kennedys in bloodstained pink dresses. In this way they poked fun at mainstream definitions of “male” and “female”, including the female icon of Camelot, America’s most charismatic first lady. Not that vulgar-feminist perceptions of gender politics were necessarily left untouched. In 1987 a Greenwich Village group of transvestites accompanied a man dressed in a long brown costume with several sheets of toilet paper affixed to it. “We’re out with our date,” one of the queens remarked. “He’s dressed as a turd because everyone knows that all men are shits.”⁶⁶

Amid the exhibitionism it is worth stressing that drag was the central motif of the gay parade. Embodying the negative stereotype of the homosexual male in mainstream culture, drag was redefined by gays as something positive and desirable within their own constituency and as a satire on hetero-stereotypes of “real”, sexually desirable women.⁶⁷ The double entendres made for some heady body politics, both within and outside the gay community. Some gays saw Halloween as “a small but significant skirmish in the wars of sexual liberation”. Others feared that this annual “drag night” would irreparably ghettoize and stigmatize the homosexual and generate an orgy of gay-bashing.⁶⁸ In fact, in Toronto political pressure had to be put on the police to assist gay volunteers in controlling hostile crowds.⁶⁹ Public space for gays, whether in Toronto or elsewhere, was not lightly won.

Halloween “is free-form, homemade”, observed Ellen Creager in 1990, “the most rebellious of holidays and the one with the fewest expectations. It’s the only holiday that refuses to take itself seriously.”⁷⁰ Certainly the deinstitutionalized nature of Halloween has been part of the secret of its success. As other festivals were consolidated as sites of national and ethnic commemoration in industrializing North America, Halloween remained at the margins, a potential moment of inversion, of a world turned upside down. Despite efforts to domesticate Halloween and ultimately to render it infantile, the festival retained its “liminoid” character, its celebration of transitional ambiguities and aberrance. As such, it has continually appealed to groups marginal to the social and political order: to street urchins outside the civilizing process of nineteenth-century North America; to students anxious to assert their *esprit de corps*; to the alienated youth of the inner

66 Kugelmass, “Designing the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade”, p. 191.

67 On the ambiguities of drag and San Francisco’s Halloween, see Mary O’Drain, “San Francisco’s Gay Halloween”, *International Folklore Review*, vol. 4 (1986), pp. 90–94.

68 *Body Politic*, November/December 1971, p. 10; Autumn 1972, p. 21.

69 *Body Politic*, November 1977, p. 8.

70 *Detroit Free Press*, October 31, 1990.

city; to gays who wished to challenge the prevailing codes of gender identity and to exploit the festival as a public ritual of “coming out”.

To emphasize the liminoid features of Halloween is not to deny that the holiday does not generate other meanings. To some fundamentalist sects in North America, Halloween appears subversively satanic or pagan as well as destructively permissive. Recently a church in suburban Denver sponsored a “Hell House” on Halloween to drive home to its visitors the evils of abortion, homosexuality, and drunk driving, promoting its exhibition as a “death-defyin’, Satan-be-cryin’ ... cutting-edge evangelism tool of the 90s”.⁷¹ For many immigrants, Halloween seems uniquely American or Canadian, an integral part of North American mass culture. Indeed, in these days of NAFTA and increasing economic ties with Mexico, Halloween has been viewed south of the Rio Grande as a corrosively commercial and culturally alien festival, disrupting the time-honoured celebration of the Day of the Dead in large urban centres such as Mexico City and Monterrey. “I regard it as an invasion,” remarked one nursery-school teacher from Puebla, “as something that doesn’t belong to us. Halloween is truly frightening for children, because it focuses on witches and witchcraft, sorcerers and devils. It deforms the imagination and threatens our indigenous traditions.” To novelist Homero Aridjis Halloween is a form of “cultural pollution”.⁷²

From a Mexican perspective, then, Halloween can appear as a marker of American cultural imperialism. Yet this festival has continually opened up space for the expression of voices that jibe rather than meld with mainstream North American culture. This paradox raises the issue of just how far the revelrous dissonance and liminality of Halloween has or could be counter-hegemonic.

On this question it is worth pointing out that the “liminoid” properties of Halloween have not always been liberatory in any positive sense, expressing at times a rather mindless vandalism or exhibitionism, even deep social prejudice. Halloween in some twentieth-century American cities has never been free from latent racial conflict, generating lynching mobs in Chicago in 1903 and race riots in New York City in 1934.⁷³ Recent years have also seen a series of “wilding” sprees on Halloween in which women have been raped and stabbed and the homeless bludgeoned.⁷⁴ In 1990 a gang of youths from the East River projects in Manhattan, some sporting Halloween masks, descended upon the homeless of Ward’s Island with bats, pipes, and knives, taunted them with cries of “trick or treat”, wounded several, and left one for dead among the garbage-strewn weeds. According to press

71 *New York Times*, October 27, 1996, pp. E1, E3. Thanks to Bryan Palmer for this reference.

72 *Ottawa Citizen*, November 2, 1996, p. A7; Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 119, 129–130.

73 *Montreal Gazette*, November 2, 1903; *New York Times*, November 1, 1934.

74 On the rape and stabbing of a Boston woman during Halloween by a teenage gang, see *New York Times*, November 21, 1990.

reports the rampage was the culmination of a series of attacks against the homeless, whose drug abuse and pilfering had angered local residents and provided a pretext for recriminatory violence. "It happens a lot here, every Halloween," scoffed one youth, who seemed to resent the media attention the incident had received. "I don't see what the big deal is."⁷⁵

The attack upon the homeless of New York's East Side in 1990 followed a time-honoured script, with masked redressers taking advantage of the festive licence customarily accorded youth on Halloween to eliminate elements that they perceived as harmful to their community. The incident forcibly reminds us, in the words of Le Roy Ladurie, that "popular festivities and social change do not always go hand in hand."⁷⁶

Further, the masks that were adopted in this rampage, of Freddy Kreuger and Jason, the serial killers of *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the Thirteenth*, illustrate the degree to which Halloween has drawn upon the cult-horror genre for its inspiration and effects. Cinemas and TV stations routinely offer a full fare of horror movies at Halloween. In the Washington area, for example, one journalist disconcertingly noticed in 1986 that no less than 16 horror movies were available on the public airwaves. These included George Romero's 1969 classic, *Night of the Living Dead*, a film about flesh-eating ghouls that rewrote a horror genre in which good invariably triumphed over evil. Shown on Baltimore's channel 54, Washington's channel 5, public TV channels 22 and 56, and via cable on WOR from New York, it was the centrepiece of a cluster of films that have subverted the old "Gothic" certainties for omnipotent serial killers, nihilism and gore.⁷⁷

Spook houses, too, have traded in on the new horror genre, for visitors are just as likely to be greeted by a Jason look-alike or a Freddy Kreuger as they are by a vampire, witch, or crudely sutured monster of Dr. Frankenstein. Of course, mirrors, lights, and videos have also been added to provide the appropriate holographic effects.⁷⁸ Such is the public craving for the scary thrill that the Grand Rapids Jaycees even sponsored a "Terror Train" on a revived Grand Trunk railway between Cooksville and Marne with waitresses offering pizza topped with a rat and actors brandishing chain-

75 *New York Times*, November 2, 3, and 5, 1990.

76 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, trans. Mary Feeney (New York: George Braziller, 1979), p. 316.

77 *Washington Post*, November 3, 1986. The 16 films were: *Amityville III*, *Carrie*, *The Demon*, *The Devon Murder Case*, *The Devil's Rain*, *The Exorcist*, *Friday the 13th, part II*, *Halloween*, *Halloween II*, *The Howling*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Omen*, *Psycho*, *Something Evil*, *Tales of Terror*, and *Terror Train*. On the new horror genre, see Vera Dika, *Games of Terror* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990); Jonathan Lake Crane, *Terror and Everyday Life* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1994).

78 Some of the early successes in spook houses, such as Bill Schuck's at Miramar, Florida, attracted the attention of the California Institute of the Arts, founded by Walt Disney, underlining the link between Halloween "horror" and its cinematic representation. See *Times Picayune*, November 1, 1976.

saws.⁷⁹ No doubt the train featured some of the party masks and pranks from the film of the same name.

The fusion of Halloween with the Hollywoodesque in films, videos, spook houses, and “terror trains” has transported the holiday to the realm of the hyperreal, in which the boundary between “safe” spooks and macabre acts of violence is increasingly (and often deliberately) blurred. Although psychologists sometimes claim that even children of seven or eight can distinguish the real from the “phoney real”, the effects of this blurring can be seen not only in the persistent legend of the Halloween sadist tainting children’s candies, but in the haunting slayings of countless “slasher” movies. In 1991 rumours of an impending massacre on Halloween, foretold by a psychic on the Oprah Winfrey show, sent a frisson of fear through the sororities of Northeast campuses that university authorities found difficult to dispel.⁸⁰ Halloween has become captive to *horror vacui*; in Umberto Eco’s words, to an imagination that “demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake”.⁸¹

Given the public appetite for the hyperreal, a condition that can only be satisfied by an increasingly ubiquitous entertainment industry, it is doubtful that modern-day Halloween can be in any meaningful sense counter-hegemonic. In its twentieth-century itinerary Halloween has resisted corporate but not capitalist appropriation. It has become deeply enmeshed in consumer culture. Humour and play, the dominant tropes of Halloween, can best parody power rather than subvert it. Perhaps that is all we could possibly ask of a festival that is becoming, like Disneyland, “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation”.⁸²

79 *Detroit Free Press*, October 28, 1991.

80 *New York Times*, October 30, 1991, p. A18.

81 Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, p. 8.

82 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 24.