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Horror, apocalypse and world politics

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<epig>The only movie I have been really and truly scared, and indeed horrified by—in an intense and sustained way—is Michael Jackson’s post-nuclear apocalypse movie *Threads*.<epigend>

<source>Peter Bradshaw, 2014<sup>1</sup><sourceend>

In 1984 the BBC released *Threads*, a film that traces the impact of a hypothetical nuclear war on two families living in the British city of Sheffield. Presented in harrowing detail, their ordinary lives and plans for the future are thrown into chaos by thermo-nuclear destruction and the subsequent unravelling of British society. The intersection between the familiar present and an apocalyptic future, set against the background of international crisis, the nuclear arms race and the prospect of mutually assured destruction, produced a level of fear and foreboding in viewers such that *Threads* is regarded as one of the most horrifying films ever made. At the time of its release, it cut through geostrategic discourses on deterrence and civil defence and gave substance to an omnipresent anxiety about the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war. Like the broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, a 1938 radio drama (based on a novel by H. G. Wells) that caused mass hysteria in the United States, the apparent authenticity of *Threads* left viewers in a ‘cold, shivering sweat’, shaken, depressed and anxious for weeks after watching the film.<sup>2</sup>

World politics generates a long list of anxiety-inspiring scenarios that threaten to unravel everyday life with sudden and violent destruction. From total war and the concentration camps, through nuclear firestorms, global pandemics and climate disaster, the extreme violence of the recent past and conceivable future is the stuff of nightmares. At the same time, both practitioners and scholars are often criticized for being abstract in their analyses and disconnected from the human realities of international crisis. Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), this disconnection is sometimes associated with a shift in level

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bradshaw, ‘*Threads*: the film that scared me the most’, *Guardian*, 20 Oct. 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw, ‘*Threads*’.

of analysis from the particularities of human agents to the determining force of structures.<sup>3</sup> This is certainly a trend in contemporary war scholarship, which focuses more on macro-causation than on human experiences.<sup>4</sup> At least as significant is the proliferation of abstract or euphemistic language in ‘common-sense’ political discourse. This line of criticism resonates when human suffering is reduced to the language of ‘surgical strikes’, ‘collateral damage’ and ‘acceptable casualties.’<sup>5</sup>

The challenge is to draw out the human consequences of extreme violence in a way that deepens understanding and facilitates better responses. In this article, we analyse these difficult experiences through popular culture, which we suggest can offer a powerful, though underexamined access point.<sup>6</sup> Of particular interest here is research exploring popular

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<sup>3</sup> Neo-realism, for instance, locates the source of conflict in the systemic dynamics of sovereign states under anarchy—self-interested, rational actors vying for power and influence—rather than humanity’s propensity for violence. On the latter issue, see Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace* (New York: Knopf, 1955), especially his concept of ‘push-button war’; Jonathan Schelling, *The fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982), especially section 3. For an analysis of war and virtual violence, see James Der Derian, *Virtuous war: mapping the military–industrial–media–entertainment–network* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> For embodied analyses of war, see Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton, ‘Powers of war: fighting, knowledge, and critique’, *International Political Sociology* 5: 2, 2001, pp. 126–43; Kevin McSorley, ed., *War and the body: militarisation, practice and experience* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. recent research on the way drone warfare can disassociate violent actions and human consequences: Alex Danchev, ‘Bug splat: the art of the drone’, *International Affairs* 92: 3, May 2016, pp. 703–13; David Hastings Dunn, ‘Drones: disembodied aerial warfare and the unarticulated threat’, *International Affairs* 89: 5, Sept. 2013, pp. 1237–46; Lauren Wilcox, ‘Embodying algorithmic war: gender, race, and the posthuman in drone warfare’, *Security Dialogue* 48: 1, 2017, pp. 11–28.

<sup>6</sup> This approach is now well established in IR. See Frederica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton, eds, *World politics and popular culture* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2015); Caitlin Hamilton and Laura Shepherd, eds, *Understanding popular culture and world politics in the digital age* (London: Routledge, 2016); Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, ‘Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture–world politics continuum’, *Politics* 29: 3, 2009, pp.

representations of the apocalypse. While the end of the Cold War may have reduced the likelihood of world ending cataclysm for some, outbreaks of Ebola and H1N1 influenza, accelerating environmental collapse, the return of Great Power politics and the disintegration of the liberal world order, including its nuclear non-proliferation regime, have reaffirmed the unnerving possibility of existential disaster.<sup>7</sup> As Kennedy-Pipe and Rengger argue, ‘world politics has taken on a much darker, more apocalyptic hue than at any time in recent history, and this has had profound implications as much for areas such as the global economy and environmental sustainability as for security’.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, while the human experience of extreme violence is often a central focus in representations of the apocalypse in popular culture, this dimension is rarely emphasized in IR research that engages with these cultural artefacts. The apocalypse is more commonly mobilized as a thought experiment, an analogy for creating more informed policy,<sup>{2}</sup> or a quirky provocation in the classroom.<sup>9</sup>

We take a different route by exploring the apocalypse through the horror genre. The horror genre includes any works (films, novel, plays, music) that ‘derive their very names from the

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155–63.

<sup>7</sup> Clare Wenham, ‘The oversecuritization of global health: changing the terms of debate’, *International Affairs* 95: 5, Sept. 2019, pp. 1093–1110; Warren Chin, ‘Technology, war and the state: past, present and future’, *International Affairs* 95: 4, July 2019, pp. 765–84; James J. Wirtz, ‘Nuclear disarmament and the end of the chemical weapons “system of restraint”’, *International Affairs* 95: 4, July 2019, pp. 785–800; G. John Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal world order?’, *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 7–24; Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne, ‘After liberal world order’, *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 25–42; Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, ‘US–China relations and liberal world order: contending elites, colliding visions?’, *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 113–32.

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Kennedy-Pipe and Nicholas Rengger, ‘Apocalypse now? Continuities or disjunctions in world politics after 9/11’, *International Affairs* 82: 3, May 2006, p. 539.

<sup>9</sup> Robert G. Blanton, ‘Zombies and International Relations: a simple guide for bringing the undead into your classroom’, *International Studies Perspectives* 14: 1, 2013, pp. 1–13; Andrew Whelan, Ruth Walker and Christopher Moore, *Zombies in the academy: living death in higher education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

affects{4} they intend to promote'.<sup>10</sup> Put simply, the horror genre intends to horrify. We explore the potential for an engagement with the horrific that deepens IR's understanding of the violence it often contemplates. What might lingering on the horrific accomplish? We argue that the horror genre is at once an access point for ethical engagement with the human consequences of extreme violence and a complex terrain where dark imaginings can be politically loaded and culturally specific. On the one hand, the horror genre foregrounds dramatically the abhorrent consequences of violence. It is visceral and candid. It captures not just physical harm, but also rending fear and psychological collapse. Moreover, as Noel Carroll argues, 'in works of horror the responses of characters often seem to cue the emotional responses of the audience'.<sup>11</sup> We highlight the way the horror genre invites audiences to step outside their own viewpoint and suggest that this in turn facilitates empathetic encounters with the dire experiences of others. In doing so, the horror genre has the potential to provoke ethical engagement with a range of IR issues that have human suffering at their core. On the other hand, beyond plot lines and production values, the nightmare visions at the heart of the horror genre express our deepest anxieties about the societies we live in and the futures that confront us, borne out in monstrous proportions. They revel in things we fear, and that which could undo us. They represent the despicable other, but also impulses that are familiar yet uncomfortable. In this sense, while the horror genre offers an opportunity for ethical encounters, it also draws forward the sometimes problematic dynamics that help constitute our reckoning with existential threats.

The important point here is that policy-makers and researchers are daily confronted by a panoply of fear-inspiring threats and unfolding calamities, each with the human experience of extreme violence at their base. Policy response on the climate crisis or human migration in the Mediterranean and south Pacific are examples that come quickly to mind.<sup>12</sup> The existential threat of nuclear annihilation, recently foregrounded by nuclear brinkmanship

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<sup>10</sup> Noël Carroll, 'The nature of horror', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46: 1, 1987, p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Carroll, 'The nature of horror', p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Shirley Scott, 'Implications of climate change for the UN Security Council: mapping the range of potential policy responses', *International Affairs* 91: 6, Nov. 2015, pp. 1317–33; Carolyn Deere-Birkbeck, 'Global governance in the context of climate change: the challenges of increasingly complex risk parameters', *International Affairs* 85: 6, Nov. 2009, pp. 1173–94.

between the leaders of the United States and North Korea,<sup>13</sup> remains among the most serious policy problems ever contemplated. The horror genre offers a way to comprehend the profound human stakes of these and other issues, while simultaneously appreciating the complicated context in which fear and violence are understood. For practitioners and academics alike, it is essential that these two dimensions be kept firmly in view to achieve nuanced analysis of world politics, leading to responses that give priority to the amelioration of human suffering.

We make this case by introducing prominent accounts of the horror genre and connecting these to IR's recurring preoccupation with the apocalypse.<sup>14</sup> We then analyse nuclear Armageddon in horror films, focusing on the normative potential of *The War Game* (1965) and *Threads* (1984). The final section deepens the view developed in the case-study, while situating it within the complicated dynamics of mediated violence. The article begins by introducing extreme violence as a powerful normative driver in IR and surveying recent scholarship that foregrounds the human experience of it.

### **Extreme violence and world politics**

The consequences of extreme violence are at the heart of IR. For realists, states are motivated by existential threats, such as conventional and nuclear warfare, that put the survival of political communities at stake. The liberal tradition gained new impetus as a response to the carnage of the First World War, which tore apart the fabric of European society and killed 16 million people. Yet the substance of this violence, its human impact, tends to be downplayed.<sup>15</sup> This section begins by highlighting the political significance of extreme violence, then positions the horror genre as one way to engage with this grim terrain.

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<sup>13</sup> Xiangfeng Yang, 'China's clear and present conundrum on the Korean peninsula: stuck between the past the future', *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 595–612; Joseph S. Nye, Jr, 'The rise and fall of American hegemony from Wilson to Trump', *International Affairs* 95: 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 63–80.

<sup>14</sup> Chris Methmann and Delf Rothe, 'Politics for the day after tomorrow: the logic of apocalypse in global climate politics', *Security Dialogue* 34: 4, 2012, p. 328.

<sup>15</sup> There are notable exceptions, including: Ben Meiches, *The politics of annihilation: a genealogy of genocide* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Jessica Auchter, 'Narrating trauma: individuals, communities, storytelling', *Millennium: Journal of International Relations* 47: 3, 2019, pp. 173–83; François Debrix, 'Horror beyond death: geopolitics and the pulverisation of the human', *New Formations: A Journal of*

Sovereignty is one of the bedrock concepts of IR and a material reality for people the world over. Yet, as Jeff Huysmans has indicated, its impetus lies not in a positive vision of communal association, but rather in the spectre of violent calamity.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the most pervasive account of sovereignty in contemporary political discourse has its origins in Thomas Hobbes's absolutist vision in the resolution of a barbarous civil war. The moral and persuasive power of his account lay in the dire consequences of doing otherwise. As Gary Herbert explains, 'fear of a violent death is the passion Hobbes considers able to transform man [*sic*] into a paragon of civil reasonableness'.<sup>17</sup> Of course, it is precisely these reservoirs of dread and anxiety that underscore the contemporary exercise of sovereign power.<sup>18</sup> Securitization scholars have long acknowledged that the traction a threat gains with any political community is closely correlated to the affective response it generates.<sup>19</sup> Huysmans

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*Culture/Theory/Politics*, nos 89–90, 2017, pp. 85–100; Harmonie Toros, Daniel Dunleavy et al., "'Where is war? We are war": teaching and learning the human experience of war in the classroom', *International Studies Perspectives* 19: 3, 2018, pp. 199–217; Emma Hutchinson, *Affective communities in world politics: collective emotions after trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Lauren Wilcox, *Bodies of violence: theorising embodied subjects in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the memory of politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte, eds, *Memory and trauma in International Relations: theories, cases and debates* (New York: Routledge, 2013). There are further notable exceptions in feminist and post-colonial security studies. We want to add to this richer literature of embodied, bottom-up approaches.

<sup>16</sup> Jeff Huysmans, 'The question of the limit: desecuritization and the aesthetics of horror in political realism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27: 3, 1988, pp. 569–89.

<sup>17</sup> Gary Herbert, 'Fear of death and the foundation of natural right in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes', *Hobbes Studies* 7: 1, 1994, p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society must be defended: lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976* (New York: Picador, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Burke, *Fear of security: Australia's invasion anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); David Campbell, *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Barry Buzan, *People, states and fear: an agenda for international security studies in the post-Cold War era* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1983); Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: a new*



pushes this point further: ‘Securitization, in essence, manufactures sudden experiences of the radical possibility of violent death in the encounter with the unfamiliar . . . [it creates] shock and rupture in the everyday continuum of political life.’<sup>20</sup> Here securitization forces publics to consider the horror that may befall them if a threat comes to fruition. These dark imaginings are given substance in humanitarian discourses that position genocide and crimes against humanity as the result of failed sovereignty.<sup>21</sup> What we are highlighting here, then, is the extent to which the encounter with extreme violence is embedded in political discourse on world politics; it is difficult to think about questions of order and security without also implicitly wondering about the horrors that make them necessary.

Despite the political significance and constitutional power of the human experience of extreme violence, direct engagement with it is not common in IR research.<sup>22</sup> This is eminently understandable. Indeed, it reflects a psychological strategy of looking away—of avoidance, suppression or sublation—that makes thinking the impossible possible. This point is made clear in Adriana Cavarero’s ground-breaking treatment of what she calls ‘horrorism’.<sup>23</sup> Cavarero’s premise is that we lack the words to even articulate the human

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*framework for analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Michael Dillon, *Politics of security: towards a political philosophy of continental thought* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Huysmans, ‘The question of the limit’, pp. 586–7.

<sup>21</sup> See UN Department of Global Communications, *Outreach programme on the Rwandan genocide and the United Nations*, n.d.,

<https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/historical-background.shtml> (accessible on 8 Jan. 2020). See also Richard Reid, ‘Horror, hubris and humanity: the international engagement with Africa, 1914–2014’, *International Affairs* 90: 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 143–66; Mahmood Mamdani, ‘African states, citizenship and war: a case study’, *International Affairs* 78: 3, May 2002, pp. 493–506; Susan Thompson, *Rwanda: from genocide to precarious peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> See n. 15 above for notable exceptions. CORRECT

<sup>23</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: naming contemporary violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Cavarero has been taken up in IR by François Debrix and Cynthia Weber, who have written powerfully on the horrific character of contemporary violence. See, respectively, Debrix, ‘Horror beyond death’; Cynthia Weber, ‘Encountering violence: terrorism and horrorism in war and citizenship’, *International Political Sociology* 8: 3, 2014, pp. 231–55.

experience of contemporary violence, a shortfall that has much to do with the perspective from which this violence is viewed. The dominant perspective, certainly in IR and the policy community, is the ‘warrior’s view’—that of the wielder of violence and the assessor of consequences.<sup>24</sup> However, the language of ‘terror’, ‘martyr’, ‘casualties’ and ‘collateral damage’ is disconnected from the material reality to which these idioms refer. Cavarero flips the vantage-point: ‘If we observe the scene of the massacre from the point of view of the helpless victims rather than that of the warriors . . . the rhetorical façade of “collateral damage” melts away, and the carnage turns substantial. More than war, what stands out is horror.’<sup>25</sup> Understood like this, contemporary violence is characterized by the way it destroys not just the human body, but also the human condition. It is ontological as much as biological. Here the emphasis is on vulnerable humans exposed to massacres, torture, the camp, and increasingly brutal techno-rationalist war-fighting.<sup>26</sup>

But why should we study this difficult subject matter?

Rebecca Dolgoy gives a powerful rationale in her critical review of *Horrorism*. Reflecting on the way contemporary violence petrifies more than panics, she points out that there is a related immobilization exhibited by the secure citizens of western liberal democracies: ‘Those who live in relative peace and prosperity increasingly cannot see their reflection in the mirror of contemporary violence.’<sup>27</sup> Western publics are often unmoved by the suffering of distant strangers, especially when the plight of the latter is understood in general or quantitative terms. Indeed, on the great humanitarian issues of the day a widespread lack of willpower among the international community has at least something to do with empathy.<sup>28</sup> For Dolgoy, looking horror in the eye is one way this disconnection and complacency can be overcome—and she is not alone in this assessment. Richard Rorty, for instance, has argued

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<sup>24</sup> Cavarero, *Horrorism*, pp. 1–3, 60–65.

<sup>25</sup> Cavarero, *Horrorism*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> This focus stands in contrast to biopolitics and necropolitics, both of which put the body at the centre of the analysis, but neither of which explores the victim’s perspective. See, respectively, Michel Foucault, *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Dolgoy, ‘On the genealogy of horror’, *Passions in Context* 2: 1, 2011, pp. 151–56.

<sup>28</sup> Luke Glanville, ‘Self-interest and the distant vulnerable’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 30:3, 2016, pp. 335–353.

persuasively that moral concern for others is rooted not in science or philosophy, but rather in literary engagement.<sup>29</sup> Particularly pertinent for our purposes, Susan Sontag contrasts the desensitizing effects that horrific photos can have after the initial ‘shock value’ wears off with the moral engagement that narratives drawing in similar content can achieve—narratives that can also help audiences take the victim’s point of view.<sup>30</sup>

Cavarero brings these threads together: ‘Violence against the helpless does turn out to have a grammar of its own . . . the name is “horror” rather than “war” or “terror” and it speaks primarily to crime rather than strategy or politics.’<sup>31</sup> She points to a millennia-old, cross-cultural tradition of representing the horrific, harking back to the myths of Medusa and Medea, and finding contemporary touchstones in works such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Studying the human experience of extreme violence through cultural representations of the horrific, we suggest, offers one route towards ethical engagement. The horror genre fuses shocking scenes with harrowing narratives, providing, as Sontag makes clear, gripping and impactful representations of human suffering. At the same time, the horror genre *moderates* that encounter, allowing a politically attuned audience to move closer to these traumatic experiences without being traumatized themselves. This dynamic is related to the ‘art house horror’ effect, where audiences realize that they are not themselves in danger and can therefore experience the fear and loathing as dramatic tension rather than existential threat.<sup>32</sup> The complex interplay between the objective and subjective experience of watching horror—and the relation between emotions and bodily affect—can offer clues about broader cultural reactions to the things that disgust us.<sup>33</sup>

There are troubling elements here too, including around the ethical status of voyeurism, mimesis and the thriller-pleasure experience. These issues point towards the cultural complexity of mediated violence and indicate the need for a nuanced analysis. James Der Derian, among others, has cautioned that mediated violence, and specifically what he calls ‘mimetic war’, bears no necessary relationship to the lived experience that it purports to

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 80–81, 94, 141–98.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 110.

<sup>31</sup> Cavarero, *Horrorism*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Carroll, ‘The nature of horror’, pp. 57–8.

<sup>33</sup> Carroll, ‘The nature of horror’, pp. 57–8.

represent.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it can be quite distorting, providing audiences with a cathartic release in the wake of crisis, rather than an insight into international conflict.<sup>35</sup> We take these dynamics seriously below, not least by positioning the horror genre as a window into the dark imaginings and moral aporias latent in political imaginaries.<sup>36</sup>

{6} Indeed, it is for this reason that the horror genre can illustrate deeply rooted cultural commitments and draw out implicit and often unexamined beliefs about subjectivity, institutions and other social units.<sup>37</sup> For instance, contemporary trends in the zombie subgenre point towards a disturbing feature of mediated violence in popular culture: that terror and suffering, bodily pain and human unravelling occupy an ambiguous ethical space in the era of Abu Ghraib and an endless war against often dehumanized foreigners. Cultural critics have noted that in post-2009 zombie films, the living dead have often been ‘emptied of their humanity and recast as an unsympathetic and disposable commodity’.<sup>38</sup> The earlier slow and lifelike zombies of the George Romero films become recoded as inhuman monsters. ‘Zombies become vilified as the unsympathetic members of a subaltern culture—an irrationally malevolent and invasive force.’<sup>39</sup> The zombie is a stand-in for the terrorist or

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<sup>34</sup> James Der Derian, ‘Virtuous war/virtual theory’, *International Affairs* 76: 4, July 2000, pp. 771–88.

<sup>35</sup> Der Derian, ‘Virtuous war/virtual theory’.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Tudor, ‘Why horror?: The peculiar pleasures of a popular genre’, *Cultural Studies* 11:3, 1997, p. 458. {?}

<sup>37</sup> A classic example is the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), which portrays the excesses of capitalism as the source of horror. According to Merritt, the theme of ‘cannibalistic capitalism’ emerges in two ways: first, through the perpetrator family of unemployed abattoir workers ‘who direct their idle skills towards the butchery of humans’; and second, the encounter between this family and their victims centred on an empty gas tank, presumably representing ‘capitalism’s ongoing pursuit of increased productivity’ and the effects of the 1970s oil shocks. See Naomi Merritt, ‘Cannibalistic capitalism and other American delicacies: a Bataille taste of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*’, *Film-Philosophy* 14: 1, 2010, pp. 204, 212–13.

<sup>38</sup> David Christopher ‘Zombieland and the inversion of the subaltern zombie’ *Horror Studies* 7:1, 2016, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher ‘Zombieland’, p. 121.

radical enemy Other.<sup>40</sup> Ten years into the ‘global war on terror’, the zombies of the 2013 film *World War Z* are reminiscent of insects as they swarm over the walls of Jerusalem, the humans inside the wall unable to respond to the punishing onslaught of undead bodies. Perhaps the most telling site for this line of thinking is the monsters themselves, whose character and depravity are often relative to the culture that imagines them. Horror can normalize and authorize punishment towards those that society has deemed monstrous. The monster is often as dehumanized as the victim, left empty of motive except for the desire to cause pain and terror. In such contexts the protagonist is justified in killing the monster with no moral or legal repercussions. In *Torture porn in the wake of 9/11*, Aaron Michael Kerner argues that the cause-and-effect relationships between horror films and real-world violence are not straightforward. Does the horror create and authorize violence? Or is the horror reflecting the violence already present? Using the *Saw* and *Hostel* movies, Kerner shows that pundits and politicians who ‘wag their fingers’ at the depravity and moral corruption ‘are misdirecting their energy’. In his view, ‘it might be true that the United States has lost its moral compass, but it is not because of torture porn but rather because we torture’.<sup>41</sup> We, as the audience and citizens, are complicit in the violence. It is not a case of a ‘few bad apples’, the defence made common during the Bush administration; rather, a culture of torture has taken root.<sup>42</sup> To put this differently, it is not that horror desensitizes the audience, but rather that the audience comes ready to pass judgement on a previously decided transgressor—of the law, values or beliefs—and commit violence against any it puts in this category. Taken together, these explanations indicate the complex terrain that any engagement with extreme violence must take seriously, including the social production of threat, violence, depravity and collapse.

Some of these concerns have been worked through in existing research on IR and the apocalypse in the popular imagination. While Daniel Drezner is responsible for establishing the zombie apocalypse as a viable scenario for explaining IR theories (and for the zombie’s popularity in IR), he suggests that government agencies{8}that have taken these scenarios up

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<sup>40</sup> Stefanie Fishel and Lauren Wilcox, ‘Politics of the living dead: race and exceptionalism in the apocalypse,’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45:3, 2017, pp. 335-355.

<sup>41</sup> Aaron Michael Kerner, *Torture porn in the wake of 9/11: horror, exploitation, and the cinema of sensation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), pp. 18–19.

<sup>42</sup> Kerner, *Torture porn*, p. 19.

vociferously, often deploy them in problematic ways.<sup>43</sup> The US Center for Disease Control, the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency have all created blogs, plans and other publications based upon the rise of the living dead. Drezner calls for caution: while drawing upon these metaphors can ‘allow for greater creativity in response to these situations’,<sup>44</sup> their use can generate fear, myths and misperceptions that are difficult to remove from public discourse once they have been introduced.<sup>45</sup> ‘A more serious problem’, he writes, ‘is the analytical weakness of using analogies to motivate public policy.’<sup>46</sup> A focus on the similarities of a situation without noting the differences can lead to ‘flawed policy outcomes’—such as assuming that the Vietnam War would follow the pattern of the Korean War, or that military surges in Afghanistan would be like those in Iraq.<sup>47</sup> Most importantly, says Drezner, the ‘rise of the zombie metaphor both reflects and reifies collective perceptions of societal breakdown’, supporting toxic and dangerous gun cultures or ‘dog whistling’ racist politics.<sup>48</sup>

However, the analogies framework may miss the mark—indeed, we have suggested already that the horror genre can provide an analytical access point, rather than simply a proxy for the real world. According to Grayson and colleagues, popular culture is less a mirror for world politics than another point on the same continuum of interpretation as the discipline of IR. Both produce knowledge about world politics and, though it might be tempting to prioritize academic scholarship as the apogee of rigorous analysis, popular culture can provide unique insights, including into aspects of world politics usually overlooked in more formal settings.<sup>49</sup> For example, as Clapton and Shepard have shown, while *Game of Thrones* analogies have proliferated—especially with regard to the hard-edged necessities of realism—the show also foregrounds ‘the gendered nature of political authority . . . [including] connections between realpolitik and sexualised violence, between sovereign power and gendered subordination’, in

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Drezner, ‘Metaphors of the living dead: or, the effects of the living dead on public policy discourse’, *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81: 4, 2014, p. 830.

<sup>44</sup> Drezner, ‘Metaphors’, p. 833.

<sup>45</sup> Drezner, ‘Metaphors’, p. 843.

<sup>46</sup> Drezner, ‘Metaphors’, p. 834.

<sup>47</sup> Drezner, ‘Metaphors’, p. 834.

<sup>48</sup> Drezner, ‘Metaphors’, p. 838.

<sup>49</sup> Grayson et al., ‘Pop goes IR?’.

ways that disciplinary IR has struggled to accommodate.<sup>50</sup> In this same vein, we suggest that the horror genre foregrounds dramatically the human experience of extreme violence, where IR has tended to elide or demur to other disciplines.

Read this way, the IR/zombie nexus looks different.<sup>51</sup> The bracing horror of a bloody and violent death, the very premise of this horror subgenre, becomes the analytical lodestar. Films like Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2003) weave global crisis together with the visceral experiences of desperate survivors, who face the alarming prospect of a sudden and hellish demise. Set on the eerily empty streets of London, the zombies—infected with a rage virus—race towards their victims with uncanny speed. The film uses the first instance of SARS in February 2003 as the origin story of the zombie outbreak, giving the circumstance an uneasy familiarity. Here 24-hour news media coverage of anxiety-inducing topics is reflected in experiences of the horror genre and its protagonists.<sup>52</sup> The zombie becomes an imago representing deep foreboding about the human suffering latent in IR discourse on international crisis.

The discussion so far has highlighted the normative significance of extreme violence for the discipline of IR and suggested that its human consequences are often left out. Inverting the usual perspective, we have associated these human experiences with the victims against whom this violence is perpetrated—in massacres, the camp and increasingly sophisticated techno-rationalist war-fighting. Taking seriously recent scholarship at the intersection of popular culture and world politics, as well as problematic aspects of mediated violence, we have positioned the horror genre as a potentially powerful way of bringing these experiences into focus, not least from a politico-ethical standpoint. In the next section, we engage with two examples of the horror genre, focused on the issue of nuclear warfare, that point towards its normative potential.

### **Nuclear horror**

Having staked out the conceptual ground of horror, in this section we focus on horrific representations of nuclear warfare, with reference to Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1965)

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<sup>50</sup> Will Clapton and Laura Shepard, 'Lessons from Westeros: gender and power in *Game of Thrones*', *Politics* 37: 1, 2016, p. 6; Elizabeth Pearson, 'Extremism and toxic masculinity: the man question re-posed', *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 1251–70.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Drezner, *Theories of international politics*, rev. edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 170.

and Michael Jackson's *Threads* (1984).<sup>53</sup> The looming prospect of nuclear annihilation provoked a significant cultural output during the Cold War, but these two films are regularly singled out for their gut-wrenching impact on public perceptions and political discourse in the United Kingdom. Of course, the prospect of nuclear Armageddon is by no means a relic of the Cold War. Today's nuclear powers now talk of modernizing their arsenals with 'third-generation' and 'usable' weapons; the United States engages in high-stakes nuclear bluster with North Korea and Iran; nuclear India and Pakistan teeter on the edge of major war; and the global proliferation of nuclear weapons is back on the agenda, as states across the Middle East and Asia consider their necessity in an increasingly multipolar international system.<sup>54</sup> Growing indifference to the suffering of others and an associated dehumanization of enemies seems to connect with this renewed willingness to contemplate the annihilation of entire cities—indeed, in some scenarios, entire civilizations.

Of course, a perennial disconnect between strategic discourse and human consequences has been highlighted in an IR context, not least by Carol Cohn in her incisive critique of Cold War defence intellectuals and their techno-rationalist idioms.<sup>55</sup> According to Cohn, <ext>the discussions are carefully and intricately reasoned, occurring seemingly without any sense of horror, urgency, or moral outrage—in fact, there seems to be no graphic reality behind the words, as they speak of 'first strikes,' 'counterforce exchanges,' and 'limited nuclear war,' or as they debate the comparative values of a 'minimum deterrent posture' versus a 'nuclear war-fighting capability'.<sup>56</sup><extend>

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<sup>53</sup> Nuclear destruction is a common theme in the cinematic and televisual apocalypse. For a summary, see Chris Nashawaty, 'A brief history of the cinematic apocalypse', *Entertainment Weekly*, 4 July 2014. For the place of nuclear apocalypse in US popular culture, see Daniel N. Wojcik, *The end of the world as we know it: faith, fatalism and apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 97–132.

<sup>54</sup> N. A. J. Taylor and Robert Jacobs, 'Introduction: on Hiroshima becoming history', in N. A. J. Taylor and Robert Jacobs, eds, *Reimagining Hiroshima and Nagasaki: nuclear humanities in the post-Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–11; Doug Stokes, 'Trump, American hegemony and the future of the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 133–50.

<sup>55</sup> Carol Cohn, 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals', *Signs* 12: 4, 1987, pp. 687–718.

<sup>56</sup> Cohn, 'Sex and death', p. 690.



As Cohn makes clear, when the language of nuclear war is theoretical and technical, ethical considerations are dampened down and it becomes easier to think the unthinkable. It is precisely the absence of ‘graphic reality’<sup>{9}</sup> that *The War Game* and *Threads* aim to remedy.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, according to Watkins, his intention was, ‘first, to bring home to people as graphically as possible the horrendous nature of nuclear war, and thereby make the man [*sic*] on the street stop and think about himself [*sic*].’<sup>58</sup>

*The War Game* directly confronts the issue of survivability by staging the likely consequences of a nuclear attack on Kent, a county to the south-east of London. Throughout the 1950s the UK government had maintained that a nuclear attack could be survived and, on that basis, implemented a civil defence policy that sought to prepare the public for nuclear war and plan for an orderly recovery. During that period the hydrogen bomb, in the form of thermonuclear devices up to 1,000 times as powerful as the atomic bombs that ended the Second World War, entered the arsenals of the nuclear powers. In that context, the issue of survivability was increasingly contentious: if nuclear war could not be survived, then what was the point of nuclear weapons? According to Matthew Grant<sup>{10}</sup>, *The War Game* reframed the debate by showing that ‘survival would turn out to be much more shocking than total annihilation’.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, beyond the jarring violence of the nuclear blast, it is the ensuing depiction of deprivation, suffering and hopelessness that is most affecting.

These devastating scenes of ragged survival are brought into dialogue with UK nuclear policy through the use of a documentary style that integrates facts about nuclear war, including likely scenarios, with fictional elements designed to situate the calamity. Tony<sup>{11}</sup> Shaw captures this dynamic vividly:

<ext>Statements made by various socially, politically, or theologically engaged parties, originally designed to allay public fears about nuclear war on practical and moral grounds, are juxtaposed with hideously convincing scenes depicting acute personal suffering and psychological deterioration. Blazing firestorms wreak havoc, policemen kill the maimed to put them out of their misery, civilians raid military food supplies and helpless doctors tell of

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<sup>57</sup> Cohn, ‘Sex and death’, p. 690.

<sup>58</sup> Watkins, cited in Tony Shaw, ‘The BBC, the state and Cold War culture: the case of television’s *The War Game* (1965)’, *English Historical Review* 121: 494, 2006, p. 1361.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew Gant, ‘Images of survival, stories of destruction’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 10: 1, 2013, p. 23.

people ‘falling apart’. These eventualities are portrayed solemnly and unspectacularly, with little change in narrative and avoidance of individual characterisation, giving them a shocking, matter of fact plausibility.<sup>60</sup><extend>

Here the contrast between the status quo policy discourse and the likely consequences of a nuclear attack for the entire population points towards the absurdity of strategies for nuclear defence. Echoing Cohn’s critique of US strategic discourse, abstract policy language and anodyne moral platitudes are reconnected with the human desolation that they imply, but leave out. The critique laid out in *The War Game* is concentrated, intensified, made poignant and incisive, by the horror of it all. It is charged by the traumatic collapse of the everyday, the transgression of norms and regularities, and the rending of the social fabric. It is made intimate by the recognition of ourselves and the people we know in the routine existence that is eviscerated.

The BBC refused to broadcast *The War Game*, deeming it ‘too horrifying for the medium of television’.<sup>61</sup> However, recent historical work drawing on the BBC archives indicates that the central motivation was political. Rather than concerns about traumatizing the public, it was the potential for a shift in public opinion on survivability in general and civil defence in particular that prompted the decision.<sup>62</sup> Although *The War Game* was released for private screenings from 1966, it was not until 1985 that it was broadcast by the BBC, shortly after the appearance of *Threads*, as part of the 40-year commemoration of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Shaw, ‘The BBC, the state and Cold War culture’, p. 1365.

<sup>61</sup> James Chapman, ‘The BBC and the censorship of *The War Game* (1965)’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 41: 1, 2016, p. 75.

<sup>62</sup> Shaw, ‘The BBC, the state and Cold War culture’, pp. 1366–72; John R. Crook, ‘Who banned *The War Game*? A fifty-year controversy revisited’, *Journal of British Television and Cinema* 14: 1, 2017, pp. 39–63. See also the debate between Chapman and Wayne in the pages of *Contemporary History*, which covers the key controversies: Chapman, ‘The BBC and the censorship of *The War Game* (1965)’; Mike Wayne, ‘Failing the public: the BBC, *The War Game* and revisionist history. A reply to James Chapman’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 43: 4, 2007, pp. 627–37; James Chapman, ‘*The War Game* controversy—again’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 44: 1, 2008, pp. 105–12.

<sup>63</sup> John R. Crook and Paul Murphy, ‘After the bomb dropped: the cinema half-life of *The War Game*’, *Journal of Popular British Cinema* no. 3{?}, 2000, pp. 129–32.

*Threads* took many of its cues from *The War Game*, adopting the same documentary style and brutally realistic portrayal of life after a nuclear attack. Likewise, it directly addressed both the enduring policy of civil defence and a broader geopolitical context of escalating tensions and renewed volatility, as detente collapsed and the Second Cold War took hold. In response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, US nuclear-tipped ground-launched cruise missiles and Pershing II missiles had been deployed to western Europe, including sites in the United Kingdom; the United States had boycotted the Moscow Olympics of 1980, and the Soviet Union responded in kind by boycotting the Los Angeles Olympics four years later. The Reagan administration had adopted the bellicose language of the ‘evil empire’, reflected in aggressive policy shifts on disarmament and the potentially destabilizing Strategic Defense Initiative, which aimed to shoot down incoming ballistic missiles.

*Threads* dramatically intensifies the personal stakes of nuclear war by developing several intimate narratives, centred on the private life of a young couple, Jimmy and Ruth, who are newly engaged and expecting a baby, and their respective families. Framed once again by documentary techniques and captured in a bare aesthetic, it is these meaningful human relationships that are brutally undone. Public discourse on international politics seeps into personal spaces through news reports on TV and radio—first as background noise, then as the focus of worried attention as nuclear crisis intersects with ordinary lives. Narratives fray, some are burnt out. As Daniel Cordle explains, *Threads* foregrounds social disintegration as the ultimate consequence of nuclear war:

<ext>[Before,] the world is coherent and human experience is prone to sense making by familiar narrative forms. Afterwards, experience can no longer be processed so easily. Part of *Threads*’ innovation is to acknowledge how the sort of nuclear conflict threatened during the Cold War cannot be contained in narrative terms and is not susceptible to retrospective processing into a story. For such a conflict would destroy the very societies and cultures which make such narratives meaningful. *Threads* thus deals with the extinction of its own cultural form.<sup>64</sup><extend>

This descent into oblivion is sketched out over a much longer period than in *The War Game*. The audience experiences the initial post-blast desolation from the perspective of Ruth, as she searches for her fiancé through the ruins of her neighbourhood. Over the next weeks and

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<sup>64</sup> Daniel Cordle, “‘That’s going to happen to us. It is’”: *Threads* and the imagination of nuclear disaster on 1980s television’, *Journal of British Television and Cinema* 10: 1, 2012, p. 84.

months society breaks down: families are devastated; desperate people do terrible things; survivors scratch out a subsistence in the sub-zero twilight of a nuclear winter. We are then taken ten years into the future to a bleak post-apocalyptic England, where a beleaguered remnant lives a medieval existence.<sup>65</sup> Ruth dies prematurely and her daughter, Jane, afflicted in the womb, is left to fend for herself. The film ends three years later with Jane giving birth to a stillborn baby so misshapen that her mother turns away.<sup>66</sup>

In both *The War Game* and *Threads*, the political critique of UK nuclear policy is carried out not simply by demonstrating its thin basis in fact, but also through the jarring affective dissonance generated in audiences, when the familiar is torn asunder. Both films highlight the short distance between routine existence and the darkest nightmare imaginable—a distance travelled regularly in the abstract language of strategic discourse, but seldom in the visceral experience of the people it would actually befall.

Although *The War Game* was initially banned from television, it was made available on limited release from 1966 and by the end of 1967 had been viewed in every UK city. Its wide distribution and screening was partly driven by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which deployed it as part of its membership drive and public engagement programme.<sup>67</sup> *The War Game* became a major focal point of the peace movement in the United Kingdom and elsewhere throughout the Cold War, and was an important influence on subsequent Cold War cultural output.<sup>68</sup> *Threads*, very much in this tradition, was screened during a period of intense public debate about nuclear weapons. It became a lightning rod for political discussion, with reactions falling along party lines: the Conservative government and its affiliates deplored what they saw as its misleading pessimism, while the peace movement, including a resurgent CND, and the political left endorsed it as a bracing

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<sup>65</sup> See Steffen Hantke, 'Going medieval: representations of post-nuclear survival in *Threads* and *The Tripods* (1984)', *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 38: 1, 2013, pp. 3–17.

<sup>66</sup> This is a scene that is repeatedly mentioned in audience interviews and testimonials. Here is Peter Bradshaw, the *Guardian* film critic: 'I was genuinely scared to look up. *Threads* had flooded my body with the diabolical opposite of adrenalin. We all went to bed in silence': Bradshaw, '*Threads*'.

<sup>67</sup> Jodie Burkett, 'The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and changing attitudes towards the Earth in the nuclear age', *British Journal for the History of Science* 45: 4, 2012, p. 635.

<sup>68</sup> Shaw, 'The BBC, the state and Cold War culture', p. 1353.

indictment of nuclear insanity.<sup>69</sup> *Threads* has been shown a handful of times since the end of the Cold War, but its enduringly powerful impact on audiences, particularly its formative influence on youth culture, is well documented.<sup>70</sup>

The representation of nuclear apocalypse gives a strong sense of the potential for ethical engagement at the intersection of horror and world politics. Indeed, we can see this engagement in practice in the powerful constraints often associated with the so-called ‘nuclear taboo’, which, at least in part, helps explain the non-use of nuclear weapons since the Second World War. Nina Tannenwald highlights the horrific effects of nuclear weapons as one of three pillars supporting the taboo.<sup>71</sup> For Tannenwald, the early link between chemical and nuclear weapons, established through the association of radiation and poison gas, connected nuclear weapons with the chemical horrors of the First World War, since universally banned under the laws of war. No doubt the direct representation of those horrors for the general public in films like *The War Game* and *Threads* helped embed this deep aversion, not least by dramatizing nuclear fallout. Tannenwald also points to the constraining power of empathy, again strongly resonant with accounts of everyday life destroyed. As we have highlighted above with reference to Sontag and Rorty, ethical considerations can be provoked, grounded and sustained through narrative engagement with the experiences of others—and the horror genre narrates human suffering in a uniquely affecting and vicarious way. Indeed, Jessica Rapson has argued, persuasively, that *The War Game* provokes a profound cosmopolitanism, first, through references to Hiroshima and Nagasaki that bridge cultural and historical context, and second, through its focus on everyday life and common experience, which people everywhere can relate to.<sup>72</sup> But nuclear war is also distinct in its destructiveness. As N. A. J. Taylor has explained in his ground-breaking treatment of the

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<sup>69</sup> Gant, ‘Images of survival, stories of destruction’, pp. 7–26.

<sup>70</sup> See the cross-generational audience testimony in Cordle, “‘That’s going to happen to us. It is’”, pp. 71–92.

<sup>71</sup> Nina Tannenwald, *The nuclear taboo: the United States and the non-use of nuclear weapons* (Cambridge, MA, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); ‘The nuclear taboo: the United States and the normative basis of nuclear non-use’ *International Organization* 53: 3, 1999, pp. 433–68.

<sup>72</sup> Jessica Rapson, ‘Hiroshima remediated: nuclear cosmopolitan memory in *The War Game* (1984) and the “Museum of Anti-memorials”’, in Taylor and Jacobs, eds, *Reimagining Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, pp. 53–70.

subject, nuclear harm shatters the biosphere and threatens the very conditions for life on earth.<sup>73</sup> In that sense, it may be the most universal ground for ethics that has ever been available.

### **Paradoxes of the heart and the horror point of view**

We began this article by discussing the intersection of horror and IR, after which we turned to examples in film to explore the ethical potential. Now we ask again: ‘Why would anyone want to be horrified?’ We may shudder in the moment, but there are strong motives related to the aesthetic experience of horror that draw viewers in and keep them coming back. The puzzling attraction of fear and suffering, what Noël Carroll refers to as a ‘paradox of the heart’, also points towards more complicated dynamics.<sup>74</sup> In this section, we foreground one of the most prominent and politically pertinent explanations, the horror genre’s transgressive critique of social orders, and suggest that this can pose powerful ethical challenges to the viewer. We then highlight the way the genre works to create a spectator who takes the victim’s view. We have suggested already that the horrific is mediated in a way that allows it to be approached, where we might otherwise look away. It is this gaze that is key: the audience’s point of view is also shifted from one character to another, from one dire experience to the next, facilitating a subjectivity more open to ethical engagement.

There are several prominent and potentially persuasive accounts for the appeal of horror. One explanation, made famous by H. P. Lovecraft (though originating with Edmund Burke), is that horror draws us towards the sublime with a mix of awe and cosmic fear.<sup>75</sup> Other explanations focus on the narrative arc of horror stories or the working through of underlying psychological dynamics of individual subjects.<sup>76</sup> For our purposes, we emphasize an account

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<sup>73</sup> N. A. J. Taylor, ‘The problem of nuclear harm for Andrew Linklater, Lorraine Elliott and other contemporary cosmopolitans’, *Global Society* 32: 1, 2018, pp. 111–26.

<sup>74</sup> Noël Carroll, *The philosophy of horror: or, paradoxes of the heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>75</sup> See H. P. Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural horror in literature’, in H. P. Lovecraft, *Dagon and other macabre tales* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1986); For an account of the sublime that draws on Burke in IR, see Roland Bleiker and Martin Leet, ‘From the sublime to the subliminal: fear, awe and wonder in international politics’, *Millennium* 34: 3, 2006, pp. 713–37.

<sup>76</sup> On narrative explanations, see Carroll, *Philosophy of horror*, p. 178. Julia Kristeva suggests that the horror genre provides a plausible cover under which to work through the

that points to the transgressive power of horror, which often probes the limits of the human condition through the fantastic and profane, unsettling social mores and received wisdom.

According to Rosemary Jackson, the horror genre

<ext>points to or suggests the basis on which the cultural order rests, for it opens up, for the briefest moment, on disorder, onto illegality, onto that which is outside the dominant value system . . . [it] traces the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent.<sup>77</sup>{12}<extend>

This connects with Cavarero's insight, discussed above, that horror narratives challenge the status quo view of contemporary violence, shifting the perspective from the view of the warrior to that of the victim, so often left out of the picture. It is this concern with what is left out in prevailing representations of extreme violence that is particularly useful. Indeed, while fearful stories are as old as human society, the modern horror genre originally emerged, under the rubric of Gothic fiction, during the late eighteenth century, as a reaction against the forces of Enlightenment, which had, at least in some minds, disenchanting the world and unleashed a maelstrom of unintended calamities that were not adequately captured in prevailing narratives about progress and mastery.<sup>78</sup> The truly shocking violence of the recent past and looming future can certainly be understood as the double edge of modernity: from total war and the concentration camps to laser guided{13} wars of choice; through nuclear Armageddon, global pandemics and climate catastrophe.<sup>79</sup> What we are pointing to here is a shift in perspective that may be at the heart of the horror paradox. The transgressive function of horror can unseat the common sense of the day and reveal other experiences and standpoints. We suggest—alongside Rorty, Sontag and many others—that this is an important dynamic for normative reasoning and ethical engagement.

This suggestion is buttressed by the aesthetic characteristics of the horror genre. In the cinematic context, horror films take up and subvert the viewer's point of view, which 'forces'

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conflicted psychological dynamics that underpin the modern subject. It has been also been positioned as a 'safety valve' for the inner beast; an outlet for the peculiar tastes of some audiences; or a return of the oppressed in the context of structural psychoanalysis.

<sup>77</sup> Rosemary Jackson, cited in Carroll, *Philosophy of horror*, p.157.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Devetak, 'The gothic scene in International Relations: ghosts, monsters, terror and the sublime after 9/11', *Review of International Studies* 31:4, 2005, pp. 621-643.

<sup>79</sup> Jim George, *Discourses of global politics: a critical (re)introduction to International Relations*, (Boulder Co.: Lynne Rienner, 1992), p. 140.

the audience to connect and engage with the character on the screen.<sup>80</sup> In this way, film can become, as Jerry Goodenough argues, ‘a refutation of the Cartesian project’, which is built around solipsistic individualism.<sup>81</sup> Drawn into the narrative, given a timeline, asked to identify with multiple viewpoints—it is here that the viewer can engage ethically in a way that moves beyond voyeurism. Brigid Cherry deepens this point, suggesting that the gaze of the spectator creates a ‘constructed subjectivity’, transforming the viewer into a part of the cinematic experience.<sup>82</sup> Drawing from early cinematic theory, she writes that the spectator is a part of the cinematic apparatus and therefore ‘the screen becomes a mirror upon which the spectator (figuratively speaking) sees their own reflection’.<sup>83</sup>

The ‘gaze’ of the spectator, a core element in cinema theory, also takes on other forms in horror cinema. Slasher films (*Halloween*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*) often use point-of-view shots, which frame the victim and deepen the sense of identification with the character. This standpoint is never static, however, and, as Carol Clover posits, the shifting point of view between the killer, the victim and the outsider creates a sense of empathy with the ‘victim’. For example, as the story unfolds, an allegiance to the killer may well shift.<sup>84</sup>

<ext>The point-of-view shot can thus be read as signalling a sense of threat for the character being looked at rather than objectifying them. This suggests a sense of identification and empathy with the victim . . . the horror is not necessarily that of voyeuristic pleasure in enacting violence on the female body, but fear of violence being done to oneself or one’s friends.<sup>85</sup> <ext>

This empathetic identification with the victim brings us back to where we began—with the horrific character of contemporary violence and the experience of vulnerable human beings. As the case analysis on nuclear horror demonstrated, it is the propensity of the horror genre to put the audience in the dire circumstances of its protagonists that generates ethical responses. Both *The War Game* and *Threads* swing between a documentary style, enacting an aesthetic

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<sup>80</sup> Jerry Goodenough, *Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell*, (London: Palgrave 2005), p. 23.

<sup>81</sup> Goodenough, *Film as philosophy*, p. 25.

<sup>82</sup> Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 131.

<sup>83</sup> Cherry, *Horror*, p. 131.

<sup>84</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Women, men, and chainsaws* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>85</sup> Cherry, *Horror*, p. 136.



of objectivity, and intense character perspectives, the former standing in for the status quo and the latter taking the victims' viewpoint. The viewer is drawn into the familiar everyday, for instance, in the burgeoning romance of Jimmy and Ruth, including the surrounding rhythms of family life. When the nuclear attack comes, the thin veneer of social order is laid bare, vulnerable innocence is annihilated, and the audience is forced to consider what this would mean to them if their own meaningful relationships were put at risk. Yet the normative traction and ethical significance of the films lay not just in the shocking human consequences of nuclear war, but also in the contrast between vantage-points. Along with the switch between objective and subjective aesthetics, the point of view shifts between recognizable characters from across the spectrum of English society, from authority figures through to children. For a spectator vicariously standing in these positions, thinking and feeling as the calamity befalls them, the possibility of ethical engagement is acute.<sup>86</sup> After all, this positional interplay was inextricably wedded to the most pressing international political issue of the day, which was the unavoidable context in which these films were viewed.

### **Conclusion**

Renewed nuclear tensions, coupled with the seemingly cavalier attitude of many world leaders, have brought the prospect of nuclear annihilation back onto the agenda in the first decades of the twenty-first century. In these circumstances, a return to *The War Game* and *Threads* seems warranted—in classrooms, living rooms and the citadels of power. Perhaps a contemporary viewing might, as it once did, provoke scepticism about the logic and moral status of nuclear war, connect abstract strategic language with human consequences, and instigate a public debate about the necessity or otherwise of nuclear weapons.<sup>87</sup>

This article has argued that the horror genre is at once a potential access point for this sort of ethical engagement and a complex terrain where dark imaginings can be politically loaded, culturally specific and ethically ambiguous. We have shown that horrific representations of apocalypse, from zombie outbreaks to nuclear war, can bring audiences into close quarters with the human consequences of extreme violence. The horror genre takes the victim's view in an era of techno-rationalist war-fighting and spiralling global contingency, and does so in a

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<sup>86</sup> The significance of varying perspectives on nuclear issues is engaged with extensively in a recent journal special issue: 'Nuclear politics: beyond positivism', *Critical Security Studies* 4: 1, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Stefanie Fishel, 'Remembering nukes: collective memories and countering state history', *Critical Military Studies* 1: 2, 2015, pp. 131–44.

powerful combination of shocking content and gripping narrative. At the same time, the horror genre expresses our deepest anxieties about the societies we live in and the futures that confront us. It taps deep reservoirs of fear and loathing latent in political discourse around security and order, including loaded characterizations of enemy others and troubling ambivalence about violence and degradation. Taking these elements together, while the horror genre offers the opportunity for ethical encounters, it also centres the powerful dynamics that help constitute our reckoning with existential threats. It is precisely this complexity that a nuanced engagement with world politics must take seriously.