

Chapter Six

When the Subtext Becomes Text: The Purge Takes on the American Nightmare

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Abstract

In his seminal 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film', Robin Wood claims that 1970s horror 'is currently the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism—in a period of extreme cultural crisis and disintegration, [it] alone offers the possibility for radical change and rebuilding' (1984, 182). This analysis and interpretation of the ferocity of much of 1970s American horror cinema as the expression of the rage and confusion of a nation in crisis has become an established critical frame through which to interpret the significance of horror cinema as well as to understand the indie horror filmmakers of the period: George A Romero, Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, John Carpenter to name just a few. In contrast, critical responses to the American horror genre at the turn of the millennium, what Steffen Hantke describes as the 'pessimist's view', suggest that the genre was 'at its worst', reduced to commercially driven remakes, sequels, and pastiches, empty of meaning and/or progressive readings (2010: viii). Hantke's book was published in 2010, three years before the first of *The Purge* films was released (2013) [followed by *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014), *The Purge: Election Year* (2016), and *The First Purge* (2018)]. The aim of this essay will be to consider how this series of films – on the one hand a carefully conceived and authored series and on the other a commercial franchise including a television series (2018-2019) and a final installment *The Forever Purge* (2021) – offers an insightful template for the consideration of the place of 'The American Nightmare' within discourses around contemporary horror cinema, authorship and American culture. While Wood saw an unconscious channelling of cultural rage via these films – 'the return of the repressed' as he describes it – *The Purge* overtly offers a blistering critique of racism, Christian fundamentalism, and Neo-Liberal patriarchal authority. This is in step with similar, self-conscious social critiques available in other contemporary films such as *Get Out* (2017) and *The Witch* (2015). The chapter will argue that the subtext has in fact become text and *The Purge* franchise demonstrates how the horror genre is, arguably, once again, an expression of rage within a period of high anxiety. Yet *The Purge* is also a lucrative franchise capitalising upon the global popularity of this critique and this essay will consider the progressiveness of this formula for horror within the light of the franchise's commercial imperatives.

In September 1979, Robin Wood and Richard Lippe programmed a season of horror films as part of the Toronto Film Festival. The programme was titled *The American Nightmare* and featured screenings of films from the 1920s through to the present with key titles representing each decade. The aim of the season was to create a space to see the largest collection of horror films in North America, but equally important was the desire to reflect upon the significance of the genre, its increasingly violent imagery, and its potential socio-political function. Reviewing the programme for *Cinema Canada*, Florence Jacobowitz noted that an emerging theme of the programme explored ‘how the filmmakers and the film impart both conscious and unconscious, subversive messages within the confines of a capitalist/patriarchal Hollywood system’ (1979, 20). To support this discussion, Wood and Lippe also produced a collection of essays, entitled *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, which was given to all passholders (1979). Among other essays, the collection included an introduction by Wood that has become a pivotal manifesto, ‘An Introduction to the American Horror Film’ (1996). With this season and publication, Wood and Lippe were attempting to consider how the horror genre could be used to explore and express radical politics and a desire for social change. As Wood argued ‘the only way in which really radical and subversive ideas can be expressed is under the cover of entertainment, often at unconscious levels on the part of the filmmaker, as well as on the part of the audience’ (in Jacobowitz 1979, 21). Wood’s assessment of horror in the 1970s was that it was ‘the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism’ (1996,182).

The perception that the ferocity of much of 1970s American horror cinema, typically described as either ‘new horror’ or ‘neo-horror’, was an expression of the rage and confusion of a nation in crisis has become an established critical frame through which to interpret the significance

of horror cinema. The millennial documentary, *The American Nightmare* (Simon 2000), has reinforced this perception by juxtaposing footage from the films of George A. Romero, Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven, John Carpenter and David Cronenberg with period news footage of America in crisis, highlighting a synergy of imagery. Coming out in 2000, this documentary's treatment of now classic horror cinema of the 1970s offers a striking contrast with how some fans and critics were responding to the American horror genre at the turn of the millennium. Steffen Hantke argues that in the early years of the twenty-first century, there was a perceived 'crisis' in the American horror film with many lamenting the reduction of horror to 'a mindless series of remakes' or pastiches (2010, viv). Though reductive of the reception of horror in this period, this critical viewpoint has been largely accepted, with the later celebration of films such as *Babadook* (2014), *Get Out* (2017), *A Quiet Place* (2018) and *Hereditary* (2018) by critics, horror aficionados and mainstream audiences, serving to reinforce this perspective. In fact, the process of recognising the originality of these films has resulted in a recurring attempt by critics and filmmakers to distance certain films from previous horror traditions through the adoption of qualifying descriptors such as 'elevated horror,' 'smart horror,' and 'post-horror.' For instance, in 2017 Steve Rose argued that because the horror genre can be hugely profitable for Hollywood, 'there's a market for horrors with low budgets and mass appeal. Which basically means variations on well-established themes: supernatural possession, haunted houses, psychos, zombies. This is the market *post-horror* is reacting against'. In 2018, Graeme Virtue's discussion of 'smart horror' similarly notes that Hollywood is 'doubling down on safe sequels, reboots and expanded universes. Yet a legion of *smart*, subversive and downright scary horror movies has been packing them in' (2018). These terms seem to suggest that horror films that are 'thought-provoking' are something other than

horror, or at least require a generic sub-label, and that established horror sub-genres, sequels, remakes, and franchises cannot be more than commercial enterprises.

With these discourses surrounding twenty-first century horror in mind, the aim of this chapter will be to consider how the *Purge* franchise, comprising at the time of writing, *The Purge* (2013), *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014), *The Purge: Election Year* (2016) and *The First Purge* (2018), demonstrates the way in which commercially driven, formula-based, graphic genre films aimed at a mass audience can nevertheless offer social commentary and moral nuance alongside high octane action and jump scares. Due to their commercial drives and mass appeal, I will further demonstrate that the *Purge* films offer an insightful template for the consideration of the place of 'The American Nightmare' within discussions around contemporary horror cinema and American culture. While Wood saw the *unconscious* channelling of repressed cultural rage beneath the surface of horror cinema, *The Purge consciously* brings The American Nightmare to the surface, rendering the subtext as text.

Blumhouse and Twenty-first Century Horror

The Purge is a commercial horror franchise produced by Blumhouse Productions, an independent production company founded by Jason Blum that has established itself as a leading producer of 'high-quality micro-budget films', largely aimed at a mainstream audience.¹ Blumhouse's micro-budget horror films with 'mass appeal' are, in many ways, the type of product that Steve Rose argued that 'post-horror' was reacting against as demonstrated by the company's first production, the found footage horror film *Paranormal Activity* (2009), which was made for \$15,000 yet earned \$193, 355, 800 at the global box office, the highest return on investment (ROI) in Hollywood history. However, this gap between production budget and box office income is more extreme than

Blumhouse's subsequent productions.² *Paranormal Activity 2* (2010), was made for \$3million and earned \$177,512,032 at the global box office; *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011) for \$5million, taking in \$207,039,844; *Insidious* (2011) with a production budget of \$1.5million and accumulating \$97,009,150 in box office receipts; and *Sinister* (2012), which was made for \$3 million and earned \$77,712,439. By 2012, Blum had established the company as a leading house of horror with three hugely lucrative franchises (see Platts chapter in this volume). The success of these films also consolidated their production model, restricting budgets to approximately \$5million or \$10-15million for sequels (Platts and Clasen 2017, 7).³ In 2013, the company released *The Purge*, launching its next successful horror franchise.

While Blumhouse is equally committed to standalone horror releases like *The Bay* (Levinson 2012) and *Get Out*, Blum recognises that making a sequel requires commitment to the parameters of the franchise, stating that 'there are rules that you have to follow' (in Crucchiola 2017). This does not, according to Blum, preclude originality, arguing that '*most of our sequels subvert expectations. They're really good. They're not what people are expecting*' (ibid). Within this context, *The Purge* films stand as a key example of twenty-first century horror cinema that is commercially successful, visceral entertainment, and socio-politically grounded. As Blum explains:

In every art form, nothing exists in a bubble. It exists because of what came before it. A lot of bricks were laid. I think if it weren't for *The Purge*, *Get Out* wouldn't resonate as a mainstream movie. You push on the taste of the audience in a way, get them used to something, and then you keep pushing on it (ibid).

***The Purge* and Home Invasion horror**

The franchise currently stands at three films written and directed by James DeMonaco, which came out between 2013-16. The fourth instalment in the franchise, *The First Purge*, was written by

DeMonaco and directed by Gerard McMurray. Collectively the films have earned \$432,074, 852 at the global box office, with production budgets of between \$3 and 13 million,⁴ which was followed by a 10-episode straight-to-series TV drama for USA and SyFy networks, titled simply as *The Purge*.⁵

The Purge franchise is set in a dystopian not-too-distant future in which a new fundamentalist right-wing party, The New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA), have moved into the White House, and in order to combat unemployment, recession and high crime rates, they have created 'The Annual Purge', in which for a period of 12 hours all crime, including murder, is legal. Each film in the series takes place on 'Purge Night', offering variations on a theme as each story follows a selected group of people who are confronted by a series of 'Purgers' participating in disturbing acts of violence as they try to survive the night.

The first film in the series, *The Purge*, presents itself as a home invasion film. This sub-genre of horror has its roots in the domestic horror films of the 1970s and 80s, such as *Amityville Horror* (1979) and *Poltergeist* (1982), in which the home is invaded by either spirits or demons that attempt to expel the family and displace the father as a figure of patriarchal authority. Other non-supernatural examples include Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971). *A Clockwork Orange* follows a gang of masked youths, led by the charismatic and articulate Alex, in a series of seemingly random and brutal home invasions while *Straw Dogs*, according to Carol J. Clover, is primarily preoccupied with 'the provocation of an essentially peaceful man to acts of savagery,' when his Cornish home and wife are violently attacked by a group of local thugs (1992, 137). As Vivian Sobchak argues, in this period of cinema a 'man's home in bourgeois patriarchal culture is no longer his castle' (1996, 145).

In the twenty-first century, the subgenre has moved away from traditions of the supernatural to develop into a form of horror/thriller hybrid more in keeping with *Straw Dogs* in which the protagonists are threatened by attackers attempting to gain unlawful entry into domestic spaces to commit acts of violence against the home owners. The early to mid-2010s saw a number of these films being produced internationally, including: *Funny Games* (1997), *Panic Room* (2002), *Ils [Them]* (2006), *À l'intérieur [Inside]* (2008), *The Strangers* (2008), *You're Next* (2011), *Hush* (2016), and of course, *The Purge*. These films arouse anxieties around the protection of family and home, coupled with the fear of being randomly targeted. Kevin J. Wetmore attributes the randomness of these attacks to the events of 9/11, which 'brought home the reality and possibility of death at the hands of people who did not know you and were not targeting you specifically' (2012, 84). When the protagonists of *The Strangers* ask their attackers 'why us?' they are told: 'because you were home'.

The continued prevalence of these kinds of films following the financial crisis of 2007 began to introduce an economic context to the genre. While the stated motivation in *The Strangers* suggests that the choice of victim is random, Tony Williams argues that

since the three victimized youngsters appear to come from an upwardly mobile social group and their assailants are young, working-class kids who seem unable to displace their rage except in random acts of violence, it appears that economic resentment may be one cause of the assault (2015, 294).

Craig Ian Mann similarly positions *You're Next* within a culture of austerity, arguing that Felix and Crispin's plot to kill their families is 'financially motivated: they see butchering their way to an early inheritance as an escape from a lifetime of financial struggle' (2016, 183).

The Purge fits comfortably within the conventions of the home invasion film. While the opening establishes the dystopian nature of this future society, once the Purge commences, the drama is built around the threat to one family (the Sandins) who are confronted by a group of masked invaders attempting to break into their home on Purge Night to kill them. Having established the conventions of the home invasion film, *The Purge* undermines them in subtle ways, such as its use of masks. In the tradition of many home invasion films, including *The Strangers*, *You're Next* and *Hush*, the Purgers wear masks designed for anonymity and to generate terror through their distorted and grotesque smiling faces. These masks, along with their machetes and automatic weapons, offer a disturbing contrast to the Purgers' tailored suits and white dresses and have become an iconic element of the franchise, with the masks becoming increasingly surreal from film to film. Having established this imagery, however, the lead Purger who approaches the Sandin's front door—credited as the Polite Leader (Rhys Wakefield)—removes his mask. This action undermines the anonymity of *The Strangers*, and instead, as the Polite Leader explains, it reveals that they are: 'some fine, young, very educated guys and gals. We've gotten gussied up in our most terrifying guises, as we do every year. Ready to violate, annihilate, and cleanse our souls'.

While the unmasking of the Polite Leader breaks with genre conventions, the narrative structure of the film also challenges expectations by featuring multiple home invasions prior to the arrival of the Purgers that disrupt the perceived randomness of the genre. After the Purge has officially begun and the Sandins settle into a quiet evening, two events are intercut together to signal the vulnerability of their home security and the danger of invasion. The first surrounds the Sandins' pre-teen son Charlie (Max Burkholder), who is struggling with the morality of the Purge. As Charlie stares at the security monitors, he sees a black man, distressed and bleeding, running down the street calling for help (credited as Bloody Stranger, played by Edwin Hodge). In a

moment of empathy, Charlie opens the security doors and calls to the man to enter the house. At the same time, teenage Zoe Sandin's older Caucasian boyfriend Henry (Tony Oller) reveals that he has hidden in the house to 'talk' to James, who does not approve of their relationship. Realising that their home security has been breached, James runs to the front of his house to be confronted by Bloody Stranger. Both stare at each other cautiously as James pulls out his handgun. As this happens, Henry calls to James from the top of the stairs, pulls out a gun and shoots at him, causing Sandin to shoot back. The intercutting of the simultaneous arrival of Bloody Stranger and Henry in the main reception area of the Sandin house in the film's first action sequence, presents James with two home invasions and deliberately contrasts the *perceived* threat of the homeless black man with the *actual* threat of the white middle class male. Henry's attack prefigures the arrival of the Polite Leader, signalling that the danger is white privilege.

Return of the Repressed – White Privilege in the Obama Era

In 'The Introduction to the American Horror Film', Wood argues that 'the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, the "happy ending" (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repressions' (1996, 171). Purge night is based upon the belief that humanity is inherently violent, and in order to maintain a civilized society, it must regularly release that violence in a contained fashion in order to 'purge' itself of these tendencies before repressing them once more and returning to 'normal' the next day. The story is invested in the language of 'the return of the repressed' (Wood 1996, 173). Reflecting on horror in the 1970s, Wood saw the genre expressing the cultural anxiety and, at times, rage emerging from 'the period's great social movements—radical feminism, the black movement, gay

rights and environmentalism' (2004, xiv). Released at the beginning of Barack Obama's second term as President, *The Purge* suggests that 'the return of the repressed' is galvanized and co-opted within the diegesis to express white anxieties about their seeming marginalization in an increasing multi-cultural global landscape. The film explores a narrative in which white, well-educated middle-class characters 'release the beast' under the pretence of 'cleansing' their souls, but in reality, they lash out as a means of *reasserting* their perceived cultural, hierarchical dominance.

The Polite Leader informs Sandin, that the Bloody Stranger

is nothing but a dirty, homeless pig—a grotesque menace to our just society who had the audacity to fight back, killing one of us when we attempted to execute him tonight. The pig doesn't know his place and now he needs to be taught a lesson. You need to return him to us— alive—so that we may purge as we are entitled.

There is no direct articulation of race in this statement, or indeed throughout *The Purge*. The film is set within an affluent, upper middle class neighbourhood, and the Sandins' neighbours, including three Caucasians, one African-American and one Asian-American, seem to reflect the post-racial promise of the Obama-era, particularly within upwardly mobile areas. The Polite Leader, however, tells Sandin that his 'home tells us that you are good folk just like us...one of the haves...we don't want to kill our own'. There is a clear discourse around 'them' and 'us' that can clearly be read along class lines. The need to 'purge' is used to evoke class and perceived entitlement, but the fact that the focus of their attention is an African-American suggests that the monster that is released is white privilege.

The racial undercurrent of the film is evident by the choice to initiate the horror with the image of a lone black man running down the streets of this affluent neighbourhood looking for assistance, an image that is charged with meaning. *The Purge* was released in 2013, over a year

after Trayvon Martin was killed in Florida by George Zimmerman a neighbourhood watch volunteer. The shooting of Martin in February 2012 and the subsequent protests calling for Zimmerman's arrest, including the Million Hoodie March on 21st March 2012 (Crimesider Staff 2013), led to extensive public discourse about the dangers faced by young black men in white neighbourhoods due to racial profiling. This discourse is increasingly prevalent through the repeated stories in the media of 'white people call[ing] the police on black people', citing traditionally normal behaviour such as sitting in Starbucks, touring a college campus and leaving an Airbnb as suspicious (Victor 2018). This is a theme that has been most recently explored by Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, which begins with a lone black man, Andre, being attacked and abducted as he walks down an empty, affluent suburban street at night. Both *Get Out* and *The Purge* highlight the dangers that this type of neighbourhood can play for people-of-colour and, in both cases, the men recognise the risks of inhabiting such an environment. Even before he is attacked, upon seeing a white car pull up next to him on the road, Andre recognises a potential threat and tries to avoid confrontation. Similarly, in *The Purge*, when the Bloody Stranger enters the Sandin house, his nervousness—standing with his back to the wall and observing Sandin cautiously—signals that he is as scared of Sandin as Sandin is of him. This house is a space of refuge for the Bloody Stranger, but also of potential entrapment.

Having established the potential for danger regarding people-of-colour in white neighbourhoods, *The Purge* employs its horror narrative to question the rights of individuals to protect themselves against perceived threats, a legal grey area that becomes increasingly problematic when racial profiling is part of the equation. In fact, the tension at the root of the confrontation between Sandin and the Bloody Stranger seems to put the controversial 'Stand Your Ground' Law to the test. This is a law that was perceived by many to play a role in Zimmerman's

acquittal of murder charges, despite not being used in his defence (Kessler 2014). According to this law, introduced in Florida in 2005, an individual is legally allowed to use lethal force rather than retreating in order to protect and defend themselves and others against threats, whether real or perceived.⁶ Sandin, who is told by the Polite Leader to hand over the Bloody Stranger or they will ‘release the beast’ on him and his family, is faced with the choice to hand over the stranger to certain death or to face the Purgers himself. While Sandin struggles with the morality of this situation, he eventually resolves to catch and hand the Stranger over to the Purgers. Later, in a confrontation with the Stranger, Sandin positions himself as a victim in this situation by saying, ‘We didn’t do anything to you—we don’t deserve this’, a common utterance within the home invasion film where the protagonists feel unjustly targeted. The focus of the film, however, shifts away from the Sandins when the Bloody Stranger responds, ‘I don’t deserve this either’. What distinguishes the men in this moment is not that either or neither deserve it, but rather that one is privileged enough to not expect to be victimised. As an affluent white male with a large house, Sandin can afford protection and can avoid being out on Purge Night, something not available to the homeless black man. At this point in the film, Sandin ‘Stands his Ground’ and uses the defence of his wife and children to justify handing the Stranger over to violent death to purge himself of guilt and responsibility. From this perspective, the horror becomes about *actual* privilege as well as *perceived* entitlement.

Kevin J. Wetmore notes that after 9/11, ‘the only plausible plot development’ for the home invasion ‘is the death of everyone’ (2012, 91). In contrast, *The Purge* does not end with the death of all the protagonists or antagonists; the action ends with the jarring and repetitive siren that marks the end of the Annual Purge and the return to ‘normality’. The film highlights the hollowness of this ‘return to normality’, which, as argued by Robin Wood, has often been a central tenet of the

horror film, as the Purgers and the survivors get up and walk back to their ‘normal’ lives (1996, 175). Normal behaviour may be restored while Purge-like behaviour is once again repressed, but survivors are forever marked by their experiences, and normality has been revealed to be a façade for the truly monstrous—a façade that can never be fully restored. This is reinforced by the final intertitle that reminds the audience that it is 364 days until the *next* Annual Purge, emphasizing that the cycle of violence continues.

The *Purge* Franchise and #BlackLivesMatter

While adhering to the tropes of the franchise, the sequels, *Anarchy* and *Election Year*, strip away the conventions of the home invasion and move the narrative out of affluent white suburbia and onto the urban streets of multicultural America; Los Angeles and Washington, respectively. As a result, the series is increasingly presented as an action/horror hybrid that integrates chase scenes, fight choreography and gun play with the surreal and macabre imagery of public ‘Purging’ on the streets of the city. Furthermore, this shift from the home to the streets enables the themes surrounding class, race, and the economy, which I have argued underpin the first film, to rise even further to the surface; that is, from subtext to text. Through their narratives and horror/action set pieces, the films offer a confrontational critique of American culture and the promise of the American dream that is present in the first film, embodied in Sandin’s exploitation of Purge night for his family’s financial gain. For instance, *The Purge: Anarchy* intercuts its end credits with images of the American flag and the faces of the Presidents on Mount Rushmore paralleled by surveillance-style footage of violent attacks from the film, and extra-diegetic footage of money being burned and people loading and firing their guns. These images are accompanied by Christy

Carew's arrangement of a choral version of 'America the Beautiful' jarringly spliced with Nathan Whitehead's discordant musical score, creating a violent aural juxtaposition. The sequence confronts audiences with the contradictions inherent within the American Dream, and not so subtly suggests that this is a society that is defined by money and violence. *The Purge: Election Year* similarly distorts images traditionally associated with American culture and heritage when a group of European Purge tourists dress up as the Statue of Liberty, George Washington, and Uncle Sam to get a taste of murder and mayhem. The image of these American icons covered in blood spatter is telling, offering a new set of iconic and macabre Purge masks, while linking this imagery with tourism reiterates the economic imperative that underpins an economy of violence.

While both sequels place another white male at the narrative centre—Sergeant aka Leo Barnes (Frank Grillo)—the sequels feature a more diverse ensemble cast in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, and the horror of Purge night is overtly presented as targeting the marginalised and economically challenged or disenfranchised underclasses, which plays out along racial lines. For instance, in *Anarchy*, African-America single-Mom Eva Sanchez (Carmen Ejogo), a waitress struggling to support her teenage daughter and cover the medical bills for her father, is first targeted on Purge Night by her lecherous landlord who resents her rejection, and later by a group of government sponsored mercenaries who are murdering the lower classes to thin the population. In *Election Year*, African-American Joe Dixon (Mykelti Williamson) runs a successful delicatessen, yet cannot afford the unexpected increase on his premiums when the corrupt insurance company decides to increase his rates the day before the annual Purge. He therefore finds himself out on Purge night to protect his livelihood. The government soldiers that appear in *Anarchy* are presented as white military, but by *Election Year*, another group of mercenaries under the employ of the

NFFA are not only white, but rather, white supremacists, covered in swastika and confederate flag tattoos.

While racial tension was implicit in the first film, the sequels bring this to the surface of the story, showing that contemporary issues surrounding race have become increasingly central to the franchise's thematic continuity. For instance, the silent auction in *Get Out*, in which a group of white people bid to take ownership of the young black hero's body, is prefigured in *Anarchy* when an old black man sells his dying body to a group of wealthy white Purgers so that he can provide for his family. His dying body is his only commodity. Both *Get Out* and *Anarchy* offer a disturbing reminder of the legacy of slavery in the US. In particular, *Anarchy* and *Election Year* speak to a legacy of resistance and protest, galvanized in recent years around #BlackLivesMatter.

Created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, Garza argues that #BlackLivesMatter is

a call to action for Black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society (2014).

The protests surrounding Zimmerman's acquittal were followed by similar protests and riots in Ferguson Missouri following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, and again in Baltimore, after the arrest and subsequent death-due-to-injuries of Freddie Gray (Edwards and Harris 2016). *Anarchy* and *Election Year* were released in 2014 and 2016, respectively, amidst these protests and the increasingly racially-focused debates and discourses surrounding the 2016 election, consciously drawing upon a legacy of civil unrest through the inclusion of an African-American-led protest and resistance movement within the narratives. In *Anarchy*, the resistance is led by

Carmelo Johns, played by Michael Kenneth Williams renowned for his role as anti-authoritarian Omar in the HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008). Johns is presented as a Malcolm X-styled leader, linking contemporary protests within historical civil rights movements, who not only speaks the economic realities behind the Purge, but advocates the picking up of arms and revolution, concluding his online speech with: ‘Fuck the New Founding Fathers. Fuck you! Fuck your money. And motherfuck the Purge!’ More significant, however, is that he is accompanied in *Anarchy* by the Bloody Stranger, the only character to appear in the first three films, highlighting that it is the African-American victims who are standing up and fighting back. By *Election Year*, the Bloody Stranger is finally named (Dante Bishop) and he is presented as the leader of the resistance, a man of action attempting to pave the way through violence for the anti-Purge election candidate, Charlie Roan (Elizabeth Mitchell). As important, however, is that in *Election Year*, the movement is revealed to feature more than soldiers, but volunteers putting their lives on the line to provide protection, medical care and sanctuary to those in need on Purge Night. This group embodies an intersectional representation of women and men across multi-generational, racial and ethnic lines.

⁷ With *Election Year* coming out at the end of the Obama-era, and through its election narrative, the film self-consciously highlights the racial tensions and social division that prefigured the rise of the so-called Alt-Right and the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States.

The First Purge is the fourth film in the franchise, but the first to be released in the Trump Era. It is the first to be written but not directed by DeMonaco, instead being helmed by African-American filmmaker, Gerard McMurray. McMurray is the director of *Burning Sands* (2017) and producer of *Fruitvale Station* (2013), a film based on the events that lead to the death of Oscar Grant, an African-American youth who died in 2009 at the hands of a BART police officer. *The*

First Purge is a prequel to the other films in the franchise, set just after the NFFA have been elected and have decided to test the ‘scientific’ principles that underpin the Purge; that a healthy society benefits from purging its repressed violent inclinations. They decide to test the theory with a controlled experiment on Staten Island. Residents are given a fee of \$5,000 to stay on the island during the Purge and, if they ‘participate’, their remuneration is increased. This film brings together themes around race, politics and economy that have been established by the earlier films, with director McMurray consciously aligning the film with ‘real-world’ events as he explains:

The movie was filmed during the time of the Charlottesville riots. “We see events that taking place in this country over the last year,” McMurray said. “I just try to use what was going on in the real world and trying to bring it into the film. I felt like horror films wrestle with the evils of real life, and that was one of the things I wanted to do with this film” (N’Duka 2018).

Through this statement, McMurray is presenting a preferred reading of the film as something more than a visceral action/horror film, situating *The First Purge* within a legacy of horror as serving a socio-political function. This reading is in keeping with his previous work on *Burning Sands* and *Fruitvale Station*, and these types of statements serve to ensure his clarity of message with regard to his perception of the progressive politics of the series.⁸ Mark Bernard argues that there is a tendency for many contemporary filmmakers to attempt to legitimize horror by elevating it from its ‘low culture’ origins by claiming ‘the political and social significance of their films’, in many ways echoing the more recent critical tendency to elevate certain horror films by challenging their credentials *as horror* through such terms as ‘post-horror’ and ‘elevated horror’ (2015, 2). While these types of statements by McMurray can be seen to legitimize the genre, and the *Purge* franchise in particular, they are also consistent with the overt politicization of horror that has become embedded within the franchise as I have argued, a factor that goes hand-in-hand with the franchise’s more visceral thrills. Also, as a critical frame through which to consider the series, this

political reading sits alongside a repeated emphasis by the producers, Jason Blum and Brad Fuller, that this franchise delivers pulse raising and adrenalin pumping action and horror (Blum and Fuller in “Behind the Anarchy” 2016). Furthermore, while Bernard notes that this tendency to elevate horror films through a socio-political reading often detaches the genre from its commercial imperatives, the release of *The First Purge* after the success of Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* positions this approach as an element within Blumhouse’s commercial strategy for the series, offering social commentary alongside visceral violence and surreal horror (Bernard 2015, 5). The selection of McMurray, an African-American filmmaker, as the first director to take over from DeMonaco associates *The Purge* with the critically and commercially successful *Get Out*, signaling that commerce and politics are not mutually exclusive and binaristic. In this manner, if *The Purge* was a significant precursor fueling the commercial potential of *Get Out* as Blum claimed, then the cycle has come full circle with the success of *Get Out* potentially influencing the trajectory of the franchise in *The First Purge*, with its clear focus on the African-American community. In this case the politics and commercial drive of the franchise go hand-in-hand (Blum in Crucchiola 2017).⁹

Like *The Purge*, the *First Purge* returns to the home invasion narrative but equates home with community rather than individual property. It is the community of Staten Island and, in particular, the impoverished, largely African-American residents who are targeted and whose home is invaded by mercenaries (again funded by the NFFA), dressed as white supremacist Purgers wearing black-face masks, Nazi uniforms, KKK robes and, in extremely charged imagery, as riot police officers stalking a lone beaten man crawling away from them across an empty baseball field. With references to Trump in the marketing campaign that refashioned the ‘Make America Great Again’ red baseball cap as a marker of the Purge and a release date of the 4th July 2018, alongside repeated footage of demonstrations and protests in the film, the marketing

campaign and the film are discursively positioning the film as being specifically about Trump's America, and thus taps into contemporary politics to sell the film by signalling its contemporary relevance. The prequel's move into the franchise's past, therefore, allows the franchise to comment even more openly on the present. As McMurray explains: 'Right now we're living in a time where people are waking up and seeing how things really are and are needing to stand up and voice their opinion' (in N'Duka 2018). Significantly, the franchise has finally abandoned its white male central hero and replaced him with dual protagonists Nya (Lex Scott Davis)—an activist fighting to save her community from the Purge—but also from more insidious perpetrators, such as the drug trade that 'destroy[s] this community 364 days a year', and Dmitri (Y'lan Noel), a local drug kingpin who, like Leo in *Anarchy*, transitions from focusing upon his selfish needs toward fighting to protect friends and community. The elevation of Nya and Dmitri to heroes moves the franchise away from the lone white savior to a narrative in which the African-American and Latino community stands up for itself. The final image of surviving residents gathering at the end of the Purge, preparing to 'fight' challenges the 'return to normality' that is self-consciously and uncomfortably reestablished in the earlier films. There is no return for Nya and Dmitri; their fight is just beginning.

Conclusion: Ambivalence and *The Purge*

Now in keeping with Wood's arguments, at the core of horror films is often an ambivalence to their own messages (1996, 176-77). Wood saw that ambivalence centred around 'the monster' and 'our attitude to normality', suggesting that 'central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfilment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us', a theme that emerges

at the conclusion of *The First Purge*, albeit slightly curtailed by the knowledge that within narrative chronology, this film marks the beginning of the Purge and not the end (1996, 177). In the *Purge* franchise, the ambivalence centres around the response to the Purge itself. DeMonaco and other producers note that the films offer wish fulfilment in terms of a cathartic fantasy of violence alongside a social commentary that seems to condemn violence. Narratively, the audience may be encouraged to recognise the barbarity, and side with those who seek the end of the killing, but engagement with the franchise means ironically that audiences want the Purge to continue so that the films and television series can continue. The films purport to condemn violence and advocate for peace and restraint in the face of escalating hatred and aggression, and yet they also wallow in violent excess.¹⁰ The films present the horror of gun culture with wealthy Purgers in *Anarchy* evoking the worst imagery of the National Riflemen's Association (NRA) bedecked with their high-tech assault weapons. It is, however, also the men with guns who repeatedly save the protagonists, whether in the form of ex-soldier Leo or drug dealer Dmitri in keeping with the NRA's defence of existing gun laws. Nya condemns Dmitri because his instinct is to resort to violence but she is thankful when he arrives at her apartment and kills her assailants. *Election Year* deliberately contrasts democratic process in the form of anti-Purge Presidential candidate, Charlie Roan, and radical protest, resistance, and rebellion embodied in Dante Bishop. These contradictions can be read as revealing-the films' tendency to nod to progressive ideals and social critique, while simultaneously producing reactionary rhetoric, but they can also be read as conveying a growing sense of rage and revolution that is often contradictory in its execution. Writing about twentieth century horror cinema, Adam Lowenstein argued that 'the modern horror film may well be the genre of our time that registers most brutally the legacies of historical trauma' (2005, 10). In the twenty-first century, the way in which 'the American Nightmare' is self-

consciously mobilized by horror filmmakers such as DeMonaco and McMurray, suggests that horror continues to be the genre that best expresses, in all its chaos and pain, the trauma of the present and the desire for revolution.

The contradictions within the *Purge* films also evidence the tension between the franchise's commercial drive and its socio-political agenda, delivering high octane action alongside political commentary. Regardless, *The Purge* franchise, as I have demonstrated, challenges perceived distinctions between 'elevated horror' and mainstream horror through its overt engagement with a political rhetoric. To achieve this, it does not deny the pleasures of the genre but instead offers suspense, violent mayhem, and surreal horror. Furthermore, it does not bury its political message beneath the surface of the narrative, 'under the cover of entertainment' as Robin Wood put it (1996, 21). Instead, it places its genre allegiance and politics on display, inviting audiences to engage with one or the other (or both), thus resisting concrete definition to some degree. *The Purge* franchise demonstrates how commercially driven horror films, traditionally disparaged as 'mere' exploitation that only offer cheap thrills, can be intelligent and thought provoking without denying their horror credentials, even if the message is contradictory. Instead, they integrate these ideas within their aesthetic and narrative matrix, making the subtext of Wood's 'American Nightmare' text. The continuation of the *Purge* narrative across an extended franchise, including multiple films and a television series, allows the development of an extended socio-political reading alongside more visceral thrills, and challenges assumptions that commerce and politics, exploitation and art are oppositional. As the *Purge* Franchise demonstrates, they can, in fact, go hand-in-hand.

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Notes

¹ <http://www.blumhouse.com/about/>

² All box office figures are given in US dollars and are drawn from www.boxofficemojo.com.

³ This budget stands in contrast to the average budget for mainstream American horror films. According to Platts and Clasen, 'the budgets for films in our dataset averaged just under \$30million while the domestic gross was roughly \$65.5million' (2017: 5).

⁴ These figures are dated from the 3 August 2018.

⁵ At the time of writing the series had not been aired and so will not be discussed in this essay. There are now two seasons of the show. In 2020, the USA Network decided not to renew the series.

⁶ See Owen 2018 for an example of the Stand Your Ground law. This article includes a link to surveillance footage that some readers may find disturbing.

⁷ It is of note that the movement is depicted as being led by two African-American men, which raises issues given that it was three 'queer black women' who began #BlackLivesMatter. This is in line with how Garza explains how the movement they created was repeatedly co-opted by other groups and movements, describing this as 'racism in practice [and] hetero-patriarchal. Straight men, unintentionally or intentionally, have taken the work of queer Black women and erased our contributions. Perhaps if we were the charismatic Black men many are rallying around these days, it would have been a different story, but being Black queer women in this society (and apparently within these movements) tends to equal invisibility and non-relevancy' (2014). The inclusion, in *Election Year*, of former gang member Laney Rucker (Betty Gabriel) as a member of the resistance, patrolling the streets in an ambulance on Purge Night, helping those needing treatment and intervening in moments of escalating violence does move toward challenging the male-centered focus of the resistance but she is still not a leader of the movement.

⁸ This is reinforced by interviews with the directors, producers and cast in "The Making of the Purge", "Inside the Purge" and "A Radical Experiment", wherein the actions within the film are repeatedly discussed as an allegory and/or metaphor for the real world.

⁹ *Get Out* was released in the cinemas in January 2017 and McMurray was announced as the director for the *The First Purge* in July 2017.

¹⁰ This is reinforced by the fact that the Purge features as part of the many attractions at Universal Studio's Halloween Horror Nights in which ticket holders can be entertained and terrorized by recognisable Purgers from the films.