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The Rust Belt Gothic: Charting the Affective Politics of Deindustrialization and the Emergence of a Great Lakes Horror Genre in Film

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by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, who have supported and encouraged me throughout my academic pursuits, and through times in my life that seemed intractable. I also dedicate this paper to Indiana, from which much of my family hails; it is the distant memories of family trips to Muncie and Albany, and the recollections of parents and grandparents, which inspired this very paper.

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ABSTRACT

Within the past decade, a string of notable horror films set within the Steel Belt has emerged. These works collectively invoke the specter of the 'Rust Belt' in their narratives: the industrial Midwest's derelict urban and suburban sprawls in the wake of the economic decline and white flight of the USA's once-mighty manufacturing sector. Scholarship has commented upon the subtext of these works individually but fails to observe their collective nature as an emergent subgenre in horror fiction, centered upon directly confronting the Steel Belt's twentieth-century history of stagnation. In this paper, I examine films which share clear aesthetic and thematic traits, built around the neglected landscapes and sociohistorical context of the Rust Belt, particularly the human consequences of deindustrialization: *It Follows* (David Mitchell, 2015), *Don't Breathe* (Fede Álvarez, 2016), *Candyman* (Nia DaCosta, 2021), and *Barbarian* (Zach Cregger, 2022). Moreover, I contend that these films represent an extension of the Gothic mode, particularly the Female Gothic and Black Gothic, using those traditions' affective forms and narrative tropes to contribute to a distinct regional variant, one which expresses and processes the scars of the Great Lakes states' abandonment: the *Rust Belt Gothic*. Lastly, I examine how these films' potential political readings evolve over time in response to the Steel Belt's changing landscape, and accordingly how the films contribute to the discourse over the value of ruin fascination in media.

INTRODUCTION

On a cold, windy night, a young woman finds herself trapped within a crumbling ruin. She had been romanced by a handsome man who, despite his charm, seemed haunted by something, possessing some dark secret he refused to share but which afflicted him with occasional bouts of paranoia. They had eloped in the evening, but when she awoke, she found herself bound and at the man's mercy, inside the chasmic halls of a massive stone building. This fortress-like structure, once a symbol of power and prosperity, was abandoned by its masters; the surrounding lands fell to squalor and overgrowth in its wake, their citizenry either fleeing or trapped in their dying townships. The man informs her at last of his horrific secret, a curse which has haunted him for years. By seducing her, he has placed his curse on her, and now the supernatural, shapeshifting entity which stalked him hunts her instead. The man waits for the entity to arrive, ensuring that the woman witnesses it firsthand, then takes her back to his car and drives her home. A *car*? Yes, a car, because despite the decidedly Gothic trappings of the events just described, this is no castle, the surrounding towns are no European village, and the man is no depraved nobleman. It is the Packard Automotive Plant outside Detroit, the decayed townships are Midwestern suburbs, and the man is a middle-class American citizen. The woman herself is Jay Height, protagonist of the 2014 horror film *It Follows*.

The past decade has witnessed a string of horror films—set in the Great Lakes region of the Midwestern and Northeastern United States—which express anxieties about the economic

decline of the industrial heartland now known as the "Rust Belt": a region defined by its subjection to deindustrialization. These media employ both aesthetic and narrative means of figuration: imagery of crumbling, empty streets in autumn which complement narratives of spectral and human threats intrinsically tied to the region's past. Prior scholarship has examined these works individually, and in doing so, discovered critiques of heteronormativity, toxic masculinity, racism, and socioeconomic inequalities. However, it has neglected to contemplate them holistically and therefore presently fails to observe their collective significance. I argue that these works comprise the latest development in a regional offshoot of the Gothic form known as the *Rust Belt Gothic*. In addition to its importance as the emerging epicenter of a new field of academic study akin to the Southern Gothic, these works rewrite the cultural narrative of the Great Lakes region and its ill-fortuned inhabitants. They reframe the narrative of the Rust Belt by adopting marginalized perspectives; they likewise insinuate culpability for the region's ruin by pointing to brittle economic structures, neoliberal exploitation, racial inequity, and patriarchal ideals. However, they also warn of the repetition of past mistakes should we fail to learn from them. For these reasons, it is vital that scholarship focus its gaze on the Great Lakes' cultural mirror-image, as the Rust Belt Gothic complexifies the region's developing history.

The Great Lakes states, spanning the upper Midwest and Northeast portions of the United States, were the heart of the country's heavy industry in the late nineteenth century, its cities forming the Steel Belt: the manufacturing backbone which facilitated the USA's rise to global power in the twentieth century. Detroit, famously known as the Motor City, became the center of the global automotive industry. Accordingly, as manufacturing came to define American identity, the industrial sector came to define the image of the idealized American Dream for the working class. However, the middle twentieth century witnessed a steady downturn in the

region's industrial economies, its manufacturing centers either failing or migrating elsewhere, while most major cities failed to pivot their core economies to other fields or provide their adrift labor force with employment alternatives. What followed was a predominantly white flight from the urban core of the failing Great Lakes cities, depressing the region further and engendering both crime and infrastructural decay. Thus, the region shifted from the pride of the nation to its shame, its abandoned landscapes a cautionary tale of economic mortality—the Steel Belt had transformed into the Rust Belt. The shifting footing of global capitalism, the aphoristic "invisible hand," relocated the pillars of the region's economy elsewhere; the United States responded by pursuing other industries but failed to accommodate those left behind in the states it once prized. The industrial sector's remaining, primarily Black residents were demonized, as the unemployment and crime rate of the region's cities reinforced views of its minorities as criminals and unproductive vagabonds. In the present day, the Rust Belt undergoes a gradual, uneven recovery via community initiatives, economic diversification, and municipal investment; however, only the cities have shown meaningful growth— and, even then, to mixed success. Worse still, the threat of gentrification in these areas lingers uneasily over the impoverished citizens who weathered decades of destitution. Regardless, its residents, whether new or old, are eager to put the identity of the Rust Belt to rest by any means; the Detroit Packard Plant, which symbolized the region's lost prosperity, has been demolished, an explicit effort to remove its connotations and reinvent the Great Lakes region. However, the Rust Belt is not done with them: in addition to uneven recovery, the national perception of the region as an abandoned, lawless husk has proven difficult to shirk. A morbid fascination with the evocative ruins of the Steel Belt lingers; for this reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that its period of rebirth coincides with a light, but steady string of horror films expressly set in the region. These works paint it in the aesthetic

and affective images of the Rust Belt, prioritizing the most infamous icons of the region—the ruined suburban houses and overgrown vacant lots—over its healthier locales. They likewise integrate the region's history and economic issues into their own narratives. However, these works do so to both implicit and explicit critical effect, and even make new insinuations as to the roots of the Rust Belt that complicate prior neoliberal and masculine figurations of the region's anxieties.

This trend possesses formal roots reaching further back than the twentieth century. The Gothic is an established mode that spans multiple mediums, united by an aesthetic of fear, haunting, and mortality. Originating in Europe in the eighteenth century as a literary tradition, and typically understood as a Romanticist reaction to the Enlightenment, the Gothic centers itself firmly around the past and the irrational. Its common tropes include an untamable, intuitive wilderness that reconquers humanity's structures and constructs of reason; isolated characters who suffer unheard in their solitude; esteemed noble lines that have degraded into squalor and madness; and mighty houses of power that have crumbled into ruins, hiding dark secrets within their foundations. These themes and aesthetics proved surprisingly malleable, rendering them capable of transplantation; such was the case when the Southern Gothic emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the American South. In fiction and art, the structures of the Gothic mode were adapted to fit a distinctly American narrative: the destruction of the Southern aristocracy by the Civil War and a moral reckoning for their decadence and dependence on slave labor. And now, the Rust Belt adopts the Gothic framework for itself: the ruined castle or the abandoned plantation manor becomes empty picket-fenced suburbs and closed-down factories. Still, the inattentiveness of the field in collating these works results in disparate, narrow perspectives that could collectively illustrate the evolving public perception of the Rust

Belt and its future. More importantly, a holistic, Gothic-oriented approach reveals what the Rust Belt Gothic contributes to the larger discourse on the role of ruins in shaping our political understanding of capitalism.

The films I examine first appear after the declared bankruptcy of Detroit in 2013, a turning point for the Rust Belt. These initial films figure the industrial Midwest's destitution as dread and loss, befitting the apparent hopelessness of the situation: *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2015) and *Don't Breathe* (Fede Álvarez, 2016) privilege derelict, overgrown, and autumnal landscapes, evoking a Gothic atmosphere of lost prosperity, mortality, and finitude. By contrast, *Barbarian* (Zach Cregger, 2022) and *Candyman* (Nia DaCosta, 2021) come after the 2010s and consequently contend with the strides Rust Belt cities have made since 2013. These later films construct an affect of rot, focusing less on the region's intractable demise and more on the corruption which ravaged it to begin with, including racist hierarchies of privilege, which the films contend exist into the present. These shifting priorities suggest an evolution of Rust Belt Gothic cinema already underway, one which addresses highlights the limits of recovery through haunting reprisals from shameful pasts. Conversely, certain traits manifest throughout most, if not all the films. Most of the works center around investigative female protagonists and oppressive households, resulting in Female Gothic narratives which tie the origins of the Rust Belt to patriarchal structures. Likewise, Gothic tropes of cursed legacies and ruined structures of various forms exist in each movie, used here to emphasize the long shadow of the region's past and how it defines the present woes of the Rust Belt's citizens. Through these narratives and atmospheres, the films position themselves as both regionally distinct yet unmistakably Gothic. However, as their affective strategies evolve and their narratives grow increasingly political, the film's use of the Gothic to depict the Rust Belt likewise shifts.

My analysis utilizes the frameworks of critical theory and affect theory, which respectively investigate the narrative implications and sensuous experiences of cinema. Together, these theories examine both content and form to discern how these films reflect the political-economic structures of the culture which produced them. Critical theory—particularly the arguments put forth by the Frankfurt School—asserts that contemporary media reflect the ideologies and cultural tensions of their eras through their aesthetic forms, whether consciously or unconsciously. As previously stated, the Gothic originated as a response to the Enlightenment, expressing a pervading doubt about that era's zeitgeist of reason and progress. Likewise, affect theorists such as Eugenie Brinkema claim that horror films deploy forms that elicit bodily reactions from the subjects, responses which precede conscious thoughts. Different forms of horror elicit different responses and, therefore, different fears; accordingly, horror films illuminate their historical circumstances through the anxieties they provoke and the fears they articulate. This, too, is Gothic: the mode's aesthetics of decay, age, ruin, darkness, and wildness call upon fears of mortality which undermine faith in the security of humanity's structures—both literal and figurative. Indeed, critical theorist Walter Benjamin discusses the fetishization of ruins—an interplay between the aura they evoke and their critical value for identifying power structures at work—thereby combining aspects of affect with critical theory. As the Gothic employs both, so, too, does the Rust Belt Gothic. These films depict abandoned streets and industrial plants for their affective qualities: overgrowth, ruin, emptiness, and silence. Such qualities evoke sensations of isolation and mortality, of encroaching hostile environments and failing bodies. The films pair these experiences with narratives which invoke the history of the Rust Belt. While the earlier films operate chiefly via subtext rather than direct statements about the circumstances which created these landscapes, later works overtly guide the audience to

suspect particular power structures as the true culprits of degradation rather than the presumptive antagonists of the stories. In this manner, the Rust Belt Gothic emulates its predecessors accurately, processing its traumas by directly confronting those experiences via affect. Simultaneously, it creates narratives to explain both the roots and consequences of those traumas. But above all, it *warns* present audiences of future dangers via evidence of past strife. This strife includes the instability of capitalism, its failure to support towns and citizens whose economic utility has waned, and its entrenched and inequal structures of race, gender, and sexuality—all factors implicated by these films as issues that haunt the Rust Belt today. Therefore, the Rust Belt Gothic suggests that the monsters created by America's previous generations still linger in the basements of the Great Lakes' gentrified, repainted households and threaten to wreak destruction anew if ignored for too long.

My argument begins with an analysis of how the Rust Belt Gothic appropriates Gothic narratives and iconography. I catalog the Gothic tropes present in the films and observe how the subgenre transforms these motifs to suit changes in locale and era. I suggest that updating these tropes for the Rust Belt's unique context likewise alters their attitudes towards modernity, with the Gothic's relationship to mortality reacting to capitalism's cyclical generation of new ruins in its wake. The subsequent section closely reads *It Follows* and *Don't Breathe*, two early films in this trend; I examine how these films demonstrate potential as critiques of capitalist and patriarchal structures using Gothic tropes, particularly the Female Gothic. I also contend that their affective strategies and narrative conceits undermine this potential by viewing the Rust Belt as doomed and unsalvageable, fitting public perception of the region in the immediate years following Detroit's bankruptcy. In the following section, I analyze *Barbarian* and *Candyman*, Rust Belt Gothic films from the 2020s; here, I demonstrate how the region's limited recovery

since the 2010s affects the films' perceptions of the Rust Belt, trading an affect of death for an atmosphere of neglect and rot. I also argue that these films continue the critiques of patriarchy present in the earlier films while also introducing an awareness of racial exploitation that was previously absent, alongside entirely new critiques of the gentrification that has followed the Steel Belt's reconstruction strategies. I conclude by asserting that, provided the Rust Belt Gothic continues in the trajectory suggested by these films, they may provide a framework for an ethical application of ruin fascination that the early films lack and which has long remained a point of contention in media representations, especially horror.

Literature Review

The current understanding of the Gothic and what constitutes or qualifies for the title is both reified and malleable within academia. Regarding the former, the core of the Gothic is traditionally asserted to represent a fixation upon the past, typically through the lens of mortality and hauntings, invocations of madness, and irrationality. Accordingly, scholars typically frame the European origins of the Gothic as a tension between past and present, between romanticist and rationalist ideals. This notion is supported by Sharon Rose Yang and Kathleen Healey, who name the foregoing list as facets of the Gothic before summarizing them as that which "disturbs the systems of culture, continuity, and beliefs" (4). In other words, the Gothic represents that which undermines the certainties that western society takes for granted. Likewise, Jerrold Hogle notes how many classic Gothic works tie themselves to emerging social and scientific revolutions happening at the time of the genre's emergence in the 1800s: *The Castle of Otranto* (Horace Walpole, 1764) to the decline of the aristocracy in the wake of the middle class's rise, *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, 1818) to scientific advances, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1892) to women's rights, and *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1897) to liberated

sexuality (4, 13). In these accounts, the Gothic historically developed by challenging contemporary examples of progressive thought and Enlightenment-based rationalism while also eulogizing the decline of the older ways of life which these new systems replaced.

Unlike traditional approaches, scholars today consider the Gothic less a hard set of definitions than a flexible thematic framework that has surpassed its origins as a distinct genre. Some scholars outright oppose allowing the Gothic to solidify, decrying such static conceptions of the mode as "decayed, long-standing images and ideas mummified and cracking into dust" (Anderson; Hagood; Turner 4). These authors argue that just as the Gothic constantly evolves, so, too, must Gothic scholarship to remain relevant to recognize and consider these changes. Gothic scholarship also recognizes regionalized Gothics and variations, such as the Female Gothic, in which structures are adapted from their European and Romanticist roots into new cultural contexts. As Fred Botting describes it, the Gothic was diffused across British and American fiction throughout the 1800s, transforming Gothic styles while retaining identifiable continuities with the works of pioneering writers such as Ann Radcliffe or William Godwin (113). Therefore, while the Gothic may retain certain traits recognized as essential, it has also evolved in accordance with time and geography. One particularly established example of Gothic speciation is the Southern Gothic; despite the American South belonging to a clearly different history and distinct cultural identity, writers such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor are widely categorized as Gothic authors by contemporary scholars (Crow 124). Despite its transplanted setting, the Southern Gothic expresses similar themes of faded opulence, scars of past destruction, and evocations of haunting and restless ghosts, molded around the South's unresolved historical traumas. It is this demonstrated adaptability which drives my argument; I seek to effect a similar expansion of Gothic definitions by once again applying the mode's broad

traits to a selection of connected media to suggest a new evolution, this time applied to the regional context of the Rust Belt and the historical context of United States deindustrialization.

My expansion of the Gothic has precedent in contemporary media studies. Scholars have folded numerous films into Gothic canon, even those from the early days of cinema. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Weine, 1920) use macabre expressionist stagecraft to depict a subjective, maddened perspective within a world where systems of order cannot be trusted (Kaye 241). Jack Halberstam goes further, asserting that the cinematic horror trope of the "single female victim ... replaces nineteenth-century Gothic fiction's series of ... female heroine/victims" (126). In this sense, he argues that film is an outright evolution of the Gothic and not merely a medium which contains Gothic examples. My project performs a similar function to Halberstam's argument, construing select horror films not only as Gothic in a generalized sense, but also as new entries in an under-recognized body of Rust Belt Gothic literature that began in the 1990s with novels such as *Affliction* (Russell Banks, 1989) and *Snow Angels* (Stewart O'Nan, 1994). Moreover, I assert that *It Follows*, *Don't Breathe*, *Barbarian*, and *Candyman* directly descend from the Female Gothic—and, later, the Black Gothic—combining both traditions to implicate their respective anxieties in larger failing structures.

In doing so, I join scholars who explicitly and implicitly appeal to the Gothic in their investigations of the films I have selected. Marco Petrelli directly connects *Candyman* to the Gothic, claiming the film represents "black re-appropriation of gothic and horror narratives" (2). However, most scholarship does not consciously consider the Gothic in their analyses. Mortiz Wischert-Zielke instead employs Marxist theory to discuss *Don't Breathe*, arguing that monetary inequality under a capitalist system drives the inciting actions of both protagonist and antagonist (153). By contrast, Meredith Eget examines *Barbarian* in feminist terms, discussing the movie's

usage of "gendered power dynamics" as a site for horror and exploring how the protagonist, Tess, approaches life cautiously—a necessity within a patriarchal society (Eget). David Church applies queer ethics to *It Follows*, correlating the abandoned neighborhoods of Detroit to "a regime of sexual shame wherein our heteronormative culture compels sexual subjects toward monogamy—even at the risk of their overall well-being" (4). These analyses rightly connect individual works to their historical and economic contexts within the Rust Belt. Even so, no thinker accounts for the existence of other Great Lakes horror media or the scholarship about them. Meanwhile, these films, much like the canon of the Southern Gothic, exist in conversation with each other, sharing subject matter and affective experiences. This conversation generates a broader, unifying narrative concerning contemporary Rust Belt horror, one best conceptualized, as some scholars already recognize, through the existing framework of Gothic horror.

This in mind, I assert that Church's analysis of *It Follows*—how that film links heteronormative culture to the capitalist forces which diminished Detroit—connects the movie to Wischert-Zielke's Marxist discourse on the underlying politics of *Don't Breathe*. Moreover, where *It Follows* expresses Gothic themes of decline, cursed legacies, and haunting pasts, *Don't Breathe* displays these alongside a Female Gothic narrative in which the female protagonist plays an "investigative figure" and must contend with the confinement and danger posed by the male master of the house (Hanson 53). The dangers and expectations associated with the Female Gothic—including the pressures to accept one's husband—accordingly reflect not only *Barbarian's* own narrative, but also Eget's analysis of how that film articulates female fear and masculine means of control (Eget, Hanson 68). Lastly, Eget's discussion concerning the overlap of gendered and racialized privilege in *Barbarian* connects her argument to *Candyman's* critiques of racism, ruination, and gentrification, which make the latter film an example, Marco

Petrelli argues, of Black Gothic fiction, which itself shares several strategies with the Female Gothic. Through the mediation of Gothic traditions and themes, the discourses on these films, despite their divergent priorities, demonstrate relevant political and economic connections: female disempowerment, racial exploitation, economic hardships, and the ruins created by neoliberal capitalist society. I argue that making these connections enables a more complete understanding of the significance and cultural work performed by these Steel Belt horror films. Examined together and in sequence, they articulate the connections between patriarchy and capital, as well as the latter's role in the Rust Belt's deindustrialization and exodus. Later films then highlight the role of racial injustice in the Steel Belt's decline and illustrate how all three systems threaten the region's present through gentrification. This chronological development in turn demonstrates how the Gothic's perennial fascination with ruin could be developed towards constructive purposes, should the films continue in this direction.

CHAPTER ONE: AT THE GOTHIC FOUNDATIONS

This project is not the first to conceive of a Rust Belt Gothic, nor did it invent the name. In 2017, the studio Infinite Fall released the game *Night in the Woods*, which follows a female protagonist investigating the dark, buried secrets of a dying Pennsylvania mining town. The game explores mortality and loss while offering a critique of the social factors which contribute to a town's decline. This intersection of American history and Gothic themes is deliberate: developer Bethany Hockenberry describes the game as a "Rust Belt Gothic," making clear the studio's intentions to emulate the earlier mode's ideas and aesthetics (Hudson). The name appears independently as early as 2012 in Matthew Martin Holman's dissertation *Rust Belt Gothic Fiction*. The dissertation chiefly concerns literature from the 1990s and 2000s, which examines rural New England mining townships, white male protagonists, and crises of masculinity "directly intertwined" with financial worries—particularly the inability to support a household (56, 60). What is more, Holman correctly predicts that the Rust Belt Gothic may expand into different media with divergent priorities (121 - 122). My interests lie in filmic examples of the 2010s and 2020s, which develop their own forms and narratives distinct from Holman's examples. These films supplant rural townships with urban centers, shift their protagonists from emasculated men to imperiled women, and transition from white protagonists to Black leads. Moreover, the region's ostensible recovery across its urban centers transforms how these works approach cities such as Detroit, shifting their horror from a dread of decline to a

fear of repetition and thereby questioning the veracity of this recovery in raced, classed, and gendered terms. Even so, these films express the fundamental core of the Gothic tradition: a "tug-of-war" driven by "forces of change that would reject the past yet still remain held by aspects of it" (Hogle 2). They do so, moreover, to warn contemporary audiences against capital's ongoing violence through sensuous experiences that prompt evaluations of past and present alike.

This warning from the past to the present manifests itself in the Rust Belt Gothic as the empty, overgrown cities of the Great Lakes. The great factories and idyllic suburbs of this region are direct products of the industrial age; modernity and capitalism made them possible but failed to sustain them, resulting in their desertion. As Steven High describes it, "Many heartland towns and cities were wholly dependent on a single industry or a single employer for their existence," only to be cast aside once the industrial economy of America became supplanted by a postindustrial economy that provided booms elsewhere in the country and overseas (5, 7). These changes promised to guide the world to a prosperous future, but they contributed to capital's cyclical production of ruins instead. Consequently, the neighborhoods depicted in *It Follows, Don't Breathe*, *Barbarian,* and *Candyman* fall into the same crumbling states as the castles of the classic Gothic: overgrown, waste-strewn, and eerily silent. In *It Follows,* Jay and her friends explore a ruined household in a deserted street in Detroit. "In the visual logic of landscape in *It Follows*," Adam Lowenstein asserts, "... plant life is always repossessing urban space," which he argues "suggests that the lines between the city and the suburbs (or the suburbs and the country for that matter ...) are not as natural or definitive as they might appear" (362). Lowenstein's comment evokes the Gothic motif of the civilized world inevitably succumbing to time and finding itself reclaimed by nature as certainly as any fallen tree. The aesthetic persists in *Don't*

Breathe and *Barbarian*, as their respective heroines trek through empty, weed-choked streets where the only other people are stalking monsters and ravenous beasts. *Candyman* places its climax within a similarly Gothic derelict church, situated in the empty Chicago neighborhood of Cabrini-Green. In the end, each film's protagonists move through urban ruins that serve as signifiers for a bygone age, reflecting the "aesthetic of loss" that defines the melancholic and contemplative Gothic mode (Kirkland 105).

Even so, the Rust Belt Gothic turns its ruins towards politicization, utilizing Gothic motifs to direct audience perceptions of the Rust Belt's historical troubles towards alternative economic conclusions. Consider the cursed legacy, another staple of the Gothic mode that recurs persistently across the films. These narratives refashion gothic conceptions of corrupt lineages, shifting them from their aristocratic genealogical trappings to chains of sexual and racial violence that perpetuate indefinitely— a recurrence of the past wrought upon the present. Throughout *It Follows*, Jay finds herself pursued by a curse that proceeds through sexual contact like descending generations, a premise the movie frames as sexual violence at the hands of her boyfriend, Hugh. "Even if the sexual intercourse occurring before her captivity was consensual," David Church argues, the film frames Jay's subsequent kidnapping—and the reactions of others—as "a sort of 'symbolic rape,'" which reinforces the curse's figuration of systemic chains of sexual abuse (8). Hugh, too, is a victim, as are all the preceding links in the chain; like them, Jay is forced to continue a vicious cycle of sexual harm that predates any of them and whose roots appear inscrutable to present-day victims. Similar chains of harm inform *Don't Breathe*'s narrative, where poverty forces the protagonist, Rocky, to rob houses to support herself and her sister. Meanwhile, in *Barbarian*, the monstrous Mother is the product of several generations of inbreeding. She is a degenerated being cursed to perpetuate the traumas inflicted on her maternal

line by the house's owner, Frank, a man who outwardly evokes the image of the Midwest's ideal working-class citizen via his perfect lawn, muscle car, denim coveralls, strong accent, and whiteness. Lastly, in *Candyman* Anthony learns he is the successor to the film's titular figure, though residents of Cabrini-Green attempt to deny this legacy. In doing so, they repress the history of racist violence in Chicago that first birthed Candyman. Through figurations of dark legacies and curses, these films appropriate Gothic narratives as tools to figure ongoing sexual and racial abuses the predate the region's destitution and linger still.

The films' application of cursed legacies informs the subgenre's preoccupation with the suburbs of the Rust Belt to juxtapose past and present social structures and foreground the political realities of our current era. Suburbia, states Bernice Murphy, "was considered a kind of utopian paradise for the American everyman and his ever-expanding brood, a means of providing cheap, well-appointed housing for returning GIs, and a stepping-stone to the middle classes for millions upon millions of upwardly mobile young families" (5). This idolization of the suburbs as a symbol of the capitalist American Dream makes them likewise effective for expressing the dark underbelly of the Rust Belt, for the films indicate that these neighborhoods housed such systemic violences well before deindustrialization. Even as the films eulogize the suburbs' faded glamor via affective juxtapositions between still-living streets and forgotten neighborhoods, as in *It Follows* and *Candyman*, they promptly render that nostalgic idolization suspect by exposing the sins atop which those houses were built. Moreover, the suburbs' association with capitalist ideals and middle-class aspirations render them useful tools for reframing the Gothic's critique of modernity in the age of neoliberalism. The classic Gothic tradition witnessed the bourgeoisie's supplantation of the aristocracy as the locus of power. In the Rust Belt Gothic, the urban ruins of the region are of capitalist origin, and yet capitalism remains the dominant system. Even so,

these ruins signify the shortcomings of this dominant system, weaknesses which capitalism seems content to repeat. Therefore, the Rust Belt Gothic's shift to suburban locales demonstrates the mode's continued effectiveness as a lens to highlight the connections between faulty systems and their consequences.

These films' inclination towards critical perspectives on the Rust Belt renders them capable of extending the discourses of various alternative branches of the Gothic mode. The most prominent of these is the Female Gothic: a branch of the Gothic first identified by Ellen Moers in 1976, which articulates "women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures" by constructing "a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic" (Wallace and Smith 2). This subgenre's logic of expressing feminist fears through direct external threats persists into the narratives of the Rust Belt Gothic, demonstrating how these patriarchal structures remain dominant despite the egalitarian promise of rationality. The Female Gothic thus provides the subgenre with a perspective with which to examine and express the manner in which neoliberalism has failed the region in distinctly sexual terms. *Don't Breathe* and *Barbarian* center on heroines investigating the houses within which they find themselves trapped. In doing so, they discover "the buried secrets of the patriarchy" for which the house's master attempts to punish them (Blake 37). In *Don't Breathe*, Rocky discovers a kidnapped woman in the basement of the Blind Man's well-maintained house, revealing that his seeming weakness belies a ruthless scheme to reduce her to her reproductive capacities. *Barbarian's* Frank employs a similar scheme, hiding his true nature as a kidnapper and sex offender beneath an unassuming, quiet politeness. In both instances, these forcefully suppressed secrets reemerge, revealing the lustful, misogynistic degeneracy that has dwelled within their respective households for decades.

The Rust Belt Gothic also demonstrates the sustained efforts of patriarchy to disempower women into the present day, typically via accusations of madness or irrationality. In *It Follows*, Jay's friends initially doubt her when she insists that the entity is right before her, treating her gingerly and patronizingly, assuming her to be addled by the ostensible sexual trauma imparted by her boyfriend. Meanwhile, in *Barbarian*, Tess's read of her situation is undermined by Keith's insistence that she is acting hysterically, leaving her to second-guess her own suspicions about his intentions. Like Tess, "we are made to feel foolish for ever doubting Keith at all," but soon after, "the horror has arrived once again with a vengeance and chastised us for ever feeling comfortable at all" (Eget). In both films, the protagonist presses forward to obtain proof of her claims, fighting off attempts by male and authoritative figures to subjugate their disruptions of the norm. Moreover, whereas Ann Radcliff's Female Gothic novels always reveal supernatural theories to have rational and status quo-affirming explanations, Jay and Tess prove the existence of terrible dangers, affording them more validation by the narrative and undermining the stances of male authority (Botting 64 - 65).

Another specter looms over the Rust Belt as well: its ongoing history of racial oppression. This sordid heritage of violence is the domain of the Black Gothic, which like the Female Gothic figures the struggle between marginalized protagonists and the forces which seek to subjugate them. Within the Rust Belt Gothic, the Black Gothic tradition depicts this tension as a recurrent evil which has thrived in the Steel Belt well before deindustrialization and now reemerges alongside neoliberalism. Linnie Blake examines this overlap via *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017), comparing the film's "themes of entrapment, bodily appropriation ... and victimhood" to the structures of the Female Gothic and its protagonist, Chris, to the subgenre's heroine, since he actively resists victimization via "his own abilities" and "solidarity" with others

in his position (39, 45). Indeed, *Barbarian* exists as both Female and Black Gothic; Tess, as a Black woman, must contend with both the domestic snares of patriarchy and the realities of racial entrapment. In addition to the attempts of Keith and A. J. to impose their own narratives on her experiences, she discovers the police to be completely unreliable. When she calls them to help rescue A. J. from Frank's house, they write her off as a drug addict based on her bedraggled appearance and threaten to arrest her for bothering them. Tess is soundly ignored by the authorities because of her gender and race. Regardless, these racial and gendered injustices connect back to the Gothic critique of capital through the figure of the white male. As Frank thrived in Detroit's industrial past, A. J. and Keith exploit the city's bottomed-out housing prices in the present, facilitating their band and lodging businesses, respectively.

Candyman, by contrast, exhibits few traces of the Female Gothic narrative; Brianna does not drive the plot with her investigations until the final act. Nevertheless, the film retains the Black Gothic's "ability to give voice to the repressed ... to bring into focus otherwise submerged racial issues," and thereby adapt other Gothic tropes to its own narrative intentions (Petrelli 2). Anthony's connection to the lineage of *Candyman* is more than genealogical heritage; it also expresses a shared history of racialized violence used to oppress and contain Black communities within their appointed ghettos in the Rust Belt. Anthony and Brianna assert that white power created and now destroys the ghetto, while William notes that the police constantly patrol Cabrini-Green to ensure its residents remain trapped in its decaying husk. *Candyman* thus combines the Gothic tropes of a cursed lineage, ruined landscape, repressed past, and haunted present towards articulating a history of violence, which, William asserts (and ultimately proves through his machinations), "have happened to us" and "are *still* happening!" By reclaiming the Gothic to express distinctly Black narratives, the Rust Belt Gothic redresses what Dora Apel

calls the consistent erasure of Black residents from the images of the Rust Belt's ruined streets. This omission of Black voices, Apel argues, advances neoliberal narratives that Black cities like Detroit fell to mismanagement rather than deeper systemic issues (5). Though this aspect of the Rust Belt Gothic is a recent development, its presence alongside the Female Gothic nonetheless indicates a shift towards alternative narratives, shedding light on the region's cyclical injustices and connecting them to both the industrial capitalism of the past and the neoliberalism of the present.

To this end, the Rust Belt Gothic utilizes aging tropes, spearheaded by white European authors, to call for recognition of present, localized tensions. It turns these structures towards expressing fears initiated by the onset of modernity but catalyzed anew by neoliberalism. The Gothic obsesses with the past, construing it as an irresistible force which always reemerges to reassert itself upon the present. These films explore similar concepts, but their placement firmly within our contemporary moment directs our attention towards the structures behind deindustrialization. Specters of sexual violence and racial oppression persist unchallenged in an era that ostensibly opposes them, while the capitalist model actively fosters social collapse to ensure its continued dominion. Consequently, the Rust Belt Gothic constructs itself as a warning, literalizing dangers which have manifested before and will do so again if they remain unaddressed. The subgenre adopts progressive reinterpretations of the tradition through the Female and Black gothics, using them as tools to articulate larger complexes of systemic issues which plague the Rust Belt. In fusing these subgenres' respective politics, their perspectives cohere into a holistic revamping of Gothic narratives that privilege underrepresented demographics over the white, male, and wealthy who dominated prior iterations of the tradition, even the novels which constituted the earliest works of Rust Belt Gothic.

CHAPTER TWO: DECAYED STRUCTURES

The Rust Belt Gothic, as with Gothic fiction, holds a complicated relationship with the subject of ruination. Scholarship has long critiqued the aestheticization of ruins for its potential danger of obscuring the realities that created them. Walter Benjamin explored this notion in *The Arcades Project*, observing how the older or ruined parts of Paris frequently evoke a sense of mortality, the sensation that the city cannot last forever (10, 90). He also insinuates that modern instances of urban decay are the products of the bourgeoisie, recalling how Baron Haussmann's projects destroyed much of Old Paris and increased the population of homeless citizens even as the city planner demonized them (12, 23). Consequently, the ruins of the past become a "fetish" commodified by the bourgeoise to obscure their origins, the deathly aura of which motivates the masses to cling to the new which capitalism presumably provides (10 - 11). This proves comparable, I argue, to the abandonment of the Steel Belt by corporations eager to pursue overseas factories or, later, the rising domestic technology sector. Doral Apel expresses similar concerns, noting how media about Detroit often naturalize the casualties of capitalism by expressing a fatalistic attitude towards cities, "'demonstrating'... the historical inescapability of decline" (5). Even so, Benjamin asserts that, despite the dangers of ruin fetishization, there remains potential in their contemplation. Ruins, he argues, promote dialectical thinking about the "destabilizing of the market economy" via the sheer speed at which capitalism produced them (13). Identifying the cause of ruins allows observers to realize the flaws in the systems

responsible. Apel, by contrast, expresses a more pessimistic perspective on Detroit's ruin imagery, asserting its capacity for use by "different political agendas" that render it overdetermined at best (5). At its worst, she argues, narratives about fatalism or fiscal mismanagement ignore the "real agents of decline—the corporations and the state," and in doing so, aid these agents in preparing Detroit for new, updated means of capitalist exploitation. In what follows, I contend that the Rust Belt Gothic's earlier films validate concerns regarding this naturalizing impulse, yet also demonstrate a capacity for constructive commentary outside the detrimental binary that Apel suggests.

It Follows and *Don't Breathe* possess notable commentaries on systems of power: Detroit's status as a ghost town shapes their narratives, while the films' preoccupations with the emptied suburbs and inert factories of the region suggests the frailty of the manufacturing-driven world to which they belonged. Significantly, these films also employ Female Gothic narratives exploring "dangerous disempowerment" to illustrate systems of patriarchal entrapment (Hanson 61). Moreover, both films directly connect these gendered norms back to the transactional ideals of capitalism, suggesting their inextricability. The systems which impacted Detroit and other Rust Belt towns exert an invisible presence on the plots and the characters, dictating the latter's statuses and choices. And yet, the affective forms of both movies evoke sensations of dread, hopelessness, isolation, and entrapment, constructing a pervasive aura of inevitable mortality, of inescapable entombment followed by death. In *The Form of the Affects,* Eugenie Brinkema argues that affect reveals new dimensions of meaning to films through close readings of their operative forms which "seize the passions" of these affective responses for "textual interpretation" (xvi). At times, these forms demonstrate political value by aligning viewers with the suffocation and terror felt by the female protagonists in the face of their captors. However,

this affect of dread also reflects an attitude of futility, presenting the Rust Belt and its surrounding systems as faulty beyond repair, walking corpses beyond resuscitation. Consequently, the films risk undermining their own capacities for motivating political action—or worse, evoke a melancholic longing for lost ways of life, despite their faultiness. All told, this early era of the cinematic Rust Belt Gothic extends Female Gothic themes of victimization within corrupt patriarchal structures to indict neoliberalism's condemnation of the Steel Belt while also engendering an affect of insurmountable finality, resulting in a capacity for both progressive and regressive interpretations.

The Female Gothic aspects of *It Follows* largely manifest via affective evocations of the sexual pressures placed on women. When the film introduces its protagonist, Jay, she drifts contentedly in her backyard pool, responding to the ogling of young boys with a smirk, undisturbed by their desire for her and comfortable with her own body. All this changes after she consents to sex with her boyfriend, Hugh, whom she admits to her friends had been pressuring her into it. Following their intercourse, Hugh drugs Jay and ties her up, revealing that he only wanted to seduce her, pass on the film's titular curse, and leave. He assures Jay that she can likewise pass "It" on via further sexual intercourse with a new partner; indeed, he is confident that it will be easy for a woman to find interested men. Sure enough, the threat posed by It pressures Jay into having sex with eager partners whose lust for her is evident; these partners range from random strangers on the lake to childhood friends like Greg and Paul. Each time, Jay becomes more despondent about what was once an intimate, personal act. She is not a virgin prior to her fateful night with Hugh; however, their date marks her passage into a complicated world where the "innocently sexual" gains "sinister overtones" through the expectations placed on women by patriarchal sexual norms (Church 10). As in the Female Gothic, Jay undergoes a

"romantic estrangement" which undermines heterosexual norms by framing such relationships as dangerous or duplicitous; as Hugh tricks Jay into accepting his death sentence, the Female Gothic heroine may find that her Prince Charming is in fact the murderous Bluebeard (Hanson 66 - 67). This estrangement aligns with David Church's own arguments concerning the film's deconstruction of heteronormativity, in which he claims that the protagonists' straight monogamy leaves them vulnerable to It, whereas a society of free, communicative love might diminish this danger (Church 4, 11). Jay's loss of innocence and resulting despondency reflect her acquired awareness of the patriarchal realities within which she exists and which follows her like the titular monster.

The film complements these narrative beats of coerced intimacy with affective expressions of pursuit and sexual violence, all centered around It, which is to say, patriarchy. In several scenes, the camera ponderously pans around 360 degrees as Jay attends college, its gaze falling on the various students and faculty milling about, any one of which could be It and, therefore, a threat. This constant panning not only evokes a sensation of constant lookout, but also underscores the camera's blind spots, engendering paranoia and anxiety. The monster itself kills its victims in a manner evocative of sexual assault, pouncing on victims and grinding against them while breaking bones and secreting an ambiguous slimy fluid. Several other moments in the film follow Jay walking down the street in silence, the camera steadily following her in long takes suggestive of the monster's point of view. Jay eventually resolves to fight It directly, seemingly killing the monster in a poolside trap—yet the film remains distressingly ambiguous about confirming It's death. This lack of resolution, and the inherent risk of incorrectly assuming Its demise, undermines any sense of resolution or security. Jay feels the same and resigns herself to sex with Paul as a preventative measure, despite her overt lack of

interest in him. Unable to shrug her anxieties of lurking violence, she complies with heteronormativity's expectations in exchange for safety. Jay's personal experiences make her aware of the violence of patriarchy, of its constraints on her own sexual agency, and of the futility of escaping it completely.

By contrast, the protagonist of *Don't Breathe*, Rocky, finds herself in a narrative more familiar to the Female Gothic, confronting overt instances of masculine tyranny personified through the film's central antagonist: the Blind Man. A tyrannical patriarch, the Blind Man denotes a specific figure of anxiety familiar to the Female Gothic: the male captor, the master of the house. He enslaves and impregnates a woman in his basement to replace the grandson she accidentally killed, thereby continuing his paternal line. The agency or identity of the woman does not matter to him, only her capacity to bear his descendants; when she inadvertently dies, he simply resolves to replace her with Rocky. The house itself is a manifestation of patriarchal power, assuming an oppressive aura once Rocky enters it. Its creaking floors serve the Blind Man by betraying intruders; tense, muffled silence reigns as Rocky carefully navigates the narrow and constricting house undetected. In earlier Female Gothic films, the Gothic male is frequently defined, according to Helen Hanson, by his control over the house, a control which is countered by the end when the heroine defeats him (Hanson 130). In *Don't Breathe*, Rocky turns the house itself against the Blind Man, triggering an alarm to deafen him, which gives her the opening to defeat him and escape. This reversal, alongside Rocky's denial of the childrearing role imposed upon her, fulfills the "disintegration of the gothic male and the dissolution of his dynasty" which frequently figures in Female Gothic plots (Hanson 130).

However, the Blind Man and his house come to figure more than Female Gothic tropes alone: the film directly links the Blind Man's misogynist appraisal of women to a capitalist

mentality. This mindset manifests through his detached transactional attitude towards Rocky and his demand that she bears his child as material compensation for his losses. The Blind Man's dynastic obsession with fatherhood and utilitarian approach to the female body renders him a figure of both "capitalist patriarchy" and "rape culture" (Wischert-Zielke 516). Moreover, he opts to buy Rocky's silence regarding his actions by refusing to identify her as his assailant and robber. Karl Marx provides a rationale for this association between patriarchy and capital, noting that under the institution of marriage, "the bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production," another resource to utilize (78). Accordingly, the Blind Man's logic of exchange-value invariably extends to his treatment of women, for the former encourages the objectification of the latter. In this manner, *Don't Breathe* associates its monstrous depiction of patriarchy with the specter of capitalism in the Rust Belt, a connection which continues into later Rust Belt Gothic works in a more pronounced form.

The Blind Man's house, meanwhile, gains significance that extends beyond its figuration as a patriarchal prison, becoming a locus for the film's attitudes towards Detroit at large. The burglar, Money, describes the Blind Man's house as the last holdout on a once-prosperous street, whose other residents vacated at the onset of deindustrialization to escape its decline. This house, large and well-kept with a mowed lawn, suggests how the rest of the now crumbling and overgrown neighborhood appeared in the past. Rocky herself plans to rob the house for funds to escape her abusive mother with her sister and move to California. Their destination is apt; after deindustrialization, the country's next boom economy emerged with the technology industry, headquartered in Silicon Valley. Rocky and her sister follow a similar trajectory, their desire to escape reflecting a common theme in earlier, literary entries in the Rust Belt Gothic, wherein "Rust Belt towns ... represent death for … characters," according to Matthew Martin Holman,

who “must get away to survive” (120). The Blind Man’s opposition to Rocky’s robbery and her attempts to escape thus make him the primary obstacle to Rocky’s bid to leave Detroit and its associated destitution. He and his home represent not only patriarchal control, but also the dying world from which Rocky seeks to break free. He and his home become ghostly, Gothic figures of the past, threatening to drag the present down with them.

In this, *Don’t Breathe*’s focus on a single house and its owner creates a microcosm of the Rust Belt, a consolidated figure which affectively suggests the region’s history in both progressive and regressive ways. The house serves as a signifier of loss and as evidence of the unjust structures which plague the region, ranging from patriarchy to capitalist ruthlessness and the consequences of deindustrialization. It intensifies the impact of the Rust Belt’s derelict neighborhoods by condensing them into a single structure which reflects its dangerous, masculine master and analogizes the latent horror, past and present, of the Steel Belt’s suburban ideals. Director Fede Álvarez states this irony is intentional; he wishes to explore how “a nice house” can be the site of the bizarre and horrific (Hannah Shaw-Williams). In doing so, he provides a useful symbol for demonstrating the underlying monstrosity of capitalism and patriarchy, the foundations of which supported the Steel Belt’s affluence and linger still at the bases of the region’s derelict husks.

It Follows provides a similar, albeit less narratively direct, example of a singular structure which embodies the fallen state of the Rust Belt. Indeed, of the once-occupied spaces in Detroit now bereft of human activity, none are more iconic than the abandoned Packard Plant. Currently undergoing demolition in an effort by the city to abject its shameful history, the plant stands as the ultimate example of the Steel Belt’s failure: once a nexus of manufacturing and economy, now a scaffold rejected by its former owners for its unprofitability, steadily reclaimed by the

wilderness. Jay is hardly ignorant of these ruins' significance. After having sex with Hugh in his car outside the plant, she idly confesses to a dream of escaping the city with a car of her own, much like Rocky. Similar to *Don't Breathe, It Follows* makes clear that Detroit has been well and truly abandoned—not only by those that could afford to escape, but also by the entire country. Steven High comments that the United States afforded little attention to plant closures in the Rust Belt at the local or federal level (14). Instead, the neoliberal ideals of global capitalism left the Great Lakes to crumble as manufacturing moved elsewhere, and the U.S. turned its focus towards new sectors. Little coincidence, then, that Jay reflects on leaving while resting in the Packard Plant's shadow; the building serves as a painful reminder to locals of those that have already left, including the forces which the city depended upon to survive.

In this way, *It Follows*, like *Don't Breathe*, ties heterosexual and patriarchal norms to capitalism; their shared legacy looms over the present inhabitants of Detroit as the fallen ancestries of Gothic fiction haunt their diminished descendants. Fittingly, the film frequently comments upon how the protagonists' own parents have failed them. When Jay and her friends return to the impoverished neighborhoods of Detroit, they muse how their parents warned them not to venture "where the suburbs ended and the city began." They comment on the absurdity of their parents' arbitrary—and likely race-based—divisions of the city into safe and dangerous zones, clearly no longer trusting these outdated definitions of safety. Indeed, race plays a factor in the divisions between the destitute and prosperous sectors of the Detroit area, with "the poorest city in the nation," largely Black, bordered by "some of the wealthiest suburbs in the nation," mostly white (Apel 4). Moreover, the borders perceived by the characters are actively enforced; Apel observes little integration of public transportation or resources between the city and suburbs. The film further illustrates the unreliability of adults and authority through figures

similar to the Blind Man and Rocky's mother: Jay's father was abusive while he was around, and in the climax of the film, the titular monster, to Jay's terror, wears his face. Meanwhile, her alcoholic mother remains absent for most of Jay's crises. Nor can the police help solve Jay's dilemma, failing to even find Hugh after he disappears. Throughout the film, Jay and her friends travel amidst ruins which testify to the failures or prejudices of past generations. They realize that neither the authorities nor their parents can solve their problems, forcing them to grow up and act as adults. Together, the failures and values of prior generations effect a fall from innocence for the youthful protagonists which propels their collective realization of both the fallibility of their world and the oppressive structures under which they exist.

Even so, the films undermine their political economic critiques through a shared and pervasive affect of mortality, which at times challenges the systems that doomed Detroit but, at other points, seems indifferent to them. Partway through *It Follows*, as Jay and her friends drive further into Detroit and away from their green, lively neighborhood, the stark and weathered buildings of the city streets pass them by. The camera uses wide-angle lenses and long takes to capture the scope of the crumbling landscapes while also minimizing the remaining residents within them. The car's speed transforms these locals into faceless shades. The synth soundtrack underscores the moment with a moody piece more introspective than suspenseful, accentuating the affect of faded vitality. The neighborhood at which Jay subsequently arrives, overgrown and completely abandoned, stands in stark contrast to her own surviving neighborhood with its mowed lawns and playing children. The presence of human life on Jay's street accentuates its absence here, driving home the inner city's destitution. The cinematography reinforces the narrative's existence within the visible, quiet remains of a city in its twilight. Detroit's humbled state becomes undeniable to the viewer, impossible to ignore or from which to run. However,

rather than foreground these landscapes to interrogate their causes, the film instead figures them as evidence of death's inescapability, as victims of naturalized age and decay. Yara's quotation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *It Follows*' closing lines make the film's thematic intentions clear: "the most terrible agony of all" is the awareness that, eventually, "your soul will leave your body and you will no longer be a person." The film ties the "realization of mortality" to lost innocence and growing up, inspired by the director's own reaction towards Detroit (Richard Whittaker). David Robert Mitchell grew up in Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s, and his nostalgia for that era contextualizes Detroit's framing as a wistful and melancholic contemplation of a lost time. Consequently, the emptied landscapes which dominate the film's mise-en-scene serve primarily to express Jay's confrontations with life's ephemerality, like the bones of large animals in the wild. In doing so, the film treats Detroit as already dead, while also marginalizing the factors which killed it.

Affectively, *Don't Breathe* frames Detroit less mournfully than *It Follows*, opting instead for repulsion and dread. Alvarez chose Detroit as the film's setting for its "isolation element" over any conscious political motivation, expressing an almost textbook version of ruin fascination for the degradation of the city's upper-middle-class neighborhoods (Shaw-Wlliams). Accordingly, the film opens with an aerial shot of the entire street from afar, emphasizing the totality of both its desolation and isolation. Meanwhile, the Blind Man's house projects a deceptively tidy exterior that contradicts its withered surroundings; it sits like an unsprung trap. In addition, the film emphasizes the homeowner's advanced age and disabilities to imply monstrosity. These become signifiers of horror and danger, while "the scars on his face and even in his eyes" mark the Blind Man as "Other" (Wischert-Zielke 519). Though ableist in its application, the film nonetheless codes his bodily traces of wear and damage as reflections of his

world, especially the withered and broken neighborhood surrounding his deceitfully ordered home. Through both the Blind Man and his home, *Don't Breathe* constructs an undead Detroit that wastes away in a deathlike state yet lies in wait to trap those, like Rocky, who approach it or seek to escape the region once and for all. The city becomes an exclusion zone, and the Blind Man's house a vector of the sickness that ravaged his street. The disease of Detroit must be quarantined, the film suggests, and the city left to die, regardless of whoever else remains trapped within it. Rocky herself may be from Detroit, but the film treats her hometown with repulsion rather than concern, discouraging action instead of motivating it.

This affective attitude towards the Rust Belt informs *Don't Breathe*'s narrative as well. Unlike *It Follows*, the film suggests a means of victory over the desolation of deindustrialization; the escape that Jay dismissed as idle fantasy, Rocky achieves. She successfully acquires the money to travel to California, leaving Detroit behind as the Blind Man's neighbors had in decades past. Still, framing her departure as a victory insinuates that the cities of the Rust Belt are indeed beyond salvaging and can only be escaped. It encourages the neoliberal impulse to cast aside the collateral of drained sectors and begin again where there is still money to be had. Moreover, Moritz Wischert-Zielke argues that despite the film's "subtext of an anti-capitalist critique," it instead suggests the Rust Belt's root evil is "extreme moral degeneration ... associated with the loss of metaphysics" (515). The Blind Man rationalizes his deeds through the absence of God, a common sentiment in the age of rationalism that reflects Detroit's desertion by capitalist society but could also motivate a conservative push for regression. Under this lens, crime and poverty derive from the loss of traditional values (to which the Blind Man clearly adheres) rather than an unjust political economic system. This is not to suggest that the film ultimately *must* be one or the other, progressive or regressive; instead, it demonstrates a state of

indecision between these impulses rather than a hard commitment to either. *Don't Breathe* examines the husks of cities left in capitalism's wake, and even indicates the desperation of those left abandoned, but nonetheless prescribes the same solution to the Rust Belt's woes as neoliberalism: move on and shift responsibility.

Taken together, *It Follows* and *Don't Breathe* frame Detroit as an irrevocably dying city, emphasizing its abandoned streets and the onset of autumn. Their affective traits combine with narrative elements which depend on the emptiness of entire neighborhoods for the plot to function as well as smaller, incidental details that contribute to impressions of the city as a lost cause. At times, the films highlight the economic realities behind this decline, frequently through depictions of previous generations as incompetent, absent, or even hostile. Such critiques dovetail with Female Gothic narratives that emphasize the system's violence against women and connect it to the exchange-value mentality engendered by capitalism. Even so, *It Follows* and *Don't Breathe* limit their political economic challenges by insinuating that Detroit is unsalvageable, suggesting—through their embrace of the neoliberal notion of uprooting to pursue prosperity elsewhere—that this decline is natural and undeniable. Their unwillingness to press the issue further stymies their critical capacities.

Ultimately, the very qualities which denote these films as Gothic—their fixation on undermining narratives of progress by demonstrating the fallibility of the modern world—counter rather than bolster the progressive potential of *It Follows* and *Don't Breathe*. The films exploit the popular perception of Detroit as a husk for their own thematic purposes, which are rooted in mortality and ruin fetishization. In this, they mirror Benjamin's observations regarding how Paris' signifiers of age inspired the writings of others, such as Maxime Du Camp, who saw in Paris' apparent decline their own impermanence (90). The films naturalize the Rust Belt's

abandonment, which, as Apel argues, distracts the viewer from the reality of these ruins' human costs and, more importantly, from the people still living there, however emptily the films frame Detroit (75). This trend erases Detroit's poor and Black citizens in favor of the scenic, timeless image provided by the city's neglected streets. Indeed, both films rely on mostly white casts; even the desperate who live in poor neighborhoods are white in *Don't Breathe*. Meanwhile, *It Follows* only alludes to Detroit's economic racial disparities; the most notable Black figures are the faceless shades seen from a distance during the aforementioned car ride. Together, the films ignore the Rust Belt's disproportionate impact on its residents and the residents themselves, writing off their homes as useless to try and fix. These troubling implications pervade the early cinematic Rust Belt Gothic— but they, as well as their expressions of naturalized mortality, find redress in the films of the next section.

CHAPTER THREE: REFURBISHING THE HOUSE

Following Detroit's 2013 declaration of bankruptcy, new life seemingly sprung from the once-mourned region. John Dove attributes Detroit's turnaround to government oversight over city spending and a more diverse private sector (341). Other Rust Belt cities likewise report growth, such as Pittsburgh's pivot towards advanced technology or Rochester's optimizations in manufacturing (Armstrong 182, Spicer). These reports suggest hope for the Rust Belt through decidedly neoliberal methods. Meanwhile, the scars of deindustrialization remain in each city, and many citizens have yet to benefit—or were sacrificed in the process. Detroit balanced its books following bankruptcy by cutting pensions for retirees, an austerity that sets a precedent, Apel warns, for other "declining cities" (Williams, Apel 5). The supposed miracle of Detroit's ongoing recovery comes at further cost to the very residents who were most afflicted by the initial downturn. More distressingly, the city's means of recovery do not foreclose the return of financial woes: Detroit's pension systems remain roughly as underfunded as when it filed bankruptcy (Williams). Consequently, even though the Rust Belt may be rising, it remains stalked by the factors that felled it—a notion which the Rust Belt Gothic promptly explores through the language of Gothic horror.

In these more recent films, the Steel Belt exists within vicious cycles of sowing and harvesting by vulturous capitalist interests. Such cyclicality evokes Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, where he argues that the bourgeoisie's "new" solutions to urban decline are merely "a

reality that has always been present" and cannot, therefore, provide a true solution (15). Benjamin later links modernity to the Nietzschean model of "Eternal Recurrence," asserting that "every tradition … becomes the legacy of something that has already run its course" (116). Capitalism maintains control by repeatedly reproducing ruins, profiting from them by providing alternatives to these dilapidated locales in the form of newer, state-of-the-art districts. Benjamin presents a counter-narrative to the notion of ruins representing natural finality; they are evidence, he argues, of self-sustaining exploitation by market forces. His sentiment connects to Dora Apel's assertions that corporate interests capitalize on Detroit's decline while placing the blame elsewhere. However, unlike what Dora proposes, Benjamin's writings suggest that images of the decline can do more than aid in the cover-up. In this manner, ruins such as Detroit's retain value in revealing the world; it is the vantage point from which they are approached that matters most. From this perspective, the townships and cities of the Rust Belt no longer constitute a lost region but an active site of neoliberal abuses. They become dialectical images which "flash up in a moment of danger," as Benjamin describes in "On the Concept of History," illuminating not only the Steel Belt's darker pasts but the negative futures that neoliberalism will bring if left unchecked (391).

Barbarian (2022) and *Candyman* (2021), released following both this turnaround and the Black Lives Matter movements of 2017 and 2020, demonstrate the Rust Belt's Gothic potential to perform exactly this task of illumination. These films depict Midwestern cities that seek to put the hardships of the past behind them and subsequently point to the neighborhoods that lie beyond their renovated communities, the streets which remain empty and rotting. The films also insinuate that these cities' recoveries come at the cost of their impoverished and marginalized citizens and in favor of capitalist investors, sinking parts of the region even further to fuel growth

elsewhere. Finally, they illuminate capitalism's connections to other specters that haunt the region: the legacies of patriarchy and institutional racism, whose norms further reinforce capitalist ideology. "In the United States, a belief in progress is almost an article of faith," claims Charles Crow (2). Consequently, these more recent films' skepticism of neoliberal recovery—alongside their emphasis on the traumas of those most exploited by it—aligns them with the "oppositional" function Crow ascribes to the Gothic, his assertion that the mode exposes unwanted truths which contradict narratives of rationality and progress. The process of recovery, rather than diminishing the Rust Belt Gothic's relevance, accentuates it: within these films, attempts to banish the Rust Belt's ghosts with the light of our neoliberal present only render them stronger—ensuring their victory in the future, unless alternative paths forward are taken.

Certain continuities in the subgenre remain uninterrupted: like the first two films, these more recent films focus on the ruins still present in the Rust Belt and implicate capitalist incentives in their creation. Moreover, *Barbarian* draws connections between these policies and patriarchal structures of gender and sexuality, employing Female Gothic tropes and their oppressive affect to express the horror of these systems. However, though *Barbarian* and *Candyman* engage in Gothic tropes, including the Female Gothic, the films crucially expand into the Black Gothic as well, which employs similar narrative and affective strategies to the Female Gothic to impart the anxiety of living as a subjugated class within a stratified society. Accordingly, *Barbarian* and *Candyman* extend critiques of capitalism from the earlier films, connecting them now to racial in addition to gendered exploitation. In this manner, the films use both the Female and Black Gothics, two of the "suppressed groups" who, according to Crow, articulate their fears using the Gothic, to illuminate the multiple stratified hierarchies of power on which, the films insinuate, capitalism relies to maintain its control (2). Unlike *It Follows* and

Don't Breathe, however, which view the region's ruins under the fatalistic assumption that decline is inevitable, *Barbarian* and *Candyman* place greater focus on the causative factors which created the Rust Belt. Consequently, the dominant affect of these films changes from overdetermined mortality to politically motivated manifestations of neglect and corruption; more than that, they suggest the ruins of the region are subject to cyclical abuses so long as neoliberal capitalism—and its accompanying systems of patriarchy and white supremacy—remain the guiding logics of the Steel Belt.

The Female Gothic primarily manifests within *Barbarian*, a film which extends multiple figurations begun by *Don't Breathe*, including the patriarchal master figure of the house iconic to the Female Gothic. Like the Blind Man, Frank is the last resident of a formerly prosperous white neighborhood who keeps women enslaved in his basement to force them to carry his children. However, unlike the Blind Man, whose visage is quickly utilized for horror and disgust, Frank himself outwardly represents the idealized American Dream for the working class of the Steel Belt's glory days: a white, blue-collar man driving an American muscle car and owning a clean suburban house with perfectly trimmed lawns. However, as the film discloses, Frank outright exploits his trustworthy image, using his work uniform to trick unsuspecting women into letting him case their houses in preparation for abduction. If Frank represents the Steel Belt's formerly idealized citizen, then the film suggests that ideal to be rooted in patriarchal tyranny.

In the present day, the film's protagonist, Tess, faces an expression of patriarchy that undermines women's confidence in their subjectivity, particularly when it comes to perceived dangers. Keith reflexively employs manipulation tactics on Tess: he responds to her story about her abusive ex-boyfriend with the moral lesson that she should simply move on and find someone else. In doing so, he "reduces her experience to a lack of self-discipline or strength,"

assigning blame to her instead of her abuser (Eget). Later, he dismisses Tess's claims of finding a dungeon beneath the house, only to position himself as a protector or savior, as though her own testament is not enough. As in the Female Gothic, Tess asserts her suspicions of danger, but the existence of this danger is kept ambiguous to subvert her faith in her own subjectivity (Hanson 58). Cumulatively, the audience experiences Tess's disempowerment through narrative means familiar to the Female Gothic; tropes meant to evoke female entrapment since the 1800s remain in currency here in *Barbarian*, reflecting how the systems they highlight remain rooted in Detroit as firmly as the house's foundations.

Barbarian primarily constructs itself with Female Gothic narratives but directs attention to racial inequalities within Detroit as well. Notably, *Barbarian* averts the prior films' erasure of Black citizens from its destitute neighborhoods through Tess's only true ally in the film: a homeless Black man who lives in the area. Unlike the white residents of this film and *Don't Breathe*, and unlike the aspirations of Rocky or Jay, he—like many Black residents of Detroit—lacks the opportunities for leaving the Rust Belt. His presence, while slight, reasserts the human cost of the ruins created by the Rust Belt, reminding the viewer of the residents who must live with the ruins of deindustrialization rather than observe them from a removed position. Moreover, Tess's status as a Black woman renders this film not only a Female Gothic but a Black Gothic narrative as well. *Barbarian*'s primary story concerns Tess's active resistance to "the despotic cruelties of patriarchy" and her confrontations with "the emotional impact of power unjustly wielded," which Linnie Blake describes as hallmarks of the Female Gothic (38). Along the way she also confronts "black inequality under the law" akin to what Blake describes for Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, which likewise uses Female Gothic structures to illustrate racialized horror (36). The police whom Tess enlists for help instead threaten to arrest her, assuming her to

be a delusional drug addict and possibly a vagrant. Her race goes unspoken in their judgement but nonetheless evokes the profiling controversies tied to police conduct. The female dimension of Gothic horror may remain the focus of *Barbarian*'s narrative, but the film's inclusion of Black characters and depictions of their inequal treatment mark the Rust Belt Gothic's progress in representing Black experiences, especially compared to the exclusively white casts of previous films.

Frank and the other major male figures of *Barbarian* likewise intersect with narratives regarding Detroit's decline, its present status, and racial marginalization, tying their gendered commentary together with racialized practices which at once illuminate the causative factors of the Rust Belt and deconstruct its current recovery. The same flashback sequence which introduces Frank also illustrates the final days of Detroit's prosperity in 1980. As Frank drives through the neighborhood, the radio comments that the incoming Reagan administration must solve the issues of the country's faltering economy. Reagan's solution was to employ economic policies of privatization, supply-side incentives, and austerity—the bedrock of neoliberal capitalism. Reagan cut welfare and support programs for the poor and jobless nationwide, intensifying the region's poverty further (Davis 33 - 34). This fueled white flight from the region, of which Frank is directly informed by his neighbors as they begin the process of selling their houses. Alluding to Reagan's role in the Steel Belt's tipping point toward destitution acknowledges the "virulent racism, antiunionism, and industrial disinvestment" which toppled Detroit (Apel 76); placing this allusion within Frank's personal world further connects his gendered tyranny to the racialized and economic realities of the Rust Belt.

Reagan's neoliberal policies in the 1980s guaranteed Detroit's downward spiral; now, in the film's present, capitalist incentives seek to exploit the city through new figures of patriarchal

oppression. Keith notes that other artists like himself have moved into the city's empty neighborhoods due to their low pricing. This outside interest in the region's bottomed-out housing market represents gentrification: a distinctly predatory form of investment whose revitalization benefits far fewer than other, more public-oriented avenues of recovery. Keith demonstrates no awareness of this; the "white male privilege" Meredith Eget attributes him insulates Keith from understanding Tess's experiences as a woman and likewise prevents him from realizing the real price of Detroit's cheap housing (Eget). The film demonstrates further instances of gentrification through A. J., a wealthy actor who purchases the house at a rock-bottom price then turns it into an AirBnB lodging to provide a secondary income source for himself in Hollywood. As in *Don't Breathe*, California drains Detroit, now of capital instead of residents. Ultimately, Keith and A. J. represent not only patriarchy, but also the latest iteration of neoliberalism's exploitation of the Great Lakes region and that system's lack of concern for the racial inequalities of which they take advantage.

By contrast, *Candyman* largely excludes the Female Gothic's patriarchal horror to instead focus squarely on the horror of racial injustice central to the Black Gothic. Even so, it ties this injustice to the larger framework of capitalism through the logics of exploitation and gentrification. These logics manifest in various ways throughout the movie, from subtle societal and economic pressures, such as Clive's threats and incentives towards Anthony's art, to overt violent subjugation, as when the police murder Anthony and threaten his partner Brianna into silence. When discussing his artwork with a white critic, protagonist Anthony states, "The city cuts off a community and waits for it to die. Then they invite developers in and say, 'Hey, you artists, you young people, you white: Please come to the hood; it's cheap.'" *Candyman* consciously politicizes the ruins of the Rust Belt to a greater extent than *Barbarian* or earlier

films by actively stating that white power structures created the ghettos, abandoned them, and then tore them down. In the place of the razed ghettos, the city erected condos that only the rich can afford, demonstrating that white privilege and neoliberal systems still control Chicago along with other Rust Belt cities.

Candyman likewise expresses that racial violence and terror continue to dominate Chicago. The film casts the police as actively antagonistic, contrasting their depiction in past films as simply ineffectual. In the opening sequence, white officers stare suspiciously at a young William. Shortly afterward, they beat to death Sherman Fields, who is falsely suspected of hiding razor blades in candy. William himself remembers most strongly the terror on Fields's face when he realizes the police have discovered him. To the Black communities of Chicago, the dread of police violence looms more potently than any individual criminal. Accordingly, the film encourages viewers to align themselves with William's sense of injustice and outrage, culminating in a dark catharsis when Candyman slaughters the police. As Marco Petrelli argues, "By showing retribution for acts of violence," the film inclines the viewer to react to Candyman's grand return "if not as a proper happy ending, at least as a finale contemplating some kind of rectification" (11). William deliberately tells the story of Candyman to Anthony to remind people of the sordid, racist past that gentrification has stridently attempted to suppress through its demolition of the ghettos. He refuses to let the past stay buried, to let the narrative of progress tied into these renovated areas stand unchallenged. True to the Gothic mode, Chicago's efforts to forget Candyman—and the history so tightly wrapped into him—only allows these suppressed counter-narratives to grow stronger, until they force themselves into the open and challenge the foundations of the present.

Significantly, *Candyman* illustrates the value of this racism to modern political economic systems by depicting how the terror evoked by threats of violence or alienation control the film's Black characters. Anthony receives pushback from art curator Clive, who discourages him from making art depicting racial inequalities unless he can make it fresh enough to be profitable. Later, after Anthony upsets Clive, the latter vows to blacklist Brianna as retribution. Just as Cabrini-Green's real-estate value drove the steady eradication of its Black community, Chicago's art community suppresses racial critiques that might upset white patrons. Patricia Clough, discussing affect in relation to biopolitics, provides a workable explanation for the intertwining of racism and market economics under global capitalism, explaining that in the modern context the former serves as a means for the latter to create an expendable demographic whose disposal facilitates the prosperity of the rest (18). Pressing further, Clough theorizes that affect, which precedes individual reactions, can act as a social force that uses the "affective capacity of bodies," the quantifiable and, therefore, manipulable nature of reactions and identities, to exert control on a population (3 - 4, 18). For much of American history, this affective capacity expressed itself as threats of violence or marginalization meant to keep Black citizens in line, methods which *Candyman* repeatedly conveys to the viewer. As a Black Gothic film, *Candyman* uses affect to reveal the abuses of past and present, voicing and validating the scars left by the USA's history of profit-driven exploitation.

Barbarian and *Candyman* thus transform the affective character of the Rust Belt's ruins through their emphasis on the causative factors of the Steel Belt's abandonment and the deconstructive depiction of the region's economic recovery. In *It Follows* and *Don't Breathe,* the aura of finitude inhibited political critique; by comparison, *Barbarian* and *Candyman* utilize Detroit's ruins as images of neglect and mistreatment rather than death and reclamation by

nature. This crucially shifts the affect of these films from decomposition to *rot*. The films express what Justin Armstrong names "a *politics of abandonment*," a "friction between occupation and abandonment" that highlights the realities of both—the circumstances which motivated dereliction and the hardships faced by those left behind (274, 275). This affect suggests itself through the associations and juxtapositions of the later films; the Rust Belt is not a graveyard, but a living, emaciated victim, suggesting the presence of social forces which allowed the region to falter for the profit of the powerful.

Barbarian demonstrates this evolution through its implementation of the suburban house as a Gothic symbol of hidden abjection and corruption, a figuration precipitated by *Don't Breathe*. When Tess first arrives in the dead of night, all she can perceive in the darkness is the house itself, which appears cared for and orderly. However, her investigations into its basement reveal a hidden door to a dirty, dingy subterranean network. Here, she finds windowless, molding rooms whose bedding, buckets, and camera evoke past scenes of trauma and abuse. The house's hidden basement functions like a cancer or tumor, an unseen disease whose discovery elicits horror, disgust, and abjection. The context Keith provides for present-day Detroit, telling of new communities sprouting up from similar neighborhoods, likewise accentuates Barbary Street's abject quality, its overgrown and empty streets feeling less like an omen and more a vestigial limb—useless to the vitality of the rest of Detroit. This applies to the film's monster as well: the Mother, with her ratty strands of hair, rotted teeth, and lesions. Like the Blind Man, her deformity reflects the state of her home, of Detroit, but given her ambiguous age and immature mentality, she lacks his sense of age; she is not old, but misshapen and mistreated. The film renders the state of Barbary Street as freakish, monstrous, and victimized, a reading which opposes the implicit naturalization or bereavement of the previous films.

Candyman, by contrast, expresses its affect of neglect and rot by juxtaposing it with the outward gentrification of Cabrini-Green, most strikingly in the example of the church. Early in the film, Anthony locates the structure and compares it to a decades-old picture. The church of the past: vibrant and expressive, covered wall-to-wall in colorful murals, and a testament to the neighborhood's culture and creativity. The church of the present is washed, clean of all art, and a bleached, bone-*white* shell standing alone in a field where the project's high-rises once stood. And yet, the lifelessly clean exterior hides the church's interior with its graffiti and strewn debris of decomposing pews in dim, dust-ridden light: a former hub of the local community left to putrefy. Inside, the past of Cabrini-Green remains plainly visible despite the city's efforts to bury it. Similarly, as Anthony slowly transforms into Candyman and adopts increasingly acerbic attitudes toward the structures of white power in Chicago, his bee sting festers and grows, spreading up his arm and all the way to his neck and face. The affected flesh necrotizes and oozes pus, becoming increasingly painful for Anthony. Much like racism and marginalization, his attempts to cover it up without treatment only allow it to grow deeper and uglier, until at last it consumes all of him, and Candyman is born anew.

Perhaps the most essential quality of these latter films, both narratively and affectively, is their emphasis on recurrence when depicting capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. Rather than affix these systems only to figures of the past, *Barbarian* and *Candyman* plainly evince the perpetuation of these norms in the present. *Barbarian* suggests the cyclicality of both patriarchal violence and capitalist exploitation. Keith and A. J. perpetuate behaviors of condescension and self-interested mistreatment towards women which in the days before the Rust Belt manifested through Frank, demonstrating that the patriarchal environments which shaped the past persist into the present. Frank is connected to Reagan's abandonment of the Steel Belt, while Keith and

A. J. are tied to neoliberalism's exploitation of the region via gentrification, both of them outsiders seeking to profit from the low prices of Detroit's housing. It may present empty streets as relics of a bygone era of prosperity like the early films, but *Barbarian* emphasizes cyclicality and recurrence, making those concepts the core of its horror. By framing Detroit's current rebuilding as a recurrence of past sins, the film foregrounds the systems of power which continuously oscillate the city between prosperity and ruin and which privilege the business of white men above all else.

Candyman likewise emphasizes the cyclicality of race and neoliberalism in Chicago. According to Judit Bodnar, the process of gentrification in Cabrini-Green followed the "cyclical rhythms" of capitalism (153 - 54). As in Detroit, the economic systems which left Cabrini-Green to die now seek to build atop its ruins and will, no doubt, repeat the process indefinitely for as long as it remains profitable. Such rhythms apply to the city's racial abuses as well; as indicated by Clough and expressed by *Candyman*, racism persists precisely because it proves a useful tool for the controlling interests of a capitalist system, allowing these interests access to the land, property, and labor of the victimized. In turn, the vengeful specter of Candyman always returns because this racism recurrently begets the sort of traumatic violence that passes into legend, which is to say, into the collective anxieties of generations of Black Americans. *Candyman* supports *Barbarian*'s turn towards figuring the horror of the region as recurrent rather than final, the former prioritizing the racial aspects of this cyclicality as the latter implicates gender structures.

For both *Barbarian* and *Candyman*, the true danger represented by the Rust Belt's empty neighborhoods is not the inexorable, one-directional passage of time towards an irreversible conclusion, nor is it even the fantastical monsters which stalk the films' characters. Instead, the

root of the Steel Belt's misfortunes lies with the repeat performances of abuse and systemic mistreatment within cyclical processes of exploitation. The monstrous figures of the Mother and the Candyman are themselves products of these cycles; unlike It or the Blind Man, whose origins are either unknown or irrelevant to the Rust Belt itself, their existence calls attention to the systems of gendered and racialized power which dominate the region. This reflects the later films' interests in actively politicizing the ruins of the Rust Belt, whereas earlier films deemphasize this potential in favor of exploring a naturalizing affect of mortality. *Barbarian* and *Candyman* emphasize political neglect and systemic recurrence, averting the problematics of ruin fetishization expressed by various scholars and aligning the films more firmly with the Gothic mode and the "eternal return" of capitalism described by Benjamin. In the end, both *Barbarian* and *Candyman* illustrate how attempts to suppress the region's dark history via gentrification inevitably fail and how the forces which brought ruination in the past will return unless the region is finally redeemed from its past sins.

CONCLUSION

Cumulatively, *It Follows*, *Don't Breathe*, *Barbarian*, and *Candyman* exhibit narratives that employ affective techniques familiar to Gothic fiction, figuring the Rust Belt's withered state through the language of ruins, first expressing mortality and finitude and, later, rot and recurrence. In doing so, the Rust Belt Gothic both reveals and conceals the unjust systems implicated in the region's past and present misfortunes, connecting these systems to the Gothic's emphasis on counter-narratives to modernity. The Gothic has long expressed skepticism toward progress and rationalist systems; within the context of the American Steel Belt, this uncertainty figures social anxieties about the violences of neoliberalism, chiefly through Female and Black Gothic narratives which emphasize those groups that capital has left behind or subdued to maintain control. The films use these landscapes to provoke dread, which Matthias De Bondt describes as "a preceding meta-emotion" that generates "fearful tension about something monstrous which remains … veiled in a cloud of mystery" (47). All four films precede their respective physical threats with mounting anxiety arising from the quiet, abandoned venues of the Rust Belt. The anxiety of these locations' silence and solitude stems both from the knowledge that an unseen threat lurks within them, but also from the implied significance of the ruins themselves whether interpreted as natural or political.

As works of Gothic horror and media centered around the legacy of the Steel Belt, the films of the Rust Belt Gothic enter a complex discourse still searching for consensus. The subject

matter which so fascinates these films introduces them to yet unresolved debates about the value of ruins in the modern era, particularly horror's role in articulating society's complex reactions to ruination and decline. Benjamin Balthaser questions why postindustrial urban spaces are portrayed so often in horror films, theorizing that such depictions of the Rust Belt—and the collective fetishizing of the region's ruins—represent an attempt to neutralize the disruptive, anti-capitalist narratives they pose (140). *It Follows* and *Don't Breathe*, films from the 2010s, affirm Balthaser's suspicions, blunting their own disruptive qualities by lacking explicit political motivations. Such a conclusion contrasts, however, with Charles Crow's belief in the Gothic's ability to highlight the anti-capitalist narratives cited by Balthaser; accordingly, *Barbarian* and *Candyman* actively politicize the Rust Belt's ruins by shifting the Steel Belt's Black residents from excluded figures to starring roles, making them the focal point. This shift in perspective reminds viewers of those most affected by the region's ruination, left behind to bear the consequences of deindustrialization once their white and more fortunate neighbors skipped town. Both films also imply that the decline of industrial capitalism set the scene for neoliberalism as the next stage of capitalism's cyclical reinvention, the system's method of renewing its control. Because ruins are themselves overdetermined and symbolically malleable, responsibility falls upon the films themselves to determine the Rust Belt's significance through their framing, and the Rust Belt Gothic therefore runs the gamut from regressive to progressive.

I assert that this conflict highlights a larger struggle within academia to categorize ruin fetishization as either hazardous or useful to culture at large—a debate that is also familiar to Gothic scholarship. Even Walter Benjamin appears indecisive on the subject; his revision of *The Arcades Project*'s between 1935 and 1939 reveals a shift from hope to pessimism on the matter. Benjamin's opening expose expresses an optimistic tone of inevitable revolution in the older

draft, but in the latter version he despairs that the working class may remain forever ensnared within the "phantasmagorie" of capitalist ruins (13, 25 - 26). Lucas Pohl likewise juxtaposes ruin fetishization and ruin *de*fetishization, eschewing a definite stance on the matter to focus on the affective forms that result when ruins are fetishized in the first place (163 - 164). Presently, the Rust Belt Gothic comes no closer to decisively resolving this debate. Given the literary entries of the 1990s and the films of the 2010s, the possibility remains that the pluralistic perspectives of more recent entries will prove a fluctuation, and the Rust Belt Gothic's narratives will remain predominantly white and male. However, if the trend continues in this direction, it might validate ruin fascination as a viable means of progressive social critique. Even so, it remains unlikely that these films can return to the same fatalistic, naturalizing affect of earlier periods given the ongoing efforts of Rust Belt cities to drag themselves from the very desolation which inspired that atmosphere. Whatever future films may bring, I maintain this much to be certain: even if the Steel Belt's fortunes have reversed for now, so long as the region attempts to rebuild itself by neoliberal means, it will play host to the same unsavory patrons which exploited it in the past. As a result, the Rust Belt Gothic, inhabited by the ghosts of the region's myriad historical traumas, will continue to acquire new stories of abuse to tell—and retell—until those ghosts are satisfied.

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